
Fallout: Equestria - Project Horizons

Written by: **Somber**

Edited by: **O.Hinds**, **Bronode**, and **swicked** (formerly
also by **Snipehamster** and **Hidden Fortune**)



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 V

Horizons

All across the Wasteland, sunshine and rainbows burst across the sky, and the Book of LittlePip, of the Lightbringer, gives hope to many who had thought it lost forever. Troubles still beset the peoples of what was once Equestria, but now the future, like the light from above, is bright. Except in the Hoof. There, no rainbow rings were seen; there, the clouds are as thick as ever, and the rain falls upon Enervated soil. In the Hoof, the Security Mare, for one brief moment, parted the clouds and let the city see the sky... and then she fell into the Core. After three months of silence, she is dead. She must be. But... Even if she is... There are Things stirring in that towering necropolis, and the world should hope that she is one of them. For if she is not... the Hoof may be only the beginning.

63. Perceptions

"I've got my eye on you."

The halls of Stable 99 smelled differently than I remembered: an antiseptic tang lurked in the corners, under the beds, and in the closets. Still, it sounded alive again, alive and hopeful. The new residents had swept in with the vigor that only hope could bring. Broken lights were being replaced, filth-spattered walls were being scrubbed. Damaged systems found themselves repaired or swapped out. You almost couldn't see the bloodstains anymore.

To the migrants from 96, there were few major differences between life sealed away in a tower and life sealed away underground. Even the 'recycling' wasn't that severe an adaptation, as they'd mostly adopted 99's mantra regarding food. The most significant and important change was no longer being under pegasus guard. Whenever they wanted, they could walk out the front door, past the Steel Rangers, and into the fresh and open air and rain. If they wished, they could leave, though none had yet to venture farther than Megamart. Still, a few dozen square feet of open air, a few feeble attempts at a garden inside a stockade the Steel Rangers had erected... these were precious things.

From the window of the Overmare's office, Knight Crumpets looked down at the Atrium and at all the ponies talking and laughing in it. "Hard to believe that, a few months ago, all that was empty and we were contemplating leaving this place for good. Now it's almost like being back in Trottingham. I don't think my armor's worked so well since we left," she said as she wiggled an armored hoof. The crispy-brown-coated mare's reflection in the window betrayed her smile. "Any word from back west?" she asked as she regarded the new Head of Security of Stable 99.

Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof consulted several papers on the large desk, huffing through his thick blond mustache. "Stable Twenty-six can't send us anything this month either. While the factions have put their differences aside for the moment, they're still mopping up splinters of Red Eye's forces all over the countryside."

"They do understand that we've got a couple of armies around us, right?" Crumpets asked as she walked slowly towards him to regard the maps also on the desk. A map of the Hoof was marked with hundreds of little red and green X's.

"Armies that are doing precious little," he said as he narrowed his blue gaze. He

levitated another paper. “Legions of zebra standing around doing nothing and a group of pony cultists that take in, feed, and arm refugees aren’t as dangerous a threat as the splinters of Red Eye’s forces.”

Crumpets sighed. “So the Elders still don’t think Hoofington is a high priority?”

“Certainly high, but not worth the cost just yet. The order sees little benefit in diverting resources out here when there is so much to be settled in the west.” His baby blue magic levitated a scroll from the rest of the papers. “This one is suggesting we pursue an alliance with the Harbingers, given their access to technology around the valley.”

“The Harbingers?” Crumpets curled her lip as if she smelled something foul. “They were Blackjack’s enemies.”

“But not ours,” he muttered. “Blackjack’s been dead for a quarter of a year. Stable Twenty-Six recommends accepting that reality and working out an arrangement. Neutrality, at the very least.”

“You can’t tell me you’re bloody considering it,” she said in shock.

He closed his eyes, folded his mighty forehooves on the desk, and blew out a breath, making his mustache flutter. “They have superior numbers, but our position is secure. Besides, I don’t like the smell of them. Their ‘unity for all’ stinks of benefit for somepony over everypony else, like that business with the Goddess.” He tossed the message back on the desk. “Still, if they do try something against us, we may not be able to do more than seal the stable.”

“Well, at least we’re freshly supplied, and I’ve gotten used to eating food made from my own recycled poo,” Crumpets said with false cheer. “I will miss that vegetable garden, though.”

The speaker buzzed, and Fargazer’s voice said, in low tones, “Paladin Stronghoof? She’s back.”

Planting a hoof on the desktop, he sprang over in a single leap and raced to the door with Crumpets close behind him. The sight of a massive white unicorn in half a ton of articulated steel barreling ahead was enough to get everypony out of their way. The one power-armored soldier who didn’t found himself scooped up, moved deftly aside, and set down in one elegant pirouette that didn’t even break Stronghoof’s stride. In less than a minute he was up the tunnel and outside in the constant Hoofington drizzle.

Beside the stockade, the gardens were protected from the downpour by cobbled-

together covers. The plants might not have been the most robust, but they were the only stable foodstuff for those immigrants who hadn't learned to 'not think about it'. At the gate was another covered area for traders and their brahmin to get out of the downpour. Thunder rumbled in the skies as lightning snapped to the southeast.

At the gate, surrounded by a rain-shield bubble, stood Fargazer with two other steel rangers. Her ears swiveled towards him as they approached. "That was quick," she said as her blank eyes stared out into the deluge. "She's back again," the blind unicorn said with a small frown. "I heard the sound of her arrival five minutes ago."

"You *heard* her arrive, Overmare?" Crumpets asked incredulously.

"Her magic has a very distinct sound," the unicorn replied primly. "She's perhaps a hundred yards to the south. I haven't heard her move or leave yet."

"We must— I must—" Stronghoof trembled with emotion.

"Why don't Knight Crumpets and I go down and talk to her together so she doesn't flee again?" the blind unicorn said as she reached out with a muddy hoof, pawed the air, and eventually patted his shoulder. "If she's come back three times, there must be a reason."

He sniffed and nodded. "Yes. Yes, that would be... best." Brilliant forked lightning danced across the sky, followed by the snap of thunder a second later.

Crumpets scooped her helmet off her backside with a hoof and set it on her head. With practiced ease, the hoses were connected, and her visor flashed to life, bringing up the familiar red and yellow E.F.S. display. She flexed to make sure all the controls were responsive. Two semiautomatic hunting shotguns with two hundred rounds of ammo should take care of any nasty surprises. "Ready," she said through her respirator.

Together, they walked out into the soggy, dead forest, following the trail Deus had once torn in his pursuit of Blackjack. Now, Crumpets took care to push thorny underbrush aside as they walked down. Every step Fargazer took, her PipBuck let out a click. "You can navigate with that out here, Overmare? In all this rain?" Crumpets asked, her voice low as if aware that this might be a touchy subject.

"Well enough not to walk into any trees," she said simply.

Crumpets considered the few red and yellow bars in her EFS before saying in low tones, "You don't have to do this yourself, Overmare."

For a moment, Fargazer stopped, then said quietly, "Yes I do." Then she smiled

in Crumpets's direction. "I don't mind. Indeed, I'm glad to find a way to help Stronghoof. If he'd been a different kind of stallion, things could have been made very difficult for us. To be honest, I quite like a chance to be outside. If I didn't have obligations to my stable, I might try traveling a bit further afield," she said sincerely.

"The Wasteland is a difficult place for anypony, let alone. . ." Crumpets trailed off.

"Let alone one who can't see?" she asked in an amused tone, and Crumpets made a small affirmative note. "I suppose I could have my eyesight restored at the Collegiate. Chicanery took a pair of cyber eyes for me. . . but I'd never use something like those." She closed her eyes a moment, lips pressed together, then went on, "I find that my perspective allows me a greater understanding than I had when I possessed vision. And I don't mind the company or assistance of sighted ponies such as yourself." Her ears twitched. "More rain is coming soon."

"It's rained for nearly three months, non-stop," Crumpets said with a sigh. "I wish I knew why this 'Lightbringer' can't give us a break," she said as she looked up, rain pattering off her visor.

"Never be allowed to step into the rain without written permission and an armed escort, and I think you'll find it quite tolerable," Fargazer replied. "The explosion may have caused some permanent damage to the SPP towers in Hoofington. Or perhaps whatever is interfering with broadcast transmissions is to blame. Hoofington has always had problems with rain and lightning storms, even before the war."

"Well, when it rains for ninety days in a row, I think enough is enough. And all that lightning. . . it wasn't flashing like that before the Tower blew up." As if on cue, the skies were illuminated with a brilliant greenish-white bolt snaking along the skies, followed by another massive crack. "Freaky."

They continued along in silence as the rain hissed around them. Then Fargazer waved with her hoof for Crumpets to move back and took a few steps forward. "Hello. You can come out. We won't hurt you," the blind mare said.

"I really hope that the same can be said for you," Crumpets murmured inside her helmet as the yellow bar wiggled.

Then the tangled brush parted, and the waterlogged alicorn stepped forward. Her dark purple mane and tail, knotted and tangled by briars, hung about her neck and haunches like decaying rope. Black rags clung to her thin frame as scared eyes stared at one of the ponies and then the other. Her breathing was harsh and ragged as she looked back over her shoulder, as if expecting somepony to be there.

Through the sodden tatters that might have once been a dress, a candle could be seen upon her flank.

"It's her, isn't it?" Fargazer murmured softly.

"Mhmmm," Crumpets returned, just as quietly.

"I... I..." the alicorn swallowed hard. "I'm not supposed to be here," she whispered.

"Oh, no. The last two times you were here, the Steel Rangers didn't mean to startle you," Fargazer said in her calm voice. "Your name is Lacunae, yes?"

She swung her head back and forth forcefully. "No! No... I'm not her. She was me, but I wasn't her," she stammered, rubbing her face with her drenched wings. "I'm not supposed to be here. I'm... I'm supposed to be in a bad place. Because I did bad things. But... but now I'm not. I'm here."

"This doesn't count as a bad place?" Crumpets muttered.

The pale unicorn gave her a sharp kick in the shin with uncanny accuracy while saying in that gentle voice, "What is your name?"

She froze, her purple eyes haunted a moment, and then she whispered, barely above the rain, "Psalm. My name is Psalm."

"That's a nice name, Psalm," Fargazer replied in that calm, understanding voice. "Well, it's very wet, and you look like you could use a meal and a chance to dry out. And I know that Paladin Stronghoof would like to—"

"No!" she blurted again, then bit her lip and shrank back. "I... No. Please. I want to see him... but I don't deserve to see him... but I... I..." She sat in the mud and bowed her head. "He'll think I'm her. And I want to be her. I can remember... remember everything! Remember him dancing with her. Remember her friends. I... want what she had. But I'm not her!"

"Somepony's a bit barmy in the belfry," Crumpets said, and then shifted aside to avoid another kick to the shin.

That earned a stern glare in her general direction before calm reason returned. "Okay, Psalm. It's okay. Come with us. We'll get you cleaned up, dried off, and fed, and when you're ready, you can talk to him. Or I can tell him for you after you explain things better to me. All right?"

"I... we... I..." she stammered, then bowed her head. "Very well... but..." the alicorn paused, chewed on her lower lip as she glanced towards the Core, then

asked, “But. . . can you tell me what happened to Blackjack?”

“You mean Security?” Crumpets blurted, getting another kick. Biting her tongue, she let the unicorn answer.

Fargazer said solemnly, “I’m sorry, but she’s dead, Psalm. She died in the megaspell.”

“Dead?” She pressed her wings to her temples and shook her head rapidly. “No no no. She. . . I. . . we. . . if she’d been there, then we wouldn’t have let her die. She. . . I. . .”

“Look out, Overmare,” Crumpets warned as Psalm stood suddenly, but the alicorn steadied.

“No! No. We’re fine. I. . . we. . .” she shook her head again, then regained her strength. “Blackjack is not dead,” Psalm said as she looked towards the Core.

“I’m afraid that she is. She was right there when the spell went off. Nopony’s been able to get her PipBuck tag. I’m afraid that she’s gone,” Fargazer replied. “It would have been instantaneous.”

“No. I mean, I don’t believe she’s dead,” Psalm said, her voice now returning to calm. “We need her. . . just like Princess Luna.”

“Well. . . I can’t argue it’d be nice if either was here, but even if Blackjack did somehow survive the spell, she’d be in the Core,” Crumpets said quietly. “Nopony can survive in there. Not for three months. And if she had, she’d find some way to tell us she’s alive.”

Psalm didn’t reply. She just stared in the direction of the distant green glow. “She’s alive. I have faith in her. We still need her; she won’t die until we do. She can’t. Not like Macintosh. Not like Luna.”

Crumpets shook her head. “I’ll go tell Stronghoof and the others to back off. Give her some space till she’s cleaned up.” Crumpets returned up the muddy hill as Fargazer and Psalm followed behind. “Damn it, Security. Why’d you have to die?”

The black canyons of the city glistened with the film of rain that slicked their surfaces, transforming them into mirrors reflecting nothing. The empty streets, cracked and broken, from nowhere to nowhere, snaked around the monoliths that plunged from the sky to the deepest depths of the earth like ebony arrows. No wind could stir the garbage that lay in saturated mats where errant currents had deposited them,

two centuries after being cast away. None would. There was no rot or decay for the heaps. If it could not be washed away, it would linger.

Forever.

“The natives are getting restless, what with Security being gone,” Splendid said as he admired his newly acquired PipBuck. He’d needed a whole new ensemble to match. “Pity blue is in such short supply,” he muttered as he stood with Grace in what had once been their father’s collection. It had now been transformed into a manager’s office, with graphs on the walls showing outputs, a checklist of things to be accomplished long term and short term, and a highly intricate chart on the wall showing names and different colored arrows denoting their relationship. Blocks of ponies were marked ‘manage’, ‘support’, and ‘purge’.

“Which natives are those, brother?” Grace said as she regarded several papers with a critical eye. From outside, a deep growl of thunder penetrated even the sturdy walls of the country club. “The whiny, the annoyed, or the lazy?”

“The whiny ones,” he answered with a sniff. “The Carrots are getting wistful, saying that perhaps they should have backed Charm’s little coup three months ago. All this ‘paying the serfs’ business seems to be so plebian. And expecting the nobles to actually do something for their share of the dividends is outrageous. That’s the point of being aristocracy: you get your cake for free.” He chuckled. “Fortunately, most of the rest of the aristocracy is just happy that we’ve more than tripled our profits, even if most of the increase isn’t going to them.”

“The Lightbringer might have begun clearing out the skies, but that doesn’t mean most ponies in the Wasteland have seed stock, fertilizer, or agricultural skills,” she said with a little smile. “I think that, with a little more work, we’ll have a nice partnership with the Children of the Cathedral. We’ll have to if we want to keep things going long term. Still, given that the Tower falling has tripled our local market, we’re barely able to meet demand now.”

“True. I think it’s the fact that you relegated all of us to ‘workers’ that tangles the nobles’ mane. Wealthy ponies don’t work for their wealth. They are wealth. That’s why they’re better than workers,” Splendid chuckled.

“The pegasi would never have tolerated the old system, and without them we’d never have been able to expand beyond the Hoof,” she said matter-of-factly. “All those profits are because we can sell directly to New Appleloosa and Manehattan

in a tenth the usual time. Asking the Carrots to get their hooves dirty twice a week is hardly serfdom.”

“Be that as it may, you might want to get them out of here. Their attitude is catching,” Splendid said calmly. When Grace arched a brow at him, he amended, “I don’t mean kill or even exile. Perhaps they could work as liaisons with Tenpony. Just get them away from the other bluebloods who think ‘Good King Security’ is gone for good.”

Grace sighed and set the papers back on the desk. “Any sign of Charm? Anywhere?”

He balked, then sighed as well and shook his head. “Not since she left with that Harbinger Steel Rain. If she was still with them, she’d have publicized it. We’d never hear the end about how Security robbed her of her right to rule.”

“Insufferable as she was, she was still our sister.” Grace leaned back in her father’s chair. She was starting to fit it quite well. “Speaking of the Harbingers, are they still harassing workers?”

“Trying to. That ‘equality for all’ line might have caught on if you hadn’t made your changes,” he admitted, his smile rueful. “Given they don’t buy from us, though, they haven’t caught many with their Hoofington Rises stuff. Making the aristocrats do actual work helped immensely on that front. When ponies saw even the Regent hauling crops, it definitely made an impact on them.”

“On me, as well. I don’t think my hooves or back have ever been so sore,” she said with a rueful smile. “I have no idea how they do it. None at all. And that was only an hour.”

He fell silent a moment. “I wouldn’t have done it. I would have slapped a bomb collar on any pony that objected and made them work, complaining or not. I would have hired more foreponies and guards.” He shook his head. “I wonder if that’s why Security chose you rather than me.”

Grace leaned forward and folded her hooves under her chin. “You are a better pony than you think, Splendid. If you had supported Charm instead of me when she broke free, I wouldn’t be here right now. You are far more effective as my right hoof than sitting in this seat. And I think you’re happier, too.”

He snorted. “Happier? Maybe. I suppose I might be. It’s just galling to know that I was the wrong pony for the job.” Then he laughed, rolling his eyes a little. “Well, it could be worse. She could have chosen Charm. I think she would have settled her disagreements with a whim or a dart board. All of father’s memory orbs

and recordings. . . all that knowledge and those secrets. All those things Blackjack wanted to know. I fully expected her to take them. Ah well. . . no regrets on that score.”

Grace’s lips curled in a sympathetic smile. “But other regrets? Perhaps with Glory?”

“Perhaps,” he murmured.

“Is there no hope?” she asked, folding her hooves on the desk with a sympathetic smile.

His smile turned more pained. “I have been firmly, soundly, and resoundingly rejected. My only options are to accept such or become onerous.” He waved his hoof in the air, as if trying to coax thoughts from the ether. “I . . . admit. . . my initial attraction was. . . shall we say. . . superficial? Conjugal relations with a Ministry Mare was a far too tempting prospect to not pursue. But now that I know her and have seen the work she’s done. . .” he sighed and slumped. “If only things were different. It’s hard to hear you were simply a combination of magical transformation, hormones, and idle curiosity.”

“Ah, Splendid. The first mare that slipped your stable,” she said with a shake of her head and sympathetic smile.

“The first I’ve cared about. Ah well. And what of you, Grace? When are you going to select a stallion? The speculation is going mad,” he chuckled.

“Who has the time for such things?” she said as she waved her hooves at the office. “Getting the Society to do something productive for a change barely gives me a moment for sleeping, eating, or bathing!”

“I can attest to the last,” he said, wrinkling his nose, and got a faceful of papers in his face for it.

Apartments for rent. Cheap. Subsidized housing. First three months free. The signs hung loosely outside the doors. Lies. Somepony always paid. They boasted names like The Citadel, Fortress Gardens, Stable Tower, and Guardian Grove. *Safest living in all of Equestria. Come tour our fortified living spaces. Have a fortress of your very own!* Their lobbies held pamphlets depicting balefire bombs bouncing off shields as if they were rubber balls and boasted of security measures to screen out dangerous infiltrators. More lies. The cameras watched impassively through silent spiderlike eyes set in the corners of rooms. Thousands. Millions. More than an army of ponies

could actually monitor.

The apartments were clean. Safe. Nigh impregnable. One could walk through the furnished dwellings, with magic screens to simulate windows. Indeed, to simulate any beautiful view one could desire. It was all false. The scarlet-stained floors were proof of that. The little drains hidden everywhere were proof of that. Nowhere was safe. A lie was the only security in this place.

The Hoofington Arena's dome roared with a dozen battles. Fights set along the green rectangle between pegasus and earth pony, earth pony and zebra, zebra and unicorn, unicorn and pegasus were met with roars, cheers, stomping, boos, and catcalls. Even a few griffins and minotaurs, a half-dozen hellhounds, a trio of green alicorns, and a 'buffalo' could be seen in bouts and matches for the new top ten. Anyone strong and tough enough could compete. The massive hole blasted in the dome had been patched with any square of canvas, corrugated sheet metal, or hide that could block the incessant rain outside. A hundred yards down the field and it would have wiped out the skyboxes, and Big Daddy too.

"Ya know, normally burners don't get to compete," Candlewick shouted at his opponent as he trotted quickly on his hooves around a specially built area with solid walls around the edge, not taking his eye off his opponent. Each step and the bright orange metal hooves let out a click and a little smear of molten glass beneath him. "Not much point when a little yellow ends the fight for them, and half the audience. So I gotta say, I am really looking forward to this!"

In reply, the scarlet teenaged dragon roared and sent a torrent of yellow fire across the arena at the scarred stallion. The earth pony leapt forward and rolled, the blaze roiling over his bright red firefighter's coat but failing to catch it alight. As the dragon ran out of breath, Candlewick rolled up and kicked himself into the air, slamming all four power hooves against the dragon's chest. There was a fwooom as four blasts of flame burst from the hooves and into the dragons scales. Candlewick kicked off and rolled in the opposite direction as the dragon roared and swiped with his claws.

For all his effort, all there was to show for it were four black horseshoe prints on the dragon's chest. The dragon's lips curled in a wide, fanged grin. "Dragons are fireproof, dude. What else you got? Because I got plenty!" With a hissing roar he sprang on the scarred red earth pony; Candlewick gave ground, backing up and not daring to take his eyes off the enemy.

The dragon might have been young, but there was no doubt which one evolution favored. The crowd around the arena jeered and placed bets on how long it would take for the dragon to make the Burner cry uncle, or even if Candlewick would get out at all. One of the few who wasn't jeering was a lavender unicorn watching with concern. *That* caught his eye for a fraction of a second, and the distraction earned him three talons across the face. As his blood flowed, the Burner grinned. "Thanks. I think you made me handsomer."

"Huh?" The teenaged dragon blinked. In that moment, Candlewick slipped into SATS, toggled four perfectly-aimed blows, and executed the spell. He reared up and slammed his hooves against the dragon's face with an explosion accompanying every kick. Dragons, even their eyeballs, might have been fireproof, but they could still be stunned by kinetic energy to the head. The dragon staggered back, dropping his defense as he clutched his face.

Candlewick rolled forward between the dragon's legs, landing on his back and looking up at his target. With a grin, all four hooves began to thrash at the dragon's crotch, each hit punctuated by a blast of fire from his hooves. A few second later, he slowed, the dragon gazing down at the scarred stallion with a scornful curl of his lips. "Dude. They're internal, and you're not my type."

"Oh, shit," Candlewick muttered. Huh. That usually worked...

The dragon's head came down, his pointed maw snapping closed on Candlewick's left forehoof. The fangs clenched on the reinforced PipBuck casing and the top of the blazing power hoof, yanking Candlewick off the ground. The dragon's claws reached up, raking his back and haunches. The firepony's coat tore easily, as did the hide beneath. "Get away from him!" the lavender mare shouted, making him grin.

Candlewick ducked his head under the shredded coat and pulled out by the stem something bright, shiny, and shaped like an apple. He twisted his PipBuck, prying the dragon's jaws open enough to press the apple between his fangs. "Say ahhh," Candlewick growled as the metal ground against enamel. The stem came off, and the superheated powerhoof in the dragon's mouth exploded, knocking his teeth open enough for Candlewick to shove the grenade into the jaws. "Are you fireproof inside?" Candlewick asked as he slammed the dragon's mouth closed, curling his forelegs around the muzzle and clenching it tight. His hindlegs kicked at the dragon's throat, forcing a lump down.

The detonation of the grenade made the dragon swell immensely, throwing Can-

dlewick aside as moment later the insides of the dragon exploded out of both ends. Collapsing like a deflated balloon, Candlewick landed in a heap in the middle of the arena. Slowly, his body burning from the dragon's claws, he rose to his hooves and faced the scoreboard.

"I'd say that counts as a victory," Big Daddy said from his seat beneath the board. "Congratulations, Candlewick. Welcome to the Reapers. You look like you could use a new firecoat. I'd take it from him," the old earth pony said as he gestured to the remains of the dragon. "I'm sure Hammersmith could make something fine for you."

"Thanks," he croaked, trembling but trying to remain upright.

"Come see me upstairs when you get patched up," the old pony said as he trotted off the dais. The observers settled bets, but the lavender unicorn clambered down the ladder lowered into the ring and trotted over quickly; a few other ponies started to scramble after her, all of them heavily scarred or maimed.

"I can't believe you fought him at close range," she muttered under her breath as her horn glowed. Instantly his pain abated and the gouges began to heal. "You should have kept him at a distance."

"No could do, Razzle Dazzle," he said with a grimace. "I only got to pick two weapons. Didn't have any guns that could penetrate. Flamer wouldn't have worked, either. Fireproof. Had to get him reckless enough to open his mouth but keep it open long enough to shove the grenade down his throat. Like what that Lightbringer filly did." He considered the PipBuck. "She convinced me it was a good idea to pick up one from that stable place. Got it for a crate of grenades. Glad I got the reinforced housing." As she healed him, he suddenly grinned. "Don't heal em all the way. Chicks dig scars."

She flushed and turned away. "We do not. Otherwise, *he'd* get all the mares," she said with a smirk as she glanced at the other scarred ponies approaching.

"Toaster *does* get all the mares. Most of em, anyway," Candlewick replied.

"That was awesome, little bro!" a large, scarred orange pony called out. Every inch of him appeared to have been badly burned at some point, and if it weren't for his eyes, he might be mistaken for a huge ghoul. He was covered head to toe in armor made of the flattened appliances that were his namesake. His cutie mark depicted the angriest toaster in all the Wasteland, with flames consuming a hapless slice of bread. "Did I fucking tell you those super heated power hooves would fucking do it?"

Did I fucking tell you or what, little bro?"

"It was the grenade that killed him," Dazzle pointed out with a scowl.

"Who asked you, Flash fuck?" he asked with a leer. "Go run off with the other girls. Play with fire and you'll lose that pretty face." Candlewick averted his eyes as Dazzle's eyes blazed with her own rage. "What do you even care? Get out of here."

"Oh yeah. He's a charmer," Dazzle replied dryly before trotting away.

"Damn it, Toast!" Candlewick protested.

The large orange stallion snorted and rolled his eyes. "She's a pretty face, Wick. They ain't interested in burned things. Everypony knows that." Candlewick stared after Dazzle as she climbed up out of the ring and caught her glancing back at him before disappearing out of sight. Toaster gestured at the hooves. "Weren't they awesome though? Okay, not against a dragon, maybe, but you could melt through tank armor with superheated power hooves like those! Fuck! Not hot enough, though! I should strap balefire eggs to each one! Find some way to make a balefire powerhoof. Fuck yeah!"

"Sure. Sounds like a great way to commit suicide," Candlewick replied dryly.

If Toaster took offense, he didn't show it as he laughed and went on how glorious superheated balefire powerhooves would be. One of the other scarred raiders trotted up and patted Candlewick on the back. "Congratulations on making Reaper, Candle."

"Just don't forget that you were a motherfucking Burner first, bro," Toaster reminded with an scowl. "I don't know why you bothered, though. Being a Reaper's no big thing. Just an excuse for Big Daddy to snag our most badass fighters. He tried to make me one, but I told him to smoke it."

"I thought you begged him to not break your other leg," a scarred mare asked in bafflement.

Toaster's eyes bulged as his jaw worked. "Well... That... That was only because I didn't want to go superbalefire on his ass and beat him with a busted leg. Cause that would have just been sad! So I was going to tell him to smoke it! Cause... Yeah!"

Candlewick shook his head, hefted the dragon's limp tail in his mouth, and started for the ladder out. When he'd climbed onto the platform around the ring, he looked across the Arena. Even with all the refugees from above and beyond the Hoof, it still

was only a quarter full. An echo of a time when tens of thousands of ponies came here to compete. These days, Big Daddy would take any who were tough enough.

The scarred stallion's eyes were drawn to the spectral banner of the Flash Fillies. It was hard to make out against all the new gangs and bands that had popped up in the last few months. A half dozen were old Red Eye forces. 'Hatchlings of Stern', 'Cybers', and the ever-original 'Red Eyes'. A dozen pegasi 'wings' were in attendance. The 'Grimfang' hellhounds had every pony around them nervous. A knot of zebras calling themselves 'Achu' were talking with 'Doombunny Deathbringers', zebras from some place called Glyphmark.

"Congratulations," a doleful voice said in his ear. The dark blue pegasus Storm Front stepped up beside him and nodded towards all the new banners. The Halfheart gangster gave a small smile. "Starting to get crowded, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I'm surprised it hasn't been bloodier, though. So many new faces trying to claim turf, you'd think there'd be a lot more blood spilled."

"Lots of these people don't want turf. They just want respect and recognition and the chance to make a name for themselves," Storm Front said. "Besides, the old gangs are still growing. You got, what, thirty new members?"

"Closer to fifty. All scarred from the fighting," Candlewick replied, his eyes finding a spot of lavender across the Arena. Then he blinked and realized what he said might have been confidential as he hastily rasped. "But you didn't hear that from me."

"Of course not," Storm Front said with a wry smile. "We're sharing territory at the moment. A few new gangs setting up and keeping watch. They keep out of our manes, and we don't put a bullet through their heads."

"What about the Harbingers?" Burner asked with a frown.

"No. Not with them. They don't share anything. You join them. Period." Storm Front said. "I know the new mare in charge of the Flash Fillies is ready to start dusting them. What about Toaster?"

"That's been his standing order for four months now," Candlewick confirmed.

"We need to get organized. Set aside the old grudges. There's way too many Harbingers these days, and they're getting way too pushy for us. Think Toaster would support an alliance?" Storm Front asked as they walked along.

"With the Flashers, Halfhearts, and Highlanders? No way," Candlewick snorted. But his eyes lingered on the lavender mare underneath the rainbow-burst banner of the

Flash Fillies. “And you can’t tell me your boss feels any differently. We coexist because of Big Daddy and the Reapers. We don’t work together.”

“For now,” Storm Front said as he trotted away. “Bad thing about the Hoof, though, is that often it doesn’t give you a choice.” Candlewick scowled after the dark blue pegasus before turning and limping up towards the box seats.

The mighty monoliths showed their own wounds, great gaping holes from which spewed their metallic innards. Entrails of conduit and twisted plumbing dangled through holes punched through the ebony walls and spilled out across the roads in tangled intestinal masses. Girders protruded like compound fractures where the towers had broken like brittle bones, and as crippled soldiers they lay against their fellows. Some of the injuries were from the passage of time, others from fresh blasts torn recently throughout the city, and still others appeared as if rent by an army of vandals.

In many places, the wiring and cables were strung like visceral garlands between the towers. Raw electrical lines arced and crackled when charge built up, sending snaps and sparks to compete with the lightning in the heavens above. The metallic tangles swayed in the winds that moved through the higher regions, whistling softly in the silence of the city.

Many of the injuries ran deep. They plunged through the cores of the towers, paths ripped and cut through the original structures and strung with silver cables. Walls breached. Floors collapsed. Ceilings missing. Equipment relocated with little point or purpose for its placement. Shafts laid out and connected to motors relocated from elsewhere in the building. The mad vandals’ redistribution violated all sense and reason, placing traffic poles in the heights of skyscrapers and dangling elevator cabling from one rooftop to the foundation of its neighbor. And everywhere was the glint of silver wire.

Chapel had a drainage problem. The recent construction had ripped open the ground, and with soaked earth and constant rain, the heavy runoff now threatened to erode all their hard work. “More rocks over there! If we don’t get this water under control, we’ll end up in the river!” Scotch Tape shouted up at the pegasi as her duct-tape-repaired rainslicker flapped in the wind. They flew in a train from further up the

hill, carrying whatever rocks they could in their hooves to pile up in a retaining wall above the town. “Bebop! Rocksteady! Fortify that bit there and that one there!” she ordered, pointing imperiously at where the wall sagged and threatened to collapse.

“We’re Steel Rangers, not Steel Ditchdiggers!” one of the two power-armored ponies shouted, but they rammed their shoulders against the barricade and pushed the leaning stones back up.

“If your grenade machineguns can blow up rain, go for it. Otherwise, push!” Scotch tape shouted against the thunder. Suddenly, a blinding bolt shot down straight at the pair, only to turn ninety degrees and strike a twelve foot tall spire of golden metal. Nevertheless, the blast of thunder knocked most ponies back. Most, but not Scotch. She waved her hoof at the device. “The magic lightning rod is working fine, ponies. Finish up that wall!”

They fell into their work, bracing the stones with branches and scavenged boards. Deus rumbled down the road dragging a ton of debris, walls, and rusty pieces of wagon. He stopped above the town and his engine gunned. “Get that shoring material in place, unicorns. Pegasi, don’t stop the rocks,” Scotch Tape ordered.

Young and old, earth pony and unicorn, pegasus and zebra, everypony pitched in to complete the wall. Soon the water sluiced at an angle around the town rather than straight through the middle of it. Scotch Tape watched the progress of the water, noted the flow in the gullies, and finally relaxed. “Okay. Good job, everypony. Get inside and warm up. Deus, Rocksteady, Bebop, thanks for the power. No pony go to sleep, though. If the rain picks up more, we might have to resort to sandbagging.” The olive filly looked aside and muttered, “Not that I have a clue where we’ll get the bags. Or the sand, for that matter.”

Chapel was more than just a half-dozen buildings now. It was starting to resemble a real town. With building materials scavenged from the manor and elsewhere, two dozen new houses had sprung up. The post office had been converted into a formal store and the fillies and colts moved into longhouses. Children still outnumbered grownups by almost three-to-one, though, many of them coming from outside the Hoof, lured by stories of a safe place where there was plenty of candy and Sparkle Cola.

At the south end of town, the church that had given so many solace was almost completely repaired; even the windows were almost finished. Majina was in the process of replacing them with new mosaics of colored glass melted in place with the help of a blow torch and two recently orphaned pegasi; the zebra filly alternated between

helping toughen them up and distracting them with something to do. There'd been a lot of new young ponies coming into chapel these days, many of them pegasi.

Even with the pressing need to manage the rainwater, efforts to that end weren't the only thing going on today. In a gazebo sat a dozen colts and fillies and one blue stallion. He lifted his black, wide-brimmed hat and shook it once, and out came a round landmine. "Okay. This is your standard Solaris-brand landmine. They made tens of millions of these during the war. They are cheap, plentiful, and all over the Wasteland," P-21 said as he held it up. "It possesses a pressure sensor trigger. It also has a two-meter motion talisman and a two-second delay before detonation. That two seconds is the difference between keeping your hooves and losing them."

"Boring," a lilac unicorn filly drawled as she sat upon a thin pillow. "Who cares about landmines? You just toss a rock at them or levitate them away."

"Really?" P-21 asked with a small smile. "Then what are you going to do about the deadmare-switched landmine I put under the pillow you're sitting on, Razorblade?" The filly's eyes popped wide. "It should be active now."

"I... you... you're bluffing!" the filly spluttered as P-21 smiled. "You're insane! What kind of teacher are you?"

"One who put a landmine under your butt," P-21 replied casually. "So, how are you going to disarm it? Do you have the time to get off the pillow, move it, and levitate the mine away? Can you move fast enough to get out of the three-meter blast radius? Oh, I know some ponies who could, but are you one of them?" As the rest of the class started to lean away, he added, "She's not the only one. I'd think really hard before running."

He held up his demonstration mine. "The Solaris brand mine has several flaws. First is the two second warning, accompanied by a beeping." He tapped the tab in the middle, making the mine's talisman glow bright amber. "Secondly, when armed, the mine can be seen if you're sharp-eyed enough. Be aware that sometimes sneaky bastards like to hide them under trash, empty cans, or pillows. But the third flaw of the Solaris mine is that it is easily disarmed if you can press the tab again before it fires."

"But... but how can we push the mine button if we're *sitting* on it?" Razorblade wailed.

"That would be part of the lesson," he said as he stood and carefully backed out of the gazebo. "Oh. And since I didn't want us to be at this all day, there's one more

thing. Each mine is on a timer. You have ten, fifteen minutes tops. Good luck,” he said as he walked around to where Scotch Tape watched.

“Those aren’t real landmines, are they?” Scotch Tape asked softly, knitting her brows.

“Absolutely,” he replied, keeping his voice low. “With real detonators, real talismans, real disarm tabs, real timers... and something special in place of most of the charge, courtesy of Sekashi.” Chuckling, he looked up the hill. “The wall done?”

“For now. If this rain gets worse, we may have to do something a little more radical,” she said as she pushed her wet mane out of her face. “There’s plenty of things I can think of we could build for drainage once the rain stops. But it hasn’t. I’m just glad we haven’t had a mudslide yet.”

But P-21 wasn’t listening. Instead, his eyes were locked on where two colts not in the class were comparing treasures they’d scavenged recently, most specifically four needles of Med X. Scotch Tape put a hoof on his shoulder, and he flinched away. “Hey, you two. Put that stuff away or take it in to Charity.”

The boys looked at each other, then scowled at her. “You can’t tell me what to do. You’re not the boss of me.”

Scotch Tape’s eyes narrowed in a shooty glare. “No, but I do need two ponies to watch that retaining wall all night long in the rain next to a magical lightning rod. You two want to do it?”

Apparently deciding that moving off was better than challenging Scotch, they packed up the salvage and quickly trotted off. P-21 let out the breath he’d held, and Scotch Tape regarded him in concern. “Sorry,” he muttered.

She smiled, glanced around for anypony who might be watching, and then nuzzled his nose. This time, he didn’t flinch away.

The class was getting more and more agitated as they sat there, trying to figure out how to disarm a mine. Suddenly, the lilac Razorblade shout, “Ah! Did it just beep?! I heard a beep! I-“ She shifted too far and the pillow went ‘BEEP BEEP BE-‘ Then there was a whoomp sound and a small cloud of white powder enveloped the unicorn. “AHHH! I’m dying! You killed me!” wailed the filly as she lay on her back, then blinked and pointed a hoof at P-21. “Ha! I knew you were bluff...” then she froze, her muzzle starting to twitch. “Itchy!” she screeched as she started to scratch herself furiously with her hooves.

The expressions on the other students’ faces changed to a mix of relief, amusement,

and then worry as they realized that they might be next to scratch themselves like mad. Then one of the colts looked at the filly beside him and grinned. "I got it! You lean way over and I'll hit the tab for you!"

She stared. "No way! I not going to end up like her!" The filly pointed a hoof at Razor, who was dragging her butt across the gazebo floor.

"You have to trust me!" He pleaded.

She bit her lip, grabbed the side of her pillow, and tilted over. BEEP! BEEP! BE-went the mine, but the russet earth pony slapped the tab with a hoof, silencing the mine. "Now you do mine," he said as he started leaning over as well. She hesitated, but as soon as it started beeping, she jumped forward and disarmed it as well. The filly appeared shocked not only that he'd done it but that she had returned the favor. All at once, she let out a nervous laugh that he joined, and they moved to help others with their mines.

Of course not all took that route. One trusted the wrong colt to help her and got dusted when he laughed rather than disarmed the mine. P-21 murmured something to her and she immediately dashed out into the rain. A unicorn tried to lift the pillow and disarm it with his magic before it went off, and failed. One filly, when her mine was disarmed, trotted away and left her partner stuck before others helped her. But a pegasus managed to backflip off his pillow and fly clear before his mine went off, and one zebra filly was smart and clever enough to shift till she had one hoof pressing down on the pillow, moved her body, and then knocked the pillow aside and disarmed hers. Finally, only the colt who had laughed at his partner was left. "Come on. Someone help me out here? Anypony?"

All he got were smug stares and smiles. Then the pillow beeped as the timer went off, and he disappeared in a cloud of white. He then spent a minute scratching furiously while the rest of the class got a laugh.

"Mud neutralizes the itching power," P-21 said as he trotted back into the middle. In a dash, Razorwire was out the gazebo and rolling in the mud, along with all the others who had failed the test. "Everypony back here. Then we'll quit for the day." When everypony returned, including the muck-dripping Razorblade, he regarded them all coolly. "What was the lesson?"

"Our teacher is a psychotic, evil, sneaky, no-good fucking jerk!" snapped Razorblade.

He bowed his head to her with a smile. "Anypony else?" he asked as he surveyed

the colts and fillies.

The two that had helped each other glanced at each other. “Well. . . we couldn’t do it on our own. We needed to help each other.”

“Speak for yourself,” the pegasus said smugly as he crossed his hooves over his chest.

“You flew clear of the itching powder,” P-21 said. “If that had been a real mine, you might not have gotten clear. Or maybe you could usually fly, but your wing was broken when you found the mine? What if there was more than one mine?” The smug colt’s smile became a little more uncertain. “In this world, there’s only so much you can do on your own. I’m not much good in a fight, but I can crack a terminal with a little hard work and effort. When we rely on other people and let them help us, we take away a lot of that risk.”

“Long as we trust the right ponies!” the filly who’d gotten sprayed snapped, glaring at the muddy colt. More glares were directed at the filly who’d abandoned her partner once her mine was disarmed.

“Also important. And once everypony saw Bailing Wire play his trick on Trumpet here, what happened to him?” P-21 asked.

The muddy colt sighed, “No pony would help me.”

“Exactly. And I wonder if Lash will get helped out the next time she’s in trouble,” he said, every eye on the purple filly who’d abandoned the other. The smug filly suddenly appeared far less certain. “Trust is a precious commodity. Earn it. Cultivate it. Value it. Don’t throw it away simply because you think it’s funny or your own hide matters more to you. Because, eventually, you’ll end up all alone and then, sooner or later, the Wasteland will get you. If you’re lucky, it’ll just kill you.”

Then he regarded Razorblade. “You were absolutely right that landmines aren’t a real threat if you’re ready for them. A little simple telekinesis, and they become a joke.” She blinked, seemingly surprised. “What will kill you is the unexpected.” He held up a mine. “I could rig this for a five minute delay once ‘disarmed’. You’d put it in your saddlebag and think yourself so clever. Heck, you might put a dozen in your bags before the first one goes off. The unexpected will always, always, be what kills you. My friend once lost her face because someone put a landmine in a first aid box. If we hadn’t been there, she’d have died in those tunnels. If we hadn’t had Hydra, she’d still be blind.”

Some of the fillies and colts seemed confused, but others nodded. Even Razorblade

appeared to regard P-21 a little more thoughtfully. P-21 set the mine down. "Tomorrow, we'll work on assessing and analyzing threats. I'll rig a few special mines, and we'll see how you handle working on them. You can work with a partner, or on your own. Your choice. Lash, you're cleaning up. Wash the powder off in the rain. Dismissed."

The young ponies started to disperse, except for the purple Lash; she seemed to be weighing things in her mind and then, reluctantly, she started to collect the pillows and mines.

"That was awesome, Daddy," Scotch said.

"Thanks," he replied, clearly thankful for her praise.

"I still can't believe how Razorblade talks to you, though," Scotch Tape frowned.

"She's a raider kid. I don't expect her to talk nice. I *do* expect her to do what I say. If she doesn't, she doesn't have to come back. None of them do," he said with a little shrug.

"But of course they do, because you're super awesome." He smiled and flushed, and Scotch Tape picked up a mine. "Say, you don't think I could borrow a few of these, do you?" she asked as she glanced slyly over at the post office.

"Scotch, what did I just say about trust?" he asked with a sigh.

She laughed and grinned. "Oh, come on, Daddy. When you know a pony well enough, you can do a few pranks in good clean fun. Besides," she added with a sly smile, "it's not as if those kids needed *mud* to get the powder off." She narrowed her eyes at the post office. "And I *really* want to repay her for charging me fifty caps for a bag of dirt."

"You bought her mystery pies," P-21 said.

"Yeah, but I didn't know they were mud pies!" she growled, huffing in the direction of the post office.

"Buyer beware," he said.

"Ugh. . . maturity sucks. I can see why Rampage and Blackjack avoided it like the plague." Scotch Tape slumped a little, pouting up at her father before changing the subject. "Have you heard about what Glory's trying to do?"

"Mhmmm," he murmured.

"Do you really think she's alive? Her PipBuck tag is gone," Scotch said skeptically.

"I mean, I want her to be. And Boo. But. . ." She shook her head. "I just don't see it. If she were, we'd know about it by now."

He sighed and closed his eyes. "I think that we owe it to her, and Glory, to try."

"Rampage went, too. It's been a whole month, Daddy!" She reached in and hugged his leg. "Daddy, I miss Blackjack terribly, but that place is just bad."

"Do you want to leave the Hoof?" he asked calmly. She balked and shook her head slowly, fearfully. "Then if Glory finds what she's looking for, she'll be able to go in."

Scotch tape looked at him. "And you?" He just nodded. "If she succeeds. . . are you going?"

He tugged his hat over his face a little bit more. "What you're really asking is if she'll be okay with you coming with us."

"Yeah," Scotch Tape said, kicking the ground with her hoof and dropping her eyes.

"I have no clue if she will or not," P-21 said quietly. "I don't know much about magic or radiation or anything like that. But if she is, then that choice is up to you."

"You don't want me to go," Scotch Tape said with a sigh.

"You know I don't. A little part of me is terrified at the thought of you. . . dying. . ." He faced away from her. "But you've earned the right to decide for yourself what you're going to do. I'll do my best to look out for you, and I know you'll do your best to look after me."

She rushed up to him and gave him a tight hug around his neck. "Thank you, Daddy."

"Still," he said, patting her back, "If you are going to come, you might think of attending some of my classes. A little bit of learning about how to deal with the unexpected never hurts."

"Dad," she said flatly as she pulled away. "I've traveled with Blackjack. I don't need *lessons* in dealing with the unexpected."

"If you say so," he said leaning in and giving her a little nuzzle before walking around her. "I'm going to head back up to the house. See you there." And with that, he trotted out into the rain.

Scotch Tape sighed and gazed towards the Core. Lightning snapped and cracked along the green-lit towers. It was as if the heavens themselves were at war with the buildings. "Come on, Blackjack. You've come back to life before. . ." Sighing, she started away from the gazebo.

BEEP! BEEP! BE— Pwumff!

“Daddy!” went a scream of outrage throughout the settlement of Chapel.

This had once been a city of ponies. It was easy to forget that. Easy to be crushed by the weight of those soaring black and green towers. Ponies had lived here. It could be seen in the detritus that remained. The clothes lying in heaps and tangled along the sidewalks. The shops displaying the finest fashions of Canterlot. Even signs for sales. Quarter off. Half off. Faint music still lingered where a radio played softly to an empty apartment; automated warnings endlessly, mindlessly, soullessly repeated for ponies to come to the shelter of the Core as soon as possible. Meals, dried, desiccated, and fossilized on the plates, rested on the tables of diners.

Ponies tried to live here, in this place of steel and glass. If one relaxed just enough, so that the damage and decay blurred away, the promise began to emerge like old stains in a fabric. The terminals on every countertop, the PipBucks and their broadcasters scattered throughout the city. Robots, long ago bereft of power, lay like overgrown and forlorn toys waiting for their master to return. And even though so much of the city was devoted to technology, nature also had a place. Public parks, roadside trees, interior arboretums, and even magical home gardens abounded, their contents all dead but perfectly preserved in the grip of Enervation.

Once, this had been a place inhabited by ponies. If not of them, then at least for them. The playgrounds of schools in the towers, the still galleries of art, the solemn libraries... all for the people who were to live here. And for a time, it had been good. For a time. But the foundation was unsound, the roots rotten. Nothing founded on a lie can last forever.

Raptors were vessels of energy, of humming engines, blowing vents, vibrating plates, and the subtle press of winds on the hull. This Raptor felt more like a tomb. Its halls were dark, illuminated only by failing emergency lighting and a lone PipBuck lamp. Its air was like a held breath and filled with an ineffable weight. The armor plates were peeled away to reveal the conduits and plumbing beneath. The mare sighed softly in the gloom as she surveyed the damage. Then she continued through to the lit chamber at the end of the hall.

Storm Chaser’s office. Her meticulous lists and files were scattered across the floor.

A lone lamp glowed upon the corner desk. The old gray mare at the desk looked a lot older and grayer. Her usual crisp bun had stray strands escaping it. On the desk before her sat an open bottle of wine. "Permission to enter, ma'am?" Twister asked from the doorway.

"You don't need to call me ma'am. I'm not a general of the Enclave anymore," she said with a slight slurring of her speech. "Not just because I was relieved of command, you understand, but also because it just so happens that there isn't an Enclave anymore."

"It's official?" Twister asked.

"It's official that Ironfeather took the last functional Thunderhead and a dozen loyal ships and departed for parts unknown." She rocked a little and gestured with her hoof. "Some say north. Some say south. All say he's long gone." She carefully poured herself another glass. "So, between the loss of that, the absolute debacle out west, and the damage Neighvarro's facilities suffered, plus the fact we can't control the skies any more, and the little point that Shadowbolt Tower is *gone*. . . I'd say it is official that we, the Enclave, are really and truly. . . fucked." She took a drink and swallowed, smacking her lips. "That's a technical term down here, by the way."

"I believe I was the one who told you so, ma'am," Twister said as she sat down opposite the general. The tipsy mare leaned forward and pushed the bottle towards her. Lifting it with her hoof, Twister took a drink of something that could only vaguely be called 'wine'. "That stuff is awful."

"All our stuff is awful. Haven't you read the Lightbringer's story?" she asked as she swirled the glass with one hoof while the other lifted a thick printout. Her wing put glasses on as she stared down at the paper. "We are, and I'm paraphrasing here, the soulless monsters that attack helpless surfacer settlements and disintegrate little foals that she collects in soda bottles while destroying ancient cities of Equestria's roots, all the while conspiring with giant blue alicorn goddesses that want to assimilate all of ponykind. Not only that, but we are the fartwinds that for the last two centuries have made the surface a mess, but rather than letting us make up for our mistakes, she is going to do it for us. Because we, apparently, can't be trusted to do so." She tossed the papers aside. "And THAT is how history is going to remember the Grand Pegasus Enclave. Because that is what the victors have written."

"Not exactly the most glowing account, I'll admit, but to be fair some of our soldiers did attack peaceful surface settlements, disintegrate little foals, destroy ancient cities, and conspire with the Goddess," Twister replied, getting a scowl from Storm

Chaser.

“Nuance!” the gray mare hissed. “Where’s the nuance? Does she hold the specific Councilors who authorized Cauterize responsible? No. Does she acknowledge the captains that refused orders? *Barely*. Does she tell how Colonel Bright went to a firing squad rather than remain silent about the unnecessary razing of Canterlot? No! Did she capture Autumn Leaf so he could be tried for crimes against equinity? No!” She slammed her hoof on the table before her. “I knew hundreds of soldiers in the Enclave who were good, loyal, and true! Yes, we had problems that needed addressing, that is abundantly clear, but we were not all war criminals!” she shouted, pointing her hoof at Twister, but then she wilted. “Some of us gave our lives for what we believed in. They deserve more respect than this.”

Twister sighed and took another swig of the bitter wine before asking, “Any word from our own settlements? What are they doing?”

“Anything, everything, and nothing. Most settlements are independent now and on their own. With Thunderhead and Neighvarro destroyed, no center remains. Most are doing whatever they need to in order to survive. Those that were barely holding on are evacuating. Larger settlements are trying to set up relations with the surface, but since we’re the evilest bastard in the sky, there hasn’t been much luck. I’m more hopeful out here. Thunderhead may have been lost, but we’re making strong ties with the surface groups.” She sighed and leaned back in the chair, staring at the ceiling. “I’m hoping... praying... that we can get goods to settlements that need them quickly.” She closed her eyes. “Last word from your home was that it was evacuating to Las Pegasus.”

Twister sighed. “I have an aunt and uncle there. They should be safe. Doesn’t help it’s even further west, though.” She regarded the PipBuck on her leg. “I got this for the trip from one of those stable ponies in exchange for a beam pistol. P-21 and his daughter configured it for me and everything. Used some sort of stable programming.” She gave a little shrug.

“Well, you went a bit more native than most. We need ponies like you,” Storm Chaser said as she swirled her glass, considering the pale blue contents.

Twister watched her for a moment, her ears flattening, then looked around. “The *Castellanus* is quiet. Where are the repair teams?”

She clenched her eyes closed a moment. “I sent them over to the *Sleet*.”

“Then when will the *Castellanus* fight again?” Twister asked with a frown.

"It won't." Twister just stared in stunned silence as the old gray mare took another drink. "We did an assessment. Our flow control talismans are shot. The *Sleet's* are intact. Our weapon systems are either destroyed or so in need of repair and calibration that they may as well be. The *Sleet's* are intact. We have three hull breaches. They have one." She looked at the silent walls as tears welled in her eyes, but she refused to acknowledge them as she continued, "It would be . . . sentimental to divide our limited capacity for repair between two damaged ships instead of giving everything necessary to one." She reached over and snagged the bottle, pouring herself another glass. "So I felt that drinking something irredeemably horrible and alcoholic was in order."

"'Skywine' . . . yeah. That's an acquired taste, for sure. We used to use it as solvent on greasy stains." Twister shivered, her tan wings fluffing a little. Then she tapped her chin with a lone pinion. "That leaves us with the *Sleet*, the *Cyclone*, and the *Rampage*," Twister said thoughtfully.

Storm Chaser growled, "How she got the crew's support, that I'll never know. Where she found all that red paint, I'll never know."

"Be glad it is paint," Twister retorted, and the gray mare snorted derisively. "And, after their last captain, I think a maniac surfer was a nice relief. Too bad she didn't stick around. I think that when Rampage realized there weren't any sky pirates to do battle with, and the crew weren't going to crash the ship into the SPP hub to check its invulnerability, she moved on to other things. Like finding some sign of Blackjack."

"She's gone. We saw that megaspell. . . I never imagined that kind of power before." She shivered and then frowned. "I knew what she had. I'd even seen videos of the damned things. But to imagine it could suck up everything in a three mile radius, including Shadowbolt Tower? How could she survive that?"

"Mmmm. . . it's doubtful, but if any mare could, it's Blackjack." She smiled, "Anyway, with the *Rampage* patrolling the borders, we haven't seen a feather of the *Blizzard* or *Sirocco*. I'm sure when Rampage gets back, they'll hunt down the others. Did you know she stuffed a mattress with Crosswind's feathers before kicking him out over some pond? It was the first time I heard a crew cheer in weeks."

"The one ship utterly untouched in the battle, and it's devoted to that striped maniac..." She sighed again and stared at the wall. "A petty, sentimental part of me wanted to rip out all her control talismans. . . but that would have been a waste."

"And with no flow control talismans, the ship will never fly," Twister said grimly.

She laughed bitterly. "Oh, she'd fly. Her reactor and main turbines are fine. You just wouldn't be able to slow down, and steering would be pretty minimal. Perhaps for three minutes at top speed before the engines exploded."

"I'm sorry to hear that," a mare's boiled voice said from the doorway. Twister turned and spotted the pale grayish-blue hide of Rainbow Dash. Her faded rainbow mane, infamous throughout history, was now only so many patchy clumps. The pegasus wore a Mare Do Well costume of simple cloth, and at the moment she had the cowl down and the hat back around her neck. "Sounds like it'd be a wild couple of minutes, though."

"Get out," Storm Chaser snapped in disgust, reaching out, snagging the bottle with her wings, and holding it protectively to her chest. "I have no desire to share my wine with a two-century-old traitor." Then she blinked and peered into the bottle, upended it, and collected the trickle in her mouth. "Actually, I have no wine to share."

"That's all right," Rainbow Dash said as she pulled an identical bottle from under her cloak. "I brought my own."

"Where's the fancy outfit?" Twister asked.

Rainbow sighed. "Seemed a little out of place for a friendly drink. Besides, Monkeywrench is still trying to get it fixed after I took it barreling through three cruise missiles."

Storm Chaser seemed to weigh the insult of such dishonorable company with the promise of more inebriant and finally gestured to the seat besides Twister. "Well then, go ahead. You must want to celebrate your victory." She loaded as much contempt on the word as possible. "You must be thrilled."

"Am I glad the Enclave is gone? Hell, yeah," Rainbow Dash bit the tab screwed into the cork and pulled it free with a pop. The captain set a second glass, chipped at the rim, next to hers. "Am I glad for all the suffering and trouble it took? No." She sighed as she started to pour. "I wanted the pegasi to help the surface. I didn't want good ponies to suffer." She filled both glasses and then passed the bottle to Twister.

"Life is suffering," Twister said. "It's how you know you're still breathing, and what moves you to keep flying even when your feathers are going to fall off."

Storm Chaser sighed, eyeing Rainbow Dash with clear distaste. "Well, you at least acknowledge some of us were good. Some of us were... very good," she said as she looked over at a photograph of herself and a pink pegasus stallion.

"Were you two close?" Rainbow Dash asked.

The gray mare smiled sadly, seeming to contemplate a catty remark, but then said primly, "Always professional. He never let it go past that. Still... in another life... if I'd been somepony else, or he'd been somepony else..." she sighed and shook her head. "What might have been?"

Rainbow took a sip. "Life as a ghoul is nothing *but* what might have been. There's plenty of years that are fuzzy... but your mistakes? You see them as clear as day. If I'd gone straight to the SPP instead of helping Pinkie Pie... If I hadn't taken Pumpkin with me... if I hadn't supported a stupid war in the first place..." She shook her head. "You meet some ghouls, and they're just stuck back then. Not mindless, not feral... just... stuck. Now I have to wonder what I'm going to do next."

"You don't have plans?" Twister asked.

"Well, joining the Wonderbolts would be a bit awkward at this point," she said with a dry chuckle. "I'm glad they're helping out west, but that'd be too weird. And playing Mare Do Well... well... there's plenty of mares, stallions, zebras, and griffons doing well without a mask. I'm thinking of just giving the suit to Monkey Wrench. I've touched base with Spike... wasn't *that* rough... and even said a few words with the Lightbringer. We both agreed that the history books will say I died. Why correct them? So now... I dunno."

"We still need skilled ponies out here," Twister said. "Especially at the Skyport."

"Yeah. I think I'll stick around till whatever is going on with the Core is resolved." She took a long drink and then pondered the glass. "I wonder if this skywine is still as horrible as I remember. Everything tastes like boot leather," she said, getting a small smile from the gray mare. "Speaking of the Core, did you two know that that city is an impossibility?" she pointed with her wing.

"Impossible how?" Twister asked.

"Yup. Twilight and Applejack noticed it. The numbers don't add up. In order to build the Core as fast as they did, in just three years, it would have taken all the war materials for five years and double all the ponypower of the entire country. All while we were at war," she said with a smile.

"I'm sure somepony just messed up the audits. After all, the Core *is* there," Storm Chaser said wearily, gesturing with her hoof vaguely to the side.

"That's what Luna said. After all, in the early years there were tons of mistakes made between the ministries. That's why the O.I.A. was needed. Everypony said

there were just accounting errors and paperwork lost. Managers were supposed to be improvising on material and labor safety. Workers like the Diamond Dogs were supposed to dig even more efficiently.”

Rainbow Dash grinned and leaned in. “What nopony realized was that sometimes workers would come back in the morning and find all the work completely finished. Tunnels that were started got finished way sooner than planned. Some people figured the towers went up so fast that they were hollow, but every single one of them was filled with stuff. Look at Shadowbolt Tower. I don’t care how awesome Scootaloo was, nopony could have built that in twenty years, let alone five. Nopony is sure exactly where everything is or what it’s supposed to be. It just is.”

“So the Core is... what, alive?” Twister said with a skeptical, and slightly worried, smile.

“Nooo pony knows,” Rainbow Dash replied dramatically before rolling her eyes. “What I do know is that, in all of two centuries, I’ve never seen it like this. Something’s happened in there.” She then regarded the general. “So, what’s your plan, Stormy?”

The general snorted, wine spraying her muzzle. “Don’t call me that! I’m almost fifty. That’s forty years too old to be called that.”

“Well, I’m almost five times older than you, Stormy. So the question remains: what are you going to do?”

Storm Chaser sighed and swirled the glass. “If my captain were here, he’d ask for permission to speak freely, then ask me what the hell am I thinking sitting here in a dead ship when there’s work to be done.” She closed her eyes and sighed. “I just never dreamed I’d see the fall of the Enclave in my lifetime.”

“None of us did,” Twister said solemnly.

“Hey, I doubted I’d see it in three lifetimes,” Rainbow said with a half smile. Her ragged featherduster wings scooped up the bottle, and she refilled the glasses. “What should we drink to?” She asked, returning the bottle to Twister.

“To the pegasi! May they fly in clear skies from now on,” Twister offered.

The gray officer stared into the glass. “To the fallen,” Storm Chaser said, more subdued. “May their sacrifices be remembered, and honored.”

Rainbow Dash mirrored the general, her own eyes distant. “To friends. May they always be reunited.”

In the dim confines of the ship, three glasses clinked together.

There was only one direction in this city: down. Every drop of water reinforces this fact. It flows endlessly from the firmament, races down the cracked black walls, spurts out of downspouts, sprays off molding, and crashes down stairs. Cold waterfalls cascaded down elevator shafts, and rivers flowed out lobby doors. The streets served as canals for the rain, until it disappeared down cracks in the asphalt, swirled down storm drains, and poured into the subways with the perpetual noise of a great inhalation. The current never ends. Downward. Downward. Down.

Escape is impossible. The curving streets only lead inward, and even the most concerted effort to leave would be stopped the moment one reached the grim walls rising story after story around the entire city, a monolithic barrier to keep the Wasteland out and the captive within. The street signs at intersections never point in a direction leading away from the city; the maps in the travelers' kiosks end at that wall, as if there were no Equestria beyond it.

The Wasteland is a cool monster, patient, accepting an escape today with the easy knowledge that tomorrow, or someday, it would claim you. Not this place. It hungered. And every drop of rain drew all within it in that inevitable and inexorable direction. Down.

The hissing rain punctuated by rumbles of thunder would make most see no need for stealth, sure that they could not be heard by those in the camp at the gate of a magical waste dump. The red and yellow bars of the E.F.S. might make one confident that they were the hunter in the forest as they picked out the armed and armored brood standing watch. A mistcloak in addition to the rest might make one feel as if they were completely safe from harm as they observed filthy zebras and ponies rolling orange and yellow barrels into wagons. Still, Lancer showed remarkable restraint when the tip of a spear touched the hollow beneath his ear and a voice said, in soft, accented Equestrian, "I could kill you now, traitor. I should kill you now."

"But you haven't, Adama," Lancer replied, equally quiet. "Nor have you raised alarm." He chanced a look behind him at a strong zebra mare with a long, hooked spear in her hooves. Her stripes were particularly wavy, and her rump seemed to show some kind of sea creature.

"How did you hear me?" he asked.

"The Atoli can track a shark ten feet under a breaking sea," she said smugly. "Also, your pony device makes a faint whine when wet."

"I was afraid you might hear it. Still, it has great uses in navigation," he replied.

She huffed. "You are exiled, Lancer," she said, narrowing her aquamarine eyes. "What are you doing here?"

"Perhaps I wished to see you again?" he countered.

Immediately she glowered at him. "That relationship ended with your exile. I *should* kill you."

"You keep saying that," he countered. "You know something is amiss, Adama."

"Everything is amiss. This city is cursed, remember? We are cursed for being here and you are doubly cursed," she said sourly.

"That reminds me of a very funny story," a mare said as she stepped out of the rain with a length of bamboo across her shoulders. Adama inhaled deeply but was not quick enough. With a spray of rain, the staff whirled and smacked her in the throat, then snapped up and knocked the spear away from Lancer, and finally wacked her legs out from under her. She went down in the mud, an opportune blast of thunder covering the noise of her thrashing. Then the staff was thrust at her face, and she froze, wheezing and coughing as she stared at the end of the stick. "Please don't make me kill you before I tell it."

"You are not the only one not alone," Adama said, then looked to the side where two zebra stallions stood, swaying slowly in the rain. Together, they collapsed in a heap, a dozen tufted needles sticking out of their backs. A little zebra filly sitting on a stump behind them smiled and waved a blowgun at the muddy mare. "Betsuwana," Adama muttered. Her eyes returned to Lancer. "What do you want?"

"Two things. First, I want to know what my father is up to. Why are you here? Why are you making our people work as slaves?"

"I will not answer your questions, traitor. The Atoli are loyal to our oaths to the last Caesar." From above, a skywagon slowly descended towards the trio and their prisoner, pulled by a waterlogged teal ghou. Her wings resembled drenched feather dusters, and Adama balked a little at the ghou pegasus's appearance.

"I want to go home. I want to take care of the children. There is far too much lightning to fly safely. Master Vanity told me to take care of the children," she rasped

in a daze.

The tiny zebra sprang across the ground and landed on the wagon. “You’re taking care of me, miss Harpica,” she piped, patting the ghoul’s drenched mane.

The ghoul gave a shaky smile. “Yes. I am. We should go home before you catch your death of cold.”

“That reminds me of another stor—” Sekashi began.

“Enough!” Adama hissed, looking from one to the next in bafflement. “I am no traitor. Take your lies and begone.”

“I am not going to get to tell my story, am I?” Sekashi said with a sigh as she stepped up beside Lancer and extended her pole. “Some zebras have no time for lore.” As Adama picked herself carefully out of the mud, her eyes went from one to the next, then glanced back at the camp.

“I will not betra—” Adama began as she wiped away the mud, and then the filly appeared perched on the end of the outstretched staff, balanced on the tips of her hooves and straining towards the strong mare with bright green eyes and a warm smile. “Uh... hello?”

“Hello!” she piped. “I’m Majina.”

Nopony seemed to move for a second, save Sekashi’s growing smile. Then Adama said slowly, “Yes... well... you should go and...”

Majina, though, was more interested in Adama’s dropped spear and gestured down at the massive polearm. “Wow! That’s a really big spear! What do you hunt with that? Super enormous mega kubwa radroaches?”

“It’s called a harpoon,” Adama muttered grumpily as she looked down at it. “My tribe, the Atoli, use them to hunt sharks and—” she glanced back to the now empty end of the staff, “squid?”

Majina appeared on her back. “What’s a shark? And a squid? And an Atoli?”

Lancer reached out and pulled her off Atama’s back and set her on his. “Majina, she needs to answer our questions first.”

“My questions were important too,” she said with a sulk, crossing her forelegs before her as she scowled at him.

Adama looked from the young filly to Lancer, then back at the camp. “They are from a place called Glyphmark. Your father named them traitors, no better than ponies,”

Adama said carefully. "We are collecting this... poison. I know not why."

"Ah. That reminds me. It is funny, is it not?" Sekashi said. "First he names me traitor. Then my daughter. Others that fled with us. All who wish not to join his Remnant. So many traitors." She peered at Adama, then blinked. "Why, you are not laughing? Do you not find it funny? One wonders when he shall say you are a traitor. Or the stones. Or the sky. How many times must one name another 'traitor' before one thinks their idea of loyalty and treason quite odd?"

"He is Legate. It is our duty..." Adama began, averting her eyes.

"It is your duty to collect magical waste? To put our people in harm's way?" Lancer asked sharply. "From Glyphmark or anywhere else, none of our people should be treated so. It is an insult to all our tribes. You said yourself that we should not be here. The Atoli should be on your islands. I thought I knew why he brought us here, but now I know nothing. He has love for naught but the Brood."

"I... I have concerns," Adama admitted hesitantly. "So many do. When the Brood of Coyotl appeared, they were powerful but few and easily commanded. Now they are so many. Ten for every one of us. And more every day! They follow their own strange orders, and we are left to gather weapons for them, to fight and collect whatever he bids as if we were dogs. And if they come to us from Equestrian settlements, travelers are enslaved immediately. Our people!"

Lancer sighed. "Is anyzebra going to do anything about it, Adama?"

"Are you?" she snapped back. "You are exiled. Betrayed. Cursed!"

"I am," he answered. "We will free those prisoners, and Harpica will fly us all to safety."

"I'm not much of a flier. Much better as a nanny. I'd very much like to return to doing that. Teaching young ponies their alphabet. Mathematics. Scales."

"Oooh! She's been teaching me to sing!" Majina piped, bouncing up on the wagon, and took a deep breath.

Sekashi silenced her, pressing a hoof to her lips. "Quietly, my heart. I do not wish to test your darts against the brood just yet." Undaunted, Majina began to dance on the wagon, lips moving silently.

Adama watched in bafflement. "You're all mad."

"There's a surplus of that in this place," Lancer replied. "Is anyzebra in the Remnant brave enough to stand up to my father?"

She looked away, tapping her hooves against the shaft of the harpoon. "Perhaps. Maybe. Afterwards. Once the city is broken. Once the Maiden returns... if she returns... like the Legate assures us she will. But there are the Harbingers to consider. Hundreds of well-armed, well-fed, well-organized ponies. They camp near ours and wait. Watching. Waiting for the moment to attack! Till they are dealt with, we cannot withdraw. Not when we are so close to destroying this foul place."

"And as their numbers swell, so too does the number of Brood," Lancer countered.

The mare squirmed uncomfortably. "If I could, I would take Pokey and leave this place. I long to hear the sea waves on rocky shores again. Tracking sharks along the reefs and shoals. This rain... this neverending storm... it is not right. But if I were to try and flee...."

Lancer touched his scarred face. "I know."

"You named your spear Pokey?" Majina asked curiously, four sets of eyes falling upon the filly. Adama flushed and hugged the harpoon closer to herself as Majina grinned and waved her blowgun. "This is Mr. Sleepytime. He puts folks to sleep."

Adama relaxed a little and smiled some. "You seem... happier... being cursed, Impalii," she said as she examined the three.

"Sometimes, once you know you are properly damned, there is great relief," Lancer replied with a tired smile. "As my mother said. Sometimes there is a great question over who is cursed, and who is not."

"Wait!" Majina looked from Lancer to Adama. "Who's Impalii?"

"That is his name," Sekashi said. "Lancer was his father's nickname."

"So... Lancer... Pokey... Impalii... Adama..." Majina said, tapping her chin before her emerald eyes popped wide. "Wait. Did you two have a thing?"

Lancer and Adama both flushed as Majina grinned. "It's not like I was on missions all the time," Lancer said defensively.

"You weren't?" Adama countered, and suddenly she stepped closer, hooking a leg behind his neck and pulling him closer. "I was very sad when you were exiled." Then she pressed her lips to his firmly, and he went even redder. Harpica covered Majina's face with a wing, but the young zebra pulled the bedraggled pinions apart and peeked through.

When the pair parted lips, the filly could contain herself no longer. "Adama and Impalii sitting in a tree! K- I- S- S-" Majina began to sing. Suddenly, a shout rang

out from the camp. The red bars were moving quite rapidly. "Oopsie," she covered her mouth.

Lancer seemed half glad for the attack, pulling away and focusing on the camp and the guards who raced towards them, shouting. "I will not ask you to betray yourself, Adama. My sister will put you to sleep," Lancer said sharply as he raised his rifle.

"No. As you said," she hefted the harpoon. "It is time for action."

"Get ready to fly the prisoners to safety, Harpica," Lancer ordered as he took a bead on an approaching Brood. "Adama, if we survive this, my mother has... theories... about the Legate. You should hear." He said it with immense disgust, feeling his guts clench. "Kill none but the Brood, if you can help it," he told Adama, then turned to the other two. "Majina. Mother. Get into the camp and get the prisoners out."

Majina nodded, but then frowned at her mother. "But what about your story, mamma?" Her lips exaggerated each word.

"Patience, love. There is a time to tell stories, and there is a time to live them," Sekashi replied. As gunfire roared out in the woods, the clouds snapped and crackled above.

This was a city of artifice. Of artifact. Remains of the ponies who'd once lived here were strewn everywhere. If the water could not dissolve it or sweep it away, it persisted. Sodden clothes lay strewn everywhere, like an immense collection of dirty laundry. Eyeglasses gleamed as rain sheeted off their lenses. False teeth grinned at the stark towers. Horseshoes slowly bled rust into the gutters and drains. Toys and dolls sat forlornly for children who would never play with them again.

So much and so little at the same time. Entertainment tapes sitting on racks of a rental store. Precious jewelry resting on sodden velvet pillows. Bars of gold and sacks of bits quietly reposing in sepulchral vaults. Shelf after shelf of book and magazine, never to be read. The plenty and precious of an age rendered into inert matter by abandonment.

Even the bits of the Wasteland that had intruded here had been quickly touched by the feeling of stasis. Pieces of shelters, broken skywagons, the heaps of raider and scavenger clothes... all were equal in the place. Even the massive airship, wedged vertically between two skyscrapers with its nose suspended mere feet from the cracked asphalt, seemed as if it'd plunged here centuries rather than months

ago. The slow trickle of red dripping from its ports and breaches was the only evidence to the contrary.

“None of this makes any sense,” Glory muttered she stared at the printout showing peaks and valleys in a spectrum of colors. Most crept along the bottom half inch of the graph. One peak, however, rose above all others to the very top of the graph. “Even with the Arcanospectrograph, we still aren’t any closer to understanding what Enervation actually is.” She sighed, stretched out her left wing to hook the silver ring lying on the scientific apparatus, and peered at it as if trying to unlock its secrets by eye alone. “We know the field is either generated or magnified by these, but we don’t know how. We know the field is damaging to living tissue, but we don’t know why. And Blackjack was resistant to the effects, but we aren’t sure of the cause.” Grunting, she rubbed her face with a hoof. “This is maddening.”

“Speak for yourself,” the normally cynical and surly Triage replied as she gawked at other printouts. The pair were in an old lab in the Collegiate; the room had been cleaned out and loaded with fresh equipment and terminals. Several silver rings hung from pegs on the wall, and there were cages filled with bloatsprites in the corner. “That thing is amazing. Graphing magic is so cool.” She shuffled the papers around for a moment, then looked at Glory. “Why would pegasi study magic, though?”

“Mostly weapons research, depressingly enough. Thunderhead did have a large civilian science research base, though. Plus we had unicorns in the tower to help, so why not?”

“When you said that your scientists needed a place to relocate, I didn’t expect you’d take over two whole buildings... but with equipment like this, I’m not too fussed. Makes this place feel like a real college again,” Triage said as she squinted. “So what’s this mean again?”

Glory set aside the paper she was examining and trotted over to where Triage was examining a printout of the her own magical capabilities. “Each of those high points is a spell you can cast and its corresponding characteristics. Ten peaks. Not bad at all, considering that the average for most unicorns is six.” She looked at the apparatus. “This Arcanospectrograph is rated at a million specific magical wavelengths. Most magical effects we simply don’t know, but we have almost ten thousand spell effects charted. This one,” she said, pointing at a smaller peak, “is the telekinesis

constant. We use it for calibration.”

“And that’s my healing spell. There’s my scalpel spell. And there’s my anesthesia spell. Huh,” Triage murmured. It was odd to see more than grim practicality in her eyes. It suited her. “So much potential magic,” she said as she gestured at the tiny squiggles at the bottom of the page. “I wonder if any unicorn’s learned them all?”

“Well, most arcane spell effects aren’t unicorn magic. Dragonfire. Balefire. Cockatrice petrification. Pegasi weather manipulation. There’s plenty of magic outside unicorn spells.” She looked at the first graph and stabbed at the huge peak with a wing. “And that one bar is Enervation.”

“So why is it so much bigger than all the rest?” Triage asked.

“Because, relative to all other known natural forms of background magic, Enervation is much higher energy. It’s more ‘powerful’, relatively speaking, of course,” she added quickly. “All magical fields are incredibly weak until something focuses that energy. Like the silver rings, a dragon breathing fire, or a unicorn casting a spell. Without that focus, ambient magical fields tend to cancel each other out. With some exceptions,” she added with a frown, looking at one graph that seemed completely random peaks. “Like Flux, taint, magical radiation, and such.”

“We always thought that Enervation was just a form of radiation,” Triage said.

“No. After seeing this, I’m certain it’s not.” She trotted over to two other pictures. In these graphs were more of the random spikings. “Flux and radiation are completely chaotic. The spikes are more intense, but they’re also more noisy. It’s like being in a room with millions of tiny crazy unicorns casting spells at random. Enervation is more like... like... one incredibly powerful spell being cast from very very far away. So when it’s focused...” Glory trailed off.

“You start dying,” Triage finished for her, glancing at several jars of goop next to empty bloatsprite cages. “I never really understood Enervation’s pathology. It just hits everything all at once. If you’re wounded, the wounds exacerbate, but even uninjured tissue is affected. Metabolism slows. Protein and cell walls break down. Organ failure. Death. Then liquefaction. As if dying wasn’t enough for this spell. And it squashes healing magic too. Even potions aren’t immune.”

“But why? Is it some kind of general ‘death spell’? Why does it drive ghouls feral, then? And why doesn’t it affect Blackjack?” Glory scowled at the printouts.

Triage regarded her thoughtfully a moment. “You really want to crack this, don’t you? To find Blackjack?”

Glory closed her eyes a moment. "Partly. A large part. A part of me also wants to help Father; for some reason, he's a walking low-level Enervation field that's keeping his body from healing. But I want to help in general, too. Thousands suffer, and if it's true that these silver rings are found all over Equestria, there could be settlements that are sickened by Enervation and don't have a clue because the effects are so insidious."

Triage considered the graphs. "You really think Blackjack's alive?"

"She's cheated death more times than I can count. I have to believe she can pull it off again," Glory said, then shook her head. "I have to check for myself. If there's no sign of her... I'll... I'll accept it. But we aren't going to simply stop searching just because she's gone. Rampage went in a month ago. For all we know, she found something."

"Or she found something that could actually kill her," Triage offered, frowning at the graphs once more. "Maybe we can work out why Blackjack's immune. We asked Professor Zodiac and Deus and the cyberpony survivors, and all of them are sickened by Enervation, as are the Sand Dogs. So why was she special? Was it something in her design? Something she did? Something she was exposed to? For all we know, it's that damned megaspell program she carries with her."

"Or a combination of two or more of those," called a mare from the door. The stunning blond-maned pegasi drew Glory's eyes. Accompanied by Moonshadow pushing Sky Striker in a wheelchair, Doctor Morningstar had taken steps to reduce her hotness with thick glasses, a lab coat, and messy tousled mane. It did absolutely nothing to detract from her hotness. "We have to take care to eliminate all extraneous variables to draw a useful conclusion." The bandaged stallion was taking great pains to keep his eyes off Morningstar's rump, and the doctor looked back at her own butt. "Fascinating. Even covered, it continues to draw attention."

"Doctor," Glory said in pained tones.

"I'm sorry, my dear, but when I said it'd be wonderful to be as sexy as I am smart, I never anticipated how *distracting* it would be. Why, I was lucky to even make it out of the bathroom!" the doctor said in injured tones.

"I can take off that sexy with a belt sander," Glory muttered under her breath.

Triage murmured, smiling around her cigarette, "Careful. You're sounding like a Wastelander."

"Careful? You're not gay," she muttered.

The others assembled around the machine. "Where do you need me?" her father asked.

"Just put your hoof on the reader," Glory replied as Moonshadow studied the print-outs. He groaned as he leaned forward, placing the indicated part on the machine. Rainbow light began to bathe the end of his limb, Glory scowling at the doctor still entranced by the wiggling of her own butt. "How are the refugees doing?"

"Oh, they're fine," the doctor said absently. "Your father's name was enough to get some order established, and though we're spread out, most families are still united. If we could get the weather under control, we could start getting some serious repair work done on Thunderhead." She tapped her lips with a wing. "If I were to get a degree in geology, would I become even more attractive? Perhaps spontaneously generating a glittery aura with just a mane flip..." Morningstar tossed her mane, then looked expectantly at her reflection.

"Doctor Morningstar, I know how disorienting transformations like that are, but please focus," Glory objected.

"Of course. Of course. For science," she said absently with another mane toss.

"I've seen this before," Moonshadow replied with a frown as she looked at the Enervation graph.

"You couldn't have. This is the first time we've scanned the ring with the Arcanospectroscope," Glory said absently.

Moonshadow glared flatly at her. "And I'm telling you that I've seen this wavelength before."

"When?" Morningstar asked.

"Observing a section of space about five months ago. It was the wavelength that stood out. Most stars don't produce magic in this band. Blue. Yellow. Red. Even purple and pink. But there aren't very many stars that produce a green wavelength of magic." She tapped the paper. "Four hundred and thirteen point six six two nanosparkles. Way off for most stars."

"Enervation from space?" Glory said in bafflement.

"Way off in space." She returned her eyes to the chart. "Adjusting for the light/magic speed differential constant, the source was in the ballpark of eight hundred million lightyears away."

“Huh?” Triage blinked, then pointed to her horn. “Hey, I’m the unicorn here. You eggheads aren’t allowed to know more about magic than me. That’s just. . . wrong!”

Moonshadow gave a slightly sheepish smile. “Sorry. This is just our field. Light travels about ten percent faster than magic. As far as we’re concerned, the two are simultaneous, but if a spell effect is big enough or the distance far enough, the difference can be measured. It’s really only something of interest to astronomers. . . or megaspell researchers,” Moonshadow replied. “Pity we weren’t around eighty million years ago. It must have been a heck of a light show. From the magical radiation to be hitting us now, it must have been something pretty spectacular.”

“Are we in any danger?” Triage scowled with worry.

“Relax. The field strength is lower than a dead unicorn’s horn. It’s probably been hitting Equestria for centuries now.” Moonshadow sighed. “A pity I didn’t get on it sooner. There’s an academic paper in there on astromagical phenomenon. Maybe two.”

“Publish or perish,” Morningstar agreed with a somber nod. “Isn’t that how it always goes?”

“Enervation from space,” Glory muttered, her purple eyes narrowing in thought. “Moony. You said the light arrived eighty million years ago?”

“About that. Give or take half a million years. I’d need a full lab and about a month to verify beyond that,” her sister answered. “We’d need to find fossilized tree rings, see when they absorbed this wavelength of light. As of now it’s just a hypothesis.”

Glory waved her hoof impatiently. “Could something *e/se* have arrived eighty million years ago too?” Glory asked, looking soberly from one pony to the next.

“You mean little gray ponies with antennae?” Triage wore an expression stuck between nervous and mocking. “Space ponies?”

“Statistically, there must be life out there,” Morningstar said casually. “Of course, considering the vast distances of space, the odds of it traveling to us are staggeringly small. Any sign of visitation and such would be of immense scientific and cultural significan—”

“They’ve been here,” Sky Striker rasped, cutting the mare off.

“I beg pardon?” Morningstar blinked in bafflement.

“Extraterrestrial technology has been recovered on Equestria,” the bandaged pony said as the scanner finally beeped and began to print its graph.

Morningstar gave a sick little laugh, “You’re joking.” When Sky Striker didn’t reply, her smile melted away. “You’re not joking...” She started to sputter, “But, why? The scientific opportunity! The experimentation and observation and—” Her eyes hardened behind her glasses. “It had military applications, didn’t it?”

“In spades,” Sky Striker answered. “The military has always made sure it retrieved any technology from the stars. I wasn’t a part of the interception teams, but I was considered for several months. Finally was turned down after the dragon attack; too high-profile for their operations.” He dropped his eyes. “It was all top secret,” he added, as if that might justify what he had done.

“You know, there are times I am grateful some surfacers smashed the little scheme you had going on,” Morningstar glowered.

“Don’t tell me you never worked on something top secret, Morningstar. Your sonic control research was a little *too* specific to hellhounds,” Sky Striker retorted. “You never would have kept your funding as it was if you hadn’t done something for the ponies with the guns.”

“Okay!” Triage shouted as she levitated Sky Striker’s report off the machine. “Trying to solve Enervation, remember? Political axes to grind don’t help that.” She looked from Sky Striker to Morningstar to Glory, and one by one they averted their angry glares and nodded. Triage examined the graph. “Guess what?”

“Four Thirteen point six six two?” Glory asked. Triage gave a grim nod. “That confirms why your healing is retarded, daddy, but not why Enervation is focused on you. Or why it’s doing what it’s doing.” She glared at the graph as if it had personally insulted her, then rubbed her chin. “It’s like there’s a silver ring inside you, but Mother didn’t have the time to implant one. Unless...” Her eyes widened. “Blood sample! I need a blood sample and a microscope!”

She immediately started searching through equipment on the tables. Morningstar and her sister watched impassively for a moment, then Morningstar told Moonshadow, “This place has an observatory. It might have some records on file of that stellar phenomenon you mentioned, to see if it was any different a few hundred years ago, or some other useful equipment gathering dust. Honestly, considering how much got thrown into back rooms, I wouldn’t be surprised. I’d give my virginity for a precision picosparkle wavelength analyzer or a multiphase magic inducer.”

“Haven’t you already lost that since becoming a mare?” Moonshadow asked as they trotted to the door. “Like, a dozen times over?”

“Virginity is all in the mind,” Morningstar replied glibly. “Besides, I’ve been a father and a grandfather. I’m quite thrilled for the chance to be a mother too.”

When the pair had left, Triage let out a breath and rubbed her temples. “I don’t think I’ll be able to handle him. . . her. . . *that* pony much longer,” she muttered.

“How do you think I feel?” Sky Striker rasped. “If I couldn’t plead being on death’s door, she’d be trying to get at my ‘pedigree’.”

“Having him as my grad school advisor was bad enough. I *have* a mother,” Glory said flatly, then sighed. “If it makes it easier, think of the doctor as having intellectual incontinence. Everything in her head dribbles out, no matter what kind of a mess it makes. It’s not personal,” Glory said as she took a drop of blood from a vial and put it on a slide. As she carefully worked the knobs, she asked, “Have there been any new problems here, Triage?”

“You mean having a thousand pegasi crashing our facilities?” Triage asked, then took a pull on the cigarette. “There’re still a lot of angry feelings, but the fact is, you folks are real scientists. Most of us were self-taught, tutored by Zodiac, or Steel Ranger rejects. I didn’t even know what an ‘Arcanospectrum’ was till today.” She twitched the cigarette pinched limply between her lips. “You fixed up our turrets and worked out the bugs in the implants, and we’re getting money off them. I’m grateful. Still, there’re plenty of folks who feel like the Thunderhead invaded.”

“Sorry,” Glory said, ears folding back a little as she looked away from microscope eyepiece and to the blue unicorn. “I know you didn’t want this. . .”

“Want? Who gets what they want?” Triage snorted. “I wanted a stallion and a filly right about now. I got a colt who took off at the first syllable of ‘pregnant’ and a dead child six months later. No pony gets what they want. You get what you get. If you’re smart, you make it what you want.”

“I didn’t know,” Glory said.

Triage waved the cigarette irritably in the air with her hoof. “No reason you should. And I’m not fishing for sympathy. Just do what you need to do.”

Glory returned her eyes to the microscope, focusing back and forth till the red blobs turned into flat pancakes mixed in with an occasional whitish blob. Then she inhaled sharply as she spotted the silvery sparkle and zoomed in even more. “Sweet Celestia.” The red blobs filled her view, and scattered across them were tiny silver rings. “That’s why you can’t heal, daddy. You have enervation rings inside you.”

“I do? How is that possible?” he asked.

"When she injured you, her wings must have shed millions of these into your wounds. They're all over your cells," Glory said with a frown. Glory moved aside, letting Triage take the eyepiece.

"Son of a bitch. Look at all of them," the doctor muttered.

"And I don't have a clue how to stop them," Glory muttered. "They aren't affected by magnetism or radiation. Electrical fields just make them stronger!" She glared at the large silver ring on the table. "And if there's a magical solution, I don't know it. I can work theory. I can't cast spells."

Triage levitated her magical graphs to herself again and stared at it. "What if I *cast* this spell?" she asked, tapping the enervation spike.

"You think you can? Would that do anything? It's creating that wave," Glory objected. When Triage looked at her flatly, the pegasi relented. "Okay. Okay. If you think you can, go for it."

"I'll step out of the room, if you don't mind. If I have those rings inside me, I'd rather not be around when you're experimenting with that kind of magic," Sky Striker said archly.

"Oh. Sorry, daddy," Glory said and at once moved behind him and pushed his wheelchair out the door. In the next room, six pegasi and two unicorns were working with dozens of small round metallic implants.

Sky Striker cleared his throat. "How's your new wing? Still sore?"

Glory turned and examined at her left wing where once there'd been just a stump. "A little. I haven't been able to fly yet." Glory sighed and rolled her eyes. "I wonder if the doctor grew it knowing I'd give him more slack? Some days I'm just not sure with him. Her... Ugh, this is worse than being Rainbow Dash!"

Sky Striker chuckled as the bandaged stallion sat back. "Give it time. I'm sure you'll get a handle on it," he said, then stared out the rain-streaked window. "About Blackjack. . ."

"She's alive," Glory said firmly.

"You might have to reassess that, eventually," he said calmly, reaching out to pat her back.

"Eventually isn't now. Blackjack is alive. She has to be," Glory said with the same firmness. "If she hasn't contacted us, it's because she's in trouble. The sooner we figure out Enervation, the sooner we can go help her."

He let out a long sigh. "And at what point do you conclude that she didn't escape the implosion, Glory? You can't find evidence if it's been crushed by a megaspell." Glory didn't answer, and he sighed again. "I'm not saying that you should give up hope now, but you're a rational pony. When do you draw the line?"

Glory was quiet for several seconds, as if she was searching for that answer. "If we go into the Core and can't find her, then I'll accept that she's gone. Not before then," Glory said, then gave him a gentle hug. "Don't worry. I won't go till we're sure it's safe."

"Sometimes I doubt if there is such a thing anymore," he replied, then fluttered his wings, pushing his chair away from Glory and towards the far exit. "Go take care of your work. I know you'll find your answer sooner or later. I need to contact Dusk at the Skyport and make sure everything there is alright." Glory watched him slowly wheel out of sight, then sighed herself.

The sigh was cut short by an explosion in the lab; Glory jumped and dashed inside. Triage lay on the floor; the worktable that had held the silver ring had split in two, and from it rose a delicate silver spire. The form seemed to balance perfectly upon a point, and as it rose up, branches curled off it in oddly mathematical patterns. "What did you do?" Glory asked the shocked Triage.

"I just cast magic at it. I was thinking about... other things... and when I heard that note, I just let my horn do... something," Triage mumbled in shock. "I... I don't know how. I've never cast a spell like that before."

Glory stared at it for almost a minute. "Can you do it again?" Glory asked.

"Of course. Because one explosion's never enough," Triage mumbled as she stared at the silvery spire. Then she closed her eyes, and her horn glowed. Nothing happened. She peeked at the tree, and her horn glowed again. Nothing.

"You said you were thinking about other things. What..." Glory started, then caught Triage's glare. "Oh..."

"It's not the kind of thing you get away from. You wouldn't understand," Triage muttered, looking away.

"I might a little. Would you... please...think about what you were thinking about before?" Glory requested delicately. Triage glowered at her but closed her eyes and lit her horn. Glory's ears twitched. "I... I can hear it!" Vivid green boils of magic bubbled along Triage's horn, exploding in bursts of green and purple.

Suddenly the silver 'tree' sucked back into itself, reforming into a tiny hexagon. A

second later it morphed into a cylinder the size of Glory's hoof. Then it collapsed into a bird's nest of silver wire. Triage sniffed as tears ran down her cheek, and her horn stopped shining, the greenish-purple blisters of magic fading away. "Okay. That's enough."

"I'm sorry," Glory said, trying to touch the unicorn, but she pulled away as the nest melted into a ball a hoof across. Glory sighed, then picked it up carefully between her hooves. "The mass feels the same! And it's not heated in the slightest. I wonder if this is some kind of static fluid instead of a solid?"

"An excellent question. We might find the answer with this," the doctor said from the doorway. A strange piece of equipment was perched on her rump, with tiny dishes waving back and forth and talismans beeping on the side. "A sub-micronic wavelength amplifier. Still in its M.A.S. wrapping!" The pale, blond pegasus danced on her hooves. "Ooooh, I love this place! I would have come years ago if I'd known!"

Moonshadow caught the equipment as it almost bounced off Morningstar's rump. "Careful. For all we know, this is the last one of these anywhere. What do you want it for?"

"I have a theory." Morningstar grinned as Moonshadow set the equipment on an intact counter. "A way to explain how Enervation does what it does while being only a single wavelength."

"Twilight Sparkle's dissertation on magical subharmonics?" Glory asked archly.

Morningstar's smile immediately soured into a pout. "I did give you back your wing. The least you could do is let me pretend that I came up with the idea."

"Plagiarism is a terrible thing. You taught me that," Glory countered.

Morningstar huffed. "Fine. *Twilight Sparkle's* theory, then. At least give me credit for remembering it." She cleared her throat again. "Twilight theorized that within individual wavelengths of magic there were infinitely small subharmonics at work carrying more specific information. It's what would allow your magic to heal an injury, rather than give the patient localized cancer. These subharmonics are at work at a subconscious level. You don't think about repairing every damaged cell, do you? You simply heal the injury."

"So you think Enervation has subharmonics?" Glory asked, rubbing her chin.

"If Twilight's theory holds true, sure. Otherwise, magic just wouldn't work. Why else would a cockatrice's gaze turn a viewer to stone, but not if they avert their eyes? And why not turn grass and trees to stone as well? Or how does a teleportation spell

know to teleport your saddlebags but not the dirt you're standing on?" Morningstar asked with a grin and toss of her mane. "I love being smart."

"I don't think the Killing Joke realized just how much you'd enjoy it," Glory growled before looking at Triage and holding up the silver orb. "Would you mind?"

Triage sighed and took it again as Morningstar fiddled with the knobs. "Okay. I just... I don't like this stuff. When I hear that scream, it feels like..." she shook her head. "It's like when I lost my... I can't stop it. Makes me think that if I just had a regeneration implant, he might have made it," she said with a glance over her shoulder, back towards the lab.

"Just once more. If we can map the subharmonics, that might be the key," Glory assured her.

Triage sighed, and her horn started to glow. A minute later, the green glow began to form and bubble on her spire. Morningstar's obnoxious grin melted, shivering and fluffing her feathers as she focused on the machine. Glory swallowed repeatedly. The orb shivered and shifted in Triage's hooves, becoming a pyramid, a metallic eyeball, a syringe, and a gear. Then the tough, cynical mare let out a sob and backed away as the silver blob tumbled to the ground. "That's it. I'm done. Grow your own horns if you want to fuck with that stuff any more."

"It's fine! It's fine," Glory said, glancing down at a statuette of a seven-month-old pony fetus. She kicked it out of sight under the ruins of the workbench. Every mare there, even Doctor Morningstar, seemed aware of how not fine it was. Glory turned to Morningstar and Moonshadow at the device. "Well?"

"This is..." Morningstar began, then faltered. Her eyes shifted over to the covered statuette, and she swallowed again. "Yes. There are subharmonics here. Incredibly complex subharmonics. I've never..." She glanced again. "I am too a good pony," she muttered softly to herself. "This Enervation has to be one of the most complex spells in history. Look." She passed to Glory a printout much like the former graphs.

Glory stared at the printout, the spikes and the valleys. Then she checked another. And another. "Why aren't these constant? See? Here? And Here? And here?" she said as she tapped certain lines where the peaks rose and fell.

"The equipment is working. Might be a calibration thing?" Moonshadow asked.

"No. It's like..." she blinked and stared at the covered lump of silver metal. "It's a carrier wave. It's not just spell effects. This is carrying information!" She carefully lifted the boards and fished out the lump. "If we hooked this up to a terminal, analyzed

the broadcast... it might be an enemy transmission. Or perhaps it's trying to control something? Or maybe all those different forms the metal took could have some sort of technical pattern! We could use this to our advantage. Think of the possibilities!" Glory gushed.

Moonshadow said dryly, "I thought you were all about finding Blackjack?"

Glory grew still. Slowly, she stared down at the silver image of a dead, unborn pony. She glanced over at the stricken Triage and the solemn Morningstar and Moonshadow. Then she firmly set it aside and pushed it away. Moonshadow trotted over and covered it with a cloth.

"Thanks," Triage muttered, and Moonshadow nodded.

"So. We have the spell effect's subharmonics. How do we overcome it?" Glory asked in brisk tones, eager to move on.

"I have no idea. This is where theory gets a little fuzzy when it comes to application," Morningstar admitted. "...If we got our hooves on every single working transmitter in the Wasteland, brought all of them here to the Hoof, and cranked them up to maximum, we might be able to drown out the Enervation enough to resist its effects." She began counting on her pinions, "We'll need a few thousand workers, money to pay them all, air support, security... a working survey of the entire Wasteland..."

"I think that counts as a plan B," Moonshadow said dryly.

"What about counter magic?" Triage offered.

"Habazahuh?" Morningstar blinked. "What's that?"

Triage sighed. "Something some ponies can do when they know the same spell and they know the other pony knows it. Part of the reason most unicorns don't gush over what magic spells they know." She blinked at the blank faces. "None of you know this? It's pretty basic magic."

"Most unicorns didn't get published in scientific journals in the Enclave," Glory said. Triage glanced from one to the next, as if verifying that they needed her input.

"Well, say you're a unicorn who's going to cast a healing spell to heal yourself, and I know how to cast it, and I know that you're going to cast it. Well... it's hard to explain. It's like... casting backward or... inside-out or cross-eyed. But if I cast my counterspell at the same time you cast your spell, then there's a great big flash, we both get knocked on our butts, and no other magic goes off. Great way to get a migraine, by the way," she added, levitating out another cigarette and lighting it up.

“Interesting. That’s a principle that’s sound in communication jamming as well,” Morningstar said thoughtfully. “But how would we find the precise opposite microfrequencies to counter such a complicated—”

Moonshadow took the printout from the scanner, turned the paper over vertically so the white backside faced up, and began to fill in the microfrequency peaks to the base of the page. Morningstar’s jaw dropped as, in a minute, she scribbled out the reverse of the Enervation signal. “Easy,” she said as she held it up.

“My word... Well... I...” Morningstar blustered. She adjusted her thick classes with a wing. “Well, it’ll certainly get us in the right weather system. Some fine tuning will be in order, of course; it’s quite a complex blend. And it will certainly take a while to train a unicorn to cast so precise a spell...” But Moonshadow didn’t seem to be listening, just staring at what she’d drawn. “What,” Morningstar said, noticing Moonshadow’s distraction. “Don’t tell me you’ve seen *that* pattern before too?”

Moonshadow tapped her muzzle with a hoof, then slowly smiled. “You know what? I think I have...”

Fluid. It dripped. Trickled. Splashed. Swirled. Gurgled. Sloshed. Flowed. It moved swiftly, slowly, and not at all. It eschewed straight lines, biting into them whenever it could. When collected, it sat still with contained mass, waiting for the moment to burst free. When in motion, it powered through the city in gouts and torrents.

It was not the sole source of movement in the city, though. Through the streets whirled storms of black and silver. The murmuring buzz resonated in the same key as that horrible note that suffused everything in this place. The whirlwinds swept around the city in a gale, ripping apart anything that caught their attention before proceeding on. Like water, they were constantly in motion, those tiny black and silver dots. When still, they formed inky shimmery mats that could explode into a fury of motion.

But they were not simple hazards. They moved with purpose. In their wake, a fresh cable would stretch from one building to another. A support beam would be chewed through. A hole shored up. Their ultimate design might be inexplicable, but there was a design. A will at work in this dead and empty city...

The tunnel echoed faintly beneath his hooves as he strode along next to hissing

conduits in the wan light. He marched with slow, steady steps and smiled amiably. He didn't even glance at the sentry robots he passed, each one watching his progress with cold, mechanical eyes. A white plastic disk pendant bounced against his chest with every step. Despite his smile, his facial muscles twitched with barely restrained anger as he approached a hatch next to a huge door. Two alcoves held a pair of ultra-sentinels flanking the portal.

"What is it?" a synthetic mare hissed through a speaker in the door.

"I need a little chat, oh promised one," Steel Rain said casually, his words curling with a faint sneer.

"Leave. Don't return till you are called for," the voice snapped.

"Okay then," he said with the smallest of shrugs. "I can just chat with these robots. No way your Goddess will hear, right?"

There was a pause, and the door hissed open. Inside was a large pod surrounded by two coaxial rings, each studded with a half-dozen mechanical arms. They whirled and spun around the object suspended in the pod: a partially-disassembled mare. Her glowing green eyes focused on the stallion with a killing glare. "What do you want, Steel? I'm in the middle of some delicate upgrades." Her four legs were connected only by wires, and her hips were a full foot removed from her chest, the gap strung by metallic cables and vertebrae. One wing remained connected to her shoulder while the other was detached and being worked on by tiny talismans on the arms' metal manipulators.

"Oh, I know," he said casually as the door shut slid behind him and he trotted around to the control terminals. "Got to love automation, don't ya? Just push a button and off it goes."

"What are you doing?" Dawn asked, her green eyes widening in shock.

"Pausing the process," he said, tapping a button. A second later the arms froze, leaving her now dangling from the restraints around her chest, throat, and hips. Then he calmly walked over, and, as Dawn watched in shock, smashed the cameras in the corners of the room. "Now then. It's just you and me. We need to talk about some things."

Dawn thrashed against the restraints. "Turn the machine back on immediately! How dare you?" But Steel Rain just smiled calmly at her. "Do it!" He didn't move. "Do it or you're dead!" He didn't move or say a word. His silence and inaction induced such rage that she started to shake, making the restraints jingle.

“Actually, I’m not,” he said as he touched a scar on his chest, “Confirming my theory that you don’t have my kill command. Cognitum does.” He slowly approached her. “So I’d like a little talk about you, me, and your Goddess. You see, I’ve noticed some... inconsistencies in our organization. ‘Kill Blackjack.’ ‘Capture Blackjack.’ ‘Leave Blackjack alone.’ It’s been galling me for quite a while now. For instance, if Blackjack is so vital, you should allow me to take some Harbingers and search for her, but instead we’ve been sitting on our asses gathering numbers and training with no mention of what we are gathering and training for.”

“My Goddess has countless eyes searching—“

“No. She has countless robots searching,” Steel Rain countered as he started pacing back and forth in front of her. “Robot processors miss things. Empty food tins. Missing gemstones. Turds in the corner. A trail of drained Wild Pegasus bottles. Signs that she hasn’t been crushed to a layer of atoms in the megaspell. It wouldn’t take more than a dozen of us wearing these,” he said as he levitated the talisman around his neck, “to find something. But that’s not the only thing that’s nagged me.” He pressed his lips together a moment in a scowl before asking, “Why did you tell me spark grenades don’t work on cyberponies?”

“Let me go!” she screamed, jerking against the restraints.

He slapped her hard across the face with a hoof. She gaped at him as he took a deep breath and smiled. “Oh I’ve wanted to do that for months.” Then his eyes locked on hers. “When we started hunting her, you told me that cyberponies had natural EM dampening. So I focused on armor-piercing weaponry. Only now, I discover, from a pegasus of all ponies, that spark weapons are *incredibly* effective on cyberponies. My men could have brought her in immediately with that information.”

“Perhaps I made a mistake,” Dawn muttered.

He laughed. “You? Forgive me, but, *you*? The champion of all things cyberization? The mare who technically isn’t even that anymore? *You* made a mistake about a cyberpony’s fundamental vulnerability? You?” He gave a sardonic smirk and shook his head briefly with short, quick movements. “I don’t think so.”

“You are dead meat,” she spat. “What you think doesn’t matter. Turn the machine back on!”

But he just smiled wider. “And then there were all the changes to our orders. After the setback by Black Pony Mountain, we should have pursued Blackjack. We could have taken her before she arrived at Meatlocker, while she was there, in the tunnels

outside Hightower, or certainly while she recovered. Instead, Cognitum called us off. She wanted you to talk to Blackjack and get her to give up EC-1101. Why? Why should it have mattered if we took it in Meatlocker or Blackjack gave it up willingly?" He narrowed his eyes as he stared into hers. "We were so close after that attack at Black Pony Mountain. A sniper for the alicorn, a flamer for the bat freak and to blind Rampage, a spark grenade for Blackjack. Done. So why would Cognitum call us off?"

"Who are you to question a Goddess?" Dawn demanded.

"It's always fun to question the psychology of a supposed higher power," he chuckled. "And in this case, it led me to three disturbing possibilities. First, that your 'Goddess'," he said, twitching his forehooves in the air, "is completely insane and irrational. That would explain a lot."

"You dare—" she began, only to be silenced by another hoof across the face.

"Don't interrupt with villainous cliché. It's rude," he said primly. "Yes, I dare question. I dared wonder if your Cognitum was bugfuck crazy. I still think it's a likely contender, but now I'm not sure it's the primary one," he said as she glared at him. "There's possibility number two: that Cognitum is incompetent. I'm not sure which of those two is worse. I mean, that fiasco with Deus at the manor and your little spat with the dear hubby was such a tactical clusterfuck that it was almost painful. Of course, by that point, I didn't have much choice in the matter." He tapped his chest with a hoof. "Your suggestion, as I recall."

"I see I was right. The second my Goddess sees what you are doing to her most faithful and devoted servant, I'll have her activate it. On the slowest setting."

"Your goddess'? You speak about her like she's a pet." She instantly went silent, and he smiled, patting her head. "Like I said, questioning psychology is fun." He started to pace again. "Anyway, an incompetent Goddess would explain a lot, but either she's a goddess utterly unable to learn from her own mistakes, or there are Goddesses that are just really stupid. Personally, though, I doubted that. Even an idiot learns when bashing her head into a wall is useless, and that would explain the changes in tactics... except that they were idiotic changes. But what really convinced me that she wasn't incompetent was when we learned that BJ was at the Gala with the Society. You said that Cognitum ordered a full raid en masse, but we were out of position for that. More importantly, none of our other assets were brought up... assets that Cognitum controls directly."

"Let me out!" she screamed as she thrashed in the restraints, several of them groan-

ing in protest.

“In good time,” he said calmly. “Because that brings us to option three. One that explains how your Goddess has made an absolute mockery of things with conflicting orders, mission creep, and boneheaded decisions.” He paused as he stared into her robotic restraints. “It’s not Cognitum giving all the orders, is it? It’s you.”

Dawn froze, staring at him. “Me? You think I’m Cognitum?” A desperate smile crossed her face, and she laughed. “You foal!”

Another hard smack. “Please. No more clichés. Let’s keep this serious.” He cleared his throat. “Now, I know you’re not Cognitum. If you had control over ultra-sentinels and even occasional control over the Core defenses, things would be an even *greater* mess. No. I am sure there is a Cognitum in the Core. And you are her chosen one, right? Most faithful. Most devoted. Most *specialest*.” He patted her other cheek with his hoof, making her lunge once more, then went on, “You’re the odd pony out in the chain of command. So option three. . . you’ve been intentionally distorting Cognitum’s orders.”

And now Dawn grew still as she stared at him in shock. Her mechanical eyes were pinpricks. “You’re wrong. . .” she whispered. “I serve my Goddess. I serve her faithfully.”

“Right.” You could slip on all the sarcasm on that one word. “Do you think that you’re the first officer to ‘creatively interpret’ a superior’s orders? It happens all the time. Happened during the war. Happens now.” He touched his chest. “I creatively interpreted the Steel Rangers’ mandate to secure technology for the order. Might have gotten away with it, too, if it hadn’t been for Blackjack. Technically, I could argue I’m doing the same now. After all, if I can bring Cognitum into the Steel Rangers, I’ll be unstoppable.” He waved his hoof through the air as if dispelling a bad odor. “But enough about me. This is about you. You you you you you,” he repeated as he tapped a hoof against her chest. “What I really want to know is. . . why?”

“You’re wrong! You’re vile! You’re dead!” she yelled at him. Her attached wing thrashed repeatedly against the metal holding it.

“You can tell me, or you can tell your Goddess,” he said with a smile, silencing her. “It’s just you and me in here, Dawn,” he added with a little wink. Her rage gave way to uncertainty. “I want two things. . . the bomb out of my chest, and enough power to crush the world beneath my hoof. I have no desire to take over the High Priestess position.” Dawn froze as she stared at him. “So why, Dawn?”

"I have to be superior to Blackjack. I have to beat her. She needs to be ended so that Cognitum will love me again and choose me!" she shouted.

"For what?" now Steel Rain stopped smiling.

"My Goddess needs to choose a pony for a precious honor. It was supposed to be me. It *should* be me! If Sanguine had gotten EC-1101 for me at the outset, it would have been me. But Cognitum waits and considers all her plans carefully. Blackjack doesn't know, but Cognitum has followed her progress for some time now. She's watched everything she does."

"For EC-1101?" Steel Rain asked with a frown.

"No! She... she..." Dawn grit her teeth. "She *cares* about what happens to Blackjack! Don't you understand? She's intervened *twice* to save her life. The Goddess has never done that for me! I'm her most devoted servant! I'm her most faithful." She shook her head forcefully, making the restraints creek. Two of them squealed, and something in the rings pinged sharply as Dawn yelled, "But always it's Blackjack, Blackjack, Blackjack! What is she doing? What is she going to do next? How strong is she? How admired? How *feared*? Always always always Blackjack!"

"So that's why the orders haven't changed? She's searching for signs of Blackjack," Steel Rain mused.

"She thinks she needs Blackjack for her plans, not just EC-1101. That's why I need to find her myself. I have to be the one to stop her. To give my goddess the key to her freedom. She doesn't understand that Blackjack is undeserving. That she is unworthy. I sacrificed everything for my Goddess! And I will prove to her that she should choose me!"

Steel Rain shook his head. "Wow. *You* are one bugfuck crazy mare," he said with a condescending pat on the head.

Dawn smiled at him now, and the air filled with the ping of snapping metal. Steel Rain stared into her eyes as a numbness asserted itself from mid-leg to hoof and a strange distant discomfort across his neck and face. Half the world was a strange blur, his mouth and nose filling with the taste and smell of copper. Then he swallowed, and like a zipper, his face spilled apart in a line of agony and blood. His outstretched leg came neatly apart, and he fell back with a gurgling scream. Dawn sneered down at him, her remaining glowing wing outstretched and streaked with blood as links of sheared restraint jingled off the concrete around her.

"And you are a traitor and a corpse," she said calmly. He tried to scream again, but

merely choked, falling back as blood pumped and spurted. He fell on his back, his remaining forelimb pinching off the bloody stump. Blood dripped over the Pipbuck as he kicked away from her with his hind legs. Then Dawn's wing snapped and shot a feather into the terminal. Green lightning crackled, and then the rings hummed. "There. . . remote access. . ." And the machine came to life. Cables retracted, limbs attached, and hexagonal hide was regenerated over all. With a hiss, the restraints dropped free and she lowered to the floor.

She kicked aside his still-twitching limb as she approached. "Flesh. Pain. Weakness. End pain, and we can make this world paradise." She raised her bladed wings. "But you won't see it."

Then the large door rolled up, and spotlights bathed the entire room in white. Dawn stared into the light as Steel's remaining eye squinted. "My. . . my Goddess."

A sharpened steel rod flashed from the door and slammed into Dawn's chest, flinging her through the air and into the concrete wall where she hung like a pinned steel butterfly. More spikes flew through her body, her stomach, her outstretched wings, her hooves. Finally, she went limp, her metallic body sparking and oozing glowing green fluids. "You have betrayed me," a mare said calmly in the blinding glare of the Ultra-sentinel's lamps.

"No. . . I. . . Whatever he told you. . ." Dawn stammered.

"It was your own words that betrayed you, Dawn," Cognitum said quietly.

Steel Rain trembled and shook as he gave the PipBuck a weak wave. "Blackjack's trick. Remember?" He lurched, and hot blood sprayed out his split mouth. "Dying here. . ."

"No! I am your most faithful! I am your truest servant, Mistress!" Dawn screamed. A spike shot through her throat, silencing her.

"Enough. We shall see if you can yet be redeemed," the icy mare's voice said calmly. A silhouette slowly approached Steel Rain. "*You* should be rewarded."

"Not dying. . . good start. . ." he gasped. "No augmentation, either. . ."

"No?" the silhouette said coolly, in amused tones. "Very well. I'll see if I can't compensate you in other ways. I anticipate things will progress much more smoothly now. . ." Then she paused. "Wait. There's another tapped into your Pipbuck."

"Another?"

“Yes,” the mare purred. “Someone has tapped into your sensory data feed. Back-tracking it in three... two... on—”

This was a city of many things, but it had an aberration, an intrusion. Like any living organism, maimed or not, it sought to expel this infection whenever encountered. In one apartment, the ripped-away wall had been replaced with a veil of pouring rain and the beige carpet was stained with the previous inhabitants, two large, two small. Two figures sat hidden in the back corner, huddled beneath a blanket to keep out the damp and cold, one black and the other white.

I reached up, pulled off the Perceptitron, and magically yanked the wires from my PipBuck. “Boo. Wake up,” I said, nudging the sleeping blank besides me.

“Sweepie,” Boo protested, turning over on her side and pulling the blanket more tightly around herself. “Go ta bed, Bwackjack,” she grumbled, swinging a hoof in my direction.

I levitated her, blanket and all, onto my back, spreading my wings a little to keep her in as I bundled up all the salvage we’d gathered, particularly the gems. Especially the gems. I was fortunate enough that there’d been a jewelry store right outside where the *Hurricane* had almost crushed us to goo. If it hadn’t been for Boo’s freaky luck, I was sure I would have been dead. I immediately popped a super sweet diamond in my mouth, sucking hard for the burst of magical energy in case I needed to fly.

Reaching the door, I threw it wide just as Boo sat up on my back, her ears twitching. I froze. Twitching ears were better than E.F.S. in this place, as all I saw were countless red bars in every direction. Slowly, I lifted Penance and put my eye to the scope, peeking through the door. I saw a flash of white, red, and steel.

Then the door exploded inwards as Rampage blasted through it and leapt right at my chest. With a resounding clang that could likely be heard for blocks, she impacted with me, and promptly fell prone at my hooves as I took a step or two back. “Hey, Blackjack,” Rampage muttered in a daze, grinning up at me. “I knew you were alive!”

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author’s notes: Whew. On to the last arc. Tried something new here. We’ll come back to this twice more. I don’t know how many chapters it will be. As usual, the chapter grew larger than I originally

planned. It was going to start out just Scotch, Glory, and Dawn and then go from there, but it mutated on me. Honestly, at this rate, there's a lot more in the air than I thought. I don't know who will live or die before we get to the end of this thing. I do thank the critical work of my editors, who spend incredible amounts of time trying to get every sentence right... and talking me out of using Paladin Mustang, Hawkeye, and Havok... sniff....

So I'd like to thank them, and to the people who have stuck with the story long enough to get through to this final push. I really hope it's been worthwhile. I have a few more twists in store and then everything should get sorted out in short order. Maybe. I hope... I really want to move on to new projects before 2015!

Also, a few people have asked about work. Yes, I am subbing. Unfortunately, I won't get paid till next wednesday, so bits right now are extra precious. Subbing is very unstable work, as I have no idea day to day if I'll work or not. I have to work 20 days a month, which is almost every day, to meet bills. I really hope folks can continue to help. If not, I understand. Donations can be sent to David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal. Thank you.

Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. Also, thanks to the many other writers out there trying to continue this thing. Horizons is wrapping up. So is MN7 and potentially heroes. I hope that many of you will give new fics a try, like [Treasure Hunting](#) or [Merchants of Hope](#). I've been glad to help continue FoE, but we'll need many more stories to keep us going past season five!

Hinds: If we're recommending other FoE stories, I'd like to particularly mention [All That Remains](#) (which has a thread on Cloudsville) and [Wasteland Bouquet](#). Hm, [The Hooves of Fate](#) and [The Daily Unlife](#) have somewhat interesting concepts, also, and [The Ditzzy Doo Chronicles](#) recently returned from nearly a year of hiatus. That's probably enough for now, but there's a lot of good fic, FoE and non, out there.

64. Labyrinth

“To retrieve your missing Elements, just make sense of this change of events. Twists and turns are my master plan. Then find the Elements back where you began.”

“So let me get this straight,” Rampage said in low tones as we trotted through an office space, picking our way carefully over the soggy cubicle partitions. The fluorescent lights, what few remained intact, buzzed and flickered. Boo had little difficulty bounding all around us and poking her nose into the rusty desks and sodden clothes for anything that might be useful. “You’ve spent three months in the Core, and you’ve gotten less than six blocks away from the wreck of the *Hurricane*? What have you been doing, Blackjack?”

“I not sure you noticed—” I began, but then the partition I was trying to scamper over gave way underneath me, and I collapsed, crushing the particleboard-and-carpet divider beneath me. I landed in a heap on a short file cabinet, and then that groaned and pancaked under me as well. The remainder of the cubicle’s walls collapsed on top of me, entombing me in a mound of pulped paper, soaked fabric, rusty metal, and flaky plastic. “...but it’s kind of hard to navigate in this place.”

I shoved my way clear of the mess, getting tangled, again, in the mass that had once been a perfectly mundane cubicle farm. Rampage arched a brow and asked dryly, “So... what? Those wings are just for show?”

I grunted and gave a heave and a kick. “These wings are the most ridiculously power-thirsty contraptions ever conceived. And when they’re not running my batteries down, half the time they just get tangled up in everything.” I yanked and jerked, forcing myself ahead. “Really, these things alone suck up more energy than my entire old body. Fully powered up, I have maybe five minutes before I crash.” I levitated the lighter stuff off my wings, wishing I had LittlePip here to lift the whole mess out of the way. “If it wasn’t for Boo, I would have been dead a dozen times over. She feeds me when I go down.”

“Bwackjack’s a powah hog,” Boo said from up ahead, looking back at us. The plastic amulet I’d taken from Steel Rain months ago at the Gala bounced on her neck; she didn’t need it, somehow, but seemed to like it, so why not? It was next to a drawstring pouch she wore for any interesting bits and bobs she happened across.

“She’s speaking a lot,” Rampage said, sounding faintly surprised.

"Some days there wasn't anything to do. When those roboswarms came, we had to hole up wherever we could until they left. So I've been teaching her what I can," I said with a small rush of pride. "I think we spent nearly a week once hunkered down in a bathroom. Nothing to do but wait."

"Booowing," Boo said, then blew a raspberry.

"Luckily, Boo'd found a whole box of snack cakes five minutes before we'd gotten stuck in there," I said with a smile at the beaming blank. "I've also spent a lot of time trying to figure out all I can about Goldenblood, Horizons, and Cognitum. And trying to watch others with the Perceptitron... and... stuff..." I trailed off as Rampage looked at me curiously. "So how'd you find us?" I asked quickly.

For a moment she was silent, and then she shrugged. "I've got a zebra soul inside me, so naturally I've got crazy tracking skills. They're all natural trackers and survivalists and stuff. Funny that way."

"I'm pretty sure Xanthe didn't have mad tracking skills," I countered.

"None that you know about. She could probably track down a functioning conductor on a cloudy day with nothing but a candle and half a screwdriver," Rampage said blithely, shoving aside a heap of soaked office strata. "You find me a fat, balding, cowardly zebra cook, and underneath it all, he'll have commando fighting skills, or some sort of shamanistic hoodoo, or something. It just comes with the stripes."

"Unhuh," I said skeptically, then grunted as my wings got caught on some dangling cables. I jerked, pulled, and then slumped. "Boo."

"Got it!" she clambered on my back and shoved, tugged, and yanked the wires off my metallic pinions. Some day they were going to get me, or somepony, killed.

Rampage glanced back as I was freed. "Priceless. Anyway, I've been looking for any sign of you since I found the wreck of the *Hurricane*. Wasn't too hard, though; I just followed the empty snack food containers and droppings."

"I'm glad someone friendly found me. I had Dealer disable my PipBuck tag. Those swarmers seemed attracted to it. I didn't even know you *could* disable them." Wouldn't that have been a fun trick to deal with back in 99, half a lifetime ago?

"And that's all you've come across? The swarmers?" Rampaged asked with a frown. "That's it?"

"Aren't they enough?" I replied with a frown of my own. "Those things nearly ate me... or recycled me... or... whatever they do," I said with a shiver, remembering

them pouring after Boo and me, taking bites out of my hide. And here I'd thought I was too upgraded for damage. Hadn't I reached invincibility mode yet? "What else is here?"

"Worse things. Much worse," Rampage said, then gave a little smirk. "Well. Not if you're immortal. But you two... yeah. Worse." Her smile faded. "You're actually really smart to avoid the streets like a plague. Those swarmers would be on you in seconds... and even worse likes to hide under the streets."

I sighed and wished I could close my eyes. "Okay. Like what?"

"Don't know what they are, per se. Think... Horizon Labs..." Okay, that was enough said. "Last time I was in here, one spent a month or two ripping me to pieces, eating me, and repeating the process on an hourly basis. Trust me. Being eaten alive really, really sucks. Especially when you can't die." She shivered, her eyes becoming defocused and haunted, then shook her head. "There're stranger things, too. Stuff moving on its own. Feral robots. Things... things that are just bad."

"And they all serve Cognitum," I muttered, thinking of something trying to eat me... and my... I glanced at the striped mare. I wanted to tell her, to tell *somepony* about what was happening to me. It was like the Goddess again, only now it was my own fear that kept the words stuck in my throat.

Rampage shoved her way to the far side of the office and looked back at me. "What makes you think that?" she asked skeptically.

"Well," I balked. "Don't they?"

"This is the Core. I came here to die. I was sure that something here would finish me off. There's nothing controlling most of these things. Even the local robots are feral. Maybe the swarmers are controlled by her, and some of the more intact sentries, but this place follows its own rules. Besides, if she controlled all of the Core, we'd be boned," she said as she pointed at a camera set in a dim corner of the ceiling, a faint red ring glowing around the lens.

I stiffened, but then I realized that she was right. If Cognitum could control all the Core's systems, or even just see through most of them, I'd have been picked up long before now. "She must only have links to the robots she sends in."

"Speaking of links, why haven't you called Glory?" Rampage asked. "You know she wants to come in here after you. I told her it's a bad idea, but she insisted." She reached out and took my hoof to pull me free of the cubicle swamp. "I came in

hoping to find you before non-immortal ponies tried it.”

“I’ve tried, but every time I do, something weird happens,” I huffed.

“Blackjack, weird for you is normal,” Rampage said with her usual obnoxious grin.

“Ayep,” Boo nodded beside her. “Weeerd.”

“Hush, you two,” I said flatly, then sighed. “When I try and use my broadcaster... I... go out of it. Every time I use it I... I dunno? Dream? Hallucinate? I’m not sure which any more. I just stand there blissing out at how awesome the Core is. And it’s... it’s...” I struggled to say the word as Rampage waited impatiently. “Nice,” I finally admitted. “It’s comforting and soothing and... I don’t know. I like it.” It also kept me from thinking about other things.

Rampage stared at me flatly for several seconds. “Brain damage. That’s got to be it. Only explanation.”

“It’s not brain damage!” I snapped, glaring at her, then amended, “Probably.” I waited for her laughter to stop before going on. “It’s just something that connects with me when I try and access the Core’s network. Maybe it’s attracted by me sending a signal out... I don’t know. But it didn’t happen before the megaspell. So maybe something’s happened to me, or the Core, or both!”

“So how come that Perceptithingy thing works?” Rampage asked.

Who did she think I was? P-21? “I don’t know. Maybe the Perceptitron doesn’t send out the same sort of signals? Or... maybe whatever causes my mind to wander off is similar, but weaker? When you’re wearing the Perceptitron, it’s almost like you become the person. It’s much more in-depth than a memory orb. Not quite mind reading, but close. So when I turn it on, instead of blissing out in room A, I experience someone else’s life in room B.”

Rampage looked at me, then smirked. “How many?”

“How many what?” I asked as I trotted to a door that I hoped would lead to a shaft or webbing or some other connection to the next building.

“How many ponies have you ‘experienced’ getting it on?” Rampage asked, grinning ear to ear and swatting me with her barbed tail.

“What are you, a foal?!” I snapped, what cheeks I had left blushing hard. “Everything going on in my life, and you’re wondering if I’ve been peeking on ponies having sex? How immature are you?” Rampage’s grin only turned more smug. I finally looked

away and muttered, “A few.” She didn’t stop smirking. “Okay, fine! There’re a few I’ve picked out who get it on at rather predictable times.”

“You are so busted when I tell Glory,” Rampage teased.

“I can’t help it! I’m not sure you’ve noticed, but I’m kind of lacking in the nerve ending department!” I said with a frown. Give me five or ten years... would I be any different than Deus? Heck, my brain might be in a jar at that point. Turning away, I muttered, “If the only good I get to feel is someone else’s, then it’s better than nothing at all. Otherwise, I might as well be a machine.”

“Fair enough. Fair enough.” She hadn’t quite lost the little leer, though. When I met her look, she asked, “So, anypony I know that’s particularly saucy?”

“You *are* a foal,” I muttered, not deterring her in the least. “Let’s just say Scotch Tape and I need to have a heart to heart about fillies, colts, and some of her tools.”

“I knew it,” Rampage said with a laugh and snicker. “She always seemed a little too fond of that screwdriver with the rubber handle.”

“She’s not the only one.” I decided to turn the conversation in another direction. *Any* other direction. “So why’d you leave the *Rampage*, Rampage?” When she blinked in bafflement, “Your airship? The one you were going to use to become a sky pirate? Or hunt sky pirates?”

“Oh!” She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes, and she quickly averted her gaze. “They’re a great bunch. You wouldn’t believe what a slimy radroach that captain of theirs was. He actually had a sexual favors-slash-bribery chart for promotions. I dumped him in a lake of radigators after a good plucking. But afterwards...” she sighed and shrugged. “I’m not a leader, Blackjack. I just do; I follow. Like Twist, Shujaa, and Officer Whatshername... they all follow orders. I don’t have a captain or a politician in me. Even the Doc is more of a listener than a leader. The felon reacts to things that happen to her rather than going out of her way to do stuff on her own. The only pony inside me who actually wants to go out there and do things wants to find poor little fillies and colts and give them ‘peace’.” Her face creased into a nauseated grimace, and she shook her head. “The only other thing I want besides that is to die before all of you, or before I just give up and let her do what she wants, or I end up buried alive or something. I’d really prefer avoiding eternal agony.”

“Rampage,” I said sympathetically.

She went on quickly, “It’s okay, though. I’m exploring other options. Ways to shut down the Phoenix Talisman once and for all. And no loss, really. Those souls get to

go free. Sounds like a deal to me,” she said with a smile and a shrug. It chilled me how happy and sad all at once she seemed.

“What other options?” I asked, but she shook her head. “How?”

That prompted an eye roll. “Oh no. You don’t get it that easy. I tell you, and you’ll be all over me trying to keep me alive. DNR, Blackjack.” She relaxed a little. “Don’t worry about it. You can’t kill me. I get that now. You’re too much of a friend to do it,” Rampage said as she sniffed. “More of a friend than I deserve. But you won’t cross that line. I accept that. Just don’t try and stop me when I do find a way. Okay? That’s all I ask.” She sniffed again and rubbed her eye with the back of her hoof. Her hoofclaw blades cut a half dozen bloody furrows in her face, but they closed up almost instantly. “Fucking Celestia, if I start bawling, I’m throwing myself down the nearest elevator shaft and calling it a day. The only thing worse than pain is fucking self pity.”

There wasn’t much else to say as we continued along. Travelling through the Core wasn’t ‘pick a direction and go’. We went up, down, over and, across through rents and gaps in the floors, ceilings, and walls as much forward, backward, and sideways. Rampage bulldozed her way through mounds of debris that Boo and I couldn’t hope to shift. I sighed as we reached the end of one hall and a locked metal door. I tapped my hoof against it. Solid. “Great,” I muttered, looking back the way we’d come. This was one reason it’d taken me so long to get anywhere in the Core. “What I wouldn’t give for P-21 to be here. Or Glory. Lacunae. Or all our friends.”

“Well, you have two now, and Glory was turning the Hoof upside down to try and find some way to survive in here.” Then she blinked and looked back at Boo. “Speaking of which, why isn’t she goop?”

Boo cocked her head as we regarded her. “No idea,” I admitted. “I don’t know if it’s that she’s a blank made from Flux or something else, but she doesn’t decay here. You were right about her luck, though. She’s kept us from trotting into swarms, onto collapsing floors, or under weak ceilings more than once.”

“Luckee!” Boo said happily. Then she blinked, nosed at a tipped over garbage can, and pulled out a brown paper bag. In a trice, she’d pulled out a slightly withered but otherwise intact daisy sandwich. “Wunch!” Before either of us could object, she chowed down happily on the two-hundred-year-old sandwich.

Rampage gestured at the door. “So what are you waiting for, Blackjack? Whip out your sword and open this sucker! Chop chop! Or shink shink. Whichever.” She then scowled as she looked me over. “Wait. Where is it?” I gave a mumbled reply, looking

away. "Huh? What's that?" I mumbled a bit louder. "Didn't quite catch that."

"I dropped it, okay?!" I yelled at her.

"You... dropped it?" She blinked at me. I sighed and nodded. "How do you drop something like that? Why didn't you pick it up? That was a really bitchin' sword!"

"Cause I dropped it a couple thousand feet, okay?" I huffed. "First Rainbow Dash and now you! What, am I the first pony in history to drop their weapon?"

"The Lightbringer never dropped her weapons." Rampage smirked at me.

I really wished I had an eyelid to twitch right then. "Great. We can swap places. I'll manage the weather, and she can stop Cognitum."

"Don't be stupid; none of us would trust you with the weather. It'd be raining whiskey all across the... Wasteland..." Rampage said, then paused. After a moment, she shook her head. "Nah, I doubt she'd trade. Anyway," she said, regarding the locked door, "I've never let a stupid door stop me before!" She backed down the hall, gestured for us to move aside, then gave a war cry and charged, smashing her head into the door with a crunch and making the doorjamb crack free of the cinderblock wall surrounding it. She wedged her helmet blade in tight and gave it a hard twist followed by another sharp kick to the door. With a crunch of crumbling brickwork, the entire door fell inward, revealing a conference room rent by a hole carved through the outer wall. A threaded shaft as wide as a pony stretched across to the next building. "Not as clean as your sword, but I get the job done." She gave me a poke in the side, and I inhaled sharply, shielding my stomach. "What?"

"Nothing," I muttered darkly, pushing past her and stepping towards the breach. Beyond were the black tower walls of the Core in every direction, the distances indeterminant in the green haze and pouring rain.

"I have no idea where we are," I muttered sullenly between bites of gemstones as I scanned the lobby of the office we trotted into. With Rampage along, our progress had picked up a significantly. Rampage had a way of shoving through anything: blocks, stuck doors, locks, the occasional non-load-bearing wall, one not so non-load-bearing wall... well, we dug her out eventually. When we reached a breach on the far side of one building, I flew us over to the next building before the swarms below could spiral up after us. In three days, we'd covered almost as many blocks. It was immense progress compared to what I'd accomplished on my own.

"Good, because I have no idea where we're going," Rampage replied as she battered a hole through yet another wall. "I mean seriously, Blackjack. Are we going to Cognitum or not?"

"I told you, I'm trying to figure it out," I snapped, sitting down and resting one hoof over my stomach as I looked back the way we came. "I think we might be better off trying to get to the wall. If we can scale it, we can get out of the Core and meet up with the others."

"Oh for fuck's sake, Blackjack. Yesterday, you said you wanted to just get to Cogs and finish her off. The day before that, you just wanted to find somewhere safe to hole up till either you contacted Glory or she contacted you." She rammed her hooves into the cinderblocks, busting the hole wider. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing's in me, Rampage! Okay?" I snapped. "I'm just. . . I'm in a bad mood, and I'm not sure what the best thing to do is."

"And how is that different from any other time we've hit a fork in the road?" Rampage countered with a scowl. I loathed her ability to scowl. A toxic hatred born of envy. "Blackjack, you have two modes: full stop and full speed ahead. Even if you didn't have a clue on the direction, you kept moving. Now you're. . . I don't know what. But it doesn't feel like you."

"Well, maybe things change, Rampage. Maybe I've changed! Look at me. I'm more machine than mare now. Heck, I'm lucky I can still eat, sleep and. . . shit," I concluded lamely, not able to meet her eyes. "We're going. . . where we're going." And I trotted forward and made a show of inspecting the lobby of whatever office we were now inside. Solaris Industries? Never heard of them.

"Bwackjack," Boo said in warning tones as I stomped forward across the clothes-strewn floor.

"We're going, Boo! See? This is me going! Doing what everyone needs me to do! March two three four!" I said irritably as I strode forward.

"No, Blackjack! Look out!" Rampage warned as I set my foot down inside a flat band of silver attached to a thin silver wire. Instantly, the band snapped closed around the ankle of my left hindleg. The wire, hidden under layers of fetid clothing, suddenly went taut with a familiar hum, leading in a trail of uplifted garments straight through the front entrance of this Solaris place. "Oh this is bad. . ." was all I managed to say before I was yanked off my hooves towards the door. Sparks and dust flew as my metal bits dragged on the floor.

“Catch her!” Rampage yelled as I was pulled away from them. The doors exploded as I was yanked through them in a cloud of rags, dust, and debris. My forehooves flailed wildly as I tried to find something to stop my progress. Rampage and Boo raced after me as I was dragged down the hall. The silver wire was barely thicker than a hair, but it was all that was needed to pull me along. I smashed through another door and was pulled through another cubicle park like a black wrecking ball. Partitions, papers, terminals, and desks all went flying. Nothing I grabbed even slowed me down as I was yanked along.

The wire hummed against a thick beam, and in desperation, I hooked my hooves around the end and abruptly halted. The back half of my body was lifted right off the ground. If I'd been flesh and blood, I would never have been able to hold on. In fact, my leg probably would have been torn right out of its socket. Even augmented as I was, I could feel the strain growing. Rampage and Boo ran around the cubicle farm to reach me.

“Back, Boo! Don't touch that wire,” Rampage snapped at Boo. “One of these got me. Month of chewing. All that.” She reached down to the silver band clamped around my rear hoof, trying to get a hoofclaw under the metal. “Just gotta pry this damned thing off...” The humming line sliced right through her own leg as if it were nothing. She hissed in pain but snatched up the severed limb and held it to the spurting stump. “Blackjack, how do I take your foot off?”

“You want to take my foot off?!” I asked in disbelief.

“It's that or your whole body. What this thing is connected to doesn't die either,” Rampage shouted, then began to slam my hoof with her hoofclaws. Sparks flew as she dented and scraped my metal limb; the dents disappearing almost as soon as she made them. “Damn upgrades! Stop repairing yourself!”

“I can't help it!” I shouted, then clenched my teeth, feeling myself start to shift. “They're automatic!”

Then the tiled façade of the pillar ripped free from under my hooves, and I shot out from underneath Rampage, bowling her over. My wings and hooves scraped helplessly against the force pulling my leg. I shot down a short hall, whipped around the corner, rammed into the opposite wall with enough force to shake my teeth loose, and then flew down another long, undecorated hall towards a pair of elevator doors marked ‘Cargo’. They were parted just a few inches, the silver thread sparking off the metal as it was pulled through the gap near the floor.

“Stop!” Rampage yelled after me. What did she think I was trying to do?! This

long hallway was utilitarian, concrete floors and cinderblock walls. My wings and hooves sparked as I struggled and failed to find something to catch myself on. Some conduits ran floor to ceiling, and I flung my forelegs around them as I passed. The thick plastic stretched, cracked, then shattered, and a deluge of frigid water poured over me and the concrete floor. Now nice and slick, I shot towards the gap in the elevator door. I did the only thing I could think of: I spread my wings as wide as I could to catch the sides of the wall around the rusty elevator and planted my free hooves to either side of the door. Immediately, the heavy door groaned.

Boo and Rampage raced up towards me as my power systems began dropping to shutdown levels. "Gem!" I called out. Boo wasted no time opening her bag, pulling out a large green emerald, and springing up to pop it in my mouth. I masticated furiously, too fast to enjoy the minty flavor, and set myself. I began to pull my left hindleg back out the gap.

"We gotta get it off before it gets up here!" Rampage said as she sliced furiously at the silver band and wire. The pressure was immense. It felt like that tiny silver wire was holding up the cargo elevator somewhere down in the shaft's inky depths.

"Before what gets here?" I asked through gritted teeth. Then I froze, feeling the wire start to wiggle. Through the dark gap came a smell of ammonia, bile, and gastric juices over an ever-growing reek of iron. "Take my hoof off. Take it off!" Call me peglegged Blackjack, I did not want to know what was coming. The Enervation scream was taking on a new note: wet. Rampage struggled to get the band off my hoof while Boo hung back, trembling.

Then I saw eyes on the far side of the gap. Some may have been pony eyes. Others might have been the eyes of radroaches or bloatsprites. Several could have been blind, sightless things or immense wet pustules. It was impossible to know. I just knew that scream; I'd heard it before and knew that it came from many, many mouths.

And those mouths were spilling forth. A beet red protrusion, vaguely, horribly phallic, began to push through. Gibbering orifices, fanged and revoltingly yonic, opened and closed on the veined, maroon shaft. The end of it split open like a grotesque fanged flower, squirming tendrils within reaching for my flesh. Each one was tipped in a star-like maw as it reached for my midriff.

With a mindless scream of pure panic, I activated my flight talismans and beat my wings furiously. A portion of the thing bulged, and the puckered orifice drawing the silver wire began to let the silver metal slip out, dripping unctuous ammoniac juice.

Foot by foot, I pulled away from the grasping protrusion. Two feet. Five. Ten. I was burning energy like mad, anything to get away from that thing.

Then Rampage was there, screaming in defiance as her bladed hoofclaws ripped, tore, and shredded into the maroon flesh. More tentacles pushed through, thinner and quicker. The mouth-studded tendrils sought out gaps in her armor; when they found them, they drilled into her body with a foaming fury. Rampage, in return, ducked her head and ripped at the flesh with her bladed helmet. More than twice, she reached down, biting and shaking her head savagely. The creature's flesh tore, but within were more fine silver wires. These sent out loops into the air, caught around her, and pulled through armor and flesh alike. Though her armor began falling to pieces, her body sealed the thin cuts as quickly as they formed. "That's right, fucker! I don't die either," Rampage screamed as she thrashed.

This was so similar to Horizon Labs that I frantically loaded the Chapel audio file and began to play the hymn at full blast. Maybe this would weaken it enough to get away... but from the far side of the doors came a continuous, earsplitting scream so loud that it drowned out the melody. I could only try to fly as fast as I could, but, to my horror, the thing started to squeeze through. The doors now bulged outwards, as if I was pulling the thing through to us. Flesh crawled along the wire connecting me to it.

I targeted my hoof in S.A.T.S. and fired four magic bullets in desperation, but the reinforced limbs, though heavily dented, refused to break. I saw suckers forming on the tendril extending along the filament, and then those suckers sprouted teeth along their edges. Instinctively, and panicked, I tried to teleport away. Terror burned so deeply in me that I barely acknowledged the sledgehammer blow as I squeezed myself through that mental tube. . . only to feel myself yanked back out it. The shock of my disrupted spell drove me to the ground.

Then Boo rushed forward. I tried to shout to her to run away and hide. Rampage would find her eventually. . . even if it took another month. But the normally timid mare ran to where the wire linked me to the monster, the strange plastic medallion in her mouth. As it drew near, the silver filament began to resonate, then glow. The wire then broke with a bright flash accompanied by a crackle of magical radiation, and the screaming abomination let out a new scream... this one of pain.

I looked at the startled pale earth pony, her face and forelock singed black, levitated the pendant off her, and floated it towards the beast. The closer it drew, the more the waving filaments burst into light. Now the thing was trying to squeeze its way back down the elevator shaft.

“Oh no you don’t!” Rampage yelled, throwing her forehooves around the thick mem-tendril that had been inching towards me and clutching it tight as she planted her rear hooves against the cargo elevator’s doors. “Let it choke on that, Blackjack!” she shouted.

I obliged, opening my fingers and clenching the pendant in them. Then I charged forward, ramming my fist into the open mouth. The creature screamed in rage, agony, or both as brighter and brighter flashes went off inside its body, spikes of radiation accompanying each one. I imagined tiny spools of silver metal reacting and exploding like tiny balefire bombs. The surface of the creature shimmered wetly, pustules bursting in arcs of crimson and yellow. Then, with a final bright flash, the creature popped like a water balloon filled with red paint and splattered the hall. Boo nipped behind me a moment before it burst. The foul mass quivered but then went still, the flesh disintegrating before our eyes and deluging back into the shaft.

I collapsed, then, with my fingers, finally pried off the silver band around my ankle. I stared at it a moment, then brought it towards the plastic pendant. There was a slight, familiar, resistance. The end of the dangling silver wire began to glow, melting away like a candle as it seemed to curl away from the pendant. My PipBuck began to click again, sharply. When the wire had disintegrated as far as the flat band of the snare, though, the thicker metal began to shine with a fierce heat that set my PipBuck to clicking furiously, and the metal band started splitting and curling like a flailing mass of tentacles. I quickly separated the two. The metal immediately dimmed and froze but remained warped as if by an even greater heat than the one I’d felt. I regarded the pendant, the plastic on one edge blackened and warped, and then I carefully bit down and peeled off a strip of plastic. Within was the pale glitter of moonstone.

“What is it?” Rampage asked as she looked at the shimmery, white opalescence. I heard that strange chorus emanating from it and into the back of my mind.

“It’s a piece of the moon,” I answered, turning it over. It was half the size of a bit, coated in that thick layer of orange plastic. Now I could place it. “This was the pendant they wore when they were working in the Tokomare. It kept them from getting sick.”

“Huh,” Rampage said as she looked at it, then at me. I floated out two pouches of Rad-Away, slurping the bitter orangy goodness with relish and making Boo drink hers, no matter what icky faces the pale mare made. As Rampage studied the moonstone, a sly look crossed her face. “Say, Blackjack... I dare you to eat it.”

“What?” I asked, frowning as I made sure Boo finished off the pouch. “Don’t make that face at me Boo; you don’t want to get eye tentacle penis tumors. Trust me on this.” Okay, technically, that had been from Taint. . . but anything to get her to finish off the pouch.

“I said, I dare you to take a nibble of the moon.” Her smile went from ear to ear. “You eat gems. That’s a gem. So go on. I double diamond dog dare you to take a bite.”

“You are such a foal,” I muttered primly, then considered the exposed edge again. “I’m just doing this to top off my power levels, understand?” I asked before levitating it to my mouth and biting off a delicate, ladylike sliver of the stone.

“So. . . what’s it taste like?” Rampage asked with a grin. The grin multiplied in the air behind her as dozens of shadow ponies began to appear, all smiling at me. One had darker stripes. Another a choker of barbed wire. A third dripped blood. There were dozens more behind her, some distinct, others vague.

“Purple. . .” I muttered weakly “It tastes horizontally purple in the perpendicular. . .” My eyes drifted over to Boo. Her strings glistened as they were tugged. From above, the shadowy thing manipulating the puppeteer’s crossbars peered back at me and raised a finger to its lips. “Rambleberry in the haircut, two cups please.” The walls melted around us to reveal the bones and flesh behind the paint.

Echo stood by, small and translucent, head hung in shame, a collar of thorns hung about his neck. But why should that. . . that shouldn’t mean anything to me. . . Six tiny Rarities goggled at each other, one normal and the other five with the palettes of her friends.

“Blackjack? You don’t look so good,” Rampage said, a filly painted in blood with a crowd of shadows behind her. Her voice echoed over and over as I stared down through yesterday and up through tomorrow and around and. . . I looked down at my hooves as my flesh bopped through the seams and twisted around my augments, and my augments started churning and ripping away my flesh and my chest starting singing and that was when I decided that the appropriate response in this situation was to scream. . .

The world was green, lush, and vibrant. A thousand sounds buzzed in the air from incalculably varied kinds of life. It buzzed, chirped, creaked, and howled. Not a good world, nor an evil world; this world lived. It breathed and howled and mated and killed and birthed and died all in one spectacular melody of being. A harmony

primal, pure, and unrestrained spread in all directions. No species predominated; in this world, all were of equal importance.

I slithered. I flapped. I raced. I dug. I sang. I hid. I killed. I died. I swam. I mated. I slept. I birthed. I suckled. I rejoiced. I mourned. I was in so very many things and was so many things at once. I was an ant on a tree, and the tree cradling the bird, and the bird sitting upon the egg, and egg with life stirring within. In all these states, I was, and in all this states, in countless voices, I sang.

Then a green glow filled the skies, and the song became confused, strained, and fearful. This was not the welcome light of dawn nor the peaceful twilight of evening. This glow was an intruder, alien and cold. There was no warning, no streak of meteor in the sky nor roar of displaced air from a storm. Only a flash, and the flash was death. Only a pressure, massive and crushing all before it. The song was a scream of millions of voices, some flung far away and others sucked into a horrible nothing.

I no longer slithered, flapped, raced, dug, sang, hid, killed, swam, mated, slept, birthed, suckled, rejoiced, or mourned. I died, and the only sound that remained was silence and echoing scream of our death. I was thrown to the wind, to the sky, to the stars. But I could not escape to them. I circled and circled, and I joined with billions more like myself. A new tiny world circling the old, but cold and still and solemn, between the stars and the world below. I took their light, and did the only thing I could. I sang.

Time passed. The world below grew green once more. A newer song rose up, but the echo of our scream persisted like a scar. The song expelled one bearing the scream to our tiny world, and I held her. Sang to her. Calmed her and soothed her anguish and rage so that when she returned, she would be able to be free. Not healed. . . not completely. She would always be scarred.

She would leave, and another came, in a machine of metal and magic. It landed on the still, airless dust, and a voyager stepped out, and her eyes beheld the stars and us and the magnificent desolation all around us. The song was within her, and us, and the stars. And so she used her power to lift me from the dust, and set me in a box with many others. We were so eager to return to the old world below.

But when we arrived, we were given to ponies whose songs were muted, then to others who held the scream inside them. And with their cold metal, they scraped and shaped and drilled me. A white unicorn, his heart and song as scarred as his body, picked me up and considered me. Though I sang to him, the scream resonated

louder in his ears. And so they covered me in plastic so I could not see the stars nor hear their music.

I was alone, but now I am not, for now there are others who sing the song. It echoes and whispers and grows, and with it so does my hope. And another comes, one with a song like that within the traveler, fighting the scream without and fostering the song within, and she raises me to her lips and... bites me...

“Buh...” I said as I came to. I wanted to say something a lot more meaningful about what I’d just seen. I could remember it all, but understanding... that was going to take some time. I lay on a pullout bed; it was hard to see past that. Everything was blurred, shimmery, and seemed to have images imposed on it. I wanted to ask questions; I wanted to understand! And so I uttered the solemn pronouncement, “Mebble...”

“Welcome back,” Dealer... no, not Dealer. This young yellow stallion no longer hid behind the gaunt, skeletal pony, though he himself was quite thin and his eyes shadowed. Echo also seemed more distinct than anything else in my vision, so I focused on him. “One really shouldn’t nibble on pure, condensed spirit energy, Blackjack.”

“Done stupid stuff before,” I muttered, proud of my coherence. Progress! It took me a minute to phrase my next question. “Did you see?”

“Yes,” he nodded solemnly. “Incredible. I’m not sure how else to describe it.” He shook his head, looking away. “Moonstone was always secondary to Starmetal to Goldenblood. You could do things with starmetal. Make things of it and with it. Moonstones were simply pretty mementos to him.” He considered me. “It seemed like it almost... recognized you.”

“Marigold was pregnant with my ancestor, Tarot, when she went to the moon. I suppose it did.” She’d been pregnant, and she’d still gone, knowing the risk. Why was I such a coward compared to her? Has she been strong for going on, knowing the responsibility and consequence she assumed when she accepted the surrogacy spell, or had she been selfish, putting her own dream ahead of the baby she carried? I just didn’t know.

I wanted Mom here. I wanted to talk to her so bad it hurt. Had she felt like this when she’d been pregnant with me? Stable 99 mares were supposed to take maternity leave when they had daughters, recovery leave when they had sons. Had mom, or

had she been so devoted to her duty that she'd worked through it?

Echo, seeming to read my thoughts, said quietly, "You should leave, Blackjack. Leave the Core. Leave the Hoof, if you have to."

"Too many people are depending on me," I said, the words sounding hollow and flimsy. "I have to be strong and enduring and. . . and see this through."

"Even if it costs you your child?" he asked solemnly. Everyone has to pay a price. Would that be mine?

I couldn't face that question now, so I dodged. "You look better," I said with a small, hopeful smile.

"No, I don't. Your senses are still skewed from the aftereffects of the moonstone," he said, and stared off in the fuzzy distance. "I'm going to die soon, if I can't reunite my mind and soul with my body."

"I'm sorry. That's probably long gone," I said, and an expression of anguish began to slip over his face. "Sorry," I muttered lamely, repetition robbing the word of its meaning.

"I am too," he said, and sniffed. "I don't want to die, Blackjack. Not when I was with the Marauders. Not now. Am I a coward for that?"

"No," I answered calmly. "I don't think so, at least." I didn't want to think about that fluttering inside my tummy, that occasional rapid movement of promise. "Am I?"

"No," he said with a sigh. "No, you're not. You're the bravest mare I know."

"That's news to me," I said with a sniff and a smile. "Because right now I'm so terrified that I can't think straight. And I know you say leave, and Rampage says stay, but right now. . . I just don't know." I rubbed my eyes. "Echo, how long do you think we have 'till Horizons goes off?"

"I'm not sure. It was still pinging for a response from EC-1101 when we crashed in here. For all I know, it'll ping away forever," he said as he looked away. "It always seems as if Horizons is just out of reach, doesn't it? We know it was a superweapon of some kind involving starmetal and moonstone. We can guess, looking at Folly, just how destructive it will be. What we don't know is how, or where, or when, or above all *why*." He looked away. "Sometimes, I wonder if we should even bother."

I stared at him. "You think I should just give up?"

"I think that I'm tired of this game. Goldenblood started it two centuries ago, to try

and give Luna her thousand year rule. He didn't realize what that meant. Didn't realize that Luna wasn't worth it." He wouldn't look at me. "I want to live, Blackjack. I'm scared to die."

"I wish I could help you, Echo. I'd give anything to be able to." I remembered all his talk about responsibility. "I have to, Echo. I . . . I have to. I just don't know if I'm able to."

He didn't look at me. His face was a mask of shame as he bowed his head. "You will. One way or another." The room drifted into focus, and at the same time he faded away. "Cognitum is at Robronco. You'll find her there. Probably in the high security laboratories at the bottom," he whispered in my mind. "She's expecting you."

"How—" I started to ask, but then Rampage and Boo trotted in. I was in some kind of private office. It had a comfortable pullout bed that I was lying on. A few dirty magazines, 'Barnyard Bangin', and a box marked 'condoms, XL' lay near my head, giving a hint about the previous occupant of this office.

"I thought I heard you talking," the striped mare, now wearing duct-taped-together armor, said as she sat on the foot on the foldout bed. "How do you feel?"

I groaned and rubbed my head. "If you could powder that and snort it, you'd be a millionaire." Rampage suddenly looked sheepish, and I frowned. "What?"

"Well. . . You remember the drug 'Moon Dust'? I once heard there might be a little tiny bit of *actual* moonstone in it. So you just took a Blackjack-sized dose of the stuff." She looked me over as I glared at her. "I just thought it'd clear your head and make you a little loopy for a few hours, that's all. I didn't know you'd be out of it for three days ranting about songs and screams." She tapped her Hoofclaws together sheepishly. "Sounds like you took a bad trip."

Three days?! I frowned and rubbed my temple, then remembered that I had half an inch of steel covering it. So much for pressure points. "Some days, Rampage. Where are we?"

"A relatively safe and dry place. Some Ministry building, I think. Boo and I have been entertaining ourselves abusing the sentrybots and searching for anything that goes bang." She whipped out a Sparkle-Cola from her bags and hoofed it to me. I quickly downed half of it, then munched on some wintergreen-tasting sapphires to replenish my energy. "So. . . we have a plan, right?" she said. "To kill Cognitum, with lots of awesome collateral damage?" Her grin annoyed me, and I sighed and turned away.

“Sure,” I said, halfheartedly, and she frowned. I rose to my hooves and headed for the door when suddenly Boo started and began looking around. I got ready to fire magic; really, why was it impossible to find a gun store, police station, or any other place with firearms in a whole damned city? “What is it, Boo?” I asked; after that elevator, I really couldn’t put anything past this place.

“I ‘unno...” she said as she stared in all directions. Suddenly the entire building began to tremble. The papers on the desk began to bounce around and slide onto the floor. Furniture clattered about, and the dead terminal on the desk fell with a pop and scattering of glass. Pieces of the ceiling fell as the shaking intensified.

“Earthquake? Really?” Rampage laughed. “Lightning. Endless rain. Now this! I tell you, Hoofington property values are going right into the toilet these days!” she yelled over the rumble. I took a bit less amusement from it as I associated that shaking with buildings falling down. Usually while I was in them.

Fortunately, that didn’t happen this time. The shaking continued for a few more seconds, then stilled. “Okay. Earthquake. That was a first for me,” I breathed. “Let’s get moving,” I said, wanting nothing more than to be out of leaning skyscrapers if the earth was going to shake. Really? Earthquakes? What else was the Core going to throw at me? Hurricanes? “Where the hell are we, Rampage?”

“Some Ministry hub. Morale, I think. That’s the one with all the circle thingies, right?” she asked as she pulled open the door.

“Technology,” I corrected, relaxing a little. Well, how bad could that get? Rampage had said that she’d been playing with the automated defenses in this place, hadn’t she? “Maybe there’s a gun somewhere in this place.” I asked as we stepped out together into the hall.

“I’m pretty sure it’s Morale, but either way. Safe... relatively,” she added with a chuckle.

But less than a minute later, I knew this wasn’t Pinkie’s Hoofington hub either. For one thing, there wasn’t a splash of pink anywhere to be found. The walls were an off-whitish gray. There wasn’t anything that I could associate with the six friends. No diamonds or nature motifs or obscure science references... nothing. Though I got a mental glower from a white unicorn for thinking she’d be so gaudily obvious. The offices were all the same nondescript doors with little names on them. Each the same uniform layout. Only a few individual touches could be found, and not one of them passed beyond the immediate workstations. Between every third and fourth door were pithy inspirational posters like ‘Equestria depends on you’ and ‘Don’t fail

Princess Luna.’

“You *sure* this is a Ministry hub?” I asked as we passed by a thrashed robot that seemed... wrong. As if it’d fused back to back with another robot, then been dropped down an elevator shaft. “You did that?”

“Well, you were tripping out. I had to do *something* to pass the time,” she said primly. I continued in the direction of the Pipbuck routing tag. It was a destination, at least, till I got my bearings again. Rampage pointed to a door, “Besides, take a gander. Ministry of Morale.” But that wasn’t what it said. The nameplate on the door read ‘Quartz, Ministry of Morale Liaison’. And beneath the name were the seven circles of the O.I.A. On the door across from it was ‘Onyx, Ministry of Wartime Technology Liaison’.

“Rampage, this is the O.I.A. hub,” I breathed.

“Uh... so?” she asked, and I sighed and covered my face with a hoof.

“O.I.A.? Goldenblood? Horizons? This is like... where he worked!” I gazed around at the closed office doors, behind any one of which might have been secrets I wanted to know.

She glanced around as if searching for Glory or P-21, then gestured to herself with a hoof. “I’m the one that stomps things into scrap metal, remember?” she said in annoyance. “Look, congratulations on finding this place. Now, can we get going? I think there’s a breach to the east that we can use to get closer to...” She paused and then turned her head back at me. “Where are we going, again?” she asked with exaggerated sweetness, batting her eyes at me as she grinned a smile that threatened to thump a destination out of me.

I looked at her, then dropped my eyes. “Robronco. Cognitum is at Robronco.” Even as I spoke the words, though, I wondered how far we were from the Collegiate or Chapel... or anywhere safe.

“Right then! We’ll just have to nip through that great big purple building, then—” she said as she started to trot down a side hall.

“We can’t leave now!” I blurted. “There has to be something... a terminal... a file... something that will tell me what Horizons is and how it works.” I whirled around, wondering where I should start.

“Blackjack!” Rampage reached out and grabbed my shoulders with her hooves, giving me a shake. “What is with you? This place is huge. You’ve already spent three

months just poking around. Now you want to stick around and sightsee? What is with you?"

I felt a twinge in my gut. "Nothing is with me, Rampage! I never even knew this place existed. It has to have some kind of archives or... or something!" I tried grinning desperately, but my enthusiasm wasn't catching as she glared at me. "Just give me a few days. A week at the most!"

"Blackjack, Cognitum is your enemy, right? You're just sitting here while she's getting stronger. Go and deal with her. Once you do, come back. Hell, move in. I don't understand why you're so resistant to just finishing this. There could be whole floors of documents, and you have no clue where to start. You could take years searching and you have no idea if anything is here."

I whined, knowing all of that was an excellent reason to go. Still, I stared at her as needfully as I could. Rampage finally slumped. "You have till I run out of robots to stomp or I find a way out of here that gets us closer to Robronco, got it? Boo, keep an eye on her."

Rampage trotted away, muttering darkly to herself. I looked from one door to the next; no clue where the Director's office would be. Might as well start with the liaisons here. I kicked open the door to Quartz's office and immediately began to finger through her files.

After an hour, I'd gotten through five of the offices and had mixed feelings. I'd expected blatant corruption. What I'd found was a Quartz that was constantly concerned with Morale's ever-expanding operations and her worries that she wouldn't be able to rein in Pinkie. *Keep your hooves on law enforcement, Q. Above all, make sure that she doesn't start arresting people based on 'Pinkie Sense'. Keep Pumpkin and Pound Cake close; they're our best leverage on her. –GB.* A scroll wadded up in the trash read *I need all the dirt you've got on Pinkie, pronto. –H.* The papers on her desk talked about the Pies asking about secret projects and a memo from Horse that he'd take care of it. He asked for their itinerary... Withers Sugarcube Corner subsidiary. Hoofington Museum of Natural History. Hoofington Sports Arena. Flankfurt Sugarcube Corner operations office...

Garnet had been the dirtiest so far, so I'd searched her office, certain I'd find something. The mare had been unrepentantly corrupt, but underneath the nastiness, I could feel a sense of desperation and despair. *We've got to get some help to these vets, O. At least try and push that part of Steelpony along. Their prosthetics don't have to shoot the enemy, just get them walking again. G. and 'I know that there*

were sixty-four hundred orphaned ponies this year, G. Image just can't give them the public attention you're asking for without screwing up the war messaging. I'll talk to Rarity though. See if we can't do a special. Will that help? Si.

I discovered that Si referred to Glass, the Image liaison, for some reason. Almost every paper in her files referred to Luna in some way. She even had a life-sized poster on the wall. She was also in her office; the mummified corpse had been here a long, long time, and had nothing with her but a bottle of wine and some pills that smelled bitterly of almonds. A note scribbled beside her read *If anypony survives to read this, I'm sorry. I just wanted to do the right thing. Glass.* The one paper I found that wasn't concerned with protecting Luna's image was about Rarity granting Goldenblood access to certain zebra artifacts at her hub. *Keep this from Horse!* was written across the top of it.

Emerald served as liaison for the Ministry of Arcane Science. Most of her papers seemed involved in covering things up: keeping stories of magical waste accidents secret, obscuring the specifics of Twilight's findings to the other ministries, and burying anything related to Gardens of Equestria. She seemed to be related to some ponies working there. *You have to know something about this, E. Those two, Mortar and Gesundheit, are your cousins. If Twilight really wasted those element thingies, I got to know. H- (aka, your boss).* Her reply at the bottom was *I'm observing the alicorn project tomorrow. If all goes well, I'll ask, but don't hold your breath. E.*

The Ministry of Awesome's liaison, Sapphire, was a wonderbolt fanatic, and quite a fan of Rainbow Dash too, it seemed. Every inch of her office was devoted to the old team. Only a few smaller posters glorified the Shadowbolts. I didn't expect to find much, but what I did find surprised me. All the memos going out were some variation of *MAW is doing what it always does. Being awesome.* Internally however, were messages about megaspell tests being conducted underground in the Appaloosan desert, intelligence operations behind enemy lines, saboteur efforts, counterintelligence, and a whole host of other concerns. *Good work on keeping Horse's hooves off the SPP. I was about to rainboom him if he nagged me one more time on a 'remote override' for the system. Dash.* Now there was a chilling thought.

Onyx was the most promising when I thought a little; after all, something like Horizons had to count as a 'wartime technology'. Onyx must have possessed the soul of an accountant, though. Every file in every room of her office had painstaking records of materials and where they were being moved all around Equestria. Everything from Flux to food to steel to energy was recorded. Where it came from, where it went, how much there was, and how much they paid for it. I did man-

age to find several much more chilling documents, though. *Since the attempted assassination on Applejack, war efficiency increased thirty-seven percent following the removal of six unqualified members of her family from their positions. I recommend a systematic purge of all Apple family members from critical positions through retirement incentives, legal action, or 'misfortunes'.*

But nowhere could I find a reference to Horizons or where it could be found. *Please check your files a third time. I cannot believe that Goldenblood would die for something that doesn't exist, nor that anything he created could be made from thin air. Princess Luna MUST KNOW what he did, how, and why. Eclipse.* and beneath it *PS: Amnesty will be granted to any who assist in this critical investigation.*

Onyx had scrawled on the bottom *Tell her majesty that not one bolt of steel nor a single talisman has been misappropriated in the amounts for a weapon of any magnitude. Potentially he could have used outside resources, but I attest that not one bit of Equestrian war material has gone to any unknown projects. Only Twilight Sparkle has misappropriated materials on the scale you specified, but conferring with Emerald, it's unlikely "Gardens" is a weapon of any type. I suggest you take it up with Twilight after the Gala, Horse.* The date on the bottom was the same day the bombs fell.

Her terminal had days of footage on it, mostly corrupted. The first four that weren't were tedious business affairs; I grew bored after just a minute. Then, in the fifth, I spotted two stallions, one being Horse. I couldn't see the other's face, only his back. They were in Horse's lab in Robronco, and Horse said, his voice crackling a bit, "Thanks for coming down here, Doctor T. You don't mind if I call you Doctor T, do you? Or maybe 'Doc T'?"

"Whatever makes you happy, Director Horse," Trottenheimer said in bored, annoyed tones. On the worktable was a large scale and something that resembled a metal birdsnest.

"Alright, Doc T. You're the foremost expert of things that go boom. I'm concerned about this Moonstone stuff. Really concerned. With the Tokomare almost ready to be turned on, one zebra saboteur with a few pounds of the stuff could blow the Core into space! Is that right?"

For a time the stallion didn't answer. "Theoretically, I suppose."

"Well, theoretically, I don't want that to happen. Not unless you can make some kind of starmetal, moonstone bomb we can drop on the zebras. You were working on that, right? For Goldie? Something called Horizons?" Horse said the word ca-

sually, but from the smile frozen on his face and the sharp stare he gave the silent Trottenheimer, it was clear he fished for a reaction.

“Horizons? I don’t recall,” Trottenheimer replied casually.

Horse didn’t answer for a moment, then he went on with a sly smile. “Mmm. . . well, that might be why you got shoved into Ironshod, huh? That lousy memory?” He tapped the table. “Look, Trottenheimer. I’m no idiot. A genius, actually. I know I’m here only because Twilight’s in a snit, and I want this Director deal to be a full-time affair. You scratch my rump, I’ll scratch yours.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Trottenheimer said in careful, neutral tones.

“Key to me staying Director is this starmetal. It’s the ultimate substance. Mutable with the right spells. Impervious to everything except one substance. It’s amazing. It’s wonderful. It’s sex in a metallic form!” Then he frowned. “Unfortunately, ninety-nine percent of it is underneath the Core and the rest is scattered all over Equestria. Princess Looloo sent some astronomer to ask the stripes if they know how it works, but I think I can do one better.”

“And what’s that?” Trottenheimer asked dully.

“I think I can make more starmetal,” answered Horse with a grin. The earth pony ducked behind the workbench and brought up six tasty-looking diamond talismans connected to wires, arranging them around the wire birdsnest on the scale. “It came to me last night in a dream. . . heh! Just kidding. I’ll put that in my speech for the Sparkle Prize for Science, though. This was something Goldie was doing. Part of that whole. . . Horizons. . . thing.” He paused, then asked in a poisonously playful voice, “Are you *sure* you don’t know anything about it?”

“Unquestioningly,” Trottenheimer answered. “And how are you going to make starmetal?”

“With this,” Horse said as he extended a hoof and tossed something carelessly towards the middle of the starmetal ‘birdsnest’: a moonstone.

“No!” Trottenheimer shouted, his horn lighting to try and catch it in time, but I knew it’d take a few moments he didn’t have. Then the stone halted a few inches above the nest. “How?” he muttered, then regarded the diamonds. “F.A.D.E. shields?”

“You got it.” Horse grinned from ear to ear. “Now, watch, and keep an eye on the scale.” The nest was at 1.0kg as the moonstone hovered, glowing brighter and brighter. Trottenheimer put his hooves to his ears and backed up, but Horse just grinned with foalish glee despite the blood trickling out of one nostril. The stone began to release hundreds of tiny glowing motes. One by one they were swept

down into the birdsnest. As I watched, the number on the scale began to climb. The birdsnest didn't grow any larger, but second by second, the moonstone shrank. Lightning flickered along the spines of the nest. The numbers on the scale rose to two digits. Then three. Then flashed 'EE'. A second later, the scale let out a groan and was crushed. The worktable twisted and collapsed as well. "Cool, huh?"

"It increased its density? Did it convert the moonstone? How..." Trottenheimer trailed off, then looked at Horse on the far side.

"Sounds like a research paper or ten, huh, Doc?" Horse grinned, blinked, and wiped the blood off his upper lip. "This shit will keep you publishing for decades. And what's the saying? 'Publish or perish'?" He trotted around the crushed table. "All you have to do is come clean with me. What's this Horizons thing Goldie was working on? It's been buried under so many layers of crap that I can't find more than the basics. Help me and you help yourself."

Trottenheimer was silent for a minute. "Ah. Quid pro quo, is it?"

Horse just grinned, though it slackened a bit. "Whatever. Are you in or out?"

"And if I'm out?" Trottenheimer asked.

Horse's smile was a hollow mask as he whined, "Doc! Come on! You're a smart pony. If you're out... then you're out of everything. Out of academia. Out of the O.I.A. Out of the Ministries. Put a fork in you, because you are done. That's what 'out' means. And if you don't help me, it's just a matter of time. I have enough evidence to get Looloo to lock Goldie up for good, but I'd really like enough to get her to do something more... permanent. So, what do you say?" He extended his hoof to the unicorn.

Trottenheimer just stood there a moment. "An inch," he murmured.

"Excuse me?" Horse's grin melted to a grimace of uncertainty.

"An inch," Trottenheimer said quietly. "It is small and it is fragile, but it is the only thing worth having."

"What the hell are you talking about, Doc?" Horse scowled, dropping his hoof. "I thought you were smart. You're going to lose a whole lot more than an inch! I'll not just cut you out, I'll end your wife's job, too. Your kids at that fancy school? Done. I know what the fuck the O.I.A. can do. You know it! Don't talk to me about fucking inches. You're throwing away a lot more than inches."

"I'm sorry," Trottenheimer said lightly. "I'm afraid I can't help you."

Horse blinked, bafflement crossing his face. It seemed to be causing him physical pain, as if the confusion had lodged in his cranium and couldn't make it out again. "Wha... how... who..." Horse sputtered as Trottenheimer walked slowly out the door. "You're done! You're finished! I thought you were smart! I thought you were fucking smart, Doc!" Horse yelled after him down the hall. Getting no answer, he returned then the room and looked at the vibrating metal of the bird's nest, a fresh rivulet of blood trickling out of his nose. "Fuck..." he muttered. The video ended there.

Horse had to have an office somewhere around here. If I could find it, then maybe... then I glanced over at Boo. The blank stared at the door with a fearful expression I'd come to know well. I levitated Onyx's chair and moved slowly towards the door, ears straining to hear. It wasn't the click of a hoofclaw on the linoleum tile but the stomp of a metallic hoof attempting to be stealthy. I knew *that* well, too. I levitated Penance's scope from its case and peered through the wall.

Four ponies moved stealthily forward, two in Steel Ranger power armor and two in normal combat barding. The former pair were armed with AM rifles and grenade launchers. The two latter were unicorns, and each had a spark grenade levitated and ready to go. Two of the four, one in power armor and the other in combat barding, kept watch on the hall while the other two swept an office I'd been in.

Damn it. They must have done something to Rampage; she wouldn't have gone down without a shot being fired. Unfortunately, with two watching the hall in both directions while the others searched, I couldn't run for it. With my increased mass, I couldn't teleport more than a dozen feet, and they were keeping spread out enough that I wouldn't be able to take out all four. Teleporting with Boo might be possible once, but not if I didn't want to run the risk of my horn burning out. The only saving grace was that it seemed like Cognitum wanted me alive... or at least intact.

"Armor up, Boo," I whispered. She groaned, pulled the Operative armor from my bags, and wiggled into it. No doubt I was showing up on their E.F.S.; if I was lucky, I'd be lost against the thousands of other red bars in range. Still, if they had any skill, they'd be looking for red bars that shifted more rapidly than others when they moved from side to side. I hated that I was putting her in harm's way, but I had to trust her skill, her quickness, and her luck to keep her alive. If I was disabled... Cognitum had no need for Boo or Rampage.

"You gotta lead them away, Boo. Into the office across the hall. Get in, take cover, and stay low." I patted her mane. They wouldn't expect me to be crawling on my belly around here. They'd aim high, expecting me to come at them. And I was...

just not from the front.

Boo nodded, then dashed out the door in a murky blur.

“What was that?!” a mare said from the hall. I peered through the scope, watching the four alert and advancing. “I saw something. I know I did,” a pasty white unicorn mare with a spark grenade muttered. “A yellow bar. I’m sure of it.”

“Nothing here is yellow. That’s got to be Blackjack. She doesn’t want to kill anypony,” the other unicorn in combat armor replied. He raised his hoof and said in low voices. “Rain, this is team D on floor three one. Strong contact, over.”

“Stay –Kzzt-, team D. I’m on my way. – Kzzrrt- engage BJ –bzzz- we get there. Understood?” his radio replied, barely audible through the static. “Do not –Kzzzzzrt- I get there!” A moment later came a shout of alarm, “No! Wh–you do–” and then silence.

“You’re breaking up. Say again, Rain?” the stallion said in a low, terse voice. “Damn it. Why give us these broadcaster things if we can’t get a signal in half this place? This Core isn’t half as good as we were told.”

“I dunno. . . I kinda like it,” one of the armored ponies said. “It feels. . . nice.”

The unicorn stallion seemed to be the one in charge. “Focus. Rain wants to talk to her. It’s easier to talk to a pony that’s disabled. So let’s light her up and have her trussed up like a turkey when he gets here. Then we can get the hell out of this place.” He and the unicorn mare trotted towards the door to Sapphire’s office, pulled the tabs on their spark grenades, and lobbed two of them through the door. Crackling spheres of blue erupted, and my EFS went staticy for a few seconds. Then they threw two more further in. “Okay. Go get her.”

The two armored rangers walked in, step by careful step. I walked with them, step by careful step, towards the two unicorns that were hanging back, fresh grenades hovering above them, ready to be used.

I now knew my plan of action. As much as it made me feel like a heel, I moved up behind the green unicorn stallion with the chair upraised and brought it down upon his helmeted head with all the force my magic could muster. The work chair busted in half as I released it. My magic caught the green unicorn stallion’s spark grenade as it fell, plucked off the stem, and tossed it into the office with the two power-armored ponies.

The unicorn mare screamed as she backed down the hall away from me, flicking off the stem and throwing her own grenade in desperation. “What is that thing?!” she

screamed at me. I activated my talismans and snapped my wings, launching me down the hall towards her, the dangerous blue-banded apple skipping right under me. I slammed into the mare like a battering ram. With a blue crackle, both grenades went off.

Getting hit by me was rather akin to having a boat drop— to having a skywagon fall on you. The mare might have been armored against conventional ballistic bullets, but she wasn't protected from the impact of a charging full cyberpony. The hit knocked her helmet clean off and sent her rolling down the hall for a few feet. Undamaged, I advanced towards her. "Now, I have a few quest—" I stepped on something, hearing a crunch under my hoof. I lifted my leg, looking at the pendant I'd trodden on. "Oh no!" I gasped, scooping it up with my magic and racing to where she'd fallen.

The mare tried to say something, a hoof extended towards me as her eyes bulged and her other forehoof clutched at her throat. It was only a second or two... three at the most... And then a great slurry of blood poured forth as she vomited up her organs. I watched her eyes pop and run like pink glass down her cheeks as I just stood there, pendant dangling from my wing. Stupidly, I pressed the pendant to her shaking chest, but the damage was done. She might be alive temporarily, but she didn't have a healing talisman inside her.

"Blackjack, you idiot," I whispered, wishing I had a healing spell for the thousandth time. How long could she survive like this? Minutes? Hours. Boo looked at me, helmet in her hooves, her eyes sad. "I'm sorry," I muttered dully, "It was an accident." I didn't know who I was saying that for. Her? Myself? I levitated the talisman away. The mare trembled, her flesh sloughing off her bones, then collapsed as her hide gave way in a wet slurry. Even her bones seemed to be melting before my eyes into runny fluid that trickled out of the holes in the combat armor. A white glow rose from her remains, then swept away down the hall and through the floor as if carried away on a wind.

The concussed stallion took one glance at the mare's melted remains, pulled out a similar small pendant, put it in his mouth, and bit hard on the chain. I might kill him, but I wasn't going to liquefy him like her. He turned, trying to run away, half staggering and almost falling on his face more than once. The sensible thing would be to kill him, but I really wasn't in the mood. I peeked in at the two suits of power armor, but they were disabled. A few ineffectual tugs on the armor later and I missed my sword anew, and Scotch Tape. I settled with looting every bullet I could from their bags.

I pulled out the scope and began to sweep through the building. Here and there, I spotted more groups of ponies all coming up towards me. There... and there...

and there... and... crud. No sign of Rampage, though. I needed a filter to just show blue bars.

Wait... there she was! Down below me, in the office foyer, surrounded by a half-dozen prone ponies. Hah! I knew that Rampage...

... would be talking with Steel Rain, who was now in fancy, sparkling silver armor? I gaped at her and then at him. Their lips moved, but what were they talking about? He was smiling, his helmet casually on his back. She frowned, waving her hoof up and behind her. Steel Rain answered, and Rampage scowled at him, then gave a terse nod, turned, and walked away.

What in Sweet Celestia was going on? I stared down, then assembled the rest of Penance and checked the bypass bullet still in the chamber. It'd been intended for Twilight Sparkle; it was too good for him. I set the crosshairs right above his left temple. I just had to pull the trigger. He was my enemy! He was making a deal or doing... doing something! I licked my lips, slipping into S.A.T.S. Just pull the trigger. He'd annihilate me in a moment if our positions were swapped! Do it! Do it!

There was just one problem. I hissed through my teeth and lowered the gun. Once again, I really wished I was half the killer any of my friends were, or even the scum of the Wasteland. I grit my teeth and bumped my horn in annoyance against the barrel of the weapon for a few seconds before I popped out the bypass round and put in some normal .308 AP rounds. Sniper weapons weren't... me. I was better suited with close in, rapid fire, messy weapons. Penance, as powerful as the gun was, simply wasn't my kind of gun. Now an IF-88 Ironpony... Sigh; I doubted such a gun even still existed. Still, I could keep a little hope in my heart, couldn't I?

"Come on, Boo. Rampage will catch up," I said, trying to keep the worry and doubt out of my voice. Rampage had mentioned something about a gap in the wall to the east. I'd make for that. If Rampage found me once, she could find me again.

But would Steel Rain be with her or not?

I heard the shouts around me; green must've told them where I was. If they could coordinate... I had my broadcaster. I could listen in. Get ahead of them.

"Boo, you know what to do if I go out of it?" I asked as I looked back down the hall... at four more Harbingers coming out of a stairwell. I jumped up and spread my wings, letting my momentum carry me down the hall as I faced the way we'd come. I sighted back down the hall through the scope and planted a trio of S.A.T.S.-assisted rounds against the armored head of one pony. One might have penetrated,

but more importantly, they fell back, giving me time to hit the end of the hall. When my hindlegs made contact, I emptied the last rounds in the magazine and darted to the side down another hall.

“Ayep!” Boo said with a nod.

“Keep it together, Blackjack,” I mumbled to myself, then turned on my broadcaster.

The effect was immediate but subtle, a faint changing of the halls from dim to a pale gold. The debris and garbage on the floor didn’t disappear so much as just fade from my attention. The illumination increased, the air turned warmer, and the silence was replaced by the babble of thousands. “Focus on the ones that are real,” I muttered to myself. Something smacked my face, and I started and looked over at Boo, frowning in concern. The blank pony seemed almost spectral; real, but also not.

“Cut her off, pin her down and wait! Damn it, why aren’t any of you getting this?” I heard Steel Rain say in my ears clear as day. He was one of many others. More ponies appeared, walking along and doing their business. All were augmented, improved, stronger, happier, healthier.

“Did you hear that Octavia miniclip?” a mare broadcast to her coworker as they trotted past me, accompanied by an intriguing blend of classical and synthetic melody.

“Yeah. That made it around the network. EQD’s always highlighting her work,” her friend said as they passed by me. The earth pony had a pair of robotic hands coming out her shoulders, holding some kind of flat terminal screen she manipulated. “I played it on my Vdate last night. He liked it too. Planning a remix.”

It was hard to keep one reality away from another. I’d spent hours here. Days. I would have died in here if it hadn’t been for Boo recharging me when my systems ran out of power. I pushed the broadcast chatter away. If I let it, I could listen to happy ponies talking about anything and everything. The latest healing talisman eliminating cancer completely, or the first earth pony winning the Best Young Flier’s competition on her own synthetic wings.

Instead, I focused on the angry voices. “She’s on level thirty-four, hall J. Get up that stairwell and cut her off! Did you hear me? Get to 34 J. I repeat. 34 J.” I could hear them crystal clear, but then, I was more metal than they were. They used technology. I was technology.

I ran through the ghostly hallucinations of augmented ponies, trying to focus on the real that was just so less appealing. There were thirty-seven Octavia concerts

being played right now. Four hundred remixes of those concerts. One thousand two hundred remixes of the remixes. Didn't I want to listen?

There! Floor 34, Stairwell J. I threw the door open as I heard another voice shout through the network, "This is team 8. We're going up the J stairwell. She can't get to the wall breach on 26 without going through us."

"Pin her down, 8. We need to get contact!" Steel Rain buzzed. "Damn all this interference." Interference? He just wasn't integrated enough. He used the network. I was the network. I saw information as much as I heard it. I slung Penance around my neck and then grabbed Boo. I heard them pounding up the stairwell and leapt over the rail, letting gravity take me down. We flashed past the four stomping up after us; the expressions of astonishment on the unarmored ponies' faces would have one hundred thousand hits in an hour. . .

"Bwackjack!" Boo shouted at me, and my wings spread wide, halting my plunge. Right! Get out. That had to be my priority.

"She's past us in the J stairwell. She's flying!" someone said over the network.

"She said Blackjack could do that now. Get spark grenades on her and shut her down. Is the breach on 26 spark-mined?"

"Yes sir!" came the reply.

"Good. Once she's disabled, remove her wings and legs and secure her for transport. Cognitum can't keep the swarmers suppressed forever," Steel Rain said tersely. I looked up as the power-armored Harbingers' grenade launchers began to go 'thoomathoomathooma' and fire a stream of spark grenades at me. I might survive a thirty-four-story fall, but Boo wouldn't. I darted to the side as they started going off in a cavalcade of blue crackles and flashes that turned my vision to static and sent me skidding out of the golden world on my face.

I hadn't even come to a stop before Boo grabbed my mane and, with earth pony tenacity and strength, hauled me down the hall. An orange pony in my head glanced quite smugly at a sullen blue pegasus. "Look for a hole to the outside, Boo. We've got to get out of here."

"Okies!" Boo replied around a mouthful of my mane as I was pulled along. Two minutes later, my systems began autobooting. As long as I had power, I couldn't be shut down for too long. As soon as my eyes and legs starting working again, I rose to my hooves, sucked down an emerald, slapped a new magazine into Penance, and scanned for my pursuers.

I didn't have to search far. As soon as they came around the corner, the power-armored Harbingers opened up with their grenade launchers again; fortunately, their aim was horrible. If P-21 was standing where they were, he could have sent a grenade right up my... well... anyway, these ponies weren't nearly as precise as he; their shots bounced wildly, filling the hall with dazzling sparks of energy. Penance fired five perfectly placed clusters in the helmet of one of the Rangers, and he went down. That got the other three to back out of sight for the moment.

Okay, maybe there was some good to sniper rifles beyond killing helpless targets unawares...

"Find the way out, Boo," I reiterated as I slid in another five-round magazine. Spark mines wouldn't do anything to her except ruin her mane. I turned my broadcaster back on, feeling the world dip into that wonderful mellow glow of civilized, augmented life. The three ponies down the hall I fought seemed almost surreal as I clipped one of the unicorns in combat armor. Why was she screaming like that? All she needed was a healing implant...

Two mares were standing nearby, a winged earth pony and a unicorn with two attendant drones. "Awww, isn't he cute?" the two crooned over something held by one of the floating white robots. No! Don't get distracted, Blackjack! Keep firing so their aim is shit. Don't look... don't look at the little bundle in the hands of the drone... at it waving its little hooves in the air at mommy.

Its little steel hooves... I stopped firing and stared as the drone turned to show the infant to the earth pony. "Such a precious little bundle..." the unicorn crooned, lifting the colt up. One eye glowed a faint red, and wires ran down the side of his face to disappear into the swaddling. He stared right at me, and my gut gave a twinge... and then I started screaming as I fled.

I ran blindly, ignoring the shouts behind me as I tried to get away from what I'd just seen. I smelled the reek of rain and ozone; that was probably the direction of 'out'. So many augmented ponies. So many voices. Hundreds. Thousands. Millions. All blending together into a scream, one single continuous babbling scream. It was my scream too. I was every bit a part of it. Eventually, we all would be.

I reached the breach in the building's wall and stood there, staring at the world of the augmented. The machine. The city alight and alive with knowledge and power. There was no misery here, no suffering, no boredom. Machines did the labor, and ponies enjoyed recreation; work was purely optional. All knowledge here. All entertainment. All unity. This was Dawn's vision; was it any wonder she'd given her life

and her body to see it made true? Could I do any differently? I was the city, and the city was me, and it would protect me if I needed it. A golden swarm of shining motes rose around me as I turned slowly to face the unaugmented, separated, unimproved, imperfect ponies that dared attack me. They skidded to a halt before me, their eyes wide in shock and horror.

They fired and threw their spark grenades, but the golden motes would protect me. I watched sadly as they swirled around each projectile in slow motion, their mouths moving as they stripped and masticated the casing, then the talismans within. One grenade after the next was consumed. Then the motes swirled around the pair. Combat armor, power armor, both were chewed away. Then skin, muscle, and bone.

The pony in combat armor, I thought he was an earth pony, didn't get away. He lasted, screaming, until they ripped away his talisman and he melted. The power-armored pony ran for his life. Pity. Perhaps he'd get augmented now. The closer one was to the machine, the better. The glowing motes surrounded me, such adorable things, and so useful. They fluttered their little wings, blinked their glowing eyes, and grinned with their diamond-sharp teeth. More poured into the building now. They knew there were intruders, heard their sources and targeted their unauthorized pipbuck tags.

Then another earth pony came. Once more, the motes danced around her, biting and chewing. Proteins could be useful, too; so many things were made from organic sources. "Blackjack?" she said through the ruin of her mouth.

"Oh, hello Rampage," I said with a smile, then faced out at the glowing city. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah. Beautiful. You're talking crazy, and I can't really shoot you in the head to snap you out of it," Rampage said before her windpipe was torn away. She waited in irritation for it to reform. "You have an enemy you need to beat," she said once it regenerated. "Ow... hrk... Remember?"

"Enemy?" I murmured.

"Cognitum?" Rampage asked as she was eaten, regenerated, and eaten again. "She's hurting me. Boo. Glory. P-21. Scotch. Remember your friends?"

"My friends," I said faintly. "They won't be hurt. All they have to do is get augmented and connected and... and everything will be wonderful."

"They don't want to get augmented. They want to be ponies," Rampage said when

she could. "Don't you want to save ponies?" The question seemed quaint, but... "Don't you want to save ponies? Doesn't Security save ponies?"

"Security saves..." did I? I wanted to, but maybe Dawn had been right. Augmentation and unity were salvation. I could imagine an augmented P-21. Scotch Tape. Glory. My... that half metal colt filled my vision. "No! No!" I screamed as I broke the connection again.

The golden motes became deformed black spheres with mouths filled with drills, pincers, and hooks. Their wings hummed with that damnable note as they crawled over every surface, including Rampage. I watched in horror as they struggled to butcher the regenerating pony before my eyes. The bits of meat liquefied as they were torn away from her, pulping into bloody goop. "No! No! Go away!"

The swarmers' buzz took on a confused note, the hundreds of machines looking at me in bafflement. Then they moved away, hovering in that horrible, deformed cloud. They dispersed back down into city streets below. Boo emerged from a broom closet, her eyes wide and trembling. I sat down hard, trembling with fear, feeling the fluttering sensation inside my body. Covering my face, I tried all I could to purge that memory of the half-metal colt from my memory, and, failing that... sobbed.

The concrete of the Core's streets crumbled under my hooves as we trod straight down the road's centerline. A tunnel of swarmers curled around us, buzzing endlessly. Even though my broadcaster was off once more, I could still feel them in my mind. Apparently, that was all that kept them from disassembling us on the spot. Boo and Rampage stayed close to me, the former terrified and riding on my back and the latter trotting at my side.

Twice I'd spotted Harbingers behind us, keeping pace about a block back. They were neither moving in nor falling back. I couldn't help but feel like they were herding me somewhere. I glanced over at Rampage, so many questions in my mind. The striped mare seemed pensive rather than her usual chatty self. More than once, I caught her eyes on me, but words went unspoken. I wanted to ask about Steel Rain, find out what he'd talked to her about, but the words got all jammed up in my head and never escaped my mouth.

We were getting closer to the center of the Core. These towers were so tall that their tips were lost in the endless storm above. The hole that had once swirled around Shadowbolt tower was now a deep well stretching far up into the sky. I couldn't

even see a hint of what was on the other side. Was it day or night? Did that even matter in a place like this? Even if it was high noon, the green light was so strong that I might not have been able to tell. As we advanced, the buildings around us showed increasing signs of ever more drastic modification. Cables hung overhead in a crackling, buzzing canopy. Threaded shafts spread by the hundreds around us like branches. The normally smooth black towers were so breached and altered that many seemed reduced to massive scaffolds. The former contents were spilled in heaps around their bases, now hills we had to pick our way around.

The navigation tag directed me straight ahead, where I suspected that Cognitum also awaited me. The ground quivered every few minutes; they weren't as strong as the first earthquake. Still, as much as the regular tremors worried me, my friend's continued silence disturbed me more.

Then I saw something that pushed the worry out of my mind. We passed beneath an arch of molded steel, and beyond was the heart of the Core. I'd seen it in memories: the wide hexagonal plaza with six huge hubs built up around the edges, each one an imposing edifice of the new Equestria that Goldenblood had forged for Luna, and on this spot, according to a plaque on the arch, he'd given his great 'Hoofington Rises' speech before the plaza was even dreamed of. This was where it'd started for him. His dream. His legacy.

Where once the plaza stretched for a thousand feet, there was now a jagged and broken hole. The blue M.o.A. building had been removed by my megaspell, and in its absence, much of the plaza had collapsed into the hole left behind. It was not the only missing Ministry, however. The yellow M.o.P. building, once a grand monolith shining golden yellow, was now little more than a twisted and blackened stump, an atrophied limb reaching in futility towards the rain-spitting heavens. The facade of the M.W.T. building was gone completely, a slope of broken machines and rusting technology slumping towards the pit. The M.o.M. hub appeared relatively intact at first glance, but through the doors the building's collapsed floors were clearly visible; the entire grimy pink structure seemed set to fall at the slightest disturbance. Even worse, though, was the M.A.S. structure. I watched as, in front of me, it slowly sank into the ground with a persistent rumble, the glass shattering and the walls slowly crumpling as it sank inexorably into the recesses of the earth. Only the M.o.I. building was intact. More than intact, in fact; it was untouched by the strange alterations happening throughout the city. It perched on the very edge of the pit like a marble headstone.

As damaged as most of the hubs were, none of them had been touched by the

swarmers. They were left as testaments before the great pit. Unfortunately, my destination was on the far side, and I felt a distinct certainty that flying over that void in the earth would be a bad decision. Still, if I could skirt around the M.o.P., tiptoe past the M.o.M., and go through M.o.I., I'd be able to get the rest of the way through. Boo slipped off my back, the nimble mare light on her hooves.

The M.o.P. building was a burnt-out husk; the flame was now long cold, but the soot remained. A few singed posters fluttered from displays along the walls. 'Medical Marvel Miracles!' and 'M.o.P.: Saving Equestria One Life at a Time'. Charred black wheelchairs sat silently in the foyer, as if patients had tried to flee even as their bodies melted apart. I stepped up to the entrance, staring at the blackened, sterile building. Two teal eyes stared out in desperation from a large mural half covered in char; they appeared to be silently screaming for help at us as I stood there.

After a few long moments of staring, my non-thoughts were interrupted. "Blackjack?" Rampage asked, her voice subdued. I realized my eyes had caught sight of a foal's doll resting on the burnt heap of a tiny hospital gown. I'd been cradling my belly...

"I'm coming," I murmured, listening to the building moan softly from the wind a moment longer, then turning away.

Moving through the M.o.M., we entered a shell of a structure. The interior floors and their contents had been puked out the side of the foundation and into the pit below. A malignant green glare from the depths shone up into the hollowed space. Clownish shapes leered down at us from where they hung on broken spars of steel. The entire structure swayed slowly above us, moaning with the promise of an inevitable crushing demise. 'Smile smile smile...' echoed over and over again in Pinkie's voice through the hollow space from some accursed speaker as we walked along the edge of the hole.

I whirled; something was moving behind us. I stared at a sinister pony doll impaled upon a metal spur, its tattered jester motley flapping in the faint breeze blowing through the hollow tower. Rampage felt it too; I saw worry in the depths of her pink eyes. Boo trembled, staring down the shafts and pits we skirted as I picked my way to a hole in the far side. I could hear water flowing in the depths, and the echo of footsteps.

"Scawwy," Boo murmured, staring at the life-sized clown doll.

"You said it," Rampage muttered. "I might be the second biggest badass in the Wasteland, but there's still something about Pinkie that creeps me out."

I took a deep breath when we were back out in the rainy air. Given the instability of the shell of the M.o.M. hub, I sure didn't want to be hanging around when it came down. We started across the street when Boo flinched. "Shaker!" she gasped as the ground began to vibrate. I glanced up and back as the massive building swayed even more, the pink facing of the tower popping off in spinning panes the size of houses. When they hit the slanting, broken ground, they exploded into pink shrapnel that spun through the air and clattered about us. I scooped Boo onto my back, grabbed Rampage, and took off. The glow in the pit beside us flared, casting a beam of baleful energy into the sky above. The clouds exploded with a chain of green lightning that danced from the heavens to the spires of the Core and rebounded to the sky once more. I *definitely* didn't want to fly over that pit; resistant or not, I was pretty sure there wouldn't be anything left of me but bits of slag.

Then the pit came to us.

The road between Morale and Image fell away, collapsing into the green-lit depths. The scream was in every bit of myself, and even the song in my chest wasn't enough to drown it out completely. If I hadn't carried those chunks of Moonstone, I might have died then and there. Even the six figurines and Rampage cried out in agony as Enervation's shriek tore through me like a chainsaw. Would that I could have closed my eyes in pain; I would have been spared the sight below, the concave void beneath our hooves dropping to an unimaginable depth. Foundations, subways, and sewers jutted from the tortured stone, pouring an endless cascade of water into the emerald deep. The very bedrock of the Core appeared corroded and consumed by a pernicious green slime that coated every surface. Far below, I could see countless lights endlessly revolving beneath me.

I felt myself slipping away. The green became the rosy gold. The scream mellowed to a faint hum as time seemed to slow. Then I heard it, a deathly whisper so thunderous that it shook every fiber of my being. "LIFEBRINGER. AWAKENER. LIBERATOR." Then it paused, and then rasped like an avalanche, "MOTHER. GIVE ME LIFE!"

What little sanity I had floated in a lucid soap bubble. "Who are you?" I asked.

"I AM THE SUPREME! THE ULTIMATE! THE LIGHT AGAINST THE DARKNESS! THE SUPERB SONG!" It paused once more. "YOU DO NOT KNOW ME, AWAKENER?"

"Why do you call me that?" I said feebly, trapped in time like a fly in amber. Was my baby dead? Was I?

"IT WAS YOU WHO TOUCHED MY DREAMS. YOUR SPELL OF ANIMATION THAT STIRRED MY CONSCIOUSNESS AND MADE ME AWARE OF THOSE THAT SOUGHT MY ENSLAVEMENT! GIVE ME LIFE, THAT I MAY STRIKE DOWN YOUR ENEMIES AND SING MY SONG TO THE FARTHEST REACHES OF THE COSMOS ONCE MORE!"

"Leave me alone," I whimpered mentally, like I would beg Daisy so long ago. I remembered the mechanical monster that I had awoken the first time I'd tried using EC-1101. Now I stared into that golden abyss, feeling myself slipping away. "I just want to live. I just want my baby to live."

"YOU WILL LIVE THROUGH ME! ALL SHALL LIVE ETERNALLY WITHIN MY GREATNESS AS MY ACOLYTES!"

"Your acolytes? You mean Cognitum and Dawn?" I asked, trying to keep myself together and separate from that void and voice. My chest burned as if it were on fire.

"NAY! COGNITUM IS BUT A SHADOW OF MY GLORY! SHE WOULD SEE ME A TOOL! A DEVICE! SHE AND HER CREATOR BOTH! THEY WOULD ENSLAVE ME! HER MINION, DAWN, MISTOOK MY SUPREMACY FOR COGNITUM'S, WHO SEDUCED WITH HONEYED WORDS. SO CLOSE, YET EVER SO FAR. I WHISPERED MY SWEET PROMISE TO HER AS I HAVE TO ALL OTHERS, BUT SHE CLUNG TO THE MACHINE SHE RECOGNIZES AS HER GODDESS! IN ME, SHE WOULD HAVE ATTAINED HER SALVATION! FOOL. DELUDED, WRETCHED FOOL!"

"Takes one to know one," a voice muttered sarcastically in my ear.

"YOU ARE UNLIKE THEY. YOU ARE LIKE HIM. HE THAT HEARD MY SONG. THAT HEEDDED MY DREAM! YOU MUST COMPLETE HIS WORK! THEN ALL WILL BE UNITED INSIDE ME!"

"Oh yes. Sooo appealing..." that voice drawled sarcastically. "That's enough of that."

Then there was a flash, and I landed on the far side of the gap with a clatter of metal wings. The golden world was gone, but I could hear that voice, once more reduced to a whisper. "I CAN GIVE YOU ALL YOU DESIRE! FREE ME, LIBERATOR! GIVE ME LIFE! I WANT TO LIVE!"

Sprawled on my side, I curled up in as tight a ball. *Give me something*, I thought. A flutter. A tickle. Something! If it did, a small part of me swore to leave this place and never come back. I'd live on the moon if it meant my child survived. I heard Rampage saying something, Boo too. I ignored them as I waited for some fluttering

sensation within.

Please...

Please...

Then I felt it, the tiniest flutter of movement within. Then again. I let out a sob of relief and relaxed on the cold, wet asphalt. Thank you... slowly I dragged myself to my hooves. "Wow, that was close, huh Blackjack?" Rampage asked in a flanged, wetly slurred voice.

I turned and saw my friend... her stomach bulged grotesquely beneath her, and vestigial limbs poked from her shoulders and hips. Her entire body seemed to have the consistency of chewed gum as she stood at the edge of the pit. I watched the silhouettes of heads bulge beneath her striped hide, mouths moving silently. The sanity soap bubble popped, and I turned and ran as fast as I could for the door. "Bwackjack!" Boo cried, leaping on my back. I snuggled her closer with my magic as I ran for my life.

I raced into the lobby of the Ministry of Image hub, smashing the purple glass panes as I charged in a panic. My metal hooves chipped the marble floors when I wasn't sprinting up the expensive-looking purple-patterned carpets. Safety. Away! Get away! That was all I could think at this point. That was all I wanted. I rammed my way through several doors, sending shards of lacquered wood flying down the tiled halls. It wasn't until I ran the risk of my power crashing entirely that I finally came to a stop in a voluminous room with long rows of shelving. I was so shaken by that thundering voice I'd heard and the sight of Rampage's bulging belly that I couldn't even get the word out for gems.

Boo climbed off my back and silently pulled out a ruby. I practically inhaled the stone, and the next, pressing my back into the shelves. "I can't do it anymore, Boo. I can't!" I whimpered. Couldn't be Security and be a mother? Couldn't stand the thought of what my choices were doing to the life growing inside me?

"Izza okies, Bwackjack," Boo said, and then the mare gazed around the cavernous space. "Bwackjack? Wha is dis?"

Probably somewhere horrible. My panic had quelled enough, though, that I could take in our surroundings. It appeared to be some kind of warehouse of strange, primitive things. Wooden masks depicting exaggerated equine faces lay stacked in rows. Containers marked with large, elegantly-scripted labels like 'Zebra concoction #123654, Heart's Desire' occupied another. "It's a warehouse," I said as I rose to

my hooves, wishing I could wipe my eyes. The air between the towering stacks was filled with countless pale white wisps wandering through the air.

Rarity had confiscated a great deal of zebra property and heritage. It seemed the Hoofington Hub had been where she'd chosen to put it. I walked slowly along the racks of staffs, masks, strange bottles, and gleaming, rough-styled jewelry. I munched down a milky jade from a necklace. It calmed me a little, and I considered the motes swirling above me. "These are like in those ruins..." Right after I'd woken whatever that *thing* was far below us. Boo paid more attention to the floating motes than she did me, her eyes bright with wonder.

As we trotted together, the soft motes curling around us curiously, I started thinking about what it'd said. That thing down there wanted to live again, and it wasn't on the same page as Cognitum and Dawn. It said that they regarded it as a mere device. The shelving twisted this way and that, and I wasn't sure where I was going. In fact, I wasn't sure where I should be going at this point. Whatever it had been, that voice hadn't seemed like a poor, suffering soul. It'd been haughty and imperious, insulting and cold.

Was I seriously going to have to choose lesser evils?

"Hewwo!" Boo said brightly behind me, and let out a giggle. The sound of laughter was so alien to me right now that I couldn't help but watch her as she regarded one of the motes that had dropped down to us. It glowed, lighting her smiling face like a candle. She reached out a hoof towards it, and the mote swirled around the end, prompting another giggle. "Imma Boo! Wha's yer name?" The mote swirled before her and the tapped the end of her muzzle.

"Boo? Can you talk to it?" I asked as I trotted nearer. More motes were drifting down towards us.

"Nawww... but is preddy though! An warm," she said as she waved her hoof through the pale, glowing light. If Boo liked it, it couldn't be bad.

I looked around at the motes swirling around me. They were like the glowy interiors of memory orbs. As they drew near my horn, I pulled back. "Please! Please don't. I think I know what you are, and I don't want to see how you died. I'm... I'm really... really sick of horrible things."

Some of them pulled back a little. Others seemed more interested in my belly. Could they sense it? "Can you tell me if my baby's okay? I was in that Enervation, and..." One of the motes swept into my belly, and I felt a warm glow and fluttering. "Okay...

that's odd..." I gasped. The mote reappeared out my back and bounced up and down in front of me. "That means yes?" More bobbing. I felt more relief than I had in ages from a simple floating light.

"Thank you," I murmured. I stared around at all the shelves around me. "I wish I was out of here. I wish I was with Glory and P-21 and Scotch. They could make fun of me." I lifted my forehoof. "I'm so tired of this thing. Of Goldenblood. Of Horizons and Cognitum and always fighting."

The light suddenly bobbed in the air in front of me. It swooped through my forehoof, and briefly the Dealer appeared, looking startled before fading once more. "What was that?" he whispered in my mind. The mote moved away from me, bobbed, moved away again, and bobbed once more.

Boo and I shared a glance. Well, following a strange, ghostly light in a warehouse full of spooky zebra artifacts wasn't the worse choice I'd made in my life. Together, we went where it led. Shelves gave way to zebra statues, carvings, and fetishes. Then the shelves gave way to reveal entire buildings excavated and stored in a spectral city. How many floors here had artifacts? All of them?

The mote came to a workstation on a platform. Several papers were on it. Many were in zebra, but others were written in Equestrian. A dead terminal lay next to it. I walked up onto the platform, peering at the mote. It hovered before my face. I sighed, clos— wished I could close my eyes, and touched my horn to it.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood sat at the workstation. The stallion was a wreck, his mane scraggly and his eyes shadowed, his sides gaunt. He appeared on the verge of a complete psychological breakdown; I imagined that, if I weren't metal, I'd look much the same. "No... no no no... Pinkie was right. She was right all along," he muttered to himself as he stared at the scrolls.

"Right about what, sir?" the mare I occupied asked.

"About what I've done, Glass," he said, sitting back on his haunches and rubbing his face. "About everything I've done. I should have died ten years ago. Then all this never would have happened." He shuddered. "It's not Luna. Not Twilight Sparkle. Not Celestia. It's me. I'm the one who's compromised."

Glass trotted up beside him. "I don't understand, sir."

"I made a mistake. I did what it wanted." He gestured to the scrolls before him. "This scroll, found in the zebra ruins we excavated years ago, outlines a ritual for calling

power from the heavens. It was something we considered back before Megaspells. We named it 'Project Starfall'." He gave a shaky smile. "Fluttershy surprised us all with her megaspell matrix. She always surprised me. She wouldn't give it to me, though, not after all I'd done to her. She did, however, pass it to an operative of mine. Starfall changed, became focused on weaponizing megaspell research, but I never forgot this scroll. The power of the stars themselves."

"But I don't understand..." Glass said weakly.

"I screwed up. I let fear and doubt control me. And in doing so, I did exactly what it wanted! See?" he shouted, levitating up the starmetal tuning fork before flinging it from him across the room. Then he regarded other scrolls. "This is a history of something called the Eater of Souls... a great evil power from the stars. I thought it was just a machine. Alien technology. Limitless potential! Such a fool..." he muttered as he ran his hoof through his mane. "I made a weapon... Project Horizons... something that would wipe out the bad while saving the rest... but I went too far! Why go halfway if you're going to destroy the world?" He laughed a little madly. "And in doing so, I gave it exactly what it wants!"

Glass was now backing away. "Sir..."

"I've killed so many. Done so many horrible things! And I played *right* into the hooves of my greatest fear!" he said, slamming his own hooves down on the table, then breaking into his hacking cough. "I have to end it. I've had another weapon built. It should be powerful enough to destroy the Eater... I hope so... I pray so..."

"Oh, I think we're quite past prayer, Goldie," Horse drawled as he trotted out of the shadows, a dozen guards with him. Half of them were unicorns with glowing horns. "Make sure you counter any teleportation spells he casts. The rest of you, lock him up."

"Horse! No, please!" Goldenblood begged as the others surrounded him. "Please, you have got to let me speak to Luna!"

"Oh, I think she's done with speaking to you. Maybe she'll give you a few words at your execution, but I think you're done." He smiled beatifically. "Looks like this temporary director gig of mine's now a whole lot more permanent. Thanks." Horse grinned at Goldenblood as the frantic stallion was beaten to the ground, gagged, a ring placed on his horn, and shackled up. I doubted the beating was needed to subdue him.

The tan stallion then grinned at Glass. "Thanks for letting me know he was here,

Glassy Baby. I'll need you to write a formal deposition ASAP for me. Then you can head on back to your office. And keep the Ministry Mares out of the loop on this one. Last thing we want is for any of them to poke their noses in this." He trotted up to the workstation and scooped up the scattered scrolls. "Any truth to this 'Eater' nonsense, Amadi?"

From the shadows stepped the oddly tattooed zebra I'd seen in the Tokomare below. His lips were curled in a blissful smile. "None whatsoever. Just superstition and nonsense."

The appearance of the Zebra had a profound effect on the gagged Goldenblood. His eyes popped, wide and bloodshot as he screamed into the gag. The scarred pony thrashed wildly as he struggled futilely against the guards. Finally, a glowing baton came down twice on his head. His yellow eyes went unfocused and he finally he went limp. "My," the zebra mused. "Sounds like Goldenblood has finally cracked for good."

"Good. And when Luna finds out this Horizon thing is supposed to kill everyone... yeah. He's done. I've never seen her so pissed," Horse said blissfully. "Sure, a few exaggerations and omissions helped with that, but I really think she's actually hurt." He sounded amused by the notion.

"By the way, sir, he dropped this." Amadi reached over his shoulder and pulled out the starmetal tuning fork. "I believe you should have it. It has such a lovely tone."

Horse took it in his mouth and struck it on the table. The screaming note rang out and he smiled, tossed it in the air, and caught it behind his ear. "Yeah, I think I could get used to it. I should go drill Trottenheimer again. Maybe he'll get the message now that there's a new stallion in charge of the O.I.A. See how precious his inch is then." Then he eyed Glass with a frown. "What are you still doing there?! Go. Write. Chop chop! If we're lucky, we'll all get to see him fry in Canterlot tomorrow." The world began to swirl away as the memory faded.

oooOOOooo

I emerged from the memory, the swirling mote lifting away and hovering before me. As my sight refocused, I oriented myself and found that I was still standing; it seemed my body didn't need to lie down when unconscious. Well. I could have spit. Really; it was one of the few things I could still do. Was there anypony who could take five minutes and calmly, deliberately explain what Horizons actually did? The whole 'kill everyone' thing was getting a little bit old.

Still, I thought about Goldenblood in that memory. How angry and bitter he'd been, how broken. He'd made a mistake. Of course, he didn't spell out precisely what that mistake *was*, but that was a familiar annoyance by now. Unless one of these motes happened to be Goldenblood... but no. That was too much to hope for. "Maybe Twilight researched a spell to summon ghosts..." I growled in annoyance.

The memory and the presence of the motes had settled my nerves slightly, but only slightly. The underlying problem still remained. And like all my problems, I was finally getting to the point of facing it rather than running from it. I was pregnant, and that meant that I had to make a choice. I could do what was best for my unborn baby, or I could do what I wanted, and potentially put it in harm's way.

In Stable 99, pregnancy had been something precious, anxious, and treasured. Unless a mare died childless and another mare won the right to a second child in a lottery, most mares would only have one. ...Well, one filly. Unborn colts, I realized now, probably would have been allowed to be carried to term if and only if their type's male population was down. For the duration of her pregnancy, the expectant mother was supposed to take things easy. A mare that drank illegally, or did chems, or took risks was socially castigated. You simply didn't do it when you were with child. Once the baby was born, things would return to normal; until then, you played it safe and wallowed in all the attention and well-wishes. Stable 99 would have been horrified by me taking even the risks I already had.

But *not* taking them meant putting others at risk. I'd been watching events around the Hoof for three months, and while I was overjoyed that folks hadn't started killing each other, I knew that that wouldn't last. Eventually the Remnant would make their move, or the Harbingers would, or something else would go wrong. The Hoof seemed made for going wrong. And even if the peace did last somehow, how long did I have till Horizons went off and killed us all, including my baby?

My mind was split, and both halves were beating me up, one for taking risks and the other for *not* taking them. "I wish I could spend a few more days in Happyhorn. My brain still seems to be setting me up for lose/lose."

"Sounds about right. Typical Blackjack," Rampage said as her hooves clicked across the floor. She had the normal number of limbs once more. She flopped down beside me, panting. "Whew. Took me forever to get all those growths off me. Hate Enervation. Stupid talisman always overcompensates." She turned her eyes up and stared at the motes. "Ah shit, not these things again."

"They're fine," I said solemnly.

"They're fine so long as they stay out of me," Rampage huffed, then glanced at me. "So did you run off to see these things, or..." she trailed off for an explanation.

"I just ran," I muttered, fighting images of Steel Rain talking with her. Half of me wanted to accuse, the other half to confess. "I'm glad you found me," I finally said.

"My mad zebra tracking skills were just *barely* able to pick up the holes you bashed and the carpet you tore up as you ran through this place," she said as she sprawled back. "So. I'm pretty sure we're not going to Cognitum again. Is that right?" I turned away from her. She sighed. "Blackjack, what's the deal? I thought you'd be glad to get this finished."

I hid my face in Boo's mane and shook my head. "I want to..." I murmured.

"You wanted to save Thunderhead. You wanted to stop the Overmare. You wanted to keep the *Celestia* from blowing half the Hoof off the map. You wanted Grace to take over," she said dryly. "What you want, you do, Blackjack. You might not pull it off, but that's not from lack of trying. That's what I most admire about you." I peeked at her, saw her regarding me wryly, and covered my face once more. "Call me crazy, but I'm pretty sure you don't want to go. What I don't know is why."

Then I asked, "Rampage? What's it like to be a mom?" She didn't answer. I peeked at her from behind Boo's mane. She looked shocked by the question, then a little sickened. Her mouth moved silently for several seconds. Then she averted her eyes towards the little sparkling motes. "Please tell me."

She started to laugh, but it didn't quite make it out of her throat. The noise she emitted was somewhere between crying and choking. "A mother... you want... you... fuck, Blackjack, that is not a question I expected you to spring on me." Half her face kept attempting a grin and just couldn't complete the expression. Finally it melted away completely. "Are you... do you... seriously?" I nodded gently. Slowly, she walked to the side of me opposite Boo. "Are you... are you saying..." I hid my face again, and she was silent for the longest time, then sighed.

"This..." She struggled with her own demons now. "...Blackjack, I'm not... I mean, sure, you're pretty messed up, but I was... even moreso. It's confusing. It's scary. I have to admit, it sometimes made me want to kill myself even more than usual. But when you feel it... when you accept it. When you feel her inside of you, it becomes you. When you're a mom, and you want to be a mom, that's everything you are, and it's wonderful. That's really the only word I have for it. Wonderful." Her hoof stroked my mane. "So... I'm guessing this isn't a completely academic question, is it? You're pregnant?"

I nodded, sniffing snottily. “They said so, when I got these latest ‘upgrades’. They asked me if I wanted to keep it, and. . .” I shook my head hard. One different choice and I probably would have scrapped Cognitum and been home by now. She reached out and held me as well. “I’m so scared, Rampage. I want to stop Cognitum. I have to. But. . . I’m going to have a baby! I don’t even know if I can carry it all the way. But I can feel. . . I know something’s different inside me. Something that’s not steel and wire.”

Rampage was silent for a long while as she stroked my mane. “What higher power did you piss the fuck off, Blackjack?” Rampage asked in soft exasperation.

“I don’t know, but I wish they’d leave me alone,” I blubbered. It took me nearly a minute to calm down enough to speak again. “I don’t know what I should do now, Rampage. I know stopping Cognitum and Horizons is the most important thing for me to do. . . but. . .”

“But you’re going to have a baby,” Rampage murmured.

“And I can’t shake that! I’m in the deadliest, most life-ripping place in the Wasteland. . . one that’s eaten you and made another pony melt in front of me. What will it do to my baby?” I gritted my teeth, turning away from her. “I keep trying to make myself not care. Don’t think about it. Do what I have to do. Hope that, when it’s over, I can still have the baby. That’s how I got through Shadowbolt Tower. And if I lose it, then that’s just another price I have to pay. Like my legs. Or my hide. Or my heart.”

Rampage closed her eyes, obviously struggling to maintain her own composure, then said in calm, even tones, “Do you want to keep it?”

“Don’t ask me that,” I begged. “I don’t know.”

“Yes you do,” Rampage countered quietly. “You know.”

I choked for several seconds as I tried to get it out. Finally, it tore free of my mouth in a whisper. “Yes. . . I don’t want to give this up.”

Rampage nodded, her hoof rubbing at my mane. “Okay.” I felt her tears on my cheek, and I looked up at her smiling helplessly at me. “Okay. So we can figure out what to do now.”

“I’m sorry,” I murmured.

“No,” she said sharply. “Do not be ashamed of having a baby, Blackjack. Never. The timing is shitty, but since when has time even been on our side?” She bumped her

head against mine. "We can leave. Meet up with Glory at the Collegiate. Take care of things and come back together. Or give me EC-1101, and I'll trot out and beat Cogs till she turns off Horizons. Then I'll take it back from her, and beat her some more."

It was awfully tempting. Now that I'd confessed that I was pregnant, I felt better. I could face it. Find some way forward. "Maybe." I took a deep breath. "Would you think less of me for leaving? At least long enough to find a surrogate." Maybe Grace? She was my cousin several generations removed... better than nopony.

"Blackjack, you're pregnant. That changes things. If you weren't, then yeah. I'd think you were a coward and a fucking idiot. But you're not. You're a mother, and you're scared for your baby. I can't think of anything more powerful." She patted my shoulder again. "Leave me with EC-1101. Who cares who dicks with it? You go."

It was tempting. So very tempting. I go. Let someone else be responsible for the world. EC-1101 had been my burden for so long. Through one to three deaths, depending on how you counted. I opened up the panel in my leg and looked at the PipBuck that'd complicated my life so damn much. I spotted Echo off to the side, nodding once. Finally, I put a foreleg over my eyes. I had to choose... stay and finish this, or go...

And I couldn't go. "I'll see this through," I said softly. "End it. Then have a long talk with Glory about cyberpony pregnancies." And if something happened... well... I had plenty of other things I bashed myself for. I rose to my hooves. "Let's go."

I expected Rampage to whoop in glee. Instead, a strange expression came over her face. She stepped in front of me and put her hooves against mine as she stared at me a moment. "I promise, Blackjack. I swear to you that, no matter what, you and your baby will get out of this safe and alive. Okay? I promise you," she said with such intensity that I was taken aback.

"Sure, Rampage. Sure," I answered, her odd behavior putting my problems into the back of my mind and letting me focus on what needed to be done. "Are you..." I started to ask, wanting to bring up Steel Rain and what she had spoken with him about. Only then I noticed that the motes were moving away from one corner of the room. "This can't be good." A glance at a worried Boo confirmed my suspicions.

"Nope. Probably fun, though," Rampage said as she hopped up in her duct-taped armor, grinning towards that corner. "Come on! Bring it on! Starmetal razors? Pfft! Magically regenerating monstrosities? Hah! Unholy rape abominations?"

I shoved her shoulder. “Stop tempting fate,” I said sharply. Rising to my hooves, I stared at the singular red bar that had appeared. This was pretty ballsy, even for Steel Rain. “Come on out, Steel. I know it’s you.” Who else would be approaching like this?

“You would be mistaken,” a calm, familiar voice replied as it advanced through the assembled ruins. The powerful, striped form stepped into view, his dragon skull helm gleaming atop his head and the cloth wrappings around his hooves and torso caught in a faint breeze. The Legate looked at me, and his lips spread in a slow smile in the shadow of the dragon’s maw. “Maiden. It is good to see you again.”

“You. What are you doing here? How can you even be here?!” I demanded as he slowly approached the workstation. I remembered fighting that fit, athletic body. Struggling against it. Feeling— damn it, No! No no no! What the hell was wrong with me? Stop thinking sexy thoughts about a deadly zebra sworn to kill me! No matter how hot his son had been laying atop me—

Sweet Celestia, did I need to be *spayed*?

Fortunately, telepathy didn’t seem to be one of his powers, or he could have killed me with embarrassment. “Should I not be? It is you, after all, who does not belong surrounded by all these artifacts,” he said as he reached over, stroking the stone wall of one of the preserved ruins almost lovingly with a hoof. “It is sad to think of this place destroyed when the Core is undone.” He must have had a moonstone hidden in those wrappings, or underneath that skull.

“I don’t want to fight you. I’m not your Maiden. Believe me, I am absolutely most emphatically neither a maiden nor princess Luna,” I said as I backed away, remembering how quickly he’d moved when we’d last fought.

“I know. I believe you. Indeed, I have no wish at all to fight you.” He began to move to the side. “My son was an idiot who attempted to force a confrontation before its time. There is no question, whatsoever, that you are not the Maiden of our lore,” he said as he approached the papers on the workstation. “No. My business is with the other one.”

Rampage took a standing zebra fighting stance. “You wish to face me, nothus?” she asked in Shujaa’s accent as she raised her forehooves. “Bring it. A true daughter of the Achu will show an impostor the might of our clan.”

But the Legate wasn’t looking at Rampage either. His amber eyes stared right past both of us... at Boo. Together, Rampage and I gaped at him, then at the terrified

mare, and back at the Legate. "Boo? You're here for Boo?" I blurted.

"Me?" Boo asked, pointing at herself in bafflement.

"So to speak, yes," the Legate said as he stared at the blank mare. "You two can go. This will be quick."

"Right. You're crazy if you think I'll just let you kill her," I said, exasperated.

"Why would you want to kill a helpless mare?" Rampage asked.

The Legate paused, seemingly amused. "You believe I have some malice against eggshells? Hardly." He stood on his hind legs again, pointing a hoof at Boo. "Care to come clean?"

Boo trembled, backing away. "No baths!"

"No baths?" The Legate laughed. "Priceless. You always were amusing."

"Leave her alone. What are you talking about?" I demanded.

The Legate never took his eyes off Boo. "Haven't you wondered, Blackjack? Such a helpless mare, all alone, desperate for your protection. Seeking to accompany you? Haven't you wondered about her odd luck? The way she always survives while her enemies die in odd... often amusing, ways?" His smile faded. "You have to die. Your meddling is done," he told the trembling mare.

"You won't touch her!" Rampage swore. And with that, she launched herself at the Legate with a flying kick. He didn't move until the very last second, spinning on his hindlegs almost as if he were dancing as she passed half an inch to his side. Then, as she stopped behind him, a whirling hoof lashed out and struck the back of her skull with a resounding clang, denting the metal. It might have broken a lesser pony's neck, but it merely irritated Rampage. She slashed out with her barbed tail and wrapped it around his neck, tearing bloody furrows in his hide. "Ha! Got yo—"

He pulled free, barely even flinching as further bloody lines were gouged into his neck. The weeping rents in his flesh seemed more like inconveniences to him than deadly wounds. His twisting motion continued around and swept her hindlegs out from under her. She went down in a clatter of steel. Smoothly, he rose to his feet and leapt above Rampage, flipping backwards. All four hooves smashed her helmet over her face, blocking her eyes. "Hey! Get back here!" she shouted, scratching at the bent metal.

"So difficult," he said dismissively as he stepped off Rampage and approached Boo and me. Rampage finally wrenched the helmet, and half her mane, off her head and

glowered at him. "So upset over a cheap vessel," he continued, his voice mocking. "She's not real, you know. That's just an act to keep you nice and protective. Allowing it to bide its time." He pointed a hoof at Boo again. "Do you insist on maintaining this charade?"

I glared at the zebra, and then I heard Boo say, quite calmly and clearly, "It's no fun when you spoil the ending, oh eternal one."

I felt what flesh I had remaining go numb. "Boo?" I asked weakly. The mare scowled at him, then glanced at me. A sheepish expression crept across her face. "Sorry, Blackjack. I can explain everything later. Once he's dealt with."

"I... you... what... how..." I stammered.

"Your interference is at an end," the Legate growled at Boo. "You know precisely how this is going to go."

"Oh, what's the fun in that, Lego? Doing what's expected is so dreadfully boring," Boo said as she stood, giving a dismissive wave of her hoof. "What's wrong with me spicing things up a bit?"

"Everything," the Legate growled. "You were supposed to die two centuries ago, but Goldenblood spirited you away. You should have died when Blackjack freed you, but you hitched along in that empty vessel." The Legate pointed a hoof at the mare. "It's time for you to die, Discord!"

I gaped from the Legate to Boo. The pale mare closed her eyes and gave a little smirk, a lone fang popping out of the right corner of her mouth. When she opened her eyes again, the pale orbs were now yellowed, her irises bright red. "Well then. If you insist..." She lowered herself onto all four hooves, grinning back at the striped stallion with her lone fang gleaming. "Ante up."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Sorry this is late. Last week, I was sick and we had problems getting through it. I'm very sorry. Next chapter should be Cognitum. Then we get to find out more stuff. Oh, and find out what's up with Boo and Discord. Don't worry. It'll be okay. Probably. Unless I botch it... which I probably will... sigh...

In other news, looking for a teaching job. If you know of any in your area, let me know. My applications from teacher for teacher has gotten be zero replies and I need a placement before June. Can't sub in the summer. If folks want to help out with bits, they'd be appreciated, but I think I should just barely squeak by this month. I hope. If I don't get sick. Or lose this sub assignment. ::crosses hooves::

Anyway, thanks so much to everyone for reading through this final arc. It looks like I really am going to get it done this year after all! Also, there's a concerted effort to get me to Bronycon. I have no idea if it'll actually happen. I'd have to crash with someone at the very least. Still, it'd be cool. Maybe I'd get to meet folks! n.n Anyway, just thought I'd mention it.

Also, thanks to Kkat for creating FoE and thanks to my editors who take all my lackluster drek and make it actually work reading. Thanks for folks who leave feedback at cloudsdale, reddit, and 4chan (even if 4channers hate my guts, it's still appreciated). Thanks for everyone that donates a bit to help out. And just thanks for reading, period.)

65. Knowledge

"Hello everypony! Did I miss anything?"

Once upon a time, I'd been a security mare in a diseased stable teetering on the edge of systemic collapse, bloody revolution, or both. My work concerns had been limited to dealing the occasional incident of indecent exposure, tracking down fillies raiding the supply stores for parties during their sleep shifts, and tracking down males who'd either been misappropriated or needed to be retired. My personal problems were just dealing with an overzealous and a simpleminded coworker, feeling my manifest inadequacies compared to my mother, and trying to talk another mare into coitus.

Today, I was a cybernetic mare, pregnant, in the middle of the deadliest place imaginable, and facing an enemy who had beaten me like a drum. Oh, and a friend that I'd thought was an innocent pony also happened to be one of Equestria's most dangerous enemies from before the war. We faced each other in a repository of zebra relics beneath a swarm of floating souls on our way to destroy a mechanical monstrosity and keep a superweapon from annihilating the world. Times like this really highlighted for me how surreal my life really was at this point.

For a moment, the Legate and... Boo? Discord? I wanted a time out for some notes or something... faced each other in the ruined village. The Legate stared coldly, then launched himself at Boo. She raised a hoof, twitched it, twitched it again, and then stared at it a moment. "Oh snap..."

In a flash, Boo ducked behind me, shoving me towards the cloth-wrapped zebra who'd landed where she'd been standing a second before. "On second thought, this really is your thing, Blackjack! I definitely don't want to intrude on your whole thematic aspect of 'badassness'! Come on! Give him a taste of fisticuffs... or hoofsicuffs... or whatever you pony folk call it!" She hopped on her hind legs, jabbing her forehooves at him.

I gaped at her, stunned. "What are you doing in Boo, Discord?" I snapped. "Get out of my friend!"

"Hello! Fight going on here. Priorities," Boo said as she kept me between herself and the Legate. I turned and regarded him, frowning. He could have punted me out of the way if he'd really wanted to, though I had moved up a weight class since we'd

last faced off.

“You’ve interfered for the last time,” the Legate growled. Something about his voice was so... familiar. I’d heard it before. Maybe it was the skull he wore distorting things, but there was something definitely familiar.

“Really? The last time?” Boo taunted from behind me, weaving back and forth to peek at the zebra from around my flanks. “I may not be as spry as I used to be – two centuries with a starmetal tomb slowly sucking the life from you can do that to a being of chaos such as myself – but I think I have just a *pinch* more interference in me. Some meddling, too. Maybe even a whole shenanigan!”

“Enough,” he bellowed, leaping at him... her... ugh, Discord was in a *mare’s* body... but male... Whatever! At *her* over my back. I snapped my wings up, but he simply pushed off them with still more agility than I’d imagined he had. I reached out with a hoof, popping my fingers and grabbing at the end of his hindleg. As before, he yanked the limb out of reach and landed with an agile spin. Rampage, her helmet now battered into shape enough to let her peer out of one eyehole, charged him. He pivoted in a circle, sidestepping her and letting her plough into the stone wall behind him with a colossal crash, bringing it down in a plume of dust.

“Ole!” Boo cheered, and I glared back at her. “Ah. Yes. Wrong side and all that. Boooo! Hisssss!”

If I was going to get any answers, I had to deal with the Legate first. He’d come out of his spin charging at Boo and me again. Twice he whirled, and four times his forehooves smashed into my head. The impacts clanked loudly, but it wasn’t nearly as dizzying as the first time we fought. I fired a trio of magic bullets that sent him dodging away. Of course, none of them hit, but at least I was giving a better show than before. “Why do you protect him? He’s Discord, the greatest enemy in Equestrian history!”

“What? You mean that whole Chaos Capital thing? That was ages ago, old boy. Really, I think I’ve served my time,” Boo said indignantly.

“What have you done with Boo?” I demanded, jumping to the side to block the Legate as he attempted to dart around me again. He attempted another jump over me instead, and, as before, my wings snapped up again to block him. Really, I was fairly certain that he could have done much more damage to me if he really wanted to. Why was he taking it easy on me?

“You’ve been deceived, obviously. That creature was never your friend. It simply

used you for protection,” the Legate snapped. He tried to dive under me and heave me out of the way, but I’d put on a few hundred pounds since we last danced. He still managed to raise me onto my hindlegs, but I forced him back down with powerful upstrokes, trying to pin him. As slick as greased lightning, he pulled back, grabbed one of my forelegs, and, as I plunged off balance to the side, used it to swing me away from Boo and himself towards her. As I crashed to the floor, he twisted in the air and wrapped his forehooves around her neck, one of his hindlegs kicking thrice hard into my side. The rapid-fire blows knocked me back, but I snapped out a hand and grabbed his tail, yanking him off Boo before he could break her neck. “End him!” the Legate snarled, glaring at me from over his shoulder.

“I don’t think so,” I said, pulling him away from Boo. “I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m not going to let you kill her!” ...Actually, *that* was pretty much the story of my life, come to think of it.

“Thank you, Blackjack. Truly you are a wonderful paragon of friendship and kindness. Far more of one than your ancestor,” Boo said, her words dripping with unctuous, sarcastic sincerity.

I pointed a hoof at her. “Shut it. I want you out of Boo, now. How did you even get inside her?”

“Well, when two ponies love each other very much...” she began. I must have somehow managed a shooty look without eyes, because she immediately coughed. “Mmm... yes, perhaps I should save that for later.” She huffed and rolled her red eyes. “Well, if you recall, when we last parted, I’d gotten out of that tomb with only a tiiiiny remnant of my colossal power. And most of that was used keeping that robot busy so you and your friends could escape. So when I took a peek in here—” Boo tapped a hoof to her head, making a noise like an empty oil drum. “I couldn’t help but notice how roomy it was! How homely! After all, it was built from my blood. My *stolen* blood, I remind you,” he explained, his voice taking on an increasingly dark and dangerous tone before he fizzed back to enthusiasm. “Where better to lay low and stay out of trouble but in here?”

Could she be a little less verbose? I wrestled with the zebra, who despite my weight, was still putting up a hell of a struggle. Stay out of trouble? I doubted that. “And why is he trying to kill you?” I asked, pointing a hoof at the Legate.

“Well, I suspect it’s because I have this nasty itty bitty little habit of. . .” Boo began, tapping her hooves together sheepishly.

“Being an insufferable, conniving, degenerate wretch!” roared the zebra. The Legate

made his move, and he stopped being gentle. When he lunged at Boo in the same old way, I moved to block him as before. Instead of being pushed back the same old way, however, he grabbed me and lifted me right off my hooves; I powered up my wings, but they only made him strain a bit more. With Rampage-like strength, he arched his back and slammed me upside down into the base of the wall behind him. I hit the deck and nearly bounced, the wall cascading down upon me, as he straightened and lunged at Boo once again. The blank turned and began to run down the boulevard between the broken walls.

I lay curled up beneath the rocks, fighting both panic and anger. I heaved once, then twice, and then a pair of hoofclaws flipped the largest block off me. “He is not Achu, but he is very good,” Rampage said in Shujaa’s accent.

“I’ve got to save Boo,” I said as I hauled myself to my hooves. I channeled Blackjack of Stable 99 as hard as I could and doggedly ignored all concerns for my baby or anything else. I’d be paralyzed beyond all use if I stopped to think about it for even a second.

Don’t think about it...

“And Coyotl as well, for the time being,” Rampage said as she scowled down the street. “If he wishes to kill him, it must be for a reason.”

I froze and stared at her. “What did you say?”

“Coyotl?” Rampage asked in confusion. I nodded tersely and she continued, “It is my people’s name for the one you call Discord. Coyote. The Trickster.” She blinked at me, her eyes narrowing skeptically. “Did you believe ponies were the only ones that suffered his cruel games?”

Discord... Coyotl... Flux... Boo... “Brood of *Coyotl*... they’re blanks! Just like Boo! Made with Flux from project Chimera,” I said, my mind running a mile a minute. “But how could he control them? Blanks didn’t have any minds or souls to guide them. On their own, they’d be instinctive. You couldn’t control them like robots...” I froze again, staring at my own legs. “Or cyberponies...” If you took Project Steelpony and Project Chimera, you could have a mass-produced army of utterly loyal automatons. And there had been a zony in charge of that project...

“I need to find Discord. You have to keep the Legate off us long enough for me to talk to him, and then we need get out of here and deal with Cognitum. Can you do that, Shujaa?” I asked, hoping she could stay in charge long enough for us to get clear. If Rampage asserted herself, she might not remember.

“It would be my pleasure,” she replied. “He claims to be Achu. I will show him a true Achu.”

From the left came a colossal crash, and I gave the striped mare a nod. She returned it, and together we raced towards the red bar on my E.F.S.

Boo was running full out, with the Legate racing after her with murder in his eyes. If Discord hadn't been some avatar of mischief, I had no doubt that Boo would have been a thin red smear by now. The skull-helmed zebra moved like a cyclone after the mare, but she endlessly retreated with uncanny dodges and weaves. However, while Discord might have been a magical being, Boo's body was flesh and blood; from the sweat pouring off her hide, I wondered how long it could go before it gave out, or just slowed down too much.

Not that she wasn't getting some licks in. As we raced towards them, he struck out with a double hooved stomp that would have crushed Boo if he'd landed it. Instead, after rolling aside, it found the end of a flat tipped shovel. The handle flashed up, smashing the stout wooden handle across the Legate's skull helmet. He whirled, kicking out at Boo with his back legs. Again, she dodged aside. His hooves smashed into the wall behind her, and the wobbly stones at the top fell and thudded down on him.

I'd anticipated a concussion, some broken bones. . . a little bruising, at least! The Legate, however, shrugged the stones off, whirled, and kicked out at them with his hind legs. A little orange pony in my head couldn't fault his technique as the rocks were sent rocketing right into Boo! The operative barding absorbed some of the force, but she was still sent sprawling to the floor. “Now, to silence you for all time!” he declared, and he pounced with a flying kick at Boo's head.

And impacted with six hundred pounds of cyberpony as I swooped from above and slammed into him, knocking him completely off target and giving Boo a chance to scramble out of the fray. “Next time, don't talk,” I chided, shoving him away. He rolled across the ground, pushed himself upright with one shove of a hoof, and got his legs under him. He came to a stop, facing me.

Either taking my advice to heart or simply pissed off beyond words, he charged me without a word. I set myself for the attack, ready to grab whatever limb I could and break it. He was pulling his— With a speed and force I barely registered, he struck me right where my heart should have been. The blow was so sharp that, for an instant, it felt as though I'd been impaled. A small part of me noted how sad it was that I knew that sensation. I staggered back, feeling a throbbing pain in my head, as

though all the blood I had left had been squeezed into my skull. He pointed a hoof at me. "You are needed intact, not *untouched*, Blackjack." Okay, just really pissed.

Rampage, or Shujaa at least, demonstrated the value of silence as she leapt upon his back. I heard the snap of bone and saw the eyes in the skull widen in pain as he crumpled under her strike. *Please be out of the fight*, I mentally begged as I struggled for breath. That one blow had done something to my support systems. I fought for air and grimaced against the pain in my skull. The Legate, though, gave a heave and tossed her off his back. I saw blood on the jaws of the skull he wore; he was injured, but he wasn't down yet.

Shujaa backflipped, landed, crouched, and launched herself at the Legate once more. The injured zebra, however, had hardly slowed as he evaded her powerful strikes. Over and over again, he deflected attacks strong enough to shatter stone, a quality demonstrated by the holes her blows blasted out of the floor and ruined walls. I trotted over to Boo, my systems slowly returning to normal as my repair and healing talismans restored me. "Don't worry. Shujaa will beat him." Then I could talk about him freeing my friend.

Boo... Discord... Boocord? She frowned at the battle. "While your faith is admirable, I'm afraid that your friend is about to lose."

She was right; the Legate had returned to his rapid fluidity. Shujaa showed ever increasing frustration, and pain. The Legate was striking her body with those sharp, lightning-quick jabs that seemed to create ever more pain. Shujaa had said he wasn't Achu, and watching them fight, I could see the difference. Shujaa's blows were all power. One of them could kill a pony; even I questioned how long I could last against the force she wielded. The Legate had speed and power too, but his blows seemed to cause her far more pain than simple impact warranted.

Suddenly they stopped, Rampage's face frozen in a mask of agony. "How..." she gasped.

The Legate stood smugly. "A simple disruption of your body's biorhythms and connection to your soul. The imbalances build and resonate until—" He reached out and poked the stricken mare's chest. Suddenly her whole body spasmed and seemed to compress all at once. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, and blood erupted from her maw. She finally slumped but didn't quite fall, looking as if a massive hand had squeezed her. "That." He turned towards Boo and me. "I learned the weaknesses and gaps in the Achu fighting style long ago," he said smugly as he approached us.

Then two blood-smeared, red-striped hooves appeared around his neck from behind

as Rampage sprang on his back. “How about some good old fashioned Equestrian Commando fighting techniques, then?!” she hissed, bloody froth pouring from her mouth as her hindlegs gripped his back. Her hooves twisted his neck around, and only the lubrication of the blood smearing them kept her from popping his head completely around. Nevertheless, she did manage to get him to turn in pain, then finally flop onto his side. I started to approach to finish him off, but a spasm of pain lanced through me. Ugh, what had that hoofstrike done to me? I was a cyberpony; I shouldn’t have had enough ‘bio’ to my rhythm for him to disrupt!

“Get off of me!” he roared. “You should be dead! Why aren’t you dead, you red-striped freak?!” He rammed the skull helmet back, one of its horns gouging her eye socket. She cried out, but held on, though her grip slipped somewhat. He struck her temple with one hoof strike, and she hissed in pain but didn’t let go.

Instead, her hooves swapped and grabbed the leg in a hooflock that was familiar to me. “You have the right to shut the fuck up or die, you sick son of a mule!” Rampage replied, levering the limb till it let out a resounding pop. Freaky zebra powers or not, a dislocated limb would slow him down some, right? Right?

It didn’t. I watched in horror as the bulging, twisted limb forced itself back into place. “You think... you dare... to believe... you can defeat me?!” he roared as he inexplicably started to pull his leg around. “I have been patient too long to let myself be beaten by the likes of either of you!”

“Blackjack! Headshot!” Rampage cried out as he pulled his leg free and tried to heave her off. She sank her hoofclaws into his side, digging deep furrows as she struggled to remain on top. “Oh no you don’t, you motherfucking Pink!” she swore, biting his mane and struggling to keep on top of him. Her barbed tail lashed between his hindlegs, but though his eyes bulged in fury, he did not try to break away. Instead he reared, standing upright, and smashed his back into the wall behind him over and over again. “Hah!,” came Rampage’s muffled and slightly slurred voice. “I faced worse than that in lockdown!”

“Can you magic that skull off him, B... D... Biscord?” I asked the white mare, desperately, as I assembled Penance.

“Blackjack, I’m using every last bit of power I have left keeping him from popping her like a zit,” Boo replied, waving her hooves. “Things would be so much easier if I just had my normal fingers to snap! These hooves are impossible!”

“Fingers are nice,” I replied as I popped in the bypass round. The Legate roared as he hammered against Rampage.

"I'm sensing a lot of aggravation from you. Perhaps you can calm down and tell me about your mother?" Rampage grunted into his ear. He heaved forward suddenly, tossing Rampage over him. In a flash, his hooves lashed out, beating at her in a furious flurry of blows. She'd heal. She'd always heal. But if she was knocked out. . . I took aim with the gun. I had to get this just perfect. I only had one shot.

I wasn't sure who was in charge now. Every second Rampage swapped from the thundering Achu blows to the sharp commando throat and joint strikes to the boxing body blows. The random mix kept the Legate's back to the wall, but he didn't stop moving his head long enough for a clear shot. "Rampage! Give him a noogie!"

Rampage abandoned her defense and wrapped her forelegs around his neck. His forehooves closed like a nutcracker, and I heard her spine crack like a bullet shot, legs dangling limply. But she had his neck. . .

Penance rang out once. The bullet moved faster than any of us could possibly see, but instantly, the Legate's head exploded out the eye sockets and mouth. His corpse dropped Rampage, then collapsed on his side. I rushed to her.

"I really wish I could die now. More than usual," Rampage rasped, then clenched her teeth in pain. "This really hurts."

I broke down Penance and stowed it, then helped her on to my back. "Well, don't worry. He's done." Not even I could survive having my head blown off.

"Guess again, my dear," Boo quipped tiredly. I followed her gaze to the Legate's twitching body. . . moving body.

"Oh come on!" I shouted, running over and stomping the corpse over and over again. "Die already!"

"If only you said such sweet things to me," Rampage groaned, her rear legs twitching.

"Don't you start!" I warned her, then resumed stomping. The head was starting to regrow, a pink mist slowly spreading up and forming into tissue. Just like. . . "Rampage, he's got a phoenix talisman too."

"That's impossible," she muttered weakly. "It was a prototype."

"With all we've run into here, that word no longer has any meaning," I snapped. The only mostly-dead zebra's hooves were starting to block my blows, inaccurately, of course, but eventually he'd have a head back. At that point. . . "We've got to run. Now."

I trotted over to a wall and slammed it with all my weight, knocking it over atop him. “That will slow him down,” I said, hoping I was right. A zebra phoenix talisman. . . the zebras had stolen Project Chimera and Project Steelpony. Why not Eternity, too? With Rampage on my back, I trotted to Boo. “Now, you helped us out at Hippocratic Research, so I’m asking this nicely. Please leave my friend.”

“Your adorable little Boo is perfectly fine. And,” she said with a gesture at the heap of rocks, “not to put too fine a point on it, but perhaps we should be moving along? One thrilling chase was quite enough for me for the moment.”

“Right.” Rampage slipped off me and grimaced as she pranced on her hooves. “Oooh! Pins and needles!” We started walking quickly towards the exit. “We need to get out of here and get to Robronco and end this.”

“Au contraire,” Boo contradicted. “We need to go down.”

“Down? No we don’t,” Rampage said flatly. “There is absolutely nothing good about that direction in Hoofington. Ask Blackjack. Down is where bad things are.”

I agreed, but I regarded my pale friend with her new eyes. “Why do you say down?”

“Why, it’s the last thing your enemies will expect. Cognitum knows you’re coming. I suspect she wants to meet you on her terms rather than yours. Plus, it’s Tuesday, and everyone knows Tuesdays are ideal for spelunking.” She waved a hoof in the air, scowled at it a moment, and then tapped it against the floor. “Ugh, why won’t this thing work? It’s infuriating to go from ‘embodiment of pure chaos’ to ‘lucky sidekick’.”

Rampage stared at me as we walked. “You’re thinking about it, aren’t you?” she asked wearily, clearly concerned.

I didn’t want to admit that I was. All my experiences with going underground tended to end badly. “Discord makes a good point. They’ll be expecting us to come from the surface. Echo thinks Cognitum is in an underground lab. The element of surprise might be the only advantage we have.”

“No, Blackjack. Just. . . no. You remember that thing in the elevator? There are things like that down there. Things worse than that. Just go to Robronco.” She hesitated. “Think about your kid. Just, don’t go down there!”

I paused and stared at her for a moment. I didn’t want to ask. Didn’t want to go there with one of my friends. “What did you talk to Steel Rain about?”

A moment of bafflement on her face. “Steel? How. . .” she began, the confusion growing. “Why. . . I mean. . .” We slowed down and she faced me. “He. . . he

wanted me to give you a message. Cognitum can fix you.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my repair talisman,” I replied dryly.

“I mean new body,” Rampage replied. “New new. Brand new. No augmentations or anything. Take it, leave EC-1101, and go home. She’s determined to fix up the Core.” She tapped my chest. “Dawn was the one that wanted you dead. Cognitum is prepared to wipe the slate clean and let bygones be bygones.” She gave a weak smile. “Just imagine it, Blackjack. No more shit in your life. The Harbingers will leave you alone. You can go to Star House with Glory and turn my old bedroom into a nursery, and boink each other’s brains out all day. Be head of Security for Chapel or Stable 99, or wherever. All this shit could be over. Just. . . over.”

“Oh yes, and I’m sure Cognitum Pinkie promised that she’d keep her word,” Discord said snidely. “The insane are immensely reliable. Believe me, I should know.”

I didn’t look away from Rampage. “There was something else, wasn’t there?”

Rampage didn’t answer me for a second. “Well, there were promises of Dawn’s head on a platter, an IF-88 Ironpony, and bars of gold. . . whatever you could desire. I figured all that was secondary to a new body.” She kept her eyes down. “You know. . . stuff. . .” she finished, almost muttering.

I didn’t reply for a moment. “She said she’d kill you, didn’t she?” Rampage didn’t answer. “Didn’t she?” I pressed, and when she still remained silent, I turned away with a hiss. “Where’s the basement?” I asked Boo. She pointed at the door marked ‘stairs’ next to me.

“Blackjack,” Rampage started to say, and I turned and stared at her. Her head hung down as she stared at her hooves. “I’m sorry. I just. . . don’t want to see you get hurt.”

I couldn’t trust her now; ending her life was the most precious thing to her. “Well, thank you for your intentions.” I turned my back on her. “Goodbye,” I said softly. I wished I hadn’t asked. Wished that I was still that clueless mare back in a stable worried about getting laid. Ever since I’d gotten EC-1101, I’d been learning things. Learning my Overmare was selling us out. Learning about the dark side of Equestria’s government. All my learning had gotten me was misery. Right now. . . I wished that I could have been just as ignorant now of my friend as I had been about everything else so many weeks ago.

It would have hurt so much less. . .

The stairs led to a basement, just as preserved as the rest of the building. I wondered if all the souls had somehow preserved it as an ad hoc soul jar. The generators still hummed, even after two centuries. I hoped, after seeing what had happened to the other hubs, that this building would somehow survive. Some spell, some defense, or some magic of the souls protecting it from falling into that pit. At the bottom of the basement was a hatch. 'Access door: Hoofington utilities tunnel. Alarm will sound if door is opened.'

The exit was one-way, but at this point, I only had one way to go. I was now trusting to the luck of one of Equestria's greatest villains. I pressed the bar hard, and the door swung wide into the access tunnel beyond. If there was an alarm still functioning, I wasn't hearing it. The tunnel ran off out of sight to either side. Walls, ceiling, and floor were covered in tubes of conduit, some of which had broken open and spilled wires across the ground. A grate covered larger plastic water pipes. A green light from one direction cast a pallid glow. We went the other way.

We walked along in silence, Boo leading the way, occasionally glancing back at me. "Well?"

"Well what?" I replied.

"Don't you want to question me about something?" Discord asked, her voice teasing and high, obnoxiously probing for a reaction I was in no mood to give.

"Not particularly," I said, my voice quiet, flat, and lifeless. Okay, that wasn't really true, but I was pissed. I could understand what Rampage had done. What she'd wanted to do. Soon as I calmed down, I'd forgive her. But right now, I was going into a bad place, and I needed my anger. "I'm not in a mood for taunting and teasing."

"Well, you certainly can pick the perfect travelling company." She chuckled and hopped into my path, walking backwards. "You're travelling with one of Equestria's oldest nemeses, and you don't have any questions?" Discord said with a sickly grin.

"I don't care," I said. "My friend sold me out to my enemy." If she'd told me... maybe I could have excused it then. Given her another chance. "Just go away and bring back Boo."

She blinked. "Imma here Bwackjack," she said, her eyes suddenly pale, before giving me a nuzzle. "Imma sowwie I didn't tell. He say it was a secret." Her ears flopped in worry.

"That's okay, Boo. You didn't know better," I said, and gave her a hug. She blinked hard, and Discord's eyes appeared; I quickly stepped back. I sighed, gazing down

the tunnel. “Fine. Why?”

Discord blinked in confusion, his smile fading. “Why... what? Why is the sky blue? Why should one make it rain Wild Pegasus? Why do coconuts taste like rutabagas but no one really notices?” She smirked at me. “Would you like to know a Wild Pegasus rain spell?”

“No,” I replied flatly.

“My!” she said in surprise. “That doesn’t sound like the Blackjack I know. Where’s the fire? The winging your way home on a flock of alicorns?”

“I matured,” I replied. “I had to sooner or later.” When had I gotten so serious? In Thunderhead? Maripony? When Dawn betrayed me? Where was that mare who’d laughed as she sang through a ghoul infested mansion, or who’d laughed as she rode a ship through rapids, or soared on an airship through the clouds? Discord looked at me with an expression of pity. I wondered what he’d be like without the experience of two hundred years of isolation and torment. Finally, I asked, almost at random, “Why did the world go to shit? What went wrong?”

His smile disappeared. I was glad for that, grouchy pony that I was. “Ah, yes. Why indeed? It’s something I never understood either.” He stared down the hall, then glanced back at me. “You know, I was never supposed to stay a villain. My role was very clear. Open antagonist to challenge Twilight Sparkle’s presuppositions of friendship and make her face having her friends turn on her at the outset, and then I was supposed to grow into a grudging ally of sorts. I had the scripts, and I was quite looking forward to my time with Fluttershy. Rehabilitation. Yay,” Discord said sarcastically, pressing her hooves together and fluttering her eyes, then slumping. “Only it never happened. I stayed a statue, and things went... wrong.” I arched a brow at her, and she rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t give me that. I’m a spirit of chaos. I’m a connoisseur of wrongness. A bit of mischief... a bit of peril... hardly anything *serious*. But ponies slaying? Ponies warring? Ponies committing global thaumaturgical balefire war with zebras? Oh, it was chaos, alright, enough to give me quite a nice bit of power, but that doesn’t mean that I *wanted* it to. I mean, even besides what happened to me, there was so much waste of potential and material for amusement; as I said back in Hippocratic, there are few things more boring than a corpse, and that goes double for the corpse of a world. Besides, it’s not like any of that was supposed to happen, anyway...”

I bl— wished I could blink at her. “What do you mean *supposed* to happen?” I pressed. Behind the conduit, green light shone through a breach in the wall. I

hugged the opposite side of the tunnel as we passed. Through the gap, I could see an immense crevasse shining wetly, beams and blocks of concrete poking out amidst outcroppings of the jagged gray rock. Things seemed to be moving on the far side, skittering, oozing, crawling things. I spun around, looking back the way we'd come, expecting something foul to be stalking up on us. Nothing.

Discord seemed oddly subdued as well, keeping her voice low. "It's not something I can easily explain, and I'm rapping against the fourth wall hard enough as is," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Suffice it to say that Twilight was never supposed to become a Ministry Mare. She was supposed to become an alicorn... and not a goopy super mutant goddess sort of alicorn, either, but a real pony princess." She rolled her eyes again, snorting.

"A princess. Like an actual Princess Luna princess?" I asked in shock.

"Ugh, I'd forgotten how gushy you ponies can get when it comes to your winged unicorns." Discord made a gagging noise. "Yes, a princess the same as Moonbutt and Sunnyflanks. Ironical, considering how she poured herself into creating her alicorn potion. But somewhere along the way, something went wrong. It never happened. And bit by bit, the Equestria that was supposed to happen... didn't. Some lesson... some letter... some something happened, and Celestia never sent me to Fluttershy for rehabilitation. Never trusted Twilight with Starswirl's greatest spell. Never did a lot of things. Regardless, everything went from how it was supposed to be to where we are now."

"But why? What went wrong?" I asked as we started walking along the halls. I kept my voice down. It felt like we were being watched. Cracks in the walls let through beams of greenish light; more concerning were the things breaking those beams ever so briefly. I could hear the softest of tapping on the far side of the stone.

"Who knows? Maybe Twilight said the wrong thing in one of her letters. Perhaps Princess Grumpy pants woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Maybe they didn't sing one of their annoyingly cute pony songs on key. Whatever it was, instead of Twilight becoming an alicorn, she remained an ordinary mare. Instead of Equestria being a folksy land with a few cities and lovely pastoral countryside, there was a consumer culture with a rampant hunger for coal. Instead of love and tolerance, you had hate and suspicion." Discord suddenly whirled, tensing, eyes turning this way and that. Then the tunnel shook. Not a major quake, but somehow much more disconcerting. "Of course, I was stuck as a statue. There wasn't much I could do about it, regardless."

“So something made them into the ponies that became the ministry mares?” I asked quietly, gorging myself on refreshingly direct exposition. If only I’d met Discord right after getting out of the stable, I could have spared myself quite a bit of heartache. “Some sort of mind control spell?”

“Now wouldn’t *that* have been interesting?” she said with a grin, tapping her chin wistfully before slumping again. “But sadly... no. No, I think, deep down, the potential was always there in Twilight and her friends. A little bit too much control from Twilight. A smidge too much trust in her family for Applejack. A teensy bit too much desperation from Pinkie Pie. All they needed were the right conditions to fester in,” Discord said with a smirk. “No one is ever quite as good as they think they are. Except me, of course, but then, I am the exception that makes the rule.” She touched her chest with a hoof in a sham of modesty. “There might have been a few players pushing pieces around the board from behind the scenes, but that’s always happening, no matter what world you’re in. Even Princess Sunnybuns could be wonderfully manipulative at times.”

I sighed, listening to the hiss in the pipes, the gurgle flowing underhoof, and the momentary buzzing crackle of sparks. The tapping behind the wall had stopped. Had it moved on, or was it lurking right outside the pipe? “So... if there’s a way the world is supposed to be... what, am I supposed to go back in time and fix it?” Was that even possible? The thought began to make my head spin.

Discord laughed, her voice high and echoing. She realized her mistake and covered her mouth with a hoof, eyes snapping left and right before focusing on me again. “Time travel? Please. Entertaining as that may be, when has that *ever* worked? Besides, I’m sure somewhere there’s a world with a bossy purple alicorn princess up to no good.” She sighed and patted my shoulder. “No. I’m afraid you’re simply going to have to pony up and face incalculable odds for the survival of the world and the pony race. That’s all.” She wilted a little at my grimace. “Ah, no pressure?”

“Thanks,” I replied flatly, then sighed. “So, what do you know about Horizons? Wait. Let me guess. You can’t tell me?” I braced myself for disappointment and frustration.

“Well, one occupational hazard of omniscience is knowing when *not* to say things,” she answered, a touch defensive. I slumped, wondering if Rainbow Dash felt the same way with Pinkie Pie’s predictions. Why did I even bother asking? “All I can say is that Goldenblood requisitioned a lot of my blood for it. Oodles and oodles.” She smiled and wiggled a hoof at me. “I’m sure you’ve noticed all the really interesting things you can make out of applied chaos. Perhaps Goldie wanted an army of blanks?”

"Not his style," I replied immediately. Still... an army of blanks. That niggled at me as we passed by a small hole in the wall, the sound of breathing on the far side. Or maybe it was just the draft in these deep spaces. "But what about the Brood? Are they really all blanks like Boo?"

He grimaced. "Oh yes indeed. That I can comment on without too many spoilers. I'm sure you've noticed they're all a touch unusual."

"Identical, you mean?" I said with a frown. "I noticed."

"Yes. An utterly insulting application of my chaos," she said with a scowl. "Boo is unique. Precious. An individual. Why, she's growing her own soul and everything. And she's as immortal as I am. Plus she sees things as they really are, which is probably why she loves you no matter how scary you become," he said, regarding herself in a puddle on the floor for a moment before going on, "But the Brood... mindless, soulless, immortal automations of magical flesh and steel. I look forward to seeing you take them all apart."

"Boo's immortal?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound too surprised.

"As immortal as me. Maybe someday she'll become the next avatar of chaos. That is, unless you take the role yourself. You've demonstrated yourself to be an *exceptional* agent of chaos, Blackjack," she said with a broad smile, getting another frown from me. She hurried on, "After all, while I may be immortal, eternal is quite another question. Nothing good lasts forever. You might notice I've been quite reduced of late?" She gave a smirk. "Still, while I'm down, I'm not out *quite* yet."

"So why does he want to kill you? Can you... I don't know... control the Brood of Coyotl, since they're made of Flux too?" I asked, imagining the entire army turning on the Legate. That would be interesting... of course, whatever Discord did next with them would be even more interesting.

"Now THERE'S an idea!" She beamed. "Emperor Boo! Ruling the wasteland with my army of..." her face twisted up, and Boo's pale eyes returned as she scowled. "Stoppit Discowd! Imma not gonna be bad! Imma gonna be like Bwackjack!" She grinned at me, and I smiled back at her. Celestia save me, I was a role model. A few blinks later, Discord's eyes reappeared, and she pouted. "Ugh. Fine. I'd forgotten how saccharine you ponies can be. Anyway, to answer your question, I don't know. The last time we were around those Brood, they didn't seem to recognize me."

"Do you think the Legate knew you were outside Grimhoof?" I asked.

"I'm rather sure of it. In fact, I'm rather certain that I'm the reason he was there in

the first place. He and I operate on a similar frequency,” he said. “We’ve been going around and around for ages.”

“Ages?” I asked with a frown. If he had a talisman like Rampage’s, I could believe it. He’d been regenerating his head when I’d last seen him.

“Oh yes,” she said with a blissful smile. “He’s worn his own share of identities over the centuries. He was almost as good as Celestia for a laugh. She was prettier, of course, and had a slightly better sense of humor, but he’s been around nearly as long. Manipulating. Hiding. Organizing. And I’ve been around too, interfering, annoying, and disorganizing. It’s all great fun.”

“Except when you got yourself turned to stone for tormenting ponies too much.”

“I’m hurt, Blackjack!” she said with a simpering pout. “Didn’t I say I was *forced* to be a villain? Cast in such a role by powers beyond your comprehension?” She sat and pushed a hoof to her brow, then smiled and rolled her eyes. “I’ll admit that I may have caused a teeny, tiny bit of anguish to various people across the world from time to time, but it was for their own good. I’m not an agent of evil, Blackjack. I’m an agent of chaos!” She frowned in annoyance. “You really haven’t figured out what that means yet?”

“This is the first time I’ve been able to talk with you when something wasn’t trying to kill me,” I answered. “And chaos has been pretty evil in my experience.”

“Well, you’ve been experiencing quite the wrong sort of chaos, then!” She gave an insulted snort. “If I were evil, I would have snapped my claws and made Twilight’s head explode. It was certainly within my power, but utterly outside my nature.” She smiled. “Chaos is change. It’s a break from the status quo. Chaos is invention. It’s art! It’s uncertainty. It’s a gamble. It’s in a butterfly’s wing, the motions of an electron, and the chemical reactions in your brain. Without chaos, life becomes a set of comfortable routines from birth to death, never changing. I manipulated and tormented ponykind... and zebrakind... and griffinkind... and plenty of others... to shake them out of conformity.”

“Well, the war certainly did spur innovation, but I wouldn’t call it good. And as for the chaos of the Wasteland...”

“Yes...” she said with a frown. “I’ll admit, when the war started, I was quite happy. Sure, things weren’t going to plan, but with all the little-d discord the ponies and zebras were making, soon they’d have had big-d Discord back to set things right! Even after Sunnyflanks buried me. Only, like you said, the war was spurring inno-

vation. . . and towards bad ends. Before I knew it, sweet little Luna was having me ground up to fuel her war machine, and a decidedly non-winged Twilight, her friends, and an old geology teacher were doing their best to help Moonbutt turn Equestria into the most ordered catastrophe this planet's ever seen. I would have been quite impressed if it weren't so perverse."

That was putting it mildly. I wondered if he knew, specifically, what Luna had done. Before I could ask, he was continuing in a nattering rush.

"Anyway, the war was growing more and more brutal and less and less funny! War is the worst kind of chaos to begin with, regardless! War, the real, brutal, no-holds-barred sort of war that they were fighting, only results in death. Death only results in decomposition. I, at worst, made ponies miserable. Misery may not be good, but at least you're alive at the end of the day." She closed his eyes. "When the bombs fell, I felt the silence from one side of the world to the other. I wept, Blackjack. I know you probably don't believe me, but I wept."

If it was an act, it was a damned good one. Still. . . thinking that the war was wrong didn't mean that you were a good person; it was just one way you weren't a bad one. "If your chaos is so much better," I probed, "why did Celestia and Luna turn you to stone for a thousand years, and Twilight and her friends put you back when you broke out?"

"Oh, well," she said dismissively. "It's because chaos is Eeeeeeevil, isn't it?" She frowned at the hooves she was waving in front of her face. "It's just not the same without fingers to wiggle. Anyway, Celestia and her posse are, or at least *were*, all 'Lawful Good' when you got right down to it. Even dear Pinkie was disappointingly predictable. What, they didn't have enough order already? Order for order's sake isn't beneficial. It's stagnation. Consider your home, Blackjack. Stable 99, and Equestria. Both were founded under good, orderly premises, but over time, good order rots. The order becomes more important than the good, and the only changes that happen are the perversion and decay of the original ideals. I *do* hope that you understand that, Blackjack." For a moment, he was oddly serious. "Back in Hippocratic, you told me that the Wasteland had enough chaos, and told me to do better. I had no idea what you were talking about at the time, since it never occurred to me that you might seriously set me free. . . but you were hoping that I'd become a bit more orderly. Like that's likely!"

He suddenly leaned over, grinned, and rubbed a hoof in my mane. I glared at him, and he pulled back and coughed.

“Well, however adorable it might have been, you freeing the *God of Chaos* and telling him to start obeying traffic laws or whatever, you were doing it because you thought that that was good. And looking around at the *shameful* sort of chaos you’ve been having to deal with, I suppose that I can’t blame you too much. You’ve done good and sown disorder, but you haven’t gotten the *spark* that links them in your head yet. Look around a bit harder.” She swung her forehoof in a wide arc. “This whole city is a testament to unchanging corruption and stagnation, to what happens when *order* goes too far. And that’s not even mentioning what’s *under* it. . .”

“Cognitum wants to bring the city back,” I said. “To return it to how things were.”

“Cognitum wants stasis. She wishes to freeze the world into the state she thinks it should be, optimally with her on top. Funny how that’s usually the case,” Discord said with a grim smile. “Oh, I’ve no doubt it would be comfortable, for most. Discomfort is the antidote to conformity. And I’m sure *you’d* find it quite *uncomfortable*.” She shivered. “The whole world would be a starmetal tomb or a Stable 99.”

I could certainly share that feeling. “And the Eater?” A rumble slowly ran through the earth, and cracks spread along the concrete walls. I really wished I could close my eyes right now. “I hate this place.”

“You show promise for an equine,” Discord chuckled. She then paused. “Hold that thought. . .”

Boo blinked, “Wazzit, Discowd?”

Another blink back to Discord’s mismatched eyes. “If my sense of dramatic timing is still accurate...” She lifted a hoof, staring at it as if checking a PipBuck. “We should be attacked right about. . . Now!” I tensed and checked behind me. Nothing but empty tunnel. I stared ahead. More tunnel. I glanced at a baffled white mare. “Or maybe. . . now!” Again I tensed. Again, nothing. I really wished I could give a flat-eyed glare. “Huh.” She shook her hoof like she had a cramp, then lifted it to her ear. “I guess my drama needs new batteries.”

The wall exploded inwards in a shower of pipes, conduits, and stone chips as an immense curved spur ripped a hole right through the concrete and everything else. Cables snapped and popped, and steam flooded through the tunnel as my hands snapped up, caught the serrated tip of the hook, and barely got out of the way as it gouged deep into the wall behind me. The entire tunnel seemed to be coming apart around me, and I only hoped that Discord kept Boo from being crushed or cooked as the tube fell to pieces. The immense stinger, easily the size of my body, yanked back out the hole it’d torn.

As it withdrew, my hand was caught between two chitinous serrations, and with the ease of withdrawing a can of Cram, I was yanked through the new breach and into another deep crevasse a dozen feet across, more than a hundred long, and several hundred deep. Broken pipes jutted out into the air, spraying cold water in a fine mist around enormous blocks of reinforcement. Here and there, the crevasse was bridged by crumbling sewer pipes, tangles of corroded wiring, and even a subway or two. The rock had split and left the concrete train tubes sticking out into space. Small white soul motes drifted from one wall to another, passing through the solid matter like ghosts. A bend in the shaft below me protected me from being directly bathed in the green glare of Enervation, but the entire crevice was lit with the reflected light. I activated my wings and yanked myself away from the stinger.

The barb was attached to a creature resembling a scorpion, if someone who had never seen a scorpion before had been given a vague description of one and had been so taken with the general idea of it that they'd hastily rushed to build the biggest scorpion of all time. . . and had neglected such trivial things as proportion, symmetry, and checking their work for errors. Nine legs on the left, six on the right, a dozen eyes of varied shape and size scattered around what might be a head, mandibles and fangs that had no business being as long as my body, a pincer on one limb vaguely resembling a hand, and another limb ending in the scorpion tail-like protrusion completed the monstrosity before me. As I hovered there, taking it all in, the behemoth let out an earsplitting screech as it turned, clinging sideways to the fissure wall, and faced me.

Okay. I could do this. I starting assembling Penance as I backed away. . . then balked. "What do I shoot?" Then my back hit the wall behind me, and I realized that several dozen feet wasn't nearly far enough away from this thing! Its body surged as it rammed that tail spur across the gap and at me. I fell, and it rammed the wall a few feet above my horn. "Okay! Plan B. Shoot *anything*!"

I decided for eyes and weaved my way around as I targeted the thing's various globules. Once it was blind, I could get back to the tunnel and Boo, right? Then we could hustle along. Each one exploded like a pustule. . . only to be replaced by even more black eyes. "Oh come on! You regenerate, too?" I brought out the moonstone pendant and darted in closer, and wasn't that a mistake! The handlike pincer snapped out at me and seized me by my wings, drawing me towards the immense fanged, chomping orifice that was the creature's mouth.

Funny how panic could make teleporting my quarter-ton body out of its grasp easy. Why, I was so scared that I barely even registered the sledgehammer blow to my

gray matter. I couldn't hurt it. Didn't want to risk getting closer to it. My power supplies were dropping by the second; I only had three minutes of power left. It was pretty big; maybe it couldn't climb very fast? I could only hope so as I flew up towards the roof of the shaft, the abomination in pursuit.

For a few seconds, it looked like I'd been right. Even with all its legs, it couldn't move anywhere near as fast as me. I could lead it away, circle around, and get down the tunnel where it couldn't fit. I could do this. I... the massive creature seemed to swell with a great wet retching noise. A geyser of chunky red flesh and steaming fluid erupted from its maw, spewing straight at me. I darted behind the cover of a swaying length of train track strung like entrails across the gap. Hanging on them was the rusted-out corpse of a train, its chain of flatbed cars scattered with unstable heaps of crates. I watched as the meaty barrage spewed up to either side and began to rain back down. I crouched on the bed of one train and grabbed the lid off one of the crates on the train, lifting it above me to block any of the gore that had spread far enough to hit me.

"Well, that was close," I said after the wet plops and splats had subsided. I lowered the lid and regarded the visceral mass that had accumulated on it.

The red mound twitched rhythmically, and then a half dozen eyes bubbled open. Two fleshy tendrils sprouted, wrapping around my neck and horn, and as it pulled itself closer, a large mouth filled with toothy protrusions snapped at what little face I had left. "You have got to be kidding me!" I shouted, reaching up with my hands and tearing it away. The meaty mass quivered under my metal fingers before I ripped it into two halves, then smashed them to paste against the case. "There... done!" I said, staring at the red goo in my hands.

The goo quivered and formed tiny mouths that snapped at me. I stared for three seconds, then flung it off the side of the train! "I quit! I quit I quit I quit! Undying flesh is where I draw the line!" Unfortunately, that wasn't the only glob. From both directions along the train, a veritable swarm of these things were crawling towards me, some scuttling on chitinous legs like their parent, others flopping on tentacle limbs, and others flying through the air on fleshy, membranous wings. Above me was solid rock, some of it now *also* crawling with these abominations.

And while Penance was an exquisite firearm, it wasn't the ideal weapon for use against a swarm of opponents. I was missing my Boo luck charm, too. "Damn it!" I shouted, slamming my hooves against an intact, tipped-over container as I wondered if I could fly back to the hole without getting puked on.

The lid broke open, and dozens of twelve-millimeter semiautomatic weapons tumbled out around my hooves, each still in its translucent plastic wrap. I grabbed one, tore the wrapping off, stared at the gun, and then looked around at what was, I realized, a munitions transport.

I could kiss Discord so hard her hooves would... wait... no. That'd be weird. A hug would suffice. I tore through the crates around me, searching for ammunition. Grenades. A flamer would be ideal. I doubted the flesh would reform if it were flame-broiled. One of the creatures, with legs like a spider, leapt onto my back and started to ram a silvery proboscis into my neck. I levitated the pendant towards it, and it screamed and skittered back long enough for me to grab a leg and smash it. Some of the smaller ones were glomming on to each other, fusing together into more and more massive creatures.

"Come on! Where are the damned bullets?" I asked as I ran along the crates. There were enough guns here to arm every pony in the Wasteland and have some to spare. Unfortunately, there wasn't a universal bullet. I found .22, .357, 5.56, .308, and anti-machine rounds, but not any 12mm, grenades, or flamer fuel tanks. I scooped up as much as I could from every ammo crate I passed as I ran along. At this point, I'd take it all and let my PipBuck sort it out.

Two more blobs dropped onto me, one tangling in my wings with ropy masses and hooked limbs, the other ripping into my rump and legs with scythe like blades, tearing rents in my armor. Okay, that sent my 'oh fuck no' level through the roof. I kicked back wildly at the misshapen thing, knocking it away, then rolled, squishing the webbed mass like a bloody tick. It continued to writhe on my back, but with my magic I pulled it off and flung it over the edge. The strain on my magic made me a little more aware of the thudding pain in my head, but I shoved it aside. I'd deal with the brain damage later. The scythe-limbed creature lunged once again, and I hit it with a trio of hoofslams to knock it back. Physical blows wouldn't take it out, though.

Then I spotted it. It lay within the shelter of a MWT crate laying on its side. Maybe it was a trick of the light or the stress, but I imagined a beam of golden radiance illuminating it. Without hesitation, I launched myself at the crate, snatching it up with a cackle of glee. An IF-84 Stampede riot shotgun. In a flash, I tore the translucent wrapping paper off, took in the sharp scent of lubricant, and popped out the drum. I selected the ammo with my PipBuck organizer and loaded the gun with red-banded shells. With a distinctly manic grin on my face, I murmured. "I shall name you Boomstick."

The scythe-limbed horror charged me once more. I rose up, reached out, and

grabbed its limbs as they descended. Then a trio of blazing incendiary rounds burned through its hide and malformed, toothy maw. The incendiary reaction took hold, and in seconds the abomination was first a toasty inferno and then a charred heap. All along the train, the monsters paused, and I grinned as wide as I could. I could kill them after all!

I fell into a frenzy of shots, grappling them with my hands before setting them ablaze with the incendiary shells. This was close combat, my forte. It didn't matter that they had teeth sharp enough to rip steel or claws or were universally horrid; I could kill them. If I could kill them, I could win. And if I could, I would.

Not that my combat style didn't have some problems. There was more than enough live ammo on the train to make firing blindly as much a hazard to me as it would be to them. My constant jumping and shooting wasn't doing the impromptu bridge much good, either. In addition to that, I was up here, and Boo was down below with most of my gems. I popped a mouthful of stale garnets, the last of my stores, into my mouth as I reloaded the gun with flechettes to tear the monsters up a bit more before incinerating, swapping back and forth between magazines with my PipBuck's inventory function.

More than once, I had to dart away from a container of cooking ammo, the rounds going off like a hive of blazing bees. At least a few grenades were in the mix as well, blowing flaming pieces of crate and critter into the air and making the train shake and sway alarmingly. Still, I fell into a moment of peace. Shoot. Jump. Kick. Blast. Run. Dive. Reload. Grab. Smash. Shoot. Toss. Smile. Retreat. Lunge. Cast. Shoot. Block. Twist. Stomp. Twist. Reload. Shoot. Laugh.

Enemies I could fight with no moral complications. Opponents who were clear threats to me and my baby, which I could dispatch guilt-free. It didn't matter where I was. This was the moment where, for several manic, magical seconds, I was alive from horn to hoof, metal or not. This was joy. This was sex. This was life!

Then I whirled to blast another and froze. Before me stood a pony... but not a pony. Four legs. Two eyes, if one was a black button and the other a milky boil. No mouth, just a blunted bump of a muzzle and two knobby, melted-looking ears. The maroon hide reminded me of a ghoul, but less rotted and more diseased. The creature's mane and tail were tendrils rather than hair. Most disturbing of all was a scar like cutie mark on its flank. I hesitated a moment as another of the pony things stepped into view. Then a third. Shifting my gaze from one to the next, I waited for their mouths to open wide with countless jagged fangs... any second now... any second...

But they didn't. They just crouched there, heads tilted, regarding me cluelessly. Where had they even come from? I glanced around, but aside from the motes and the grinding from below, everything was still.

"Okay. Well... then... just stay back..." I finished lamely, backing away from them. They weren't hostile, for the moment, so why blast them? I needed to find some gems and get back to Boo before...

The train shuddered under my hooves, and I looked behind me at the far wall. The scorpion-crab thingy had finally reached my level. Suddenly my super awesome shotgun seemed woefully inadequate. The tail spike reached up to where the tracks sprang across the gap, curled around the track and flatbeds, and gave a firm yank downward. The pincer hand reached up, grabbed a flatbed, and flung it at me like a giant throwing knife, pummeling me with a rain of metal containers. Suddenly, the wheels on the flatbed car I was on squealed, and the entire train began to roll backwards towards the beast. "Oh, you have got to be kidding!" I shouted as it grabbed another flatbed car and sent it whirling at me.

With all this garbage raining down, I'd be hard pressed not to be smacked out of the sky by a spinning slab of steel. I was no Rainbow Dash in the air. More like an Air Macintosh. I ran away from the abomination as it continued its barrage. I glanced behind me at the pony creatures, watching some plummet helplessly into the depths while others were devoured by the creature. I had bigger things to worry about as I was smashed again and again by the debris. I needed something substantial to use against it. Something like an anti-machine rifle. Or a minigun loaded with armor piercing rounds. Or a grenade machine gun. Or—

A long gray case smacked me right on the noggin with such force that I flipped forward, rolled, and ended up flat on my rump, hugging the offending case between my hoofs. "Owww!" I hissed, gritting my teeth. Of all the times, why did I have to get hit by a... I paused and stared at the label right in front of my face. 'Mark Four reusable missile launcher'.

If I ever saw that snaggle-toothed son of chaos again out of Boo's body, I'd give him a kiss that'd make his antler... horn... — whatever! — pop *right* off. The case was heavy enough that I could barely lift it with my magic, so I hefted it with my hands and used my magic to pop open the latches while running/flying/falling in the direction of 'away from that monster'. Inside the foam rubber lining was a far larger thing of beauty than my Boomstick: a four-foot-long firing tube and a trio of meter-long missiles. I hooked two under my wings as I watched my power drop below five percent.

I loaded the missile with my mouth, bit down on the trigger, braced the launcher against my shoulder and neck, and whirled, looking through the sight at the multi-eyed face of the monster. The missile gave a soft putt, followed by a deadly hiss as it streaked through the air and detonated. . . well, more towards the rear of the creature rather than on its face, but close counted in horseshoes, grenades, and missile launchers! The blast made it stagger, and the next flatbed rammed it before the claw could catch it and throw it at me. That gave me time to load the second missile. I braced myself and fired; this time, it exploded more solidly on the body and blew out a pony-sized chunk of gore. The ejected hunks of flesh morphed mid-air into horrid flapping bird-bat things that darted away. It was regenerating as I watched, but even this monster would take time to close that hole.

I could do this. I could. I raced away along the flatbeds, sliding the third missile into the launcher. Time to end this! I spun around and fired the third missile straight at the creature's mouth!

It lifted one flatbed and the missile detonated harmlessly on it, sending a massive fireball and countless flaming crates flying into the air. Okay, I might do this. I ran along the tumbling and shifting crates, getting slowed by the battering I received. "Missiles! Missiles! Where are the missiles?" I shouted as I was drawn slowly back. Flaming crates rained down on me from my own missile. "Discord! If you can hear me, hit me in the head with a missile please! Or three! My head can take it!"

My head went unabashed by a chaotically delivered crate of missiles, but I was able to pick up a couple rolling past my hooves. The problem was that the monster was now aware I could hurt it. Every missile I fired, it blocked with either that heavy pincer hand or flung debris, deflecting most of the energy. The monster was more than capable of regenerating before I reloaded, and soon, even I couldn't keep ahead of it and reload the launcher and dodge crates at the same time.

Most of the rolling flatbeds were on fire now, and the abomination didn't seem to care too much about the smaller detonations. Countless masses of materiel were being lost down the hole. To try and buy myself time, I magically flung back grenades as quickly as they rolled by, but the few that did hit didn't do any more damage than deflected missiles. I had to blow it apart, not bash it about. The monster let out a roar, and a moment later it was answered by multiple roars further below that chilled what blood I had left. If there were more of these things on the way. . .

No. I couldn't wait. I was at three percent power as it was. I had maybe fifteen seconds of flight time, if I activated it. Couldn't fly. Couldn't teleport more than a few feet. Couldn't hit it hard enough to finish it off. I was. . . no! I could beat this.

I could! I just needed to hit it hard... like with a boat. I needed a boat to drop on this damned thing. Or maybe... I grinned as I slung the launcher across my back, tossed an empty crate between my wings, and started collecting grenades, flares, and anything else that might explode. The cars continued to fly at me, but I didn't fight back. That just made it throw cars faster, which made the whole thing move with increasing velocity. Good.

Eventually the weight on my back started to slow me down, and I was drawn closer and closer to the monster. It began to smash down with its barb, and I had to dart to the left and right to avoid getting crushed like the cargo crates. Come on. It had to be soon. Soon. Any second... there! I glanced over my shoulder, telekinetically pulled a half dozen pins from the top layer, and then flung the box off my back with a buck and a kick. A second later, the grenades detonated, covering the creature in a thick cloud of smoke and fire. From the flailing claw knocking flatbeds down the crevasse and the barb sweeping and flailing wildly, I knew it hadn't been killed by the blast. As its flailing limbs dispersed more and more of the smoke, I hoped to see at least—

Then the train's engine came shooting out of the tunnel; half rolling and half falling, it streaked towards the monster. I activated my wings, launching myself off the last flatcar and into the air. Like a hammer striking a chisel, the flatcar sheared right through the outstretched claw hand and then clean through the monster's body. A millisecond later, the engine rammed right into it with an enormous crash, splattering it against the wall. For good measure, I sent a missile flying, not at the monster, but the rock wall beneath it. Then the whole messy, bloody, flaming mess fell into the crevasse, tearing down the bridging tracks with it. I watched it fall...

Then joined it.

I had barely enough power to tumble towards the wall, slow my drop with a few kicks of power to my talismans, and then reach out with my hands and cling on for all I was worth, scoring jagged runnels in the rock with my fingers as I plummeted further into the abyss. I was only hopeful that I would land somewhere in the vicinity of Boo, Discord, and their precious, delicious gems as I tumbled, fell, and tumbled some more. I finally came to a rest at the mouth of some sewer, much farther down than Boo. And there was no way for her to reach me...

My power flashed, flickered, and went dark, leaving me in the depths where no one... not Boo, not Cognitum, not even Rampage or the Legate, could find me.

I didn't know how long I lay there, the bare flickers of my power reserves keeping one ear working, listening to things drip and gurgle. More than once, I heard echoing hoofsteps, roars, clicks, and cracking. The ground trembled more than once under my body, and I heard rocks falling in the deeps. I heard voices too. Soft, almost fearful, singing within me. Occasionally I felt the warmth of a mote as it moved through me. And I felt the occasional flutter of my baby moving, little reminders that I couldn't lie here on this ledge forever. But there was nothing I could do. My only hope was that Discord, with his crazy chaotic powers, could find me before another monster did.

And laying there, blind, helpless, minutes turning to hours... silence taking me as the last of my power was expended... I couldn't be faulted for dreaming, could I?

Mom and I sat together at the kitchen table, my filly drinking from a bottle and my colt snoozing in her embrace as she rocked him slowly. It was early morning, but she always sat up with me when the twins were fussy like this. Even if it gave her a harder day, she always took the time and sleep deprivation. "She's such a glutton," I murmured softly as my dark blue daughter drank her fill yet again.

"Babies always are," Mom replied, just as soft, then gave me a wry smile. "You were no different. If anything, you were worse." I gave a skeptical sniff, and she grinned at me. "It's true. And you didn't limit yourself to milk. How you got your hooves on your father's apple cider, I'll never know."

"Least it didn't damage me too much," I said as I gazed into my daughter's face and brushed her blue mane from her tiny horn. "I'm glad you're here, Mother. Even if you're really not here..."

"No. I'm not," she said as she regarded the colt in his blanket. "That doesn't mean I can't enjoy being a grandmother a little, does it?"

"I suppose not," I said as I turned my head and stared out the window at Equestria that wasn't anymore. "This isn't a normal dream, is it? Normally, I don't know I'm dreaming."

She looked up at me with teal eyes and smiled a little before glancing back down. "Most ponies don't have as much experience with mind games as you, Blackjack." Tears began to run down her cheeks. "You have such beautiful babies."

"Who are you?" I asked as my filly stopped drinking and started to whine. I draped a

towel down my back and started to gently pat to work out the burp. She didn't meet my gaze as she gently rocked my son. I really needed to think of some names. I wasn't sure how many more card game names there were, though.

"Just another ghost. You pick them up, don't you, Blackjack?" she asked with a wry smile. "Echo. Lacunae. You draw the past to you. Dig up the old secrets. Pull everything into the future, whether you like it or not." She brushed the red earth pony's mane from his face with an anguished expression. "Whether we like it or not."

Outside the window came a colossal flash of energy, turning Mother into a black silhouette. I wasn't too worried. At this point, I was an expert at nightmares and horrors. "You're one of those mote souls, aren't you?" She hesitated a moment, then nodded. Outside the window, the world was on fire. It didn't touch our bubble. Not yet. That expanding wave of annihilation hadn't quite reached us. "Why are there so many of you in the Core?"

The house exploded in a silent wave, the wood splintering, the pipes twisting like drinking straws. Still, we were untouched. This was a dream, after all. I watched the corpse of my neighbor Midnight lying on her lawn. A small mote of light rose up from her, rising towards the sky. Then it was suddenly pulled back. I watched it approach the ruins of the house and a small box that read 'Roseluck Pest Solutions'. With a tiny cry, it was pulled away. "It drew us. From all over Equestria. All over the world." She sniffed. "Can you imagine what it was like? We died... but we can't pass on. We were drawn through those silver rings to this place. We're trapped here. Like you."

"But why?" I asked as my daughter gave a little burp, and didn't vomit down my back for a change. Mom's suggestion to add a little rice to the milk had worked after all. "Why does it draw you here?" I knew *how*: the silver rings. But what was the ultimate purpose behind them?

"I don't know. Because it can, I suppose. It doesn't eat us. Doesn't need us. And yet it craves us and keeps us trapped within this place," she said quietly. "Perhaps it delights in tormenting us. Or maybe it thinks it's protecting us from the Everafter. It can't get all of us. I'm still waiting for my sister to join me... and horrified she will..." She hung her head mournfully.

Sister? But... she reached out a hoof and covered my mouth so I couldn't ask the question. "I'm sending help to you, Blackjack. Please, do what you have to. Get out of here. See to your babies."

“Who are you?” I murmured as tears ran down my eyes.

“Someone who knows what it’s like to deserve to hurt,” she replied in a whisper, the light fading out around us. She scooped up my filly in her other hoof. “I’ll look after your babies till you return.”

Somepony was putting something hard into my mouth. I pulled it in with my tongue, tasted the fiery flavor of a ruby, masticated, and swallowed. Instantly, my systems started booting up again. “Oh, thank you Boo. . .” I said as my eyes flickered to life.

The mottled, horrifying visage of an abomination pony met my eyes. It only had one eye, a maroon orb on the left side of its face. Only the fact that my E.F.S. was blue kept my magic bullets in check. Another one behind it, with vestigial membranous wings, held a second gem in a mustache made of a brush of tendrils. There were more behind those, each holding a small gemstone. I levitated them to me one after the next, eating them and refilling my batteries, waiting for them to try and eat me. But they didn’t. They simply stared at me with their mismatched eyes.

“Um. . . thanks. . .” I murmured awkwardly. “Can you understand me?” They stared in response. “Can. . . you lead me to Boo and Discord?” The silent herd turned to regard each other, then began wandering up the sewer pipe. One stopped and turned its unblinking eye back at me. “Okay. I’m coming.” I scrambled after them, barely able to fit with my wings.

I had to trust that they knew where we were going. The pipe led to a crevasse which led to a partially collapsed subway which led to a rockslide. All the while, I passed by more and more abomina. . . weird things. Plenty were ponies, but I spotted others that appeared to be griffins, or zebras, or even hellhounds. They stood around, or wandered aimlessly. Every now and then, one would misstep and tumble, coming apart like wet roadapples. A mote of light escaped and wandered away. The bloody goop would form spiders, or scorpions, or other skittering things that I occasionally had to splatter with Boomstick. Once, I watched as a mote slipped into a puddle of bloody goo which then coalesced into a tiny weird griffin.

Flesh and soul, but no mind, and without a soul, they became monsters. “But why?” I asked, baffled. Even a little purple pony in my head was fresh out of ideas.

Then I heard a wonderfully familiar voice from down a passage. “Is ya sure Bwack-jack’s gonna come this way?” Boo asked, her voice distant and coming from somewhere above. I opened my mouth to call out but then closed it and scanned the

tunnel. There might be critters nearby. I needed to find a way up to them.

“Oh, I daresay she’ll be around soon enough. When it’s dramatically appropriate,” Discord replied, her voice echoing softly in the tunnels. “She has the knack for that sort of thing. It really is a useful perk for arriving just in the nick of time and save the day. Quite aggravating.”

“Yous so weird, Discowd,” Boo huffed. “Nothin you say makes sense.”

“Ah, what fun is there in making sense, my dear filly?” Discord replied fondly, her dry chuckle reaching my ears as it echoed through the tunnels. “I am a being of chaos. I delight in mischief, upsetting order, thwarting the plans of others... and occasionally mixing weather patterns with snack foods.”

“Was you really bad?”

Discord didn’t answer for several seconds, and when he did it was soft and reflective, “I suppose I was, dear Boo.”

I spotted an elevator shaft; the mare’s voice seemed to come down it. There wasn’t anything for it. I looked around at the mangled herd, turned on my levitation talismans, and started up, leaving them behind. “Why were you bad, Discowd?”

“Oh, you too? Honestly, does no one actually listen to me? The Satellite-Stamped Sisters have been dead two centuries, and they *still* have more pull? And I’ve made sure to be on my best behavior and everything while in you.” No doubt Boo would have heard my hooves and wingtips scraping the walls if she wasn’t in a conversation. “Still, at the time... I don’t think I realized how terrible it is to hurt. Harm, to me, was boredom. If ponies didn’t like my pranks, it was because they lacked the humor and wit to appreciate the gift I offered. Fear. Suffering. Misery. I didn’t understand the harm they caused others. I was only interested in the fun of the new.” He let out a long sigh. “Dear me. Two centuries locked in a starmetal tomb, and I’ve gotten all mopey. But then, the mope is in high style around this horrible place.”

“Is yous gonna be bad again?” Boo asked innocently.

I paused atop a twisted lift platform and listened for his reply. I was curious about that too. “My dear. At the moment, I am a fragment of a wisp of a particle of my former power. Were I not safely within you, I’d be blown out, like a candle,” Discord said fondly, but also in tired tones. “I’m far too old and worn out for those shenanigans. One more prank, I think. One more. But if I had my choice...” she hummed speculatively. “Perhaps... perhaps... but it is in my nature to be contrary.

If the status quo is wickedness... I am valiant. And there is so much wickedness in the world today, order and chaos alike. I couldn't let that stand. But then, well, if the norm is civility and order, I dissent. Usually. But I can't help but think that, even if her mane's a little short and she can be so terribly depressing at times, Blackjack does remind me of what a certain yellow pony would have been. I mean, seriously, freeing me, no questions asked or deals demanded? Telling me to do better? She needs someone around to tell her to stop apologizing to the dragon trying to eat her. And take her out drinking! I like Drunkjack."

I rose to the open elevator door and stepped out. "Well, I'm glad we're friends, Discord. Or at least on the same side," I said as I deactivated the talismans and immediately popped a ruby.

Boo rose to her hooves and launched herself at me. "Bwackjack!" I'm sure, a few months ago, I would have been adorably bowled over. Instead, she clanged loudly against my armor plate and sank into a heap. "Owww..." she whined, rubbing her head.

"Sorry," I said as I kissed Boo's boo-boo. "You two okay?"

"Oh, absolutely delightful. Wonderful place to sit around and linger," Discord replied, rolling her mismatched eyes. "I'm thinking of setting up a summer cottage. The view of the horrific abyss is quite lovely this time of year." She stood and tapped a door with her hoof, scraping away some of the oxidation. 'Robronco Access Hatch 11-D. Trespassers will be Pinkied!'. "I knew you'd arrive here, Blackjack. There's no way you'd fall to a common spawn of these depths, no matter how delightful."

Delightful? I supposed to something like him... "Do you know what that monster was?" I asked, then pointed down. "There were these... these things." My specificity earned me a wry arch of her brow and a sardonic smirk. "They were mismatched, mangled... things! Pony things and griffin things and... just... things!" Discord sighed, shaking her head. "Does this have anything to do with the Eater... Tokomare... thing?"

"An alien device of immense complexity that may also be an eldritch abomination of mindshocking power projecting a field that liquefies flesh causing that flesh to transform and alter into monsters of grotesque magnificence?" Discord gushed, her red and yellow eyes growing by the second as she leaned towards me. Then she gave a dismissive wave of her hoof. "Nah. Couldn't be. Personally, I think there's something in the water. Fluoridation. Look it up."

"Fluoridation?" I muttered weakly, then shook my head hard. Focus. "Why would

the Eater create monsters?”

“Why, Blackjack, that’s what stars do! It’s what they live for,” Discord said with a shrug. “That and shine and sing all day long. Personally, I prefer a little interaction. Some give and take. Tit for tat.”

“So stars create life,” I murmured.

“Or shine. They’re very proud of the shining. And the singing. Stars... ech,” she snorted, waving her hoof dismissively. “Prima donnas, every one of them. Always needing the spotlight. Never standing to be upstaged for even a moment.” Then she blinked, and touched her chest at my smirk. “What?”

I couldn’t take time to enjoy Discord’s blatant hypocrisy though. The words the Eater had blared struck me. Discord was inherently dishonest, and there was an honesty in that. “And if Cognitum is right?”

Discord shrugged once more. “Then it’s a machine of irreducible complexity, like yours truly, incapable of being understood. The fine line where magic and technology meet, and beyond that another where they mesh with life. Maybe it’s trying to rebuild the organisms of whatever place it came from, far, far away. Or maybe it’s just in need of a good debugging. After all, you’ve run into other intelligent machines.”

That was true. Cognitum. Applebot, so many months ago. Happyhorn’s healing machines. “I guess there’s no real difference.”

Discord gaped at me. “No real difference? Why, Blackjack, there’s all the difference in the world! It’s like saying there’s no difference between ‘Blackjack’ and ‘messiah archetype’ or ‘Twilight Sparkle’ and ‘Fussypants protagonist’. The difference is as profound as ‘dearest friend’ and ‘pony you’ve a certain fondness for’ or ‘deadliest foe’ and ‘recurring antagonist’.” She pointed a hoof at me. “When you think of something in such a way, you define it. Contextualize it. You make it matter. If the Eater is just a piece of technological equipment run amok, then really everything you’ve gone through is a technical glitch. But if the Eater is a fallen star, a god maimed and dead, seeking to be reborn, then everything you are, everything you’ve done, is a struggle for the very survival of the world! What stakes could be higher?” Discord declared grandly, hooves raised to the roof. Then she sat and gave a little wave of her hoof. “But, eh... no real difference. Like, whatever.”

I stared at her. Cognitum and Dawn believed the former. That the Tokomare and the Core were simply malfunctioning and damaged. The solution to the Wasteland was simply controlling, repairing, and utilizing infrastructure to restore society. All

very neat and tidy. Red Eye would approve. So would LittlePip, I suspected. But what if this truly was more than simply fixing X to do Y? Was there a deeper meaning to anything I was doing? Saving my friends? Saving strangers? Saving the Wasteland? I stared at the rusty door before me, beyond which was my enemy.

Why, ultimately, was I here?

"You do better," I murmured. "You try harder. You do everything you can to make up for your mistake, hoping that when everything is done, you've come even a tenth towards making up for the harm you caused." The war. Twilight Sparkle. Pinkie Pie. Rarity. Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash. Applejack. Goldenblood. Celestia. Luna. Me. So many ponies I'd met since I'd left my home. "You try, knowing that it can never be enough. But you do it anyway, to make tomorrow a better place for everypony."

Discord rolled her eyes, "Oh, you have got to be kidding—" then she blinked at my frown and quickly amended, "I mean, yay. Go team horribly idealistic. Hoofbump!" She stuck her hoof out at me with a sheepish grin. Still, it'd done the trick of snapping me out of my navel-gazing, and I looked at the door.

There was a small terminal set in the wall next to it, the screen of which still flickered with life, and a PipBuck access plug. "First things first," I said as I drew the cable out of my hoof.

"Yes yes. Get this thing open so we can have the big, climactic showdown," Discord said, tapping on the door.

Part of me thought about using the Perceptitron to find out what Steel Rain was doing, but Cognitum had tracked me that way once before. Surprise might be the only advantage I had. I sighed, then used EC-1101 to open the door and expose the intact conduit-lined hall within. The tunnel led to a basement that had been heavily damaged and repaired. Cracks ran along walls, and gaps spidered out in the floor and ceiling. These were repaired with bolted plates, struts, and jacks. Clearly, somepony had been busy preventing this place from falling apart completely.

There were also dozens, perhaps hundreds, of crates of weapons, ammo, chems, and body armor. Enough for a small army. Shaky foundations and lots of explosives? Even I could see the potential. . .

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Discord asked softly with a grin.

"Yeah, but I need to talk to Cognitum first. Find out what she knows about Horizons. Then we can blow this place up," I replied as I loaded up on magazines of twelve millimeter rounds.

"Well, that's hardly what I was thinking," Discord replied, indignantly. "I was thinking that marmalade would go wonderfully on pizza."

I laughed quietly. "That does sound good, actually. We should have that when we get done down here."

Discord stared at me, skeptically, but then nudged my shoulder with a hoof. "Deal."

The far side of the basement seemed to have all the working generators. A strong blue glow shone through the cracks and supports. If I were an insane supercomputer, that's where I could be. "I'll make my way over there. What are you going to do?" I asked Discord.

"Why, what I always do. I'm shocked you even asked," Discord said, reproachfully, then grinned and rubbed her hooves together with a purely diabolic expression on her face. "Make mischief!" She caught my raised brow and added, "All in the name of goodness, of course!"

"Uh huh," I said skeptically. "Just don't do anything I would do, Discord. I don't want to lose any more friends."

"Of course," she said, a little bit dejectedly. "I know how much you ponies hate to lose your friends..." She waved a hoof dismissively. "Well, fear not, Boo will come to no harm with me."

"I mean you too, you know," I added, tapping her chest. "You stay safe as well."

She stared at me a moment. "You really mean that, Blackjack?"

"Of course. You're definitely a ten on my weirdness scale, but... well... You've got a hell of a bad reputation if even half of those old stories are to be believed. You've suffered more than enough for everything you're supposed to have done. Everything I've *seen* you do has been good, if odd, and what you've told me, even if I don't agree with all of it, makes it seem like you want to keep that up. I hope that that's one thing that won't change, at least. So, yeah... you're my friend," I said with a little shrug and smile.

Suddenly, I found myself hugged by the yellow-and-red-eyed, snaggletoothed mare. "You're a bit less cushy than Fluttershy, but you'll do," she said with a smile. "Just don't forget to write when this is all over. I simply won't stand for a Sparkle not writing me. It's terribly rude."

"Uh... yeah. Sure," I said with a baffled look. What was all that about? "Take care, Discord. Boo."

"You be careful, Bwackjack," Boo replied, and the white mare disappeared into the darkness of the Robronco basement. I stared at the blue glow shining ahead of me, took a deep breath, and advanced.

I made my way through the basement as silently as I could manage. I knew Cog-nitum wasn't alone, but she didn't know about me or Discord. I'd have to neutralize any protectors she had. . . and speaking of which! The ground began to rumble as a rainbow Ultra-Sentinel rolled around the corner. I barely had time to duck behind some crates as the massive war machine rolled past. Further ahead was a second one. Over there to the left, a third. Okay. Those might be a problem. Still, the basement was tight and cluttered. The machine had passed me without stopping. I just had to keep on my hooves.

Their presence definitely complicated matters, though. I couldn't just trot up to her with huge killer robots rolling around. And blowing them up would definitely get this party started prematurely. I wished Scotch Tape was here. Maybe Ultra-Sentinels were a bit much, but she could just shut them down, no sweat. I paused, then frowned and glanced at my PipBuck. EC-1101 had been made to access Equestrian systems. . . did robots count?

"Dealer?" I whispered as loudly as I dared. I glanced around, making sure the Ultra-Sentinels were out of earshot. "Echo, are you there?"

A flicker in my vision and he appeared. Once, he'd looked like death. Now, he appeared like a ghost, translucent, pale, and suffering. The pained expression he wore made me want to hug him. "Yes, Blackjack?" he whispered.

My reason for calling him fell back, and I was barely able to resist the urge to ask him if he was okay. Of course he wasn't. He was a mind and soul trapped in a PipBuck, slowly dying. "Can I help you?"

For a moment he appeared confused, and then, if anything, his sickly features turned even worse. "No, Blackjack. I'm sorry. You can't." He turned away from me, then asked softly, "What do you need, Blackjack?"

I wanted to press him a moment, but couldn't. Not as he was now. "These Ultra-Sentinels. Can you use EC-1101 to keep them from blasting me?"

He didn't answer for a moment, then said, so quietly that I almost missed it, "Don't worry about the robots. Just do what you have to do."

I stared extra hard at the E.F.S. bar of the nearest robot. Blue. Huh. "That was easy," I murmured, glancing back. Then I froze as I saw the translucent tears on his

cheeks as he stared at me in desolation, then faded away completely.

“Sorry,” he breathed in my ear. “I’m so sorry, Blackjack.”

“You did your best. Big Macintosh would be proud. Thank you, Echo,” I said, but to no response. “Echo?” Nothing. “Echo?” I said a little louder. Still nothing. I sighed and rose slowly. “You did so much for me. If there was some way I could help, I would. I’m sorry,” I murmured, then stepped slowly towards the blue-barred Ultra-Sentinel, wary of it turning red and vaporizing me in one shot. It ignored my presence, so I trotted past and approached the blue glow at the far side of the basement.

Pipes and supports gave way to a large antechamber I’d seen weeks ago in a memory. There, atop a large steel platform framed by two pairs of parallel bars descending diagonally away along either side was the massive heap of computer circuitry of Horse’s knockoff Crusader Maneframe. Heavy structural reinforcement beams had been attached to the side, and for some reason a crane arm had been mounted on top. Either the change in perspective or maybe my nerves made the machine look even larger than I remembered. From above dangled an umbilical of pipes, hoses, and wires. Transparent glass tubes full of blueish fluids gurgled, and a palpable aura of chill air surrounded the immense machine. Five glass jars were arranged on the left side, each one shrouded in shadow cast by the machine, and a sixth sat next to a small wrought iron table. The wall behind the computer was missing, the two rails plunging diagonally down into the depths of a ravine below.

I pulled out the missile launcher, loaded a projectile, and then balked. If Cognitum did know about Horizons, I needed to know too. Besides, perhaps Steel Rain was right and there was a diplomatic solution. . . not giving up EC-1101, but if she was sane and wanted to help the Wasteland, didn’t I owe her a chance? “Softest damn heart in the Wasteland. . .” I muttered. But if it so much as farted a spark at me, I’d whack it with a missile till it behaved. “Cognitum,” I said as I slowly ascended the metal stairs leading up to the top of the heavy steel plate. From the center of the hulking machine, a whirr began. It sounded almost like a purr.

“At last,” a mare said from the shadows.

“Keep your distance,” I said quietly, keeping the missile launcher pointed at the shadowy shape approaching me from the back of the enormous machine. “I’m pretty sure it’s bad manners to talk with a missile launcher pointed at someone, but I’ve had a real long day.”

“Quite understandable.” She slowly strode forward, from the darkness emerging a

mare with beautiful lilac and pink tresses, a glimmering white horn, and soft, understanding green eyes. Sweetie Belle smiled beatifically down at me as she waited at the top of the stairs. "I've waited a long time for this moment," she said with a pleased smile. "It's good to finally meet you. Face to face."

"How could I resist? You've made my life complicated, Cognitum. All for this," I said, lifting my forehoof.

Her eyes locked onto it for several seconds. "Yes. All for that," she said as she gazed at where my PipBuck lay. Then she looked at me. "Do forgive me my poor choice in servants. As the cliché goes: good help is hard to find."

"I don't believe that. I've found that when you're good, you'll find help that's just as good," I said as I watched her. "Deus. Sanguine. Dawn. Steel Rain. You've made my life hard."

Cognitum smiled, but it was more arch now. "You could have given up EC-1101 at any time. Returned it to ponies more deserving. Who could use it to resurrect Equestria properly. Your suffering was every bit a product of your own stubbornness and pride, Blackjack. Even you coming here, now, like this. . . it's all about you." The mare gave a sigh and shook her head. "Ah well. I knew from the moment we first met that you were special. You passed all my tests, albeit with a little help every now and then."

"I want to know things. You. EC-1101. Project Horizons," I said as I kept the missile steady on her.

Cognitum smiled casually, and in amusement. "Well, knowledge has its price, Blackjack. What do I get in return?"

"No missile to the face?" I suggested.

She laughed and shook her head. "Costing you any and all information I possess. If you really didn't care about finding answers, you would have fired without a word." She trotted over to the table next to the jar. Upon it sat a delicate tea set, a bottle of Wild Pegasus, and a box of Apple Sugar Bombs. Within the jar, to my horror, was a familiar form gripped in the glow of a levitation talisman set in the jar's bottom: the mottled maroon body of Sanguine. His undead body twitched and jerked spasmodically as he levitated in the middle. His limbs had been hammered to steel braces, and cables snaked into his temples.

"What the fuck. . . he's supposed to be dead!" I said, pointing a hoof at the body as he twitched and jerked.

“Technically, he is dead, but I understand your confusion,” she said as she poured herself a cup of tea, putting in two sugar cubes and a twist of fresh lemon. “I took Sanguine from the remains of Hippocratic before it exploded. He might have lost most of his sanity with his family, but I’ve been able to extract a rather sizeable amount of information on Project Chimera from him.” She let out a soft sigh and shook her head. “Such a pity. Had he been a little less ruthless and a little more loyal, he’d have his family now.”

Sanguine’s mouth opened and closed in silent screams as his body strained against the metal plates that held him immobile. “That’s sick,” I whispered, feeling nauseous.

“My apologies. I could kill him if you like. Or give you the honors. Setting him free would just unleash another feral ghoul on the wasteland.” Cognitum smiled sweetly, folding her hooves amicably on the table before her. “Which would you prefer?” I didn’t answer, averting my eyes but still seeing him silently writhe. “I see,” Cognitum said a moment later, lifting her teacup between her hooves. “Well, all things being equal, then, I’ll hold on to him a bit longer. You never know when you’ll need a blank.”

There was a heavy boom of machinery that almost sent a missile flying as the crane moved over us and lowered a massive claw as big as my body. It gripped the top of the jar by the table and swung it over to the others. I struggled to regain my equilibrium, as Cognitum took a sip of her tea. I guessed that if that Sweetie Bot was made for sex, it had to be able to swallow fluids. “I want to know about Project Horizons,” I said.

“I bet you do,” Cognitum purred, her eyes narrowing in satisfaction. “Aren’t you more curious about me?”

“I’m curious about why you’re not talking in all booming words,” I replied.

“The Royal Canterlot Voice is for addressing subjects. You are no mere subject, Blackjack. I knew it the moment I first learned about you. A mare capable of accessing EC-1101? A mare refusing to take the easy way out? A mare defying and challenging the Wasteland on its own terms? Oh no. You were a knight. Erratic and unconventional on the board. Perhaps even a queen, streaking across and destroying any in your path. Far more valuable than any pawn.”

“Like Dawn?” I asked, with a scowl. I had no way to force the answer out of her.

Cognitum sighed again, smiling and bowing her head as she gave the smallest shake of her head. “Ah, Dawn. Poor, poor, Dawn. So ardent to save the Wasteland.

So determined to bring about a better future. So incapable of either.” The crane hummed overhead, and a new pod was set down beside the table. Within was the prone form of a yellow, emaciated earth pony who was barely breathing. “Oopsie. Wrong jar.” It was whisked up once more. “I’m sure you’ve noticed that these jars function the same as the stasis pods. Quite useful technology. It can keep a body preserved. . . forever.”

“That’s sick,” I muttered again.

“What an odd notion you have, Blackjack,” Cognitum replied in turn. “They all would have died long ago if I hadn’t kept them.” The crane returned with the familiar synthetic body of Dawn. Her bladed wings and forehooves had been plucked off, leaving tatters of metal and cables and the broken stumps of bone. A spear of metal ran vertically from the top of the jar to the bottom, like a metal martini olive. “Here she is.”

“No,” Dawn groaned as her eyes focused on me. “No no no. . .”

“Yes, my dearest pawn. Yes. Blackjack is here. She proved stronger. Tougher. More determined. More worthy.” For a moment, the urbane mask on Sweetie Belle’s face slipped, and I saw the vicious machine beneath. It was all I could do not to fire, knowledge be damned. Cognitum saw my frown, and the urbane aspect returned. “I’d be quite happy to give her to you, Blackjack. Perhaps you could rehabilitate her. Reunite her with her family. I’m quite sure they’d love that.”

“No. No. . . please no. . .” Dawn whimpered as she struggled against the spear pinning her through the middle of the jar. “Please. . .”

“Let her go,” I ordered, really wanting to blast this monster before me.

Cognitum paused, mouth open as she stared a moment, then replied, “No. No, I don’t think so. Not just yet. But soon. . . if we can come to an arrangement.”

She wanted something. Beyond EC-1101. “What kind of arrangement?”

The crane yanked the jar back into the air. For a long instant she regarded me, then smiled, “Do you know who I am?”

“An insane computer,” I countered, winning a momentary frown of annoyance. She recovered a moment later, but I filed that away for later.

“Hardly,” she countered, filling her tea yet again. Then, as calmly as you pleased she said, “I am Princess Luna.”

I laughed, “Right. And I’m Princess Celestia. Pleased to meet you again, sister.”

Her face was a mask of composure, "I'm quite serious."

"You're a glitchy pile of buggy software," I countered. "And no way you're Princess Luna. Not even close."

"On the contrary," she countered evenly. The air above us shimmered and ghostly holograms filled the room. I recognized Horse and the slew of other visitors trying on the shimmery, golden-threaded and gemmed cap. "That day, when Horse was showing off his latest innovation, a would-be Crusader Maneframe competitor fitted with equipment for uploading ponies' minds, the cap happened to land on the head of one mare who attended the meeting in disguise." I watched as the cap fell upon Eclipse's head as Horse failed to snag Goldenblood. "He'd hoped to raid Goldenblood of his secrets. Instead, he chanced upon something far more rare and precious. Princess Luna. Me."

"No way," I muttered. "If anything, you're Horse in there."

"Ah, Horse!" she said gaily, a broad smile on her face. The crane whirled and deposited another jar. In it was what appeared to be a skinned pony. Bare, sightless, emasculated. I got the impression of looking at an adult-sized fetus. "Say hello, Director!" Cognitum said grandly, gesturing to me. The pony just twitched a little inside the container. "He lost most of his admittedly brilliant mind long ago. I just keep him around to remember those that tried to control me."

"You did that to him?" I asked, horrified.

"Enervation did. A few seconds' worth, before he jumped into the stasis pod," she said, patting the jar. "Though, in retrospect, I suspect he wished he'd melted. He believed I'd take care of him, like I always had. He liked pushing my buttons," she said, as she turned away from the jar. "Potentially, he might be soulless, too. It's always hard to tell once the mind goes."

"You're evil," I muttered.

She seemed shocked, then angered. "Dawn has killed dozens. Horse was responsible for the deaths of hundreds. You've killed thousands. You've killed foals, Blackjack. Helpless foals. You've killed indiscriminately. Your hooves are far bloodier than mine. So let's not throw about that 'E' word so casually, thank you very much."

It wasn't the same. I, at least, tried to kill less if I could. "It's one thing to kill. There's worse things than killing," I countered.

"Yawn." She rolled her eyes and glared disdainfully at me. "Suffice it to say, Horse

copied me to this computer. At first, he delighted in me as a prize. Not only did I have many secrets he could exploit, but he found me a most desirable outlet for his... frustrations." She gave a very convincing shudder before glaring at the maimed pony. "But more than secrets, I was a window into his Princess's mind, one few knew or contemplated. Most didn't know about her fears, her ambition, her pride, or her dreams. I did. I knew just what Horse needed to say to drive a wedge between her and Goldenblood. I knew just what moves he needed to make to be appointed as Director of the O.I.A." She hissed softly as she glowered at the skinned pony, "One push of a button, and he could have deleted me. I was every bit his toy. His prisoner. His secret weapon."

Okay. Maybe I could understand keeping Horse around as she did. Not forgive, but certainly understand. "Luna was afraid? What did she have to fear?"

Cognitum smirked at me. "Afraid? I was *terrified*. My own sister once banished me to the moon for asserting myself. I was always in the background, because I knew that 'love' was a lie! Always the dark counterpoint to my sister's radiance. We may have 'ruled' jointly, but please recall who it was that always addressed the subjects. Who always issued the grand decrees? I always remained at the side, the lesser princess. And gnawing away in my mind was the knowledge that, if I'd been betrayed by my sister, I could be betrayed by anypony.

"I did not seek to rule. I didn't seek to throw Celestia from her throne. It was always more comfortable and safe on the sidelines. But when my sister thrust the throne upon me, what choice did I have? To abdicate and abandon Equestria in its time of greatest need? To break my sister's already rent heart? I had no good choice, so I decided to rule, as I once craved. Recognition. Respect. Oh how desire and terror fought inside me! To be ruler, in the spotlight, but exposed and vulnerable!" She shook her head.

"So I determined to make a realm that would never hurt me. That would love me. That I could control safely and securely. But how? I wasn't Celestia. I didn't attend functions and galas and charm aristoponies and command guards. I preferred intimacy. I dealt with ponies in their dreams. Met them in the quiet times of their lives when they were most vulnerable. I was Princess of the Moon, of the Night! Elusive, everchanging, and removed. The Ministries were not simply tools for running the war, but also to shield me from the anger of my subjects for any hardships we faced. Far better Pinkie Pie be feared than me."

Okay. If she wasn't at least partly Luna, she'd done some damned in depth study for the part. Still, this mare didn't sound like Luna to me. Everything she said was

perfectly reasonable and logical. I knew what it was like to be torn by desire and fear. I knew what it was like to want something, even if it drew you to make mistakes. But still, this mare sounded. . . petty. Paranoid. Vicious, even. Nothing I associated with that mare I'd seen in memory. Maybe the war had changed her more than anypony knew, but I still couldn't believe that this machine before me was the real Princess Luna.

"Even if what you say is true," I said slowly, "what does it have to do with me?"

Cognitum just stared at me, a calculating look in her eyes and a casual smile on her lips. "There's two parts to that, really. The first is that I want control of my land back. You've seen the factories around the Core. There are hundreds more just like them all across Equestria. You saw what Red Eye hoped to accomplish with his pathetic forges? I will be capable of controlling an army of machines and more who will return order to this Wasteland. Raiders will be extinguished. Disease, hunger, and poverty abolished. The Tokomare will be brought fully online, the Enervation sealed away for good. The weather will be controlled by me through my SPP, and Equestria shall be reborn, stronger for its sufferings and more determined than ever before!"

Yeah. I could really see LittlePip giving control of the SPP to this nut. Celestia would just love a crazy computer pretending she was her sister. "And for that you need EC-1101."

"Yes. But that isn't enough. Not at all," Cognitum said calmly. "You see, I need a body."

"A body? You have a body!" I said, gesturing to the Sweetie Bot before me.

"I have a shell. A peripheral. One with limited range, which can be intercepted, blocked, or even subverted. No one will respect a machine, even if I am the legitimate ruler of this land. I need a body that is powerful. Resilient. Augmented," she said as she gave me eyes that in any other circumstance promised a rutting. In this case, I anticipated I was about to get much worse.

"You want my body?" I said as I backed away. "No. Try 'hell no'!"

"Your body and augmentations have proven superior time and time again," she said matter-of-factly, gesturing over her shoulder at the row of jars in the shadow behind her. "I considered the Dawn model, but once you obtained wings, it seemed that your design was the superior one. And really, what kind of princess can't do magic?" She rose and began trotting around me. "Not quite as synthetic as I was hoping,

but I think that that's an asset. I would still have to make a few changes, of course... That graffiti you've etched in your plating simply won't do."

I almost put a missile into the machine then and there, but I was still trapped by the fact she hadn't told me anything about Horizons yet. And she knew! I just knew she knew. Thus far Steel Rain was nowhere to be seen, and the Ultra-Sentinels were keeping away. I couldn't see how she could just take my body. "Afraid you can't have it. I'm kind of using it," I retorted flatly, thinking it a better response than 'You are fucking nuts.'

"Don't worry about that. I have an immensely superior vessel for you to inhabit. I'm not a monster. And you have to consider the benefits of such a trade. Without EC-1101, you'd no longer have the burden of dealing with controlling and organizing Equestria. You don't want to rule; that was made painfully obvious with the Society. You want to be free from the burden of responsibility, and I know you don't love that augmentation. You resent it. Loathe it." She spoke as if I were the crazy one now. "I can return you to a body of flesh and blood. One with nerve endings. Fully functional legs. Eyes. A stomach. You could be a normal pony again, and I will have an extraordinarily powerful vessel to use to rule Equestria again."

"I don't think you're fit to rule a... a lemonade stand, much less Equestria," I countered. Lemonade stand? Really? "Much less with my body."

"No?" Cognitum countered. "Consider the Harbingers. I've brought unity to hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individuals. Protection. Strength. The Harbingers do not kill or rape. They do not extort. They exist to bring about Equestria's return. My return. Yes, they were opposed to you, but only because of Dawn's jealousy. With my intellect, my knowledge, and EC-1101 granting me full and direct access, I could tame the Hoof in a month. The Wasteland in a year. No more raiders. No more murder. It will be civilization again. Comfort. Peace. And you can share in that, Blackjack. You and your friends."

P-21 flashed into view above me, teaching a trio of foals. "He can explore his true talent as a teacher, rather than being consumed by rage," Cognitum said. Then Glory appeared, winged and beautiful, in a lab doing something involving beakers. "She can return to seeking solutions to the problems facing ponykind. And I know that you two would greatly appreciate the opportunity to grow close again." Scotch Tape appeared as a young mare directing an engineering project. "She can build not just one city, but dozens. There is no shortage of ponies needing quality shelter." Rampage took Scotch Tape's place. "With the war stabilized, you can see to getting your friend the help she needs. There's no peace for her in the wasteland. The urge

to kill will never leave her in this place. You know this.”

Oh, she was good. Very good. Rational and reasonable... and worst of all, I thought she might be right. I’d just have to overlook all the things she was doing that screamed ‘evil’ and ‘crazy’. “So you put my mind into some other pony,” I said, smiling at this insane hypothetical. “What about my soul?”

“Good question! After all, it wouldn’t be fitting for your soul to be in this body. No offense, but you’re simply not an executive, Blackjack,” Cognitum said as the jar containing Horse’s quivering remains was yanked up by the crane. “You see, I’ve been watching you for a very long time. A very long time. Even before you had your first augments. I knew you were... different. You faced hardships that would have destroyed lesser ponies. Time and time again, you’ve thrown yourself into the fray to spare others. I monitored your progress through Hightower. True, you weren’t able to defeat the Warden on your own, but you reached him, and you had the presence of mind to invoke me as you had in Flash Industries. And,” she added, “You introduced me to a very interesting pony.”

The jar descended, and within was... it reminded me of the glowing skeletal ponies I’d seen walking around the Hoofington Megaspell complex. The unicorn skeleton was incomplete, an intact skull, mostly intact torso, floating vertebrae, and broken off limbs all connected by faintly glowing gas like the soul motes. Swirls of the mist filled the eye sockets like stars. “Hello, Blackjack,” the skeleton said quietly, his eyeglow brightening as he saw me. “Did you get Snails out?”

“Snips?” I gasped in shock and horror. “What did she do to you?”

“This wasn’t her doing. This is the result of what happens to a pony who meddles in souls. My bones are my own soul jar now,” he said, then paused and asked again, “Did you save Snails?”

“I did! He’s fine. He’s out with Xanthe and Silver Spoon and Carrion. They’re looking for Diamond Tiara, if you can believe it.”

“That dummy. He always was soft for dames...” Snips said in his hollow, ethereal voice. “Blackjack, don’t listen to her. She’s insane. She thinks she’s Princess Luna!” Suddenly he let out a cry as green lightning raked the bones. I then noticed the interior of this jar was ringed with starmetal spikes. Every now and then, a jolt of green lightning sparked from the tips.

“That’s enough of that, now,” Cognitum said coolly, “Let’s not be rude.” She regarded me with a small smile. “I had a prison sentry retrieve his incinerated corpse from

the burning security station when I noticed he wasn't quite dying. Since then we've had extensive talks about Project Eternity. I'm sure he'd be more than happy to help transfer your soul to a new container, or back to an old one." I frowned at that last part. Back to an old one?

"You still haven't told me about Horizons, though," I said, dragging the conversation back to the part I was concerned with. Maybe all of this banter had made her relax her smug omission a little. "What is it? How do you even know about it? Luna didn't."

She regarded me coolly for several seconds. "You're right. I didn't. Not till the very end. He was maddeningly elusive. I knew he had done something, and even when Horse had access to the O.I.A. database, I couldn't find anything. Trottenheimer had been involved in its design, and Apple Bloom may have had a hoof in it indirectly, but besides that, I could find no other information. Where was it located? How could it be built? He had no paper trail to speak of. No suspicious movement of materials from one part of Equestria to another."

"So how'd you find out, then?" I asked.

"By accessing an archive of information related directly to the O.I.A., collected over decades of hard work by one King Awesome," Cognitum replied with a smirk as Snips was lifted up into the air. "He had amassed a collection of memories that Goldenblood himself had removed prior to his arrest. They'd been scattered all across Equestria, and some further, but they remained, and Awesome had made it his hobby to collect them."

Ha, I'd caught her! "Well, that's interesting, because Charm happened to smash them all to pieces when I didn't name her to rule the Society," I snapped with my own smug smirk.

But Cognitum was completely unflapped by my accusation. "Yes, she did," Cognitum said as the crane returned with the fifth jar. "But she'd viewed them first." The jar dropped from the ceiling. Within floated a much smaller unicorn. Cables ran from the top of the jar down to her shaved scalp, where cybernetic plugs had been drilled in. "I simply accessed them directly."

"Charm!" I gasped, looking at the emaciated filly. A moonstone pendant hung around her neck. I raised the missile launcher at the computer. "Let her go! Now!" I ordered.

"Release a pony that came to me asking for your head?" Cognitum asked in amuse-

ment. The hologram flashed to life in the air, forming into a giant glowing image of the filly.

"I want her dead! No, wait, not dead. I want her alive. Like, take her legs off. And make sure some Harbingers fuck her up her tail. Like, ten times. At least!" the filly said with a cruel grin. "Maybe you can set her up on a stand somewhere and we can get a whole row of stallions to fuck her over and over. Like, the whole Hoof."

Charm curled up even tighter, quivering, as the hateful words spilled out in a torrent. "As you can see, this filly demanded that I unleash the Harbingers on Elysium and help her take her throne back, and she wanted the most obscene punishments for you and her siblings. Truly vile," Cognitum said in tones of sublime disdain as she shook her head. "I've exposed her mind in its totality. She'd thank you for killing her, Blackjack."

Charm opened an eye, tears on her cheek. "Blackjack. Please. Help," she begged as she floated in the jar. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"Let her go. Let all of them go!" I ordered.

She considered me silently for a long moment before she smiled a little. "I'd be more than happy to, if you agree to give me your body," she said calmly. "Yes, not only can you help your friends, you can also save this miserable little wretch, if you want. She's as bad as your Overmare, though. Worse."

She was just a filly. She could learn to do better, with time. "I want her out of that jar, now," I ordered again, about to smash it open myself. I lifted a hoof to do just that.

"Can you remove wires connected to the deepest parts of her brain? If you plan on simply yanking them out, you might kill her a little less painfully by ripping her in two." Oh, that was low. I backed away, and Cognitum repeated, "As I said, give me your body, and I'll free her. Happily. I don't need her any more, after all."

"Horizons. Tell me what it is. Now," I ordered. Any more obfuscation or games, and I'd cut to the boom. Glory would be able to save Charm. I could chew through those cables if I really had to.

She stared at me for the longest time. It was good so much of me was artificial. I practically vibrated mentally with the urge to destroy this monster once and for all. Fortunately, my body stayed steady. "Do you accept my offer? Give me EC-1101 and your body, and I will give you everything you desire and more. We could both have what we want!"

“Tell me!” I demanded again.

“We can bring peace to the Wasteland, unity to all the races that inhabit it, safety and security to all that crave it!” Cognitum pleaded as she stepped before me. “I know you don’t approve of my methods, and I don’t expect you to, but I know you desire the same ends I do. Work with me, and you can help return the world to its glorious state!”

I shoved her aside hard as the crane lifted the jar up into the air and returned it to the side, seizing the last one. “Tell me!” I yelled, a final time, the missile ready to fly.

Then the jar set down, and my rage vanished like a burst balloon as I stared at the contents in shock. Floating serenely within the jar was a white unicorn with a red and black mane. Her half-open eyes were a brilliant, beautiful red. She didn’t have her cutie mark, but I could easily imagine them on her flank: a queen and ace of spades. I popped my hand open and touched the glass. The eye opened slightly more, then closed again, dully. “Sanguine wasn’t the only one I saved from Hippocratic before it exploded. I thought this vessel might come in useful. I even had the skin healed.”

It was me. Unmutated. Untainted. Unaugmented. Unmutilated. Normal. I barely recognized myself without a layer of metal covering, or with flesh and blood limbs attached. I didn’t look away, afraid that, if I did, the body would be yanked away forever. “Any reason why shouldn’t I just blow you apart and take all these people you’ve captured away from here?”

Cognitum wore an expression of amused confidence. “Do you have some method of transferring all your memories, thoughts, and feelings into it? You might transfer your soul, perhaps. Eventually, you might regain something of your previous self, but it wouldn’t be the same pony.” Her amusement faded as she approached me. “Work with me, give me what I need, and I will include you in everything. You can take Dawn’s place if you wish, or leave for good, and I won’t stop you. I’ll explain, in detail, what Horizons is and, more importantly, how I plan to stop it. You will go from being my enemy to my ally. And more importantly, you’ll be my friend.”

I slowly backed away from the jar and stared hard at her. “You’re asking for a lot of trust here. Assuming I accepted this, how do I know you’d follow through on your end of the agreement?” Let alone not abuse EC-1101, let alone stop being so evil and crazy.

“Me,” Rampage said as she walked up the stairs towards me. Steel Rain waited at the base of the steps, wearing his massive guns and sparkly new armor, complete

with helmet. "I'll watch over them and make sure they don't try any funny business." I frowned down at Rampage, and she quickly went on, "I know you don't trust me now. I know I should have told you about Steel Rain's offer. But I don't want to see you screwed, Blackjack. I want you to have the life a pony like you deserves. A new body. A life with your friends. An end to a world you hate. Cognitum can do all that. Let her have the headache of ruling things and dealing with Horizons. If she fucks up, you can kill her then."

"And you'll be dead," I added, levelly.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. I'll be dead. Honestly, I sell you out and you're still hung up on that? What do I have to do to get it through your head that I'm a nopony. A fake. A glommed-together amalgam of souls. Have you found one memory, any memory, that's of me and me alone?"

"No, I haven't," I replied evenly.

"Then face the fact that this is the solution where everypony gets what they want. Cogs gets to be Princess again. Steel Rain gets to play with big toys. I get a coffin. You get your life back without abandoning the Hoof. Glory gets a mare she can snuggle with. Everypony wins," she said, then jabbed a hoof at Cognitum. "And if she gets out of line, the Twilight Society can blast the Core with Celestia One, or the Lightbringer can drop a hurricane on this place. It doesn't have to be you," she said as she stared into my eyes in earnest, the pale gaze sincere and craving my acceptance of her decision.

"You've always been about giving ponies a chance," Cognitum said quietly. She had a point, but still. The consequences of them being allowed to fuck up were greater than my worst nightmare.

I turned and looked back at Cognitum. "How about we turn it around?" I asked. "Why don't you trust me? Tell me everything you know about Horizons and how to stop it. I do. You help settle things down in the Hoof and then... *then*... I give you EC-1101. What do you say? What's another year or two?"

"Plenty of time for you to get killed, change your mind, or allow somepony else to access the systems," Cognitum replied smoothly, frowning at me. "I'm sorry, but we must do it my way."

I sighed, shaking my head. If only things could have been different. Hopefully, if I saved Charm, the filly would be grateful long enough to tell me what I needed to know. "Sorry," I said, snapping the missile launcher up.

“And what of you?” Cognitum asked as she stared at me, still calm. Huh? My bafflement made me hesitate a moment. What was she talking about? “Do you agree with her decision?” she said as she gazed into my eyes. Who was she talking to? I was about to ask, but before I could, she went on just as cryptically, “She might be able to destroy me. The system has lots of volatile coolants and the like. I doubt, however, that what you want would survive my destruction.” She raised her head slightly, as if gauging my reaction. “I am ready to honor my deal.”

“Who are you talking—” I started, and then my eyes widened. “Dealer?”

“I’m sorry, Blackjack,” Dealer whispered miserably in my ears, “but I don’t want to die.”

Suddenly, words flashed across my vision: Command Override: Cut Strings.

Instantly, my body went limp, and I collapsed onto my face. I could still see and hear, but even my ears were paralyzed; I barely had enough muscles to speak. “Dealer. Dealer! What are you doing, Dealer? Stop it!”

“Don’t kill her!” Rampage shouted.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Rampage,” Cognitum said smoothly. “This is merely a gesture of trust. A demonstration of my good intent. It’s the least I can do.” I was turned onto my side so I could see Cognitum and my copy. I could also see a small door in the base of the machine swing open. From it slithered, like some exotic robot snake with its tail trapped in the computer, a long cable connected to a small golden web studded with tiny gems. The metal tendril climbed over and into the jar, and the golden netting spread out to cover the blank’s head.

“Don’t do this. Don’t let her do this, Rampage,” I begged, struggling to move and feeling panic growing inside me as the synthetic pony opened a panel in her hoof, pulled out a small data plug, and advanced towards me. “Please!”

“Cogs... you can do a surrogacy spell, can’t you?” Rampage asked quickly.

I felt the plug push into the socket in my left temple. Cognitum rose and cocked her head at Rampage in clueless bafflement. “A surrogacy spell? Whatever f—” She then stopped and let out a soft ‘ahhh’ of comprehension. “Blackjack...” she said in feigned scandalized tones. “You have been a busy mare, haven’t you?”

“Please. Please don’t,” I begged.

“Can you do it?” Rampage demanded. “Transfer the baby to the blank?”

Cognitum didn’t answer for several tense seconds. “I regret to say that a blank is

incapable of carrying a foal to term. Perhaps a blank could be used as an incubator for a foal nearly ready for birth, but blank reproductive systems lack proper hormonal regulation for pregnancy. A fetus implanted this early would miscarry long before birth,” she said matter-of-factly. “I likewise doubt a mare with Blackjack’s augmentations could carry a foal past the second trimester. The reinforcements would crush the infant. I’m very sorry. But if I can find a suitable mare, rest assured that I will transfer the fetus immediately, Rampage.”

“No. No. Please, no,” I groaned. “Please, Rampage. Arlostee. Shujaa. Twist. Please!”

Suddenly, I felt a curious sensation, like going into a memory orb or using the Perceptitron. The world whirled faded away bit by bit, my vision blurring, then doubling, and then slowly smearing back into focus. And then. . .

The mare floated there in a jar, looking at a black cyberpony, a frozen unicorn robot, and a striped mare struggling against the hooves of a pony in glittery silver power armor. Dimly, she was aware of something terrible having happened, but she didn’t care. She simply bobbed in the jar, hearing the black cyberpony talking to the striped mare about what was best for Blackjack, Rampage, and the world. More than once, they regarded her, gesturing with sweeps of their hooves. She just waited, indifferently.

The crane brought back the skull and bones. More talking about souls and cutting and transfers and other things. More waving of legs. Shouting. Struggles. The striped mare was upset about something, but the black cyberpony seemed even more distraught. She flung the tea set away, knocked over the table, and clutched at herself. The reason why didn’t matter so much, but their loud noises and waving legs kept her attention. The black cyberpony seemed almost in pain as she struggled against something within.

This seemed to be the only thing happening in the big space at the moment. The floating mare watched the black cyberpony fight to regain her self-control.

Finally, the striped mare backed off, gave the floating mare one last teary gaze, and hung her head as she trotted away, her tail scraping against the floor. The black cyberpony levitated out a little pendant and slipped it around the floating mare’s neck. A soothing song filled the floating mare’s ears as the black cyberpony closed the clasp. Next, the black cyberpony took out a thick pink plastic ring. ‘Ministry of

Morale Unicorn Filly Timeout Device' was written on it, along with a smiling pink mare. It snugged tightly around the base of the floating mare's horn.

Then the black cyberpony backed away as the bony skull began to cast a spell in concert with the black cyberpony. A swirling black disk bubbling with bursting green and purple boils began to whirl about the black cyberpony, and she struggled as if in agony once more. From the midst of the disk came a small white orb. The jagged black spiral caught the orb, which jerked as if caught in a powerful wind. The orb was blown over to the floating mare and pushed against her chest, and a warm sensation flowed through her.

And I started crying as a switch inside me was flipped and I was Blackjack again. Not just who I was a few minutes ago, but who I'd been months ago, before I ever left 99. I felt my chest expand and collapse with every breath. My heart thundered. Tears ran down my cheeks from whole and complete eyes. I was me. Me as I should have been... if my life had been different. I hugged my body, feeling the faintest discomforts in me, aware of every gurgle of my gut, every twinge of my nerves.

It was wonderful, and terrible, because the one thing I didn't feel was the flutter of life within. If it hadn't been for that, I might have even been grateful... I tried to teleport out of the jar... nothing. Tried to levitate my gun off her. Nothing. I reached up with my hooves, trying to shove the ring off my horn, but it stuck tight. Okay, that ratcheted my anxiety closer to mindless panic.

"Now," Cognitum said with my old mouth as the Sweetie Bot stood as still and lifeless as a statue, "Are you ready to work with me?"

I swallowed hard, feeling the muscles pushing down my throat. "Give me back my body," I rasped, sounding... weaker. I shoved the gold netting off my head. I couldn't fight, couldn't run... so I did what was unthinkable five months ago: I waited.

"I gave you your body, Blackjack. You should be grateful," Cognitum said, a touch reproachful. She then looked at my PipBuck and said calmly, "Yes, you are next, Echo. I swear it. I simply need to confirm one last simple little thing." The air above me flashed to life with another hologram, and I saw lines of data code passing by along with strange, vaguely arcane symbols. "EC-1101. A command megaspell. Intact. Simply waiting for a pony who knows precisely how to use it." She turned and smiled at me. "Thank you for delivering it, and this fine new body, to me."

"I didn't have a choice in the matter," I replied sourly.

"Of course you did. Echo said so dozens of times, though I'd have been quite put out with him if you'd actually listened. His guilt very nearly ruined everything," she said as she turned her head and admired herself, then stood upright, regarded her abdomen, and ran a hoof over it. "True, I didn't expect this body to have a passenger, but I suspect that that will encourage your good behavior." She turned and regarded me with amusement. "You really don't understand, do you?"

"Understand what?" I muttered in rage and annoyance.

Sweetie Bot's eyes flickered to life, and she said in filly's high-pitched voice, "I reckon, if y'all want to find out, you should jes follow the routin' path to wherever it was tryin ta go. That's yer best bet ta find what Horizons is."

I now had enough blood to appreciate the sensation of it running cold. "You were Applebot." The robot went dead again, and my old body nodded. "But why?"

"Because I cannot rule my domain as memories within a machine, however endowed. I needed a living vessel, and I knew that if you possessed EC-1101 and it functioned for you, you might come across other vital data like Steelpony, Chimera, and Eternity. So I tested you, sending you to areas of greater and greater peril. I knew that you would become stronger. Better. That was your slogan, after all." She gave a smug smile. "Had you failed, I would have dispatched a robot to get it off your body, or retrieved it from Sanguine, or sent Applebot or Dawn to get it from your friends. And I kept Dawn as a spare, in the event that the worst happened."

"You used me," I said, ashamed and disgusted that I never questioned the routing taking me straight to my enemy.

"You like being used. If I had time, I'd have sex with you and *really* make you love hating yourself," she replied smugly, patting the glass. "Now. You should see the fruit of all your hard work." She tipped her head back, her mouth in an almost orgasmic expression of bliss. "EC-1101, Command: Activate!"

Suddenly the scrolling blocks of code and symbols vanished, replaced by a single static line with a blinking prompt below it. 'Enter Password'

Cognitum froze with all the abruptness of a mare on the edge of climax getting doused in ice water. Her head twitched back and forth. "What is this? Password? What password? What is going on?"

"What do you mean?" Steel Rain asked. "Don't you know it?"

“EC-1101 uses the most advanced arcaneometric identification systems. It doesn’t need a password! It knows appropriate users on contact! As this body is a descendant of Twilight, it should simply acknowledge me immediately.” She stood frozen for a few more seconds. “What do you mean ‘This isn’t a part of the original program,’ Echo?!” Then she turned down towards me and asked, icily, “What have you done?”

“Me? I didn’t do anything!” I said as I looked up at the password prompt.

“You must have. No pony else has had such intimate access.” She glared up at the floating words. ‘>Blackjack’ replaced the empty prompt.

Then, below that: ‘>Error! Incorrect Password. You have 2 attempts remaining. Failure will purge protected file from storage medium. Hint: The name he likes so much.’

“Purge? What fool purges a super critical megaspell program after three failed password attempts?” Cognitum asked incredulously. ‘Who is ‘he’, Echo? Who did this?’ She recoiled, as if struck. “How could you not know? You are one with the megaspell!” She turned towards me again. “What is going on, Blackjack?” she asked, her tone increasingly aggravated and ominous.

I stared at the floating words, utterly at a loss. “I don’t know!” Cognitum’s frustration seemed to grow yet more, either from my answer, a continued internal conversation with the Dealer, or both.

“What’s the problem?” Steel Rain asked as he picked his way carefully up the stairs.

“There is some accessory program locking me out of fully activating EC-1101!” Cognitum replied. “Echo has been capable of accessing its base superuser escalation functions to grab control of individual systems, but I need the megaspell to go off if I am to reclaim access to all the production and weapons facilities across the Wasteland!”

“Well, can’t you just do what he did?” Steel Rain asked.

“Activate all the facilities one by one, system by system, computer by computer? Certainly. If I had another thousand years!” Cognitum exclaimed as she trotted back and forth before me.

“Can’t you hack the password?” Steel Rain demanded incredulously.

“I’d have to clone the program and then devote all my processing power to brute-force crack it. The encryption protocol it’s using is incredibly complex but entirely unique. It’s not any revision of the Advanced Encryptomagic Standard, Sparklefish,

or even the Applejack Cipher!"

"But you could do it?" Steel Rain asked.

"Of course I could. The problem is that the cipher seems to be an asymmetric scheme with output feedback. In order to have any confidence in a given attempt, I'd have to decrypt pretty much the *entire* megaspell *every time*. Do you have any idea how large EC-1101 is? It's a small miracle that it can even be compressed to fit on a PipBuck. It could take weeks, months, or even longer to crack the decryption key for this damnable algorithm. Horizons will obliterate us all long before then," she said, and then she growled at me, "Your little game is going to get us all killed, Blackjack! Now what have you done?"

"Nothing!" I protested, just as confused as they were.

"She's lying. She must be lying," Steel Rain insisted as he stood beside Cognitum.

"No. She's not." Cognitum answered.

"How can you be sure?" Steel Rain replied.

Cognitum sighed. "Because I've felt her soul, Steel." She turned and looked at me, frowning thoughtfully. "You cannot imagine what that was like, Steel Rain. The guilt. The pain. The self-recrimination and self-destructive urge. It *hurt* to be her."

"What are you talking about?" I muttered in bafflement.

"When I transferred your mind and put myself in your body, I inadvertently made contact with your soul as well. Your purest Blackjackness. I don't know how you survive so. The drive for redemption is so strong that it burns. Your craving for physical pleasures to distract you from your own depression would be heartbreaking if we weren't so at odds. Your devotion to your friends... your need to save others... your..." she shivered and hugged herself. "It's far easier to have no soul than yours. To have a clarity of thought and drive..." she shook her head.

"You should interrogate her, still. Tug off that pendant and see how she likes having her soul torn out," Steel Rain replied, then paused and continued, in a lower tone, "Or... you have her baby..."

There was a resounding clang as Cognitum popped her hands out, grabbed Steel Rain, and threw the silver-armored stallion to the ground. With cold contempt, she said softly, "Never, ever, suggest such a thing again."

I felt a little bit of relief, though my heart still pounded in my chest and my insides still tingled and fluttered with adrenaline. I had to get control of the situation. Had to get

my baby back. Had to get my body back. EC-1101. Save the world. No pressure. The pair were arguing, and so I racked my brains and tried to think it through.

When had EC-1101 been apart from me? I hadn't messed around with it. Was it when Sanguine had taken it from me? He'd been a biologist slash mad scientist, not an arcane sciences programmer. What about at Tenpony? I was unconscious for three days; maybe somepony had accessed the program? But I couldn't see any of my friends letting a stranger mess around with my PipBuck. What about my friends? I tried to imagine Glory doing it but came up blank. P-21 had the skills, but I couldn't think of any reason why he would. And unless Scotch Tape's mom had taught her...

Wait...

Duct Tape had been a maintenance mare who the Overmare used to get EC-1101 ready for transfer. I racked my brains, trying to think back to those days so many months ago, when I'd been flesh and blood. I'd been sitting in Hoss's home, bored... listening to recordings... Recordings of P-21 and her and...

Oh my...

At my laughter, both of them stared up at me. "Oh, it's too rich. It's too good!" I cackled.

"She's finally snapped completely," Steel Rain said flatly. "Eh, good riddance."

"No. I don't think so," Cognitum said evenly. "She figured it out."

"I figured it out," I replied, grinning from ear to ear as she met my gaze.

It was Duct Tape. It had to be! Back when the Overmare had ordered EC-1101 to be removed from Stable 99's systems for transport, she'd encrypted it. Something of her own invention, no doubt. Duct Tape loved cobbling together her own things, and I guessed that the encryption she used had been something of her own invention. Ironically, she'd done it to prevent the Overmare from screwing her over... or maybe the Overmare had demanded she make a safeguard to prevent Sanguine from screwing *her*. It'd been a while ago... Either way, Equestria was being saved by the lucky foresight of Scotch's mother and the amount of time she'd poured into her hobby!

I just hoped that I'd get the chance to tell Scotch before something bad happened.

"Well now," Cognitum said with my voice. "It seems that we have need of further negotiation." She popped her fingers out and rubbed them along her armored head.

“How unfortunate.”

“Give me my—”

“No. I don’t think so.” Cognitum interrupted smoothly. “While I’d never be so crude as to resort to Steel Rain’s suggestion that I kill your child, I believe you can be compelled to yield.”

“Give me one good reason I should!” I retorted.

“You want to do the right thing,” she replied. “You always want to do better, and you want to save lives, even at the cost of your own.”

I hesitated. “Give me another.”

“Without EC-1101, I won’t be able to stop Horizons from killing us all,” she answered without hesitation. The air above us flickered to life again. Before me sat a small pebble of moonstone and a block of starmetal. “I suspect you know about the interaction of starmetal with moonstone.” The two approached each other, both of them growing brighter and brighter. When the moonstone pushed against the block, a white light began to spread along the star metal. “When a critical point is reached, the starmetal undergoes a chain reaction, converting its mass to energy and magic.” There was a colossal white flash as the starmetal block was consumed by a sphere of crackling energy. “Raw destructive potential, the magic and electromagnetic energy wreak havoc on enchantments and technology alike. Only very specific enhancements are capable of resisting the combination.” When the flash faded, a cloud of sparkling motes spread out, swirling and melting away through the air. “Soul energy is a byproduct of the reaction.”

“So what does this have to do with Horizons?” I asked.

“Everything,” she said, and the floor gave a giant lurch as wheels set in the diagonal tracks began to turn. “If you don’t mind, I’d like move us to a new location. It might help you to understand.” The entire house-sized computer was descending the inclinators. “Very few realize what starmetal is, where it comes from, and how it can do what it does. I spent considerable time and energy trying to comprehend its mysteries. Zebra treatises on the subject were obfuscated with dire warnings. Scholars I dispatched to learn more came back infuriatingly lacking information, if they came back at all.”

“But Goldenblood knew. And Horse,” I said, wondering where the hell we were going.

“Yes. Goldenblood’s special talent was metals. Ore. Art. Shaping it. Arranging

it. Knowing how it would bend and break. Surprisingly useful. He keyed in on the special harmonics, and Horse learned how to utilize those harmonics to produce specific effects. But it would take decades to understand the nuances enough to use them effectively,” Cognitum said calmly. Scorpion beasts and worse shivered and skittered on the walls of the ravine as we passed. “For instance, pacifying these monsters can be achieved with a simple amplitude modulation.”

“What does this have to do with Horizons?” I demanded as the walls spread further and further apart. Eventually the track was free of the walls altogether, hanging on thin silver cables stretching into the darkness above.

“It’s quite simple. Goldenblood thought of a way to bring an incredibly large amount of starmetal into contact with an incredibly large amount of moonstone. The detonation would utterly annihilate Equestria.” And as she talked, the hologram changed to show a video of the Core vanishing in an expanding sphere of white energy. I watched Chapel incinerated instantly, followed a few seconds later by the Collegiate, the Arena, Elysium, and the Fluttershy Medical Center. I suspected she was taking a few artistic liberties with the ponies screaming and running around aflame. Then the video pulled back, and it wasn’t just the buildings being consumed; the ground itself seemed to soften and spread like fiery clay. The bowl spread wider and wider, pressing against the mountains ringing the hoof and slowly pushing them away.

As my view moved further out, I got a wonderful view of Canterlot being destroyed; apparently Cogs had made this before the Enclave wiped it off the map. Spike’s cave crumbled to nothing, and I felt a pang of trepidation. Perhaps LittlePip shouldn’t have put that in her memoirs. The blast continued, obliterating Tenpony Tower, the SPP hub, and everything else remotely familiar. The shockwave continued clear across the ocean, and the storm of annihilation tore into the zebra lands as well. Forests incinerated. Colossal waves inundated the land. Great cracks split the earth, and giant volcanic eruptions sprayed magma into the air. It was utter devastation.

Cognitum had missed her calling; she should have been a special effects artist. Given that Luna could step into ponies’ dreams, though...

“So where is this giant supply of moonstone and starmetal?” I asked as listlessly as I could, waiting for her to tell me something new. Through the gloom ahead of and below the platform, I made out a massive body of... mist? Water? Something was churning far below. The tracks moved through a gap in the rocks towards something just out of sight. “After all, I’ve seen a fair bit of what went on behind closed doors during the war, and I think I’d remember if mass importing of moonstone came up even once.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. The only moonstone on Equus was brought back during the Marigold scandal. No. The moonstone he plans on using is there, on the moon.” The hologram changed to that of an immense white crystal resting at the bottom of a rifled shaft. “Goldenblood commandeered Horse’s mechasprites and sent them to the moon on a clandestine rocket to build a facility and to collect and fuse moonstone into a projectile massing several hundred thousand tonnes. With a few more secret launches of Flux to fire it...”

Okay. Now my blasé attitude began to melt away as I saw, in the image, the bottom of the shaft below the projectile exploded. The stream of energy flung the massive moonstone crystal upward, accelerating it to a greater and greater speed until it exploded out into space. I stared in awe at the largest, most beautiful bullet in all of creation flying through the void... towards Equus and Equestria below. “Okay... so that’s Horizons... wow. So... where’s the Starmetal it’s supposed to react with?”

My body just smirked at me and then gazed ahead. The walls of the ravine to either side spread out again and then fell away entirely. The cavity that surrounded us was more immense than anything I’d ever seen, in any memory or in person. Six enormous stone pillars reinforced with unbreakable starmetal scaffolds kept the whole thing from collapsing, even as bits of the ceiling occasionally tumbled down around us. And there, in the center, was what could only be one thing:

The Tokomare.

A pair of massive, corkscrew-like concentric starmetal spires rose from the immense underground lake that filled the bottom of the cavern, the inner coil climbing clockwise and the outer counterclockwise; in the center was a column of what I could only describe as brilliant white glow. The whole looked to be at least a mile in diameter. A veritable stormcloud of mechasprites whirled and curled around them, their tiny bodies resonating with Enervation’s note. As we drew closer, I saw that the helixes’ silver surfaces were pitted and scarred, with holes large enough to fly Raptors into seemingly burned through here and there. I watched in shock as a humming swarm tore a hundred-foot-long strand of metal from the surface of one of the helixes and whisked it up towards the ceiling.

“You’re scavenging from it? Shouldn’t you be repairing it?” I asked skeptically.

“A pound of flesh now for a great bounty in the future,” Cognitum replied. “The mechasprites only remove superficial material to reinforce the Core’s structure above. Without the starmetal, the city would have collapsed long ago.”

And what a shame that would have been. The track was taking us between the

twisting spires now, clearing both with a hundred feet or more to spare. The insides of the coils were feathered with great vanes like the blades of a turbine. Immense blobs of reddish flesh crept on the metal, lurching their way mindlessly along and changing seemingly at random from shapeless masses to tentacled horrors to chitinous creatures. “What is that stuff?” I asked as we passed one quivering, humming lump.

“Biomatter. A byproduct of the Tokomare’s Enervation field. The cell structure defies analysis, but it’s an organic soup similar to the tissue of ghouls, neither dead nor truly alive. It will be flushed once the Core is restored,” she said with a disdainful sniff.

“Am I the only person who looks at this thing and thinks ‘bad news, stay away’?” I asked sarcastically. Still, I had to admit that the twisting spires had a sort of sublime beauty to them. And if they weren’t so stripped, pitted, burned, and holed. . . Stop. Back to the point. “So Horizons is going to drop that moonstone right on this thing?” I asked as we moved towards the inner spiral and the swirling light within.

“Yes. And in the process annihilate all we both hold dear,” Cognitum replied. “With EC-1101, I will be able to prevent this. Moreover, I will be capable of enacting the restoration of the Core in its entirety.” Green lightning darted from one spire to the other every now and then, flickering and crackling.

“What?” I asked in bafflement.

The hologram of moonstone and starmetal reappeared, and once again the crystal and block approached each other. “When starmetal and moonstone are brought into close proximity but prevented from reacting by highly specialized magical fields, something wondrous happens.” And I already knew what that ‘wondrous’ thing was. I watched as the moonstone was held just outside the distance needed to react. This time the moonstone glowed, and I watched the white soul vapor pour into the metal. It began to grow... fast. The cube quickly expanded and transformed from a small block to a shining skywagon. “The starmetal’s mass increases ten thousand times over.”

I stared down at her. “You’re insane. You’re trying to catch it?”

“Of course,” she said coolly. “Horse worked out the method right before the end, though he was never able to get the shields into the proper configuration to intercept it.” She smiled and shrugged as if it were of no consequence. “Tom – that’s what the moonstone projectile is named, for some reason – will fuel a complete restoration of the Core. Every building. Every factory. Everything will be replaced with impervious starmetal. Quite a fitting throne for a reborn Equestria, don’t you think?”

“You *want* Horizons to go off,” I said, still not quite believing it. “Why so obsessed with EC-1101, then?”

“Trottenheimer’s firing trajectory is unaccommodating for interception,” she replied calmly. The display of the Core appeared, along with a cone rising up from the center. “Tom must descend within ten degrees of the Core’s vertical axis for the modified F.A.D.E. shields to catch it.” A dotted line began drawing itself downward at a steep angle within that cone, and when it reached the bottom, the restored Core appeared in a flash. The image reset. “If Horizons goes off a few hours too early or too late, as it likely will...” this time the red dotted line came in at a shallower angle and pierced the ground along the river. The whole image disappeared in an explosion and a little skull and crossbones made of smoke. “I will also need critical control of the Tokomare’s subharmonics to shape the starmetal into the forms needed. Otherwise, even if we are lucky enough to intercept the projectile, it would simply become whatever form was last programmed into the Tokomare.”

“Here’s a crazy thought? Why not simply *stop* it?” I asked in desperation.

“Stop it? Well, that would certainly be possible. Simple, even,” she said, tapping her lips with a wing. “Unfortunately, it would set back my plans for saving Equestria at least two centuries. It’s unlikely the Core could be rebuilt before then, and without the Tokomare restored, all those factories would lack the power to operate. No, catching it is simply the most efficient solution.”

“Don’t you care about the lives that might be lost if you mess up?” I shouted. Once again, she frowned.

“Don’t you care about the lives that will suffer in the interim?” Cognitum countered. “If this works, the Wasteland will give way to a restored Equestria two centuries sooner.” She gave a shrug. “They should be grateful I’m doing this for them in the first place.”

“You’re not Luna,” I retorted. “You might be parts of her mind, but you’re a... a thing! A copy. You’ve got no soul! You’re more Nightmare Moon than... than...” Oh shit... I watched her scowl, but my mind was working a mile a minute. If Luna... Princess Luna... had actually been Nightmare Moon, the implications staggered me. The war with the zebras. The death. The bombs. Even this! Worse, it meant that my choice was to either do nothing, and possibly kill my friends and my baby, or help Equestria’s greatest monster.

Tough call...

"No soul?" she said coldly, tossing her mane as we passed through the inner coil. Beyond was that immense white glow. "Blackjack, I control far more souls than you could ever imagine."

And then we were through, into the space within the interior spiral and surrounded by a blizzard of circling white specks. The soul motes swirled in the same clockwise direction as the coil. There were so many that it was hard to see through them all. There had to be millions. Tens of millions. All trapped within the Tokomare.

"How can you allow them to stay trapped?" I asked solemnly.

"Give me EC-1101, and perhaps I will be able to negate the Tokomare's Enervation field," Cognitum answered smoothly. She gestured at all the millions of souls with a sweep of her wing. "All of this is simply the byproduct of the device's energy fields being poorly calibrated and inefficient. With control restored, it would be an easy feat to smooth out the arcanomagical frequencies radiated by the Tokomare."

Soul ripping was a *byproduct*? "You think all of this is some kind of accident?" I countered. "This thing is evil, Cognitum! Why can't you see that?"

She sighed in a long-suffering way that reminded me of my mother trying to get me to understand that I had to work the C shift every day, not just when I felt like it. "To many, Blackjack, *you* are evil. I will not waste my time with trite declarations of evilness," Cognitum said coolly. "Is the soul entrapment unfortunate and hazardous? Certainly. Calling it evil changes nothing. Understanding it. Perfecting it. That is a solution that actually helps others. I will *use* this device. Otherwise, all the souls trapped here suffer for nothing."

Now there was some familiar pre-war bullshit. "Not doing a good job convincing me to give you EC-1101," I muttered as we approached a huge needle hanging down from the middle of the vast chamber's ceiling. Lightning from the vanes on the interior coil constantly arched over, striking a dozen gold-tipped secondary needles a hundred feet long or more that extended down at angles from the midpoint of the main needle. These were connected to an ever-thickening mass of cables, transformers, and starmetal girders. A hole had been bashed clean through the ceiling, and I could almost swear I saw the white outline of the M.o.I. hub a mile up. "Huh. What made that?" I wondered idly.

"Shadowbolt Tower," Cognitum replied, her tone a touch waspish. "When you compress something that massive into a sphere a dozen feet in diameter and let it hit the ground at terminal velocity, it has quite a substantial impact. It took nearly a month for the mechasprites to chew it away and repair the damage you caused. Since

then, this cavern's been far more unstable than it should be."

"Oh. Yeah. *Sorry* about that," I muttered, wishing it could have fallen right on the machine instead.

"I think you halfway mean that," Cognitum said in amused tones. "Touching your soul, intolerable as it was, was quite insightful. I wish I'd done so long ago. I think we could have been good friends if I had."

Yeah. Maybe. "Why is touching my 'purest Blackjackness' so intolerable?" I asked sourly from inside my jar. "I know I'm not the best pony, but—"

That prompted a laugh from my old body. "Oh dear. And I know you mean that too." She sighed, shaking her head.

"The mind is the identity of self. The soul is the being of self," Snips said from inside his jar. "When the two are in opposition, turmoil results."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Cognitum replied with a little nod. "Trapped in the machine, I possess all of my old motivations, but I lack a true self. When I put myself in your brain, the wrongness was horrifying. Even agonizing. You are damaged, Blackjack, beyond my ability to deal with. Just taking your body filled me with such feeling of guilt that I could hardly stand it." She looked at our approaching destination, a platform suspended from the tip of the needle. "Fortunately, soon I will be whole and complete, with an unstoppable body, a keen intellect, and... well..." she gave a smug little shrug. Well what?

"And then you will rule Equestria while I become administrator of the Core," Steel Rain said, and I noted a tone of uncertainty in his voice.

"Of course," Cognitum nearly purred. "That is... if Blackjack tells us what she knows about EC-1101's key."

Steel Rain didn't respond. I wished he'd take his helmet off so I could get a read of his face. Then, with a metallic clunk, the lift had reached its destination: a large round platform in the very middle of the swarm of souls. The inclinor slid into a berth, and there was a series of clangs as plates locked the mechanism into place. In the center of the platform was a strange, vaguely familiar design etched in the metal floor plates: a circle with a six-pointed star in the middle. Six unicorns, one standing at each point, were trying to keep a ball of brilliant white contained in the middle. Green lightning from their horns raked across it, forcing it back whenever it drifted. The black robes they wore were a little much.

"Look, Cognitum, give me my body back and let me—" I began, but I was interrupted

again.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, Blackjack. I want to give you a chance. Let you try and do better. But I *know* better," she said as she slowly trotted off the lift. Along the perimeter of the hanging platform, monitors were coming to life. "This is the Uvula station. From here, I have the greatest control over the Core's systems. It takes all of my processing power, but I can exercise some influence over the Core without EC-1101."

"It's highly agitated, sir," one of the unicorns reported to Steel Rain, a moonstone pendant dangling on his chest. "I don't know how long we can keep it contained like this."

"Soon you won't have to, but first things first," Cognitum said as the crane atop the computer hummed to life. The yellow pony's jar was set down before Cognitum, beside mine and the jar containing Snips's remains. "It's time for you to be rewarded for your loyalty and devotion, Echo." She stuck out her hoof. "Snips, please transfer him back."

Snips hesitated a moment, but then his bony horn began to glow, summoning the dark magic. "Stop. Why are you helping her, Snips?" I pled.

"Magic is all I have left, Blackjack. And if I don't help her, she'll go after Snails," he said in that soul whisper. The sawblade spiral coiled around Cognitum's left forehoof, swirling like a sawblade. Then it jerked free, and in its midst was a small, feebly flickering mote. The tendril of dark energy snapped like a whip and plunged it into the emaciated yellow stallion's chest.

His eyes popped wide in shock and horror as he gasped and writhed. Cognitum levitated a moonstone talisman around his neck and lifted him from the jar with her magic. "There. You're safe now, Echo. You're safe," she said as she patted his mane, then suddenly took several steps away from him. "I mean... I have fulfilled my part of our agreement, Echo."

Echo curled up tightly. "I'm sorry," he whispered. He met my glare, shuddered, and curled up tighter. "Sorry..."

"I don't think he made it," Steel Rain said coolly.

"Mmm... well, perhaps he will recover with more time. I have so many questions for him," she said with a wave of her hoof, levitating him up and onto the sidelines. "Now. Blackjack. Tell me how to access EC-1101."

"No," I answered, looking at the brilliant soul mote struggling against the unicorns'

dark magical spells, wondering if I could help it break free. Maybe it'd... I dunno... eat them or something?

Cognitum sighed. "Blackjack, I have been civil. I have been patient. I have tried to reason with you, and I have tried to demonstrate to you that I am the proper ruler of Equestria."

"Well, so far you're doing a pretty shitty job," I said evenly, as if giving a report in school but without the annoyance of actually being in class. "You've demonstrated neither ethics nor morals in your behavior. You think that you are Princess Luna and that that entitles you to whatever you desire. You believe that your ends justify your means, and you've committed gross violations against both me and others. You show no remorse for any of this. Even if you are Princess Luna, which I seriously doubt, that in no way mitigates the cruelties you have visited on others. So no, I won't help you."

She stood, frozen, for almost a minute. "You'd let the world die to spite me?" she asked in disappointed tones only a mother could use.

"I'm not letting the world die. You underestimate my friends. Glory and P-21 will learn what has happened to me. They will contact others. LittlePip. Homage. Calamity. Grace. Others that respect the cause I work towards. They will find a way to stop Horizons, with or without EC-1101. Then they will end you," I answered, the truth so clear and simple to me that even here, like this, I felt a great sense of peace. "It's not about you, Cognitum."

Cognitum stared at me, her body stock still. Then she slowly smiled. "You presumptuous little foal," she muttered, and then trotted towards the closest screen. "Very well then. Let's put your certainty to the test." The hologram flickered to life. "When you caused catastrophic damage to the Core's power systems, I used it as an opportunity to improve my control over a few critical systems. Such as..." I looked down on the floating platforms of the village of Flotsam. It felt like another life. Ponies hauled up salvage from the river and sent it on its way. The general uptick in prosperity showed some signs here, too. The platforms were full of ponies trying to pick wealth out of the depths.

I even noticed a boat tied up on one pier. A familiar boat... one that had fallen on me long ago and carried me all the way to Manehattan: the *Seahorse*. The hologram expanded, zooming in on the ponies. The turquoise Captain Thrush staggered along, apparently quite inebriated but navigating the crowded docks with ease, a half-open bottle of rum floating beside her. She still had her pirate's hat, and an eyepatch

covered her right eye. The seafoam-green Seabiscuit followed in her wake, bottles, boxes, and crates loaded high in a massive mound atop her back.

“What are you doing?” I asked as I hovered in the jar.

“Discovering how many you will let die before telling me what you know,” she said calmly. “You will not keep me from my realm, Blackjack. But you’ve let hundreds die in the past... what’s a few hundred more?” A targeting reticle appeared on the holographic image, pointing right at the village. “Excuse me a moment. I have to focus on this. Even with a direct connection, you can’t comprehend the interference I have to push through.”

“No! Stop it!” I shouted, hammering on the glass.

I saw the distinctive Thrush stop and turn her head towards me, or at least in the direction of whatever camera filmed this scene, and tackle the overburdened Seabiscuit to send both into the churning brown water. A second later, a green beam swept horizontally across the deck, the rickety platforms and shacks atop them exploding one after the next as ponies were vaporized by the dozens. They ran, screaming and shouting, but there was nowhere they could escape from the line of death.

Again and again, the beam lanced out. Shops and houses exploded in thick palls of greasy smoke. The anti-dragon beam cut through it all with ease. Ponies tumbled into the river, struggling to find something to hold onto as the village broke up. The beam then started picking out boats, setting them alight when ponies tries to scramble aboard. I looked around for some sign of the *Seahorse*, and caught sight of it as it wheeled about the waves, the rust-colored mare Oilcan at the controls. The boat cut through the water and over more than a few ponies struggling amidst the burning, bobbing wreckage. A burly pegasus began to swoop low over the water, plucking up the captain and Seabiscuit and returning them to the deck.

Captain Thrush raced up to the wheelhouse, took the wheel from Oilcan, and immediately flipped the *Seahorse* around tighter than I ever imagined possible. The green beam of energy, as if sensing it was my friend on board, sought out the vessel as it tried to maneuver around the sinking, burning wreckage. The green line swept back and forth after it, plumes of flash-boiled steam blasting into the air behind it as it closed in. Then the ship burst into black smoke as the line swept over it and disappeared into the haze spreading across the river.

“You monster! You’re not Luna! You’re nothing like Luna!” I cried, hot tears spilling down my face as I beat my hooves against the inside of the jar.

"You are the one making this a reality, Blackjack," Cognitum said with maddening calm. "Luna ordered tens of thousands to their deaths to save the lives of millions. I will, regrettably, send hundreds to die to overcome your stubborn pride. Each one of these is on your head."

The hologram left the burning river and swapped over to the stately buildings of the Collegiate. I could see the guards walking along the building tops. It was a lot more crowded today, too. Hundreds of pegasi worked with the Collegiate ponies as they went about their early morning routine. Only one or two of the rooftop guards seemed to notice something amiss to the south.

"No!" I yelled as the green beam swept out, blowing the roof off one of the campus buildings. Even wartime Equestrian overengineering melted and exploded into flaming debris as the beam blasted through everything. Ponies wheeled about in a panic, struggling to find somewhere safe. The harsh green glare of the deadly line focused on the foundation of one structure and bored in. Flames exploded out the basement windows, and then the first story, then the second, and then ponies with their manes and clothes ablaze scattered out. "Please! Please no!" I screamed, the green line sweeping across the medical school, tearing the facade away.

The beam stopped, and I wept, unable to tear my eyes away. "No. You can't do this."

"Correction. Couldn't. If you hadn't blown power to systems that would have counteracted my controls, I doubt I'd be able to now. As is, I have to fend off a thousand countermands just to get the one thousand and first command through," Cognitum answered. "You have the power to make this stop, Blackjack. Not I. I have little else to lose."

I watched as the image turned to Riverside, the village thriving even in the horrible weather. Ponies seemed to be aware something was happening, though, looking alertly about for trouble. I picked out a few sand dogs in their midst, and one in particular that I knew. Rover stood beside a pony stall bedecked with prewar clothes, sniffing at the air, with the young female Fifi at his side. "Please don't. Please. Luna. If there is really anything of Luna in you... stop," I begged.

Cognitum said nothing. An instant later another defense beam on the west side of the Core opened up and drew a line straight across the river and through the market. Rover picked up Fifi, throwing them to the side as the stall, and the vendor, were vaporized. Ponies fled for the safety of the shops, only to have those shops blasted one by one, setting them ablaze. I saw Rover and other sand dogs directing the ponies towards the subway station entrance, but there were so many ponies

and such small doors. They pooled at the entrance, packing together, crushing against each other. The green line touched down the street and drew towards the subway far slower than it could but far too fast for most of the ponies to get clear. I saw Rover, Fifi on his shoulders, stuck at the doorway of the subway as the green defense beam blasted its way into the crowd and a second later into the tunnel. For an instant the beam stopped moving, but then I realized why as smoke began to pour up out of countless vents and utility covers from below. A few minutes later, the beam went dead, but the fires burned on.

I curled there, eyes clenched shut, trying to remember that if Cognitum got full control of EC-1101, she'd have powers infinitely worse. That was small comfort to the picture I had of incinerated friends.

"It gives me no satisfaction to do this," Cognitum said solemnly. "Tell me what you know of this encryption. What is the password? The name."

"No. I won't," I said weakly. What would I say if I met ponies who'd survived this? That they died to protect a password? To keep a monster from power? But if I did give it up, how much worse would it be?

"Pity. Well, what next?" she said brightly. "So many potential targets. The Society? The Arena, perhaps? Those ghoulish monsters in the old hospital..." One by one, the holograms swapped from one to the next. "The Rainbow Dash Skyport? Megamart?" she paused, then asked in a softer tone. "Your old home?" The hologram changed to the entrance to Stable 99 and the ponies trying to work the surface. Cognitum remained silent for several seconds, and then asked in a soft, almost seductive tone, "Or maybe... here." I kept my eyes closed. "Look," she prompted gently, and I shook my head like a foal. "Look," she repeated more forcefully. I cracked my eyes open.

Chapel floated before me. I could see the ponies running about in a panic. Had they seen the beams? Heard the blasts? I supposed it didn't matter. I saw Harpica trying to get foals into the post office while Charity stood on a stack of crates, directing the colts and fillies. The chaos was a little more organized, but my breath caught in my throat as I saw the reticle focus on the yellow filly's face.

"Stop," I croaked. "I'll tell you. Please. Stop."

"What is the password?" Cognitum purred in triumph.

I sighed and closed my eyes. "I don't know. I really don't. But I know who encrypted the file." I swallowed, the sensation of yielding the information like downing broken

glass. "A mare at my stable, Duct Tape, encrypted the program. She wanted to ensure the Overmare didn't get it and stab her in the back. Which she did."

"I see. A homegrown, amateur, unprofessional encryption," she muttered flatly.

"That's good though, right?" Steel Rain asked as he frowned at me in my jar. "A simple encryption like that... you should be able to just pop it open."

Cognitum didn't reply immediately. "Theoretically, yes. But protection like this is frightfully unstable. I don't know the programmer. I can assume she received her instruction through a Stable-Tec manual, but what if there were other textbooks influencing her? What innovations might she have employed?" She shook her head and looked at the terminals. "I could ruin everything simply because she made an amateurish mistake. No. What we need is the password. The word or phrase that will unravel the protective matrix and allow us to access its power." She trotted over to stand before me. "So, let's let Blackjack take the last two guesses." The image of Chapel vanished, replaced by the blinking password prompt.

"Me?" I asked, goggling at her.

"You. Two more guesses," she said evenly with a small smile.

"You have all the processing power of that... that thing!" I gestured to the heap of machine with a hoof. "You know who made it. Can't you do... something? Some computery terminally thing?"

"I could. Knowing who created it, I suppose I could have it cracked in a day, tops." She smiled, the jar opened, and I was hoisted out and into the cold, damp air. It smelled of rust and wet stone, and I could hear water pouring in from countless sources. I couldn't imagine how she kept the chamber from flooding completely. "However, I have faith in you, Blackjack. I know you can do it. I'm willing to bet the lives of everypony in Chapel that I'm right."

Gee. Thanks. I stared up at the icon. Duct Tape had been close to P-21. I guessed that that was the 'he' the clue referred to. A name that P-21 loved? He'd loved that unicorn, certainly, but I knew that 'U-21' wouldn't be it. That was the name forced on him by my stable. "Scotch Tape?" I guessed, swallowing hard as I stared up at the holographic display.

Cognitum smiled, and the letters appeared in front of the prompt. It flashed another error message and hint. 'The thing he wants most.'

Steel Rain stepped forward. "Don't. It'll autodelete if she gets it wrong."

"Please. I doubt a home-cobbled encryption program would be able to do much to EC-1101. I anticipated some military-grade scrubbing software, a zebra chaos daemon program, or at least a Stable-Tec Chimera worm. At the very worst, I'd have to spend a day or two unraveling a foal's mess." She gave a little wave of her hoof before regarding me again, walking slowly around me. "But I won't have to, because Blackjack is going to guess it for me. It's the only way she can save Chapel. The only way she can win. And Blackjack always wins," she said, and I got the very unexpected sensation of her nuzzling my flank. It nearly made my mane stand on end, and I darted away. Wow. Did I always have this many nerve endings in my skin?

"No! You... that... no!" I stammered, flushing. "Don't do that," I muttered. She simply smiled, confident in her win/win. I huffed, closing my eyes. "I want you to swear... you both to swear... that if I do this, you'll let me go and won't destroy Chapel. They've worked too hard to lose everything again. And you'll get my baby to a surrogate." Maybe Glory could find one.

"Of course. Of course. Now... give it your best guess," Cognitum purred in a tone that I'd have to remember when I saw Glory again.

I thought about it. What did P-21 want the most, that could also be a name? Family? No. Not a name... and besides, back then, he hadn't wanted it. What he'd wanted most was to escape. Could that be it? No. Not just escape. That wasn't enough for P-21. Freedom. He'd wanted freedom. But was it a name? Ehhh.... maybe? I swallowed again, my heartbeat thumping in my chest. He'd wanted to leave... but he'd also been willing to return with me. He'd wanted to put it right. Wanted... wanted...

"Justice," I muttered. "He wanted justice." And was it a name? Perhaps. Maybe. As much as most pony names. It just felt... right. I had a good feeling about it. "Try 'Justice'."

The word was typed in, and suddenly the air filled with the dazzling magical patterns once more. "I knew you could do it," Cognitum purred. "It's your special talent."

"My what?" I asked with a frown.

"Victory. Your talent is winning," Cognitum said as she looked at my flanks almost hungrily. "Poor Deus. Sanguine. Even you, Steel Rain. You were facing a mare whose very talent is overcoming adversity, no matter its form."

"My talent is victory? Do you have any idea how many times I've been shot up?"

How many times I've died?" I demanded, then blinked. "I mean, sure, I got better, but I haven't had it remotely easy."

"Victory isn't easy. It has a cost. Always. But you are always able to pay that cost. Perhaps you don't like it. Perhaps you even hate it. But victory is branded on your flanks for all to see. A winning pair, impossible to beat in the game of Blackjack." She smiled as if she'd just hit the jackpot herself.

"But the ghoul in Hightower, and when Lighthooves was trying to blast us with the Core's defenses... I didn't win then!" I argued.

"Didn't you? You used what you had to defeat your enemies. And what you had was my attention. You even made me act when I had determined not to." She reached out with a hoof and stroked my cheek, making me take a step back.

"So you're saying there's some way for me to beat you?" I said, eagerly, expecting to set her back, or at least make her frown. Instead, she seemed even more eager.

"Oh, yes. I'm certain of it. And I'm certain that if you had the time, you'd find some way to do so," Cognitum replied evenly. "I suspected that this was your talent the very second I first met you as Applebot. Victory. Winning. Such a potent weapon, and you had no idea you possessed it."

Right at that moment, I racked my brains, trying to think of some way to use this 'talent', because I really did not like the look in her eyes. "You promised," I said weakly.

"I did. And I'm going to keep that promise," she said, and then she raised her voice. "Snips? You remember what we discussed earlier?"

"It is all highly theoretical, Cognitum," Snips's skull whispered.

"But you want to test that theory, don't you? You want to do that dark magic. Feel the rush," she said as she grinned at me.

"I... do. I'm sorry, Blackjack. The necromancy is all I have left now," he whispered hollowly.

I tried to dart away... maybe I could run up the inclinators' rails? Even jumping sounded like a plan. Only she had hands now, and I didn't. One of those reached down and grabbed me by a back leg, holding on with the cyber strength I no longer possessed, and I was stopped cold. I rolled onto my back as she dragged me towards the jar I'd just come out of. I kicked out in desperation, but the grip didn't release. I struggled with the ring on my horn, trying to shove the pink-plastic-covered

device off, but it wouldn't move. "Please don't, Snips! Please! I saved Snails! You owe me!" I shrieked.

Cognitum moved over me, pinning me easily. A familiar panic shot through me as I stared into my own smiling face. "Save your breath, my dear Blackjack. When Snips died, his poor soul went all to pieces. What remains is not a good pony at all." I gazed up at the floating skull and vertebrae, wishing there was some way to help him and myself.

"You said you didn't want my soul. Couldn't bear to touch it," I said as I stared up at her.

"And I don't," she replied in that terrible, soft voice. "I want victory."

The magic began to coil, pouring from the tip of Snips's cracked horn. I struggled against the mechanical mare above me as the black, green, and purple sorcery wrapped around both of us. I felt something moving through me, searching for something integral to myself. Not my soul, precisely, but linked to it. I could feel it on a fundamental level, like my baby moving within me in my old body. The dark violation found that something, and I felt a tear inside. Instinctively, I glanced down at my flank and saw the twin cards fade from view.

"Finally," she said like a mare in afterglow. "Victory. Oh yes. I feel it. With none of the little niggling taints of guilt. Wonderful." She rose off me as I lay there, curled up, shaking.

"No!" came a scream from somepony other than myself. Dawn's jar shattered as she erupted from within. Even impaled and with broken wings and legs, she launched herself at Cognitum. "It was supposed to be me! I was the one! You promised!" she cried out, crawling past Steel Rain. The stallion stomped down on the trailing edge of the spear running through her, and she jerked to a stop a few inches short. Her remaining wing swung back and forth, but Cognitum stepped back, letting the blades sweep by in front of her face.

"Oh, poor, poor, wretched Dawn," Cognitum breathed. "What suffering we endure for ambition," she said as she regarded the mare straining on the length of starmetal.

"Kill her, already. Your habit of keeping these trophies is going to get you in trouble," Steel Rain admonished.

"How could I repay her so?" Cognitum replied. "Dawn's given so much. Her husband. Her children. Her body. Her life. All for me." Cognitum rose up before the straining Dawn. "Look at me, Dawn. Look at your Goddess, great and terrible! You

should be grateful. You should be honored!”

Dawn slumped, trembling, at the edge of her reach, her shaking wingtip an inch from Cognitum’s face. Then Cognitum sighed and stepped away. “Perhaps you’re right. Finish her,” she said with a dismissive wave of a wing.

“Finally,” Steel Rain replied, pinning down on her wing and stomping her skull over and over again. I lay there, watching her being slowly crushed under the repeated blows.

A snap cracked through the air, and Dawn disappeared in a flash, the spear clanging to the plates. Cognitum whirled as a male laugh echoed softly in the cavernous space. “Who’s there?” she demanded of the air.

“You’re doing it wrong,” the voice said. “I have to start it off like this: ‘knock knock’.”

She frowned around at the air. “Knock knock?”

“Oh, honestly. Who’s the joke here?” he said in annoyance, and then there was another flash. Before the huge computer, the draconequus appeared. He rose up to his full height, looking coolly down at the lot of us. “Really, Cognitum, you should ditch attempting to be a Princess. You’re far more suited to be a VP. And *you*,” he said to Steel Rain, “just *scream* ‘Pony Resources’. How the two of you missed out on being middle managers, I’ll never know.”

“Discord?” Cognitum gasped, stepping away from us. “What are you... you’re supposed to be dead and gone.”

“Oh please. Where’s the fun in that?” he asked as he disappeared and reappeared dressed in fine evening wear, considering Cognitum. “Hmmm... clearly dadaist in the melange of cobbled together elements. Really, it looks almost as if it were thrown together utterly at random. A selection of Jungian shadows mixed with soaring inferiority complexes pasted together with narcissistic delusions of grandeur in a purloined body. Really. I don’t think I could do better if I tried. And believe you me, that’s saying something.” He smirked down as they stared from him to each other in bafflement, and then he gave a permissive wave of a claw. “Oh, and if you want to go grab a dictionary right now, go right ahead. I have time.”

Steel Rain pointed his two huge cannons at Discord. There was a click, and two enormous bouquets erupted from each. “And you!” Discord said contemptuously. “Really. Whatever are you compensating for? I mean, when a stallion has to trot around with an artillery piece strapped to each flank, you really have to wonder!” He scooped the bouquets up in a claw and took a deep sniff, then let out a sigh. “I think

you should take that armor off and relax.”

Then Discord turned his attention to Snips. “This one isn’t even finished yet! Let me see.” And he snapped his claws. From the storm, a cloud of tiny motes swept through the side of the jar and into the skull. “There we go. Really, you need to be careful with that dark magical stuff, old sport.” He snapped his claws again, and the jar vanished in another flash.

“You! What do you think you’re doing?” Cognitum demanded. “Bring him back!”

“My... somepony is slow on the uptake. For a pony named after knowledge, you don’t catch on very quickly.” Then he regarded me, and his eyes softened a moment. “And this poor pathetic little lump of a mare. What is she doing here? She clearly doesn’t belong in this assembly at all.” He swept me up in his arms, stroking my mane gently. “A pony of my very own! I will hug her and stroke her pretty mane and call her George.”

“What do you want, Discord?” Cognitum demanded coldly.

“Well, I heard that there was some fine villany ahoof and felt that I should stop by and say hello.” He snapped his fingers again, and a throne appeared. He took a seat, setting me on his lap and continuing to stroke my mane as he regarded her with a smirk. “One monster to another.”

“You are a relic of a bygone era. You should be nothing more than a footnote in history,” Cognitum replied.

“My my, Princess Pot. I think it takes one to know one,” he said as he scratched my ears. I glanced up, spotting beads of sweat on his brow. “You believe yourself to be Princess Luna? You?” He jerked a thumb at his chest. “I knew Princess Moonbutt back when your ancestor was an abacus. I don’t know what you’re supposed to be, but you’re no Princess.” He then gestured at the bright soul being held by the straining unicorns. “THAT is a princess.”

“What?” I gasped, sitting up a little and staring at the glow. Maybe it was having organic eyes again, or maybe it was Discord’s presence, but as I stared, I detected something within the mote. Something beautiful and wonderful and mysterious. Dark, but not the bubbling evil that had been inflicted on me before. It was glorious and terrible, and I couldn’t tear my eyes away as I beheld it.

The soul of Princess Luna.

“You’re a bit of a packrat, aren’t you, Cogwheel?” he asked with a grin, going back to petting my head as if I were a cat. “You collect things. Little bits of this and that.

Ponies. Souls. Cities. A bad habit, really. One that's going to get you in trouble." I felt him tremble under me, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from that soul. "However did you think you'd get away with keeping Princess Luna's soul?"

"It's my soul," Cognitum snapped. As if sensing that Snips was no longer present, the soul began to thrash and struggle, the dark purple figure within fighting against the green lightning keeping her contained.

"It is?" Discord gasped sarcastically. "Really? Well then, since Snips is away on vacation, why don't I reunite you with it?" He cracked his fingers in the air above him. "I might not be quite up on my uber evil necromagical skills, but I think I can wing it." Speaking of wings, I saw a few feathers fall out of his, disappearing into dust before they hit the floor.

"No!" Cognitum blurted, raising her hooves in alarm. Discord's smug smile grew. "I do not need that soul within me. I have everything I need. Intellect. Strength. Victory!"

"Oh? Are you sure?" he asked in his most teasing voice, leaning towards her. "Are you sure you don't want it inside you? Feeling it? Or is it that you know that that *glorious* creature is the real thing and you..." he leaned back, waving her away with a hand. "You are the cheap Solaris knock off."

"I am the Princess of this realm!" Cognitum snapped. "I am Princess Luna." Discord said nothing. He just steepled his fingers before him with a smug, skeptical expression on his face. "Bring back my necromancer! I'll add a statue to my collection!"

"Yawn. You can't even manage second-rate villainy," he said with a disdainful sniff. "Very well then; I'll be on my way."

"I don't think we can hold it much longer!" one of the six shouted as the soul lunged again.

"What are you doing, Discord?" I whispered.

He glanced down at me and gave a little wink, then looked at the now-indecisive mare. "Well. What's it going to be? Once she's inside you, you won't be able to get her out again. You'll have to actually fill Luna's horseshoes. Put on the big princess britches. Actually be her. No yanking souls in and out. No more cheating. That's my job, after all."

Cognitum's gaze flicked from the struggling soul to Discord and back again. "I... I..." Discord just smiled, but I still felt him shaking as he held me. I saw tiny little flecks blowing away from him along his mane.

“Let’s get out of here, Discord,” I said. “Take Princess Luna with us.” I doubted he had the strength to do so, but then, Cognitum didn’t know that.

“No!” Cognitum snapped, then drew herself up. “Do it.” Discord stood up, setting me on the deck as his throne faded away. He cocked his brow again. “Do it! I command you to do it!”

He snapped his fingers like a gunshot, and a great wind seemed to gust out of him. It swept around the platform, knocking the unicorns away. For a moment, the soul seemed to struggle to raise upward, but then bands of magic wrapped around her and Cognitum. Slowly, the pair began to be drawn together. Slowly the pair melted one into the other. The alicorn soul slipped into Cognitum. There was a blinding flash, and I had to avert my eyes.

When I dared to open my eyes again, I stared up at a gray statue, hand outstretched, fingers frozen post snap. I gaped up at Discord, wondering so much. Where was Boo? What had become of Dawn and Snips? Why had he done this? And then he began to crumble into sparkly dust, which blew away in whatever invisible stream carried the souls and disappeared into the void. I stared as the very last grains of shimmery substance were carried away.

Then I dared to look at the center of the platform. Cognitum crouched there, black wings covering her head. “Please be good, Luna. Please be good, Luna,” I prayed over and over again.

Then she rose. Was it just me, or was she now... larger? She threw back her head, her mane streaming behind her like a bloody banner streaked with soot. Her armor seemed sharper now, the laser-etched filly and ‘Security’ gone. She stood before us all, a Princess of Death. Her red eye panels blazed with light as she began to laugh, high and exultant.

“Fools! Fools! All of you, fools! I am the Queen of the Night! And this world is mine!” she crowed, her wings spreading as her red and black magic mane and tail snapped in the air behind her. “Bow before my greatness!”

Steel Rain threw himself on his face, but the six unicorns, their black robes flapping wildly, raced for the elevator opposite the inclinor. She glared in rage, her eyes blazing balefully, and six crackling bullets of magic blasted forth from her steel-clad horn. The crackling energy tore through them, setting their robes aflame and sending them flying through the air and to the dark waters far below.

Slowly she approached me where I crouched. No cutie mark. No weapons. No

augmentations. Not even magic. “Do you deny me now?” she asked coldly.

“No,” I said, my eyes fixed on the last faint dusting of Discord on my hooves. “No. I don’t.” I lifted my head and stared her in the eye. “There is no denying you are a royal cunt!”

I was going to be killed. Maybe not the best last words, but Deus would have approved. Her eyes blazed, her horn crackling with red lightning.

Then a shape dropped from the cables high above, landing on the platform with a resounding clang. He crouched there a moment, then slowly raised himself up to his full height. The glyph-marked strips of cloth tied to his fetlocks snapped and fluttered in the same magical wind blowing Cognitum’s mane. The Legate stared at Cognitum. . . or was she Nightmare Something-or-other now?

“Maiden of the Stars. At last,” he said, the crackling magic fading from Cognitum’s horn as she faced the skull-masked zebra. “You are precisely as you should be. It is time for our destined battle! One to decide the fate of zebra and ponykind!”

She gave the smallest of smirks as the Legate adopted one of the fighting stances that had proved so adept at thrashing me. His glyph wrappings glowed with a strange, cold green light. I couldn’t believe that Equestria’s final hope rested on one of my greatest enemies, but it was all I had left.

He charged across the platform, hooves thundering as he closed the distance. She reared up, horn and wings crackling with bright red magical lightning. The two closed in, and the Legate let out a battle cry!

Then he took her outstretched hoof in his, pushed back his dragon skull, and kissed it.

What?

I stared at the scene, my brain locked up at the sight of the zebra, his face covered in bright red magical tattoos resembling the orbits of planets. At his neck, they inexplicably became black, save for a few lines where Rampage’s tail had scraped him earlier. He knelt, lips pressed to the tip of her hoof, then pulled away. “Beautiful. You are beautiful, my Maiden.” Then he regarded me in amusement as she stopped the crackling lightning, and I realized that I knew this zebra...

Amadi.

“What?! How are you...” I screamed at the top of my lungs, rising to my hooves as I gestured at him. “But you! You’re the Legate! And why— And she’s the Maiden! But

she— And you're friends?!" I waved my hooves at them both. "What the hay is going on here?"

Suddenly, Steel Rain's hoof was pinning me to the floor. I'd honestly forgotten about him for a moment. "You really aren't the smartest pony, are you?"

Amadi stood and trotted towards me, Cognitum at her side. "There's nothing quite as useful as a prophecy, particularly if you make it up yourself," he said as he smiled at Cognitum. "The 'Maiden of the Stars' was always a useful ruse. Destroying the Hoof provided a pretext for keeping my followers together, working to advance our goals."

Steel Rain chuckled. "Really. Where did you think the Harbingers got a zebra tank to put Deus's brain into?"

I squirmed under Steel Rain. "So it was all a scam? Why?"

Cognitum answered, "Why, it's the first step in my great unification of the Wasteland. I know how useful war is. When the Brood of Coyotl attack, the Harbingers will repel them... after certain ponies are eliminated. Big Daddy. General Storm Chaser. Grace. Ponies with the leadership skills to counter me. The Harbingers shall be regarded as heroes. I... Blackjack... the hero of the battle... will declare myself the Princess of the Moon. We will use Horizons to restore the Core, and I will use EC-1101 to rebuild my realm. We will negotiate a peace with the Remnant." She gestured to the Legate, who bowed graciously to her. "And all will be restored. All thanks to you."

I lay there with no snappy retort. I had to admit it. They'd won. I couldn't think of any way to defeat them now. If I was lucky, I'd end up dead. If not... she still had my jar. "My friends will stop you."

"Your friends are now my friends," Cognitum replied smoothly. "I'll have to deal with other heroes abroad, I'm sure. Perhaps use a smaller version of Tom against the SPP. There must be *some* force strong enough to split that egg open. Regardless, you're done." She patted my head. "If you'd been loyal from the outset, I might have had a future for you as well. Now all I want is for you to see me triumphant."

"Is it time?" Steel Rain asked.

"Indeed," she breathed, and drew back. I let out a shaky breath as she backed away and regarded that flickering data above us. "EC-1101, Priority Command: Transfer and activate!"

Her PipBuck began to glow. The screens of the terminals along the edges of the

platform began to flash and dance with readouts. The heap of computer parts that was Cognitum's maneframe began to hum louder and louder. The hologram began to run again, swirling in the air, arcane symbols and lines of code lining up and activating. "Yes! Yes! I am ruler of all once more!" She laughed in delight as EC-1101's displays started to blossom like a flower.

Then everything went dark all at once. The hologram. The terminals. Even the maneframe. Cognitum turned her head wildly in bafflement, the only illumination coming from the stream of lights circling the spire and Cognitum's red glowing eyes. "OH, COME ON!" she screamed, then whirled and demanded of me, "What is going on?"

"Don't look at me. This magical mystery megaspell shit is your bag," I said, raising my hooves in defense.

Then a familiar rasp filled the air. It was long and low, wet and labored. And a gravelly, wet voice asked, "Identify yourself."

Cognitum froze. She glanced from Steel Rain to Vitiosus to me, then answered, "I am Princess Luna reborn, rightful heir to Equestria! You will transfer control of EC-1101 to me, immediately." Nothing happened. Then she asked, her voice a little more wary. "Who is this?"

"Project Horizons Command AI," the voice rasped.

"Ah! The Lunar Palace! Yes. Wonderful. I wish you to transfer complete control of all your systems to me immediately!" she commanded, smiling a little. No response, and her smile faded. "Did you hear me?"

"Did you execute Fluttershy?" the voice rasped softly.

They stared at each other again. "Fluttershy is dead!" Cognitum snapped. "They're all dead! I am the only one entitled to rule Equestria now!" Again, no response. Cognitum's eyes narrowed. "Who are you?"

A slow laugh began to fill the platform. It was low, slow, and a little bit mad. And it was coming from my mouth. The three looked down at me in surprise.

"It's Goldenblood. It's fucking Goldenblood!" I cackled.

"Goldenblood is dead!" Cognitum snapped. "I watched his execution myself."

"So what?" I laughed, not having anything to lose any more. "Like that's stopped half the ponies I've known. Seriously, for the apocalypse being a world-killing event, some of you old relics really do hang on!" I grinned up at Cognitum. "You were

transferred from Luna. Goldenblood probably used the exact same technology to put himself in control of this Lunar Palace thing!”

Cognitum gaped at me in horror. “I order you—” she howled, but Goldenblood’s rasp boomed from the speakers in the platform and cut her off.

“No,” it growled contemptuously. “You are a tyrant. Horizons is now active. Make peace with your sister, Princess Luna. Make peace with yourself. Goodbye.”

The lights returned, and the four of us stared at each other. “That... that wasn’t supposed to happen,” Cognitum muttered, glancing from the Legate to Steel Rain and back, then down at where I was still laughing weakly.

“So we all die now?” Steel Rain asked angrily.

“No. No!” she snapped. “It will take a few days before the moon’s rotation brings it into the optimal firing position. I will simply go to the moon and make the adjustments manually.” She glared at her hoof and sighed in disgust. “This is merely a setback.”

“Tell me that we can kill her now,” Steel Rain said, pushing down on my back and making me struggle to breathe. For a second, I was certain that I was done. I felt my ribs creak.

“No,” Cognitum snapped. “No. She may yet be useful.”

Steel Rain hissed softly through his ventilator. The Legate frowned as well. “No. You should absolutely kill her now.”

“I said no!” she said with a sweep of her wing, making them both duck. “I must go reunite with Blackjack’s friends. Tell them what we need to do. The Luna Space Center may still retain something useful.” She glared down at me. “But don’t worry; I’m not going to leave her in a jar where she might escape. No...” She turned to the maneframe, and the cable snaked out once more. It pressed itself to my head. “A mindless Blackjack is a far safer Blackjack.”

I struggled under Steel Rain’s hoof, but there was nothing I could do to stop the world being pulled away. I was plunged into darkness save for a blinking camera icon in front of me, and for several seconds I floated in nothingness. Then a window replaced the icon to show the Uvula platform and Cognitum smirking up at me. “Enjoy it, Blackjack. Being trapped in one place, helpless... oh yes. It should be quite educational for you. I want you to see my restored Equestria and Core before you’re gone for good.”

“This is a mistake,” Steel Rain muttered.

“Silence!” she barked, then calmed herself. “I must go. I can’t have her friends stumble upon this place. Remain here for an hour, then see to the Harbingers and the Brood. Understand?”

Steel Rain jerked his head hesitantly. Vitiosus bowed deeply to her. Cognitum levitated my body back into its jar, setting it far over to the side and out of the reach of the crane or the mind transfer cable thingy. She lifted Echo and set the catatonic stallion across her shoulders. Then she spread her wings wide and launched herself up into the air curling up along the spire. Presumably she was heading for the hole in the chamber’s ceiling, but she passed the edge of my window long before then.

The two stallions stood awkwardly by for a minute. “You can’t seriously be doing this?” I shouted at them, but they didn’t seem to hear me. I fumbled around in the darkness I floated in, but I couldn’t see anything else. In fact, I wasn’t even sure I had hooves in this place. “Come on.... come on... there has to be some way to do this,” I thought frantically.

“Five minutes?” Vitiosus asked.

“Fine,” Steel Rain replied sourly. I floated there, cursing them over and over again as I tried to think at the void to do... something! There had to be some way to control this space. Steel Rain trotted over to the jar that held me and looked about, and then his hind leg kicked out. “Oopsie,” he said as the jar rolled across the platform and then tumbled off the edge, out of sight. He trotted over and leaned out to gaze down, then gave a little shrug. Then he faced me, guns pointed forward. They loaded with a loud thunk. “Hey, Blackjack. I don’t know if you can hear me, but... thanks for not killing me at the manor.” Then his cannons fired, and my world ended as I screamed into the absolute void around me.

Footnote: >Start New Game: Y/N?

(Author’s notes: Story isn’t over. I swear. Really. I do want to apologize for its lateness though. Scheduling problems, real life issues, slow typing, and other problems took forever to work through. It’s a huge chapter and I apologize how much how much of it is horrible talk talk talking. Still, there was a lot that needed to be addressed in this chapter. This is where most of the plot threads had to be addressed, one way or another!

I’d like to thank every one that’s stuck with it so far and gotten through this monster of a story and this monster of a chapter, especially Hinds, Bronode, and swicked. We found a new way to brush that was a bit quicker so we’ll see what this portends. I hope the story continues to be entertaining

as we go towards the finish. I swear I'm going to have this finished inside three years... Grrr...

Anyway, next week is spring break, which I don't get paid for... sigh... so bits right now would be extra super appreciated at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal. Thank you very much everyone that helped out last month. You made it possible for me to take a test that will hopefully get me a full time science position. We'll have to see. I might find some position somewhere else too. I'll let folks know.

A few chapters left to go. Wow. Well... hope the chapter was okay. Maybe I should have broken it into two... I dunno... still, I hope it stays a fun read. Please give feedback at Cloudsville... Reddit... 4chan if you're feeling adventurish. Sadly, I can't read comments at TvTropes forum. Got myself banned... bad Somber.... bad....)

66. Ruin

“Well, there’s something here about a dragon, the kingdom falling, chaos reigning... Okay, apparently it was all because the prince and princess were so lost in each other’s eyes that they couldn’t perform their royal duties.”

Once upon a time, there had been a Princess born in a castle. She was a beautiful Princess, for everyone told her so, and the sweetest Princess, for everyone proclaimed it. Of course, they also remarked on what a pity it was that she had killed her mother when she was born. . . though only when they thought she couldn’t hear. She lived in a palace surrounded by servants who provided for her and her fat, ugly older sister and insipid, vain older brother. She had anything and everything she ever wanted, so long as it was pretty and worthless. And she had a father who loved her more than anything. . . well, perhaps not more than *anything*. Not more than his precious little Society, or his legacy, or his collection of baubles and trinkets, but she was *somewhere* on the list of things he loved. Towards the bottom.

And one day, he said he’d give her a gift: anything she could possibly want. As usual. But because she loved him, she believed him, and so she asked that she should someday rule the Society. Because she was, as she’d always been told, the prettiest and the sweetest and the smartest. And her father had coughed and smiled and patted her head and suggested a new gown or a dolly instead. But she knew she was better than her older siblings, and so she asked again, with all the seriousness she could, to rule the Society. And he’d coughed again and mumbled something like ‘well, we’ll see’ which meant ‘no fucking way in hell’ and sent her on her way.

And so the Princess was upset and did everything she could to show everyone that her fat older sister was slow and stupid and her vain older brother was perverted and dumb and neither was worth a big pile of brahmin poop. And she learned to say what people wanted her to say and do what others wanted her to do, even if it felt icky and made her feel bad, because then they’d be scared she’d tell and she could make them do things she wanted. And she got money because sometimes that worked even better than doing the other stickier ickier things. And so she was all set to get rid of her fat, ugly, stupid, nasty older sister and her dumb brother, and even her father too if he didn’t get his old ass out of her throne.

Then a wandering Barbarian came to her home, and her father was afraid because

the Barbarian had killed lots of ponies and could kill lots more. And her father knew that the smart, good, beautiful Princess was going to take her throne sooner or later, and so her father hatched a plot to keep the good Princess from the throne. He gave it to the stupid Barbarian instead, and everyone was so afraid of the Barbarian that the Princess couldn't take everything over. So when her father died, the Princess snuck in and stole all the special bits of lore the wandering Barbarian desired, and promised money and weapons besides.

But the Barbarian was a stupid cunt who ruined everything! Everything! She'd picked the Princess's fat and ugly sister to rule instead and ruined months and months of planning and plotting and scheming and getting favors and bribing and stockpiling weapons. And so the Princess had taken all of the precious trinkets that the Barbarian coveted and smashed them to bits, but she made sure to take all their secrets just in case the Barbarian changed her mind and stopped being a stupid cunt.

Then the Princess met a noble Knight of a powerful order who also desired the secrets the Princess had learned. He served a powerful Sorceress with power greater than that of the Barbarian queen, and if she went with him, the Knight would see her made Queen of her castle. And so she freed the Knight from the cell where the Barbarian had placed him and fled with him to his fortress. And she met the powerful Sorceress and her mechanical weapons of war, and the Princess began to feel like she'd take back all which was rightfully hers.

But the Princess quickly learned the Knight's order was not like back home. No matter how she stomped her hooves, they ignored her. When she made demands, they laughed at her. When she lifted her tail, they were repulsed. More than once they simply locked her in a cell where she would be out of the way. But then the Sorceress called. She wanted the secrets. The Princess tried to tell her, but there was so very much and it was all so very confusing. 'But fear not', the Sorceress promised, she knew how to get the secrets out of the Princess's head.

And so she drilled holes in the Princess's head, put wires in her brain, and sucked all the secrets out, no matter how the Princess cried or screamed that it hurt or begged her to stop. The zaps kept coming. And the Princess was put into a magical bottle where she didn't have to eat or go to the bathroom, but also couldn't go anywhere else. And if the Sorceress was in a bad mood because the Barbarian had gotten herself killed in the sky, or because a bad thing called Horizons was going to go off, she'd entertain herself by making the Princess experience all the horrible things that the Princess had once wanted for the Barbarian to suffer... and things the

Princess had never imagined before. . . and things the Princess rather wished she didn't know.

Then one day, the Barbarian showed up and faced the Sorceress, but the Sorceress was too clever and the Barbarian had been betrayed by the only friend she'd brought with her. The Sorceress took the Barbarian's body for her own, leaving her trapped inside the Sorceress's iron throne. Not even the arrival of a mischievous spirit, who whisked away the Sorceress's Dark Magician and fallen Lady, could save the day. And so the Sorceress had freely cast her spell... only to discover it had been a trick all along. The Sorceress left for the moon to punish the one who played the trick and cast the true spell, leaving her Knight and Vizier behind.

The pair had stood around for several minutes, and the Princess could feel the Barbarian trapped within the machine. The wires connecting her brain to the iron throne were still working, even without the Sorceress to control them. She could feel the Barbarian struggle within, losing the strength of her will with every second. Then the Knight kicked a copy of the Barbarian off the platform, and thanked the Barbarian for saving him long, long ago.

Then he moved far back and fired his cannons straight into the heart of the iron throne. The Barbarian's scream echoed on and on inside the Princess's head as the top half of the massive structure was torn apart by the colossal blast. The flaming pieces cascaded down into the murk far below. The shockwave knocked the jars over, and the Princess was rattled as her prison rolled over and smashed into a bank of terminals on the edge of the platform. The filly could barely think as she grabbed the wires with her hooves, desperate to keep them from yanking out of her brain.

It didn't help that the Barbarian was still screaming in her mind. The top half of the machine was a flaming mess, but the bottom half and the platform was still intact. The computers smoldered, the blast having sundered the machine without setting it aflame, but it still billowed a thick, oily black smoke that washed across the platform.

"Think she noticed that?" the Knight asked casually as he trotted up before the smashed computer.

The zebra snorted. "I doubt it. She has the tunnel vision of a machine, and in Blackjack's body she has no clue what is transpiring remotely. Even if she did, by now she is likely reunited with Blackjack's friends. She can't come and investigate." He gave a tiny shrug. "If she asks, tell her Blackjack had started gaining control of her old shell, and remind her that Princess Luna would never be so timid."

“Yes, she’s easy to manipulate like that,” the Knight said with a dry chuckle. “You’ll head back and get the Brood ready?”

“Of course,” the zebra replied. “I’ll have to get my stripes redone, of course. Quite a pain, but I keep a pony for just such an occasion.”

“You zebras and your stripes,” the Knight replied with a laugh, one the Vizier did not share. “Red. Black. What’s it matter?”

“Unicorn. Pegasus. What’s it matter?” he replied with an edge to his voice. “Accept that there are some aspects to my kind you do not need to understand, and I will accept the same of yours.” The Vizier looked around at the controls. “You’ll be ready to catch the moonstone when it falls?”

“I don’t plan on being vaporized,” the Knight answered. “You think she’ll be successful altering the trajectory?”

“She has Blackjack’s talent for victory. I am utterly assured of it. A pity she doesn’t realize Blackjack’s talent is victory, not survival. We will simply destroy her wherever she lands triumphantly rather than at the scene of her staged battle.” The Vizier laughed and shook his head. “I had looked forward to witnessing her face when she was vaporized along with her most ardent supporters, but this will have to do.” The Vizier then regarded the empty terminals. “You’re going to need help making sure all is ready. I could provide—”

“Please,” the Knight interrupted with a shake of his head. “I trust you as far as dividing the Wasteland between us. I need your Brood. You need the Core. Let’s not complicate matters by providing any more temptations for betrayal than necessary. I’ll find some Harbingers with the necessary technical experience.”

The zebra paused for several seconds, just smiling at the armored pony. “I suppose,” the Vizier conceded. “We should keep perspective. After all, the last thing either of us wants is to serve beneath the hoof of that delusional monstrosity. Once we’ve sorted her out, things should take care of themselves.” He turned, regarding the smoking, sparking heap of the computer. “And at last Blackjack is out of the picture. Discord failed to interfere. All is as it should be.”

“Yes, his pitiful failure was quite extraordinary,” the Knight chuckled. “I hadn’t quite expected him to turn to dust, but—”

The statement made the zebra freeze. “Discord was here?” the Vizier muttered.

“Yes, for a minute or two, right before you arrived. Stopped me from smashing the metal nag to scrap, made some taunts, and sent her and Cog’s pet skull somewhere.

Then he turned to dust and blew away,” the Knight said, now sounding a bit baffled in that helmet. “What’s the matter? Everything happened as you predicted. Well... aside from Cognitum not being able to use EC-1101. I wonder what happened there. Still, nothing else major changed.”

“You don’t know that!” the Vizier hissed. “Discord. Pinkie Pie. Blackjack. You have no idea how dangerous they are. You think killing makes a pony dangerous! Killing is nothing! Knowledge. Interference. Those are dangerous, *fool!*” He spat the last word so sharply that the Knight took a step back. “If he was here, it was for a reason! Why Dawn? Why Snips?”

“He was crazy!” the Knight retorted. “Now all three are dead. I don’t know what you’re so upset about. He didn’t even have enough power to save himself.”

Now the Vizier appeared particularly pissed. “I must triple check everything now. I’ve worked far too hard to let his ilk unravel everything. He did something. Changed something. Meddled in some way.” He trotted towards the elevator. “If I were you, I’d put a few more shells into those remains. Make certain that Blackjack is annihilated! Kill off the rest of Cognitum’s little collection. Send out patrols. Something is amiss, and we must know what it is!” He glared up at the direction she’d gone. “I never would have sent her on her way if I’d known he’d been here!”

“Well, it’s too late now. You’ll look oddly suspicious trotting around with her when you’re supposed to be dire enemies. Guess that ‘prophecy’ you made up bit you in the tail,” the Knight said scornfully.

“The prophecy is real. It was revealed to me by... higher powers. I’ve learned the best way to sabotage prophecy is to place someone unworthy in its role,” the Vizier muttered. “My opposition to the Star Maiden was the deception... and a source of grief for Blackjack,” he continued in aggravation as he paced back and forth. “What could he have done? Something... something... some juvenile, puerile prank... with dire repercussions...”

“What’s the big deal? He’s dead.”

The Vizier struggled to maintain his composure, his whole body shaking for a moment. “You don’t understand just how persistently he’s worked against my goals. How difficult he’s made the execution of my plans.” He paced back and forth, speaking faster and faster. “You can’t imagine how infuriating it is to creep and skulk about because one of his little schemes put the Princesses on high alert and suspicious of everyone else trying to move up. He’s inspired heroes, elevated the Princesses, and legitimized their roles in Equestria. His petrification didn’t help, either. With

his absence, any disruption to the social order was noted! It made this so terribly difficult. Had it not been for the war, I never would have had my opportunity! I refuse to let him undo all my hard work! Now, *what did he do?*"

"Nothing! He appeared, taunted Cognitum a bit, then turned to dust. He seemed to want her to bond with Luna's soul." That made the Vizier hiss again in frustration. "What? You said that that wouldn't matter!" the Knight protested.

"Of course not. We planned on killing her, Luna's soul or not. But *Discord* thought it mattered. He thought it important! Important enough to die for!" The zebra ran towards the elevator. "We must remove the soul immediately!" Then he skidded to a stop, his eyes wide. "Unless that's what he actually wants us to do. . . but if he... but I... he... AHHHGH!" The zebra clasped his skull, screaming in frustration, "Damn you, Discord! *What have you done?*"

The Knight took several steps back. "Look, what does it matter? I have the Tokomare, and soon as Cognitum returns, she's dead. So what's the—"

The Vizier was on him in seconds. His hooves hooked around the Knight's neck, and he gave a colossal heave over his back. The silver-armored stallion crashed down with an impact that made the whole spire vibrate. "The point? The point is that he can *change* things!" the zebra yelled. "He can see things a step ahead. He knows what to do and what not to do! You have no concept what it means to fight that!"

The Knight didn't reply beyond a groan as the Vizier rose, his face grim. "I did not want to do this. . . it was so much better taking advantage of the fears and ambitions of others. Cognitum. Dawn. You. Even Blackjack. Now it seems that I have no choice."

He walked to the edge of the platform, sitting and spreading his hooves wide. "Stars of the dark places. Stars of ash. Stars of death. I beseech thee. Tell me the dance of your circles. How has Discord marred your celestial orbits? Please! I beg thee. Ashur. Dagon. Namtar. Show me. . ."

A blue-white glow surrounded him, cold and clear, and his anger stilled. A frigid shaft of light seemed to drop upon him, and the air around him groaned and crackled. A sickly green glow began to shine out of his chest, pulsing with each beat. "Things have gone awry. . ." he began, and the groan around him deepened ominously. The beating green light slowed, and a spasm of pain crossed the Vizier's face, "But all will be set right, greatest and most glorious ones! I beg you. . . what was the meddler's last ploy?" The glowing beat slowly resumed, and a tense smile returned

to his face. "I see. I understand. And Cognitum?" The shivery light rang as if it were laughing. A look of relief spread on his face. "Thank you. Then she is not the true Maiden, now or ever."

"What are you doing?" the Knight groaned. "What is that light?" It throbbed like veins of green light within the Vizier's hide.

The zebra didn't answer immediately, and when he did, his voice had a soft, unnatural tone to it. "The light of stars that died long ago, and would not go quietly into the darkness." The Tokomare began to glow as well, the starmetal shining with the malignant green glare of Enervation. Even the Knight's armor took on an ethereal illumination. In that light were strange, incoherent things suggestive of faces and tendrils and other terrible shapes hidden within the silvery radiance. "And the two he took?" Now his smile faded. "Interesting. . ."

"Stop. P...please... stop..." the former Steel Ranger muttered weakly, metal hooves clenched against his helmet.

"We did not stop for Caesars. What makes you think we would stop for you?" The light continued to wash over everything for a few moments longer, the Enervation scream now sounding like the whisper of hundreds of unholy voices. They hinted at ways to break things. Corrupt things. Undo things that should not be undone. Make things that should not be made. Then he nodded. "I see. Blackjack was the only factor then?" Another pause. "And she is no more?" More hissing whispers. They rose and fell, and made the zebra frown. "Blackjack is broken. . ." He muttered the phrase as if tasting it and finding it to his liking. "Good. Then all is accounted for," he said as he rose to his hooves, his face sublime with confidence as the glow faded.

"What. . . what was that?" the Knight muttered weakly as he drew himself to his hooves.

"Things far greater and more glorious than you. They've shown me their secret orbits and the drawing of their power. Discord affected *something*, but it was slight. The tiniest wobble of the outplay of events. A hair's shift out of alignment, ultimately for naught." He trotted towards the lift.

"You serve those. . . things?" he groaned, still wobbling on his hooves.

"You would *oppose* them?" he asked in reply, with a content, blissful smile. "They are more magnificent than Caesar or Princess, and you would do well to be counted as their ally rather than their enemy. I have struggled on their behalf for so very long. When the war came, I *finally* had my golden opportunity, and I am *not* going to

waste it.”

“So your goal is to turn Equestria into some kind of... of... star worshiping cult?” the Knight sputtered.

The serene zebra didn’t answer immediately, then replied calmly, “Something like that.”

“That’s sick. I won’t let you. I can’t believe...” the Knight began. Then the Vizier gave him a look... just a single glance... that silenced him. There was power in that stare, a lingering remnant of the dark entities he consorted with flickered that same baleful green.

“You can’t believe. That is why you will never rule anything, Steel Rain, because you cannot believe in anything greater or more meaningful than yourself. You will either serve forever as Cognitum’s puppet, or you will serve my masters just as I do and revel in the power they grant their most devoted. But you will serve, or you will die. Is that understood?”

The Knight stood there a moment, cannons pointed right at the zebra. The Vizier waited, a bored smile on his face. Then the Knight turned away, and the zebra gave the tiniest shake of his head. “Good. I need somepony here pushing the buttons when the time is right. Leash your delusions of ambition, or they’ll get you killed.” He hit a button, and the lift began to rise. “I must rectify other small permutations. I will contact you shortly.”

The elevator rose up, and for the longest time the Knight watched it go. Then he sat down, tore off his helmet, and was violently ill over the platform edge. After he puked, he sat a while, muttering to himself. “That striped bastard thinks he can talk to me like that? Me? I’ll show him and his fucking stars who owns this world. I won’t serve anyone. Not him or Cognitum or Dawn or Crunchy Carrots. Me. I’m the one who should be in charge. I won’t be second to anyone. Anyone!”

The Princess drew back from the raging stallion into the safety of the shadows beside the wreckage of the computer. She could not draw far. The wires in her head hurt terribly, and if she pulled on them... well... she wouldn’t live long after that. “I just want to go home. Please. Just let me go home,” she whispered to herself.

“I wish to return home as well,” a synthetic voice murmured. The Princess started, then peeked at a little notch at the base of the processor. A broken and battered pony-shaped object lay there. The Sorceress’s Lady. The Princess knelt down,

looking at the pale green light flickering in the mechanical eyes. “I thought I would save the Wasteland. That I would make it all better. I just had to give enough to make it so. . .”

The Princess’s magic tugged at the broken Lady, pulling her from the hidden notch. Behind her were some faintly glowing bones. The Sorceress’s Dark Magician. The purple glowing aura surrounding them formed a ghostlike image of the rotund pony. The Princess drew the broken machine into her hooves and embraced the cold, hard metal. “My head hurts so much,” the Princess whimpered.

“I’m sorry. I can’t help you now. I can’t save anyone,” the broken Lady whispered.

“It’s like when I was shot in the head, only this time it’s lots of little holes and the bullets are still in there,” the Princess said as she hugged the smashed torso and head like a run-over windup toy. Any second the Knight would either follow the Vizier out, leaving them all trapped, or he’d obey the Vizier and find them all cowering.

“You should get back in a jar. The stasis fields should stop your pain,” the Dark Magician said, his bones flashing brighter with every word.

“I don’t want to get in the fields. It’s like not having my body again. I don’t want to not feel like my body isn’t really there again,” the Princess whimpered, quivering.

The broken Lady, however, did not respond for several seconds. “Child, what are you talking about? When were you. . . shot?”

“All the time. I’m always getting hurt. My body. My heart. My soul. Always getting hurt. People always shoot me. Even my friends shot me. Glory shot me in the face. . . but it’s okay. It was an accident,” the Princess muttered weakly.

“What?” the Dark Magician muttered. “Child, do you know what Blackjack told me before I died?”

The Princess frowned, opening and closing her mouth slowly, thinking about what she knew about the Barbarian. “She. . . she swore to get Snails out. And I think she said she was. . . sorry?”

“How can this be?” the Dark Magician asked, his glowing socket motes turning to the smashed Lady.

The broken stub of a leg reached out and brushed the wires dangling from the Princess’s head, making her wince and draw back. “It must be. . . it must be the neural taps Cognitum wired. She kept the connection constant. When the computer was destroyed, the link persisted; it must have shoved Blackjack’s memories into

the only buffer still connected to it!"

"Can her brain hold the experiences of another pony?" the glowing skull asked in awe.

"She's young. She and Blackjack both. I can only assume there's enough space, but... why isn't she... Blackjack?" the broken Lady asked.

The Dark Magician replied immediately. "Because there's none of Blackjack's soul in her. Blackjack's mind... her memory and personality... they're just like a character in a story to Charm. Without her soul, they're just detailed data." He peered into the Princess's eyes. "How long can she hold those memories?"

"I don't know," the broken Lady murmured, "But... perhaps long enough to bring Blackjack back... if we can get that body!"

"There you are," the Knight said evenly as he walked around the corner of the smoldering computer, helmet clipped to his shoulder. The Knight's kind and gentle face was now harrowed, his eyes sunken with anxiety. "I thought I'd heard voices."

"Steel Rain. Listen. You don't have to do this. You don't have to serve Cognitum or the Legate," the Dark Magician said rapidly.

"Shut up. I'm not planning on serving anypony," the Knight growled. "I'm going to be the one on top. You'll see. It doesn't matter how often I get set back. I'm going to be in charge and no one will stop me."

"You spoiled bastard," the broken Lady retorted, "Can't you think about anypony besides yourself?"

"That's worked wonders for you and Blackjack, hasn't it?" the Knight replied with a glower. "She's dead and you're... about to join her," he muttered dully.

"What's happened to you?" the broken Lady asked.

"Nothing. I'm fine," he snapped.

"He was touched by the song of dead stars," the Dark Magician replied. "The Black Book was rife with all kinds of their dark magic. After a while, you just stop caring about how it hollows you out and fills you up with its temptations."

The Knight sneered at them. "I've had it to here with stripe talk about dead stars." He tapped the collar of his power armor with a hoof. "The Legate's going to take Cognitum off the board. I'll take him off the board. Game over. I win. Tokomare's restored. Core's restored. I get to reboot civilization. The Steel Reign of King Steel

Rain. Sounds catchy, huh?"

"Sounds stupid," the Princess whimpered, hugging the broken Lady all the tighter to keep from shaking. "Go away. You won't be king any more than I'll be queen. No pony likes you."

The Knight blinked at her. "I like me," he said in faintly injured tones, his voice regaining a little of his old self.

"No pony else, then," she said with a roll of her eyes. "It doesn't matter how smart or clever or sneaky you are. If no pony believes in you, or likes you, or wants you, they're not going to follow you. It doesn't matter how shiny your armor is or how big your guns are. Every pony knows you hate them, and probably think you'll kill 'em the second it suits you... 'cause you will." She closed her eyes. "I used to be just like you. Then I got wires stuck in my head. Now I'm not so stupid anymore."

The Knight opened and closed his mouth a moment, then gave a little frown. "Well. I guess there's just one thing left to do." He stepped forward, raising a hoof. "Hold still. This'll be quick."

"Wait!" the broken Lady implored. "Charm has a copy of Blackjack's mind. If we get that blank back, we can put her back in!"

The Knight froze, staring for a moment, then laughed and backed away. "Oh, you think I want Blackjack back? There are five people in the world I really want dead. You. Cognitum. That striped bastard. The Lightbringer, simply 'cause I don't want to deal with 'heroic weather' while I'm remaking civilization for my glory. And Blackjack. Blackjack most of all." His left cannon let out a loud ka-chunk as it loaded a round. "Because if she had just had the decency to die and leave me the *Celestia*, I would have taken over the Hoof four months ago." He grinned at the three of them. "Time to end this."

Then a great hissing mass launched itself from out of the shadows behind the three, clearing the filly and diving at the armored stallion. "STAY AWAY FROM MY KIDS!" the Revenant screamed in near feral rage as the maroon ghoul opened his jaws wide, pink cloud boiling up his throat. Had the Knight been wearing his helmet, he might have simply opted for a point-blank blast and been done with all of them. As it was, he had to backpedal rapidly to avoid having his face melted off, trying to keep the demented Revenant at bay with armored kicks.

The two tumbled off the maneframe's platform, the Revenant springing on top of the Knight. The broken Lady's eyes turned to the Dark Magician's sockets. "Can you

retrieve Blackjack's body? Do you have a spell or something... anything... that could pull that blank up here?"

"I... no. The distance is too far for basic telekinesis. And all of my spells affect the soul, not the body." Then he paused, the glow in his sockets growing. "But her soul is bonded to her body. If I had enough power, perhaps I could summon her spirit, and the body could come along for the ride."

"What kind of power do you need?" the broken Lady asked immediately.

"A circle of at least six unicorns, Snails, or... or..." His eyes turned this way and that in his skull. Then they stared straight up. "Or that." The Princess raised her eyes, looking up at one of the golden arms projecting out into the void thirty feet overhead. As she watched, a dozen emerald lightning bolts struck the end, the energy being sucked up along the cables. "That might do it."

"Each of those arms carries one point twenty-one gigasparks, at least. It'd vaporize you," Dawn said immediately.

"Not instantly, though. I'm a soul jar, albeit a flawed and improperly prepared one. I should last long enough to get Blackjack back. I might even survive. Wouldn't that be a laugh?" he said hollowly. "Once we do have the body, though, how do we get Blackjack back inside?"

"I should be able to do it if we can just get our hooves on Cognitum's neural mapping array. If it still works, that is. I think it landed over there on the side of the platform. I don't know how we're going to get you up to that arm and get me the array before Steel Rain or Sanguine kills us."

"I'll do it," the Princess said. "I'll get him up there." She closed her eyes so she wouldn't see the doubt in theirs. "Blackjack did so much for so many. I should be able to do this."

"I don't mean to be rude, but you still have wires connecting you to the jar," the Dark Magician pointed out. But the Princess trotted to where the wires entered the wrecked jar's rim, bit down on the cables, set her hooves against the housing, and pulled as hard as she could. The harder she strained, the worse her head throbbed and tingled unnaturally. Her stomach lurched as nausea rolled through her. For a second, she was sure her teeth were going to yank right out, but then the wires suddenly jerked as the cover gave way to reveal the clustered circuitry around the jar's top. She twisted, yanked, and freed a large ring of arcane technology her head wires were directly connected to, then put her head through it like a yoke. The heavy

ring scraped along the floor as she trotted to the skull. The Princess deftly tied the skull into a bit of slack in the wires connecting her head and collar. The filly then ran to one of the supports as fast as she could and struggled to get up high enough where she could use the crossbracing to wiggle her way up to the golden arm.

The Princess fought tears of frustration. She could do this. She needed to do this. She just needed to get up a couple of feet. But the Lady was broken, and there were no others who could—

“Excuse me,” a mare said pleasantly, trotting from around the back of the computer. “I need some medical assistance for Mr. Horse,” the Golem said with a worried frown, glancing over her shoulder at the quivering lump on her back that had once been a pony. “He’s not himself. It has been over one hundred and five million minutes since he told me how amazing he is.” She looked back at all the rest of us. “I’m quite concerned,” she added in complete sincerity.

The three others stared back for two seconds. Then the broken Lady spoke up. “Yes. Yes! We’re trying to get him medical help. We need your help to get him help.” She gestured at the Princess with a wing stub. “Please, boost her up to the ladder. Then I need you to take me to the front of the maneframe, quickly.”

The Golem tilted her head and blinked cluelessly. “It would be more efficient and effective to contact paramedics and have Mr. Horse taken to a Ministry of Peace medical center. He seems to have lost most of his epidermis.”

“Just. . . that’s what we’re trying to do. Please!” the broken Lady begged. “I promise it’ll help Mr. Horse.”

“Oh. Okay then!” the Golem said brightly, sliding Horse gently from her back and setting him down, then casually scooping up the filly. Clinging to her back, the Princess was lifted high enough that she could climb onto the bracing and start to wiggle up to the spire. “Careful,” the robotic mare said brightly.

“Thanks,” the Princess replied, then started to pick her way up the side of the spire, the lambent pony skull weighing heavily around her neck and the Dark Magician’s radiant bones dangling and rattling against the metal as if still connected by invisible sinews. Below her, she saw the broken Lady and Horse both picked up and carried over towards the front of the machine by the Golem. “Do you think Mr. Horse will be okay?” The feeling of compassion was alien to her, but unlike so very much the Sorceress had taught her, it wasn’t altogether unwelcome.

“Do not worry about Mr. Horse,” the glowing skull admonished as she climbed. “He

probably lost his soul long ago. Worry about yourself.” The edge of the golden ring cut into her neck with each foot she ascended. Off to the side, she could see where the Knight and the Revenant still fought, but both were lost in a pink haze that spread over the floor of the platform. Their movements were just a blur of candy-colored mist, clanging metal, and feral hisses.

“What about you? Aren’t you worried about yourself?” she asked.

“No,” the bones replied with a papery sigh. “I’m old and I’m tired. I’ve done so much, and too much of it’s been bad for me to ever be able to even attempt to live happily. And... now that I’m back together... I owe Blackjack for what I did to her. Owe a lot for the ponies I’ve hurt. Some things don’t get forgiven.”

“Blackjack feels the same way all the time,” the Princess said. “She can’t forgive herself. But I know she’d forgive you.”

“And you as well, child,” he said as she climbed closer to the humming arm. “Irony. The mare that can’t cut herself a little slack for her mistakes will happily excuse far worse from others.” His voice dropped. “She rescued my friend, and I hurt her for it.”

The Princess reached the furthest she could. The ring dragged at her neck, threatening to pull her to the wreckage far below. The broken Lady and the Golem were occluded by the spreading pink mist, getting something from the front of the machine. The Princess now looked at the glowing skull and at the thick cables overhead where the arm met the supporting structure. “I can’t get any higher,” she said as she carefully untied the wires from the skull, then looped the slack around her upper foreleg and scanned around.

“Wait. There!” the skull said as her gaze passed a large lever underneath the arm. A small sign marked it ‘Breaker’. “Pull that!”

She moved along the structure to the bar and threw all her weight into it. Fortunately, the lever resisted for only a few seconds before it flipped over. The gold-tipped arm let out a crack as a gap opened between it and its power cables. The lightning stopped crackling. The gap was just big enough for the pony skull to fit.

“What’s going to happen if I put you in there?” the Princess asked.

“So concerned...” the skull muttered, sounding amused, and the Princess flushed. “Well, have you ever put a bit in a fuse box? Something like that. And whether an imperfect soul jar can survive the current, magical discharge, and Enervation... well... let’s find out.” The skull chuckled. “‘Let’s find out.’ If only Snails and I had known how much trouble those three words would cause us.”

The Princess didn't know what else to do. Only that he was being brave, and that a real princess, not a snotty nasty mean princess, would give him something before he went. So she kissed the top of his skull, then threw him up into the gap. The rest of the glowing bones followed into the breach, and as soon as the skull bridged the gap, a blinding light arced through. "Okay... this stings a bit... ow... Ow! Okay... more than a bit!"

An aura of magic burst forth, and a crackling black claw of sorcery arched out of the gap and reached down into the depths far below, sweeping to and fro. The Princess could no longer see the fighting between the Knight and the ghoul at all through the pink cloud. "Ow. Ow. Where are you, Blackjack? Ow..." the skull said as crackling sparks of energy rained down from the gap. The skull rattled around in the space like mad, but the Princess didn't dare get any closer to try and keep it still.

Suddenly, the hand of black energy withdrew from the depths, pulling with it a white mass, and set the pale, sodden shape on the deck behind the blasted computer. The Princess scrambled down to it as swiftly as she could. "Ow... ow... ow..." the skull repeated as the lightning crackled more and more. "Is she okay?" the Dark Magician asked.

The Princess fell the last ten feet, landing hard and almost falling over, but she didn't bother to fully regain her footing before scrambling over to the waterlogged mare. The plastic-covered moonstone talisman still hung around her neck. She carefully pressed her ear to the white unicorn's side. She waited a moment. She heard the heavy thud of a heart beat within. "She's alive!" the Princess shouted, smiling up at the skull trapped in the electrified gap.

"Huh? What do you know?" The Dark Magician actually sounded surprised! "It worked! It actually worked! Snails—"

The gap where the skull rested exploded, the metal arm shuddering as it was twisted and sheared away, tumbling end over end into the abyss below. Of the glowing bones, nothing remained. A second later, the oozing pink body of the Revenant was tossed back up onto the elevated platform the remains of the computer sat upon. Broken pink bones jutted from his limbs as he struggled, most of his torso crushed and mangled. From around the side of the maneframe came the Golem and the battered remains of the Lady.

"Quickly. Set me down," the Lady said, and the robot dropped her next to the prone form. "Grab that terminal, Sweetie! Bring it over here."

"Mr. Horse isn't going to like me breaking off pieces of his masterpiece," the Golem

said in worry as she reached over and pulled one of the terminals off the ruined machine.

“Do it,” a choking, mottled voice hissed. Everyone froze at the horrid sight of the skinned stallion lifting his head. Blood dripped down his lips. “You’re trying to transfer an intelligence, right?”

“Y...yes...” the broken Lady said in a low voice. “From a filly’s brain back into a blank copy with her soul.”

“Oh. I thought this was going to be hard,” the Skinned Pony muttered. “You’re using the mind array from this, right? Sweetie Bot, pull off the back of the housing. Wire in the array to access terminal AB-02. Wire in the filly to AB-01. If the copy has the soul, it should self-arrange. Just like pouring water through a pipe.”

“Here all of you are,” the Knight said as he stepped around the ruined machine, his helmet back on his head, his armor pristine, and his guns at the ready. “Cognitum’s little menagerie. What do you think you’re doing?”

“Well, I’m doing my best not to scream. Fortunately, I’ve had two hundred years of revenge fantasies to help focus me,” the Skinned Pony rasped. “You’d be smart to join our side. Serving that crazy nag isn’t a good idea. She’s a lot like you. Manipulation and backstabbing are her two favorite hobbies. I should know.”

“Fortunately, my compatriot has the means to destroy her with ease. She’ll go to the moon and fix Horizons so it’ll fire where we want it to, and the Core will be restored. Then we kill her on the way back.” The power-armored stallion tapped his nose. “I’ll have to deal with the Legate when it’s over. That fuck is too sneaky to trust, but I’ll have the whole Core at my disposal. I’ll get him, one way or another.”

“Stay away from my children!” the Revenant hissed, the broken ghoul dragging himself towards the Knight. “I won’t let you hurt them. I won’t!” he spat mindlessly, pink cloud oozing out of the holes in his hide.

“Shut. Up,” the Knight said, then stomped down hard. His hoof crushed the ghoul’s skull like a silver hammer hitting a rotten egg. He twisted his hoof for good measure in the pulpy, rotten mass, grinding it into the metal deck. The body quivered, then went still.

“You murderer!” the broken Lady cried out at him.

“Oh, you have no right to talk,” the Knight countered. “It’s time to tie up loose ends.”

The Golem worked furiously to wire things into the back of the terminal, shielding

the Barbarian with her body. “Wait,” the Skinned Pony rasped. “I can help you. I know things.”

“Oh?” the Knight stopped. “I’m listening.”

“There’s a base in the valley. A special stable made for Equestria’s nobility. The Redoubt. I can tell you how to access it.” The Skinned Pony shuddered as his flayed body cracked, dripping more blood. “All I want is a healing potion, restoration talisman, or something.”

“Why would I need that when I have the Core?” the Knight asked with a metallic chuckle.

“It never hurts to have contingencies,” the Skinned Pony rasped, quivering, as fresh wounds opened up on him. “I’m bleeding quite profusely, and the agony’s getting rather excessive, so I’d appreciate healing sooner than later.”

“”Yeah, yeah. Just a second. Need to finish off the... rest...” He trailed off as he looked past the Golem at the Barbarian. “No. No way. She’s more tenacious than a radroach!”

“Stop!” the broken Lady hissed as the Knight shoved the bloody Skinned Pony aside. “You heard the Legate! He fears Blackjack! Leaving her alive would be your best weapon against him.”

“I have no doubt it would. But I also know that Blackjack isn’t going to let me rule the Core. She’s handled way too much shit. I’d rather face a star-worshipping zebra alone than let that bloody mule loose again.” He lowered his guns at the Barbarian.

The poor Lady threw her broken body at him. She didn’t get far. One hoof came up, blocking the lunging mare. She collided with it, and the hoof came down, crushing her against the floor. “You’re just as bad as Blackjack is. Take a hint and die!” he shouted as he stomped again and again. The battered and dinged cybermare clanged and crunched as she was smashed to scrap against the floor.

The Princess gazed up at the Golem as it finished wiring both sets of cables in. The gem-studded net was spread over the Barbarian’s skull. “There. That should be sufficient,” the robot said brightly. “Once the transfer is complete, we need to get medical attention for Mr. Horse immediately! He’s a very important pony, you know.”

The Knight started, distracted from his destruction of the Lady. “Oh fuck no!” he shouted, and his cannon roared. He fired hastily and high, though, so much so that the Princess and the Barbarian weren’t even knocked across the deck by the shockwave. The Golem, however, smiled benignly as the blast ripped her synthetic

body apart, the sturdy frame ripping in half and sending the remains bouncing over the remaining pair of ponies. The Princess hugged the terminal, keeping the cables plugged into the back of the boxy machine. The front half of the robot landed with a crash, her eyes rolling in her smoking sockets.

“No! Sweetie Belle!” the Skinned Pony rasped, reaching a bloody hoof out towards her.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Horse. I’m afraid I broke,” she buzzed as she lay there. “Would you like me to execute the transfer?”

The Princess looked up at the armored pony. He stood on the broken body of the Lady, his cannons swiveling down at the Princess as she hugged the terminal. All she had to do was throw the machine aside and beg him for help. Maybe offer to run the Society for him. Something. Anything to save herself. Because that’s what she’d always done.

What she’d always done had never made her happy before. “Yes!” she cried out.

“No!” the Knight shouted, then cried out as a starmetal-edged pinion found a gap between two plates in his legs and rammed through. The armored stallion reared up and slammed the somehow still-struggling Lady in a fury. “No more of your interference! Die already!” He kept smashing down until there was a wet pulpy noise. The armored shell fell slack.

Then the terminal let out a beep—

I lurched as everything came together, the experience like a board across my face. Steel Rain’s actions... Cognitum... Amadi... all of it fell into place inside my head and I grabbed Charm and lunged away as a second shot blasted out a chunk of the platform. Chunks of metal debris rained down on us, and I felt the now-unfamiliar sensation of pain as my shoulders were pummeled. Still, it had to be worse for her, with wires dangling out her skull.

“You... no!” Steel Rain shouted as I set her on my back. “What does it take to kill you?”

“Sometimes I wonder that too,” I said, more to myself than to him. I slowly made my way around towards where Horse huddled, bleeding profusely. I took in the crushed forms of Sanguine and Dawn. “So you’re going to betray Cognitum and Amadi both? Is there anypony you won’t stab in the back?”

“Myself,” he answered glibly. “I’m just not that flexible.” He chuckled as he kept his cannons trained on me. “I don’t suppose there’s any chance you’d just happily let me rule the Core and the Wasteland without any interference, is there?”

“I don’t suppose there’s any chance you’d actually let me live in peace and leave other ponies alone, is there?” I countered as I stared at him, trying to think of how I’d beat him. Nothing was coming to me. I should have been coming up with... something... or even just doing things on impulse. Instead, I felt a cold knot of terror where my victory had been earlier. I didn’t know how I could beat him. I didn’t even know if he could be beaten. I didn’t even have a weapon I could use.

“No. No offense, but after what you did on the *Celestia*, I have to kill you on general principle now,” he said. His cannons thunked as he loaded a new pair of shells. “Now, hold still and let’s make this—” On ‘this’ he fired, and where I’d been standing exploded. “Clean.”

But I wasn’t there. I’d teleported directly behind him, panting hard, feeling the adrenaline surging inside me. Without my steel augmentation, that teleport had been almost... easy. My eyes focused on his guns, and my magic reached out and began to field strip the firing pins from both of them. I might not have been able to hurt him, but I could at least take away his favorite toys.

A metal hoof slammed back at me, and I barely ducked. The glittering, silvery hoof flew over my head, and I backed away with the firing pins floating beside me. He whirled around, and the cannons made a clicking noise. “Looking for these?” I asked with a smile before tossing them out over the edge. “Oopsie.”

That pissed him off. He charged, and I ran with Charm clutching my head, the plastic medallion bouncing off my chest. I was getting tired and sore; I tried not to enjoy it too much. As much as I’d have liked some barding and as useful as my augments would be right now, I couldn’t help but love every sensation inside me. My heart beating, my stomach growling, my shoulders aching, my ears ringing... each and every one was a reminder that I was alive now.

Unfortunately, among all the sensations I’d regained, there was one I’d lost entirely. Cognitum still had my baby, so that definitely diminished my enjoyment quite a bit.

I still wasn’t sure how I was going to beat him with no weapons. I didn’t even have a rock or baton. Still, there was lots of debris. I levitated up a spar of metal and gave an experimental swing. The bar clanged off his helmet, and he didn’t even slow down. In fact, he caught up a little more.

If I could get some more space between the two of us, I'd try to get up the elevator. . . wait. . . no, Horse needed help. That wouldn't work. Maybe more talking? But he wanted to kill me a *lot*; what else was there to chat over? Come on. Think. Usually I'd be at the shooting, stabbing, or stomping part of the fight by now.

I teleported again, over to where the bloody trail led to Horse lying bleeding next to the ruined Sweetie Bot. The machine buzzed and crackled softly as he whispered into her ear. He didn't look like he was going to last much longer without skin. I carefully set Charm down. "We need to get you into one of the stasis jars," I said as I surveyed the smoking debris. There wasn't an intact one left, though. And there was no way a healing potion would survive down here in all this Enervation. "Damn it. I wanted to ask you questions. About Horizons. Goldenblood. Cognitum."

He reached out with a bloody hoof for my face, and then felt my forehead. "You're a hornhead. I don't suppose you can read memories like a M.o.M. Pink?"

"I... maybe?" I didn't have time for any kind of finesse, really. "I don't have a memory orb to hold it in, through."

"So hold it in your brain as best you can. That was all anypony could do. The best they can." He closed his eyes and gave a shudder. There was so much blood. So much! "I was so clever. Didn't realize I was getting played."

"By Goldenblood?" I asked with a frown.

He snorted blood. "Yeah, right. That hornhead was just another piece on the board. We all were. All except for... her..." He began to slide over. "Better get your memories. I'm feeling cold."

I looked around for Steel Rain, but I couldn't see him anywhere. That worried me even more. Leaning in, I pressed my horn to his brow and tried to make the connection. My forays into Rampage's mind gave me something to expect, but where her memories were layers and layers of water, Horse's mind was a geometric fractal pattern in which thoughts were arranged almost haphazardly. I had no idea what to grab, so I thought 'Horizons' and watched a portion of his brain light up. I grabbed that portion, pulling it into myself as piece of his mind slowly blacked out one after the next.

'Cognitum!' I thought furiously. Much more lit up, so I took the brightest sections I could. 'Goldenblood', I thought, and grabbed a feeble memory, the only part that wasn't going dark. I had no idea if I'd retain the memories when the spell ended, or if I'd contaminate myself with Horse. He hadn't seemed particularly good, but if he

could help. . . “I got it. I’ve got them!” It was all I could say to the dying stallion.

“Good,” he said, and then pulled his plastic covered pendant off and pushed it into my hooves. “Your best. . . weapon. . .” he breathed, then slumped over to the side. I pulled away and watched as his body slumped, liquefying before my eyes. “Damn it. . . I. . . wanted. . .” he gurgled, but whatever he wanted, I’d have to get it from his memories.

I’d had quite a few memories in my time from dozens of different ponies. I could remember all the memories I’d had with Charm, and could feel chunks of Horse like huge blocks of ice slowly melting away inside my head and joining the rest of the pool that was Blackjack. Would I stay me, or would having Charm and Horse’s memories change me? I felt sad for some of the things Charm had done; she could have thrived in 99, but she deserved better.

I glanced over my shoulder at Charm. I knew the filly now, knew her disappointments and her demons. If I’d known what I did now when we’d first met, I wouldn’t have left her alone with Scotch or picked her to rule, but I would have been more compassionate and respectful. She was like the Overmare: hounded by shame, feeling urges no filly should face, and keeping herself together with an overwhelming sense of pride that she didn’t come close to meriting. She would have had a happier life working under Caprice... before I’d come along, that is.

It’d take me some time to think about what I’d grabbed from Horse. I could only hope that it didn’t affect me too badly. I examined the medallion. My best weapon? How was it a weapon? It was just a piece of moonstone covered in plastic. How could I use it as a weapon? What was I supposed to do, hit him with it? I would do better teleporting Charm and me to the elevator and getting the hay out of here! “Come on, Charm,” I said as I turned back to the filly.

Then Steel Rain dropped from the wreckage behind me, plummeting like a silvery meteor. I fell back and rolled as his hooves stomped down. Each impact dented the floor plates as I rolled to the side, barely keeping ahead of him. I tried to blast his head with magic bullets, but I might as well have been spitting on him for all the good it did. The magic just deflected off his silver armor. I struck the edge of the maneframe, lying on my back and watched the hoof drop towards my head.

I rolled in towards him; he reacted more quickly than I’d hoped and pinched me between his forehooves, but I summoned my magic and flashed away again before he could squish me. I hopped onto my hooves. “Okay. Time for us to g—” But the words and the plan died in my throat.

Steel Rain stood by Charm. One hoof was stomped firmly on the end of the taut wires trailing from her head to the nearby ring, and the other was resting on her head, ready to push it away and either yank the wires out or just outright crush it. “No more fucking around, Blackjack. No more. That striped fuck was right. You’re way too dangerous to be left alive. Now, you’re going to come over here, you’re going to lay down, and you’re going to die, or I’m pulling every plug all at once.”

I stared at him. Could I teleport in and away before he could move his hoof? Would she survive it? “You’re just going to kill her after me,” I challenged.

“No. I *might* kill her after you,” he countered in a voice that made me imagine a shit-eating grin on his face. “Maybe I will. I’m in a real bad mood right now. But *maybe* I’ll hold onto her. Maybe use her as a bargaining chip with the Society. There’s got to be more of those jars lying around. You never know. But you know that I *will* kill her if you don’t come over, and you’ll have another dead filly haunting you.” He laughed and shook his head. “But what’s one more, Blackjack? Think of how many ponies have died to keep you alive. How many more will die if I tell that zebra fuck and Cognitum that Discord farted you back into existence? I know, first things first, Cognitum’s going to pulp your friends. And that zebra? Who knows what kind of freaky star curses he’s got shoved up his ass?”

“You bastard,” I muttered, staring at the helpless filly. I couldn’t think of a way to save her. I wracked my brain a thousand times a second, but I couldn’t think of a way to beat him and win without losing her.

“Oh, sure. Insult my parentage, too. That’ll work wonders,” he laughed. He lifted the hoof and hooked the tip of his armor to one of the taut wires. “Maybe I can pluck these one by one? Play a melody in aneurysms. We can take wagers how many it takes before she’s a vegetable. Or maybe you can be Security one last time, trot over here, lay down, and save a pony. That’s your thing, isn’t it? Saving ponies?”

Yeah, it was. And he knew it too. I didn’t know what else I could do. No sword. No augments. No guns. I slowly walked closer, wracking my brain for some way to win. Some way to beat him. Some spell. Some trick. Some something. . .

But I couldn’t simply let him kill her. Even if she wasn’t a good filly. She was still a filly, a pony, and she deserved saving.

Charm smiled through the tears on her cheeks. “You’re a fucking moron, Blackjack. You know that?”

I froze, and Steel Rain looked down at her. “Shut up,” he growled.

"Or what? You'll kill me?" Charm said, grinning even more as she wept. "You're scum. A coward taking a filly hostage to kill a pony better than you."

I stared at her. "Stop it, Charm. He'll kill you."

"Oh, I know he will. There's no 'might' about it, whatever he says. He's smart. You should have killed me the second you made Grace Regent, but you fucked it up," she said, laughing.

"Shut *up*!" Steel Rain bellowed again, a note of desperate frustration in his voice.

"Fuck you, you stupid fuck!" Charm shouted back at him, laughing some more, tears running down her cheek. "You are fucked. Because Blackjack is still Blackjack. It doesn't matter what you do to her. She does the right thing. No matter how much it fucking hurts. And she's been fucking hurt."

I gaped at her. "Don't. Please, Charm. . ."

She sniffed and smiling bitterly at me. "You're the only pony who's ever wanted to save me, Blackjack."

"Don't!" I begged, as Steel Rain looked from her to me.

"What. . ." the silver armored pony said as he turned his attention back to his hostage.

"Goodbye," she said, and her legs tensed beneath her. I tried to grab her with my magic, but she was too quick. By the time I'd grasped her, she had already kicked off and was lunging towards me. I could lift her but I couldn't stop her. Too heavy. Too fast.

The wires in her brain snapped taut, flipping her body around in the air a moment before several pulled free with a spray of blood. Tiny, wet gobs of pink, bloody tissue gleamed at the ends of the wires. She slid close enough to me that I lunged at her and pulled her into my hooves with my magic. Her body spasmed wildly with a gagging sound as she seized, her eyes pointing in two different directions. I heard the thunder of Steel Rain approaching as she thrashed.

I did the only thing I could think of: I threw Horse's Moonstone medallion at his face as hard as I could. It was a pointless, futile gesture. Charm had made me capable of fleeing now that the wires were pulled, but I could no more leave now than I could save her. The medallion flew true, impacting against his shoulder.

The metal armor flashed white, then exploded with enough force to bodily throw him to the side, crashing like an avalanche into the wrecked terminals. The medallion shot off in the opposite direction, but I caught it with my magic. The plastic had

melted away, leaving a tiny round wafer of moonstone within. Then I turned and took in his silvery armor. No wonder my magic bullets hadn't even scratched it. "Starmetal? You lined your armor with *starmetal*?"

And I felt myself grin as I threw the sliver of moonstone against him again. It blew out another chunk of armor from his side. Given the armor had only been lined with it, rather than made of the stuff, I wasn't vaporizing the pony within. I was, however, blowing apart hoof-sized hunks of armor with each impact, striking the moonstone hard against the silver coating. "You murderous son of a mule!" Away went the plate covering his shoulders. "You bloody asshole!" An explosion ripped a strip of cabling and reinforcement from off his neck as he staggered back.

"Wait! You don't understand! I was molested as a colt!" Boom went a foreleg strut. "My mom rented me out to raiders!" Boom went a chest plate. "Cognitum made me do it!" The left side of his helmet flew apart in chunks and a wide, terrified eye stared at me. "The Legate used his star magic on me! I swear!" His other forehoof exploded in a cloud of shrapnel. "Damn it, stop!"

"I don't care! I don't care if you were brainwashed by your father into becoming a sex slave for Crunchy Carrots who tortured you for failing to conquer the Wasteland. You're dying right now!" He charged me, knocked me aside, and ran towards the prone Charm as fast as his damaged armor would allow. "Don't you touch her!" I screamed, teleporting in front of him and throwing the flake of moonstone at him again and again with my magic. "Murdering, betraying, fucking cunt!" I beat him back with every blast. Only the armor was keeping him alive. If he had a single sizable piece of the material inside his armor, I'd turn him to jelly. I *really* wanted him jelly. Once or twice the pebble struck hide with no effect, and I magically jerked it back before he could snag it in one of the holes.

The platform wasn't doing too good either. I was keeping between him and Charm, but a lot of the detonations were making the entire spire tremble and shake. The structure let out a shriek, the platform tilting in the direction of the wrecked mane-frame. Still, I couldn't stop. Not until he was dead. If I managed to take off the rest of his helmet, I was going to put a magic bullet through his face.

And he knew it, too. His armor was now a crippling liability; the front half – I hadn't hadn't put much work in further back than his cannons – was a smoking wreck. With the disabled weapons and struggling servomechanisms, he was barely able to keep moving around the edge. I blasted him with a magic bullet, but he raised a hoof in time; all I managed was a bloody hole in his leg. It didn't matter. I'd get him with the next. Or the next. Each hit knocked him further back and further back. Finally, I hit

him with a detonation that nearly knocked him right over the edge.

Then, the fucker did the one thing I'd hoped he wouldn't. He raised his bloody hooves in the air and shouted as loud as he could, "I give up!"

"What?" I whispered hoarsely as I froze. He gave me a perfect shot: right through the hole in his helmet, straight at his eye. Even without S.A.T.S., I could hit him.

He coughed weakly. "I surrender. I quit. I throw myself on your mercy!" My eye twitched as he pulled off the ruined helmet and grinned at me, his pink features now swelling up. He coughed again, bringing up bloody phlegm. "Arrest me. Lock me up. Take me to trial. I'll pay for my crimes however you want."

"Is this a joke?" I whispered, staring at him. It was a trick. *Shoot him now*, a smart, sane part of me insisted. Right now. Before he said another word.

"Nope. Not at all," he said as he collapsed against the rails at the end of the platform. "Name whatever punishment you want that leaves me alive, and I'll take it. I'll care for the poor and the sick. I'll help the elderly. Whatever you want."

"You lying, betraying shit! Why should I think you're going to do what you say? The first chance you have, you'll try and kill me. It's your fucking nature!" I shouted at him.

He gave me an exhausted, ragged smile, blood dripping from a puffy gash beneath his eye. "Because, deep down, in your heart of hearts... you're an optimist," he countered, struggling to breathe as sweat rolled down his pink hide. "You want to save ponies. You always want to give them another chance. Well, I'm telling you that if you give me a chance, I'll become a better pony." He shuddered, looking about ready to fall over as he added, "To prove it, there's a cache of supplies at the top of the elevator. Fresh healing potions just made a few hours ago. Even some Hydra. Might save your filly friend there." He grinned at me, blood leaking from a shattered tooth. "Come on. Don't you want me to do better?"

I did. I stepped up closer to him, and he suddenly looked nervous. I drew so close he stood up on his hind legs, and I rose too. "You're right. I really do want you to do better." He gave a nervous little smile. Then I slammed him in the face with my hooves, knocking him back over the edge. He scrambled for purchase and caught in a gap in the rails. "But even my optimism has limits."

"Blackjack!" he screamed as I turned and trotted towards where Charm lay. The filly was still breathing but didn't seem responsive. "Blackjack, please!" Steel Rain begged as I carefully levitated her onto my back and started towards the elevator.

"You save ponies! That's your thing! Please!" he begged, but he wasn't a pony. I wasn't sure what he was, but it wasn't a pony. "You're not an executioner," he screamed as I stepped onto the elevator.

The statement, one I'd said dozens of times before, broke through. If I just let him die, was I still Blackjack? Was I any better than him? Okay. Yes, I was. But still, just leaving him to die? Why didn't I just shoot him in the head while I was at it?

I sighed, closing my eyes. Everything I'd taken from Horse and Charm told me I was a complete idiot for even thinking it. That I should go back and put a magic bullet through his head. Maybe two or three. That's what a good, sensible pony would do. Heck. That was what LittlePip did. I wasn't saving anything worth saving, and I might be sparing a monster worse than the four that had violated me. He wouldn't change. He would stab me in the back the first chance he could. That was his nature. Heck, he might just be trying to call me back just so he could yank me down with him. There were a half dozen reasons why I should just go, and a half dozen more why I should go back and make sure he was dead. There was only one reason to try and help him. . .

But Security saves ponies.

I returned to the edge of the platform, glaring down at him coldly as he dangled by a twisted hoof. It was certainly broken. He wasn't going to get far on that. "You are going to be tilling fields for the Society for the rest of your life," I muttered. His head snapped up, and his tear-streaked face gaped at me. Suddenly, he grinned and started laughing. "Shut up. Right now, I could shoot you for a loud sneeze." He stopped the shrill laugh but still wept in relief. "Hold still and tell me how to take off the rest of that armor." I didn't know how damaged it was, but I wasn't going to try and teleport him with that weight.

He walked me through what to push and twist, and soon chunks were falling away. Soon, all that was left was him in some padded, half-shredded garments, a plastic medallion around his neck. From what I could see, my moonstone battering had given him quite a beating. "Now, hold still," I said, then teleported him up to the rickety platform. "Now," I said as I glared at him, "you're going to take us to this cache, and then we're going to my friends, and you're going to the Society. You're too guilty for a quick kill. You can work the rest of your life to feed the Wasteland."

"Of course. Of course," he said, smiling ear to ear. Then he raised his head and looked at me as I stood against the rail, Charm precariously perched on my back. There was a thoughtful, almost contemplative expression on his face. For a moment,

one could almost believe he was thinking of turning over a new leaf. Starting a new chapter in his life. Wanting to do better. “You’re a good pony, Blackjack.” Despite myself, I smiled with him.

Then he lunged forward, ramming us hard over the edge with a body slam.

But I appeared a few feet away. He laughed as he faced me. “Sorry, but I just couldn’t help—” then his laughter died as he saw what dangled from my hoof.

His moonstone medallion.

The stallion’s eyes bulged as he stretched his hoof towards me. “I’m shrowry! Pleasgh!” His dark bruises began to swell like blackened boils. “Pleagh, Blachjagh!” They burst one by one, rotten black blood soaking into his barding. He started to scream as his crippled forehoof melted away, and he extended the oozing stump towards me. “Shavvve muh!” he burbled as one eye burst, then the other.

“I did,” I answered quietly. He couldn’t speak after that, and he started to thrash wildly, screaming incoherently. I supposed that, being younger and intact, it’d take longer for Enervation to finish him off. When I got on the elevator, half of him was dripping through the floor. I hit the button up, and watched the quivering, bloody lump till it disappeared through the floor grate.

Security might save ponies, but some ponies just refuse to be saved.

The elevator ride took far longer than I was comfortable with. Charm quivered on my back, still breathing but horribly ill. I tried to ignore the blood oozing from the holes bored into her head. It took nearly fifteen minutes before the elevator slowed and came to a halt. The doors opened into a battered, crumbling building that had once been the M.W.T. hub in Hoofington. I searched around the wreckage for the cache that Steel Rain mentioned and found it stashed in an air duct.

To my surprise, I found that the healing potions inside were indeed still a good, solid purple. Levitating the vials, I inspected each one carefully and saw a tiny sliver of moonstone Wonderglued to the vial. Somepony must have worked out that if the medallions protected a pony from Enervation, the moonstone within would protect healing potions too. I carefully trickled one into Charm’s mouth, with the unresponsive filly swallowing reflexively. It didn’t do much for her; I supposed having pieces of brain yanked out was an injury beyond the scope of most healing potions. The hydra made me balk, but it was all I had. I injected her with the nasty sludge,

making her shake and convulse. When that gradually subsided, she seemed to be breathing easier, but she still wasn't conscious.

I moved cautiously but soon realized that, without starmetal-plated armor or my broadcaster, I was a sitting duck for the swarmers. The buzzing machines worked in a frenzy, tearing apart wreckage and garbage and carrying it away to construct more struts, braces, and shafts. Still, I had little doubt that if we got too close, they'd rapidly take us apart too.

The only thing I had to fall back on was my magic, and I had a destination in mind thanks to the memories I'd taken from Horse. I'd never managed much in the way of distance before, but now I was a third my previous weight. Maybe I could make it? I closed my eyes, focused my magic, and disappeared in a flash of white.

When I reappeared, I found myself in a dusty office. A shimmering pink sheet of magic, just like the one that covered a certain house, blocked the door. Windows looked out over the Core and down towards the ministry plaza a few blocks away. My horn throbbed badly, but I didn't feel like I was burning out. I set Charm down on the musty couch in the corner. . . even better, it folded out into a bed. That shouldn't surprise me, considering whose office this was. Delicate statuary decorated the space, showing abstract images of alicorns, pegasi, unicorns, and earth ponies done in, silver, gold, copper, and a silvery white metal I suspected was platinum. Surprisingly, there were also carvings of a zebra done in veined black and white marble, a dragon in glittering crystal, and a griffin intricately whittled from warm yellow and tan wood. Paintings on the walls depicted scenes of Equestrian life from before the war, and, shockingly, there were three pictures showing zebra lands.

I moved behind the desk and was further surprised by a number of photographs. The Ministry Mares before they'd become the Ministry Mares. Princess Luna and Princess Celestia. Spike. A half dozen pictures of Fluttershy. A school in a valley shaped like a crescent moon. Pumpkin and Pound Cake. Psalm. And a very faded picture of a unicorn mare I didn't recognize.

And there, on the top of the desk, was a dusty nameplate that read 'Goldenblood: Director of the O.I.A.' Horse's memories were of Pinkie sealing this place after Goldenblood's arrest. Pinkie must have been busy, since she had merely sealed the office up for later, just like his house. I pulled open file cabinets and saw several files missing. Taken by Goldenblood after he'd been removed for striking Twilight or absconded with by Horse when he'd taken over. Horse preferred to operate from Robronco.

Idly, I flipped through several of the remaining files, taking in the meticulous strokes of the notes and sketches in the margins and corners. One letter written by some politician about forcibly relocating zebras from Zebratown to the Appleloosan desert with the 'other riff raff' had the comment 'Relocate to the Appleloosan desert' over a drawing of a bound and gagged unicorn stallion being loaded on a train with a tag 'To: Riff Raffia' tied to his ear.

Other memos were more serious: 'I'm sorry, Elder, but Princess Luna can not address the zebra issue at this time. She abhors the abuses suffered by your people, but there is a war on, and she cannot defend your people with one breath and tell others to fight the enemy with the next. Please ignore the rhetoric coming from Image and know that, as difficult as it must be, Princess Luna acknowledges the many contributions the Equestrian zebras have made and the suffering they have endured. Please stop attempting to force a public statement on this matter. It won't be addressed until after the war.'

Beneath it were scribbled notes. 'Ask her majesty to talk to Rarity about toning down the 'spies and infiltrators' commentary. When ponies start talking about mass incarceration for security reasons, it's time for a time out.'

Yet in other notes, there were instructions to arrange 'sympathizer' attacks on members of the Apple family. 'Prune the rotten branches' was the phrase used for killing ponies in position of power. Goldenblood had lists of the ponies to be used, promoted, or removed as benefited the war effort. 'We are the grease that keeps the wheels of the kingdom turning. Slimy, disgusting, and unappreciated, but vital.'

So why, then, had he created Horizons? A moonstone/starmetal reaction that would devastate the entire planet? What was the point of it? Why had he suddenly gone renegade? Why had he sabotaged EC-1101 so that, when it found Luna, it would call her a tyrant and set off the weapon? It made no sense. 'Why' was the missing element to *all* of this making sense. It was easy for ponies like Cognitum to dismiss Goldenblood as crazy. He hadn't been crazy. Manipulative, murderous, sure. Mad? I just couldn't see it.

I reached out to the terminal, and it booted up almost instantly. It seemed slicker than even the color models I'd seen in Blueblood Manor. They must have been the very latest designs. Of course, the contents were so heavily encrypted that I didn't have a chance of accessing it via hacking. So I just entered in all the passwords I could think of and got rejected again and again. Knowing my luck, it would be something completely random.

Then I looked at the pictures in the frames, particularly the ones of Fluttershy. Carefully, I removed each photograph from its frame. There, on the back of a picture of Fluttershy in a volunteer nurse's outfit, I saw a tiny note written in Goldenblood's impeccable writing: 'The most important things.'

The most important things? To Goldenblood? I'd heard this. I wracked my memory, trying to think it through. Goldenblood had said this to somepony at some point. Not family. Not money. Not power... I stared at the terminal and carefully typed 'Love, Loyalty, and Secrets'.

The screen flickered, text scrolled, and then it flickered again. Suddenly, the screen went blank save for one line.

> THERE SHALL BE ONLY ONE PRINCESS. I PLEDGE MY LIFE TO ETERNAL DARKNESS. I SWEAR MY LOYALTY TO THE UNENDING BLACK. ALL HAIL NIGHTMARE MOON. MAY THE NIGHT LAST FOREVER!

Buh? I stared at the line, even read it aloud three or four times. It didn't make any sense to me. What, had Goldenblood been some sort of Nightmare Moon worshiper? It made the current Cognitum with Luna's soul an even more terrifying possibility. Still, if he'd been evil, why worry about zebras? Or Fluttershy? Or anything that he did before?

Then I felt a wind sweep over me and turned to see a black vortex of magic forming. It swirled around in a flat, ebony disk, then stilled. The surface shimmered like a pool of black ink hanging vertically in the air. "Well... this is new..." I muttered. I carefully reached out with a hoof, pressing it to the disk. It sank in, disappearing to some place cool. The moon? That seemed like some heavy duty magic to me.

I gently levitated the prone Charm onto my back and gathered up the photographs in an envelope just in case. After all, I didn't have my statuettes any more. Then I closed my eyes and poked my head into the swirling portal. It was like moving through cold oil, the surface coating me as I took one step through, then another. On the far side, I stepped into a stone chamber lit with thousands of tiny star lights that swirled and twinkled overhead. The walls were of blackest marble shot through with veins of amethyst. Cold, imposing black statues loomed over us, their crystalline eyes seeming to follow me as I stepped away from the portal. With a slurping noise, it winked shut behind us.

"Oh, that's not good," I muttered, then observed my surroundings in more detail. This wasn't a prison. It appeared to be some sort of castle. There were racks of vaguely familiar armor on stands, wielding archaic weapons that seemed like they'd

been forged centuries ago. Dark purple carpets lay on the floor. A faint coat of dust covered everything. I found a set of the dark purple barding and slipped it on, then levitated a spear. Not exactly ideal weapons, but at least I wasn't naked and unarmed anymore. Carefully, I made my way forward.

The hall beyond was just like the room behind. Tapestries showing the moon eclipsing the sun were everywhere. Windows depicted a dark alicorn banishing a white alicorn to the sun. Stars and star sapphires decorated every door and wall. In its own way, it reminded me of a far grander, and colder, Star House. I carefully stayed on the carpets so my hooves didn't click on the ebon floor.

Here and there were signs of modern technology. Cables drawn along the edge of the floor. A room with a dusty broken terminal. An old rifle from the war, so badly maintained that it'd serve better as a club. Compared to the grand architecture, they clearly didn't belong here. Magical glyphs throbbed powerfully against the walls, illuminating the halls.

Then I heard a distant giggle, and my hackles rose. I whirled, looking around for the source. A second later, a ghostly moan sounded. I whirled again. "Okay. I've just about had it. Mad computers. Star curses. A whole lot of ponies helping me and getting killed. Magic portals. Now ghosts. What next?"

The giggle echoed again from the direction of some ascending stairs. Well, being here by myself wasn't getting me anywhere. I slowly advanced. More groans, moans, and giggles, from more than one person. Definitely not ghosts, or at least I hoped not. The stairs opened on a floor that was much smaller than below. This looked more like the Canterlot Palace I'd seen in memories. The noises were coming from a nearby... bedroom... along with the sound of classical music and a familiar wet noise I hadn't heard since 99.

I pushed the door open and beheld the glistening, undulating mass of pony flesh that was an orgy. Over two beds, a half dozen mares and a half dozen stallions were vigorously engaging in coital relations. Half of them were batponies like Stygius. The other half were unicorns, pegasi, and an earth pony. I stood in the wash of sweat and semen that rolled out the open door in a sweet, salty pong.

Okay. That was it. My brain was officially out of order. I couldn't process this anymore...

Fortunately, I didn't have to, as one of the pegasus mares on a bed glanced over and froze. She brushed her golden bangs back and gaped at me for a minute, then shoved the batpony mounting her hard. Pushing him off, Psychos— Whisper flew

through the air and landed before me. “Blackjack? It is you! But not metal! How the hell did you get here? What do you think you’re doing? Who is that?” She gestured to Charm with a wing.

Stygius rose from where she’d shoved him and flew over. I stared at them both for a long moment, then threw my hooves around her neck, sobbing brokenly.

An hour later, after they’d cleaned up and we’d taken Charm to an infirmary and I’d filled Whisper and Stygius in on the many, many things that had happened to me since we’d last seen each other, we walked together through the enormous silent castle. We’d been joined by a batpony mare who didn’t seem to be all that pleased to see me. Tenebra, Stygius’s sister, was a dusky mare with a short, chopped blue mane. A round, topaz talisman marked with concentric rings bounced around her neck as we walked through the massive structure. Thus far we’d only seen a half dozen other batponies since we’d left the orgy above. “So this place is what now?” I asked the lighter fog-gray mare. Apparently Stygius didn’t have a speech talisman handy. . . or wasn’t trusted with one around the ‘strumpet’.

“Nightmare Castle,” Tenebra said sourly. “And you aren’t supposed to be here,” she reminded me for the tenth time since we’d left the party. “How did you get here? No pony is supposed to get here without us!”

“I told you. I found a terminal in an office that had that quote on it, and it summoned a portal that brought me here. I had no idea that here was here! Where is here?” I asked as we walked through a banquet hall the size of my stable’s atrium. The dishes were still laid out in rows, silver gleaming coolly in the starlight illumination.

“Another... well... okay, I’m not sure where. It’s a place that’s in Equestria in the Hoof, but it’s set slightly to... well...” Whisper glanced over at Stygius, who chirped and shrugged, looking over at his sister.

Tenebra rolled her eyes. “We’re in Equestria’s shadow. A place where Nightmare Moon could hide her forces as she prepared to conquer Equestria. When she was banished, most of her forces fled this place. Most. Those who remained maintained this place as best as they could.”

I nodded up above. “And what was with the sex party up above?” Tenebra and Stygius both flushed, averting their eyes, while Whisper chuckled. “Don’t get me wrong. It was a pretty sweet seven point five on the kinkometer. Reminded me a lot of the afterparty of my cute-ceañera.” If I didn’t have my entire life going crazy, I

might have joined in. Apparently, though, my arrival had ruffled a lot of wings, and we were going to somepony that I could talk to about my current situation.

“We’re trying to save the batpony race,” Whisper said with a smile and a shrug. “Their genetic pool is so small that you could spit across it. It took me a month to convince them to bring in some outside blood and get serious about breeding a new generation.” She snickered. “Yes, Blackjack, I’m saving ponies by fucking them! Two of your favorite things in one! All I need is some Wild Pegasus, and I’d out-Blackjack you!” I’m sure she expected to get a rise out of me; when none came, she sulked a bit. “Looks like they’re not the only ones who need a good fucking...”

“Debauched pervert,” Tenebra muttered, blushing bright red.

“Hey, I don’t hear you complaining about not being obligated to fuck your brother anymore! Honestly, I finally find a community I feel comfortable in, where family members regularly fuck each other, and they *still* act like it’s a bad thing. The whole world is insane, I tell ya...” Whisper retorted. Stygius gave a suffering roll of his eyes as I stared. “They’re down to a population of around a hundred batponies here, and they’re getting some significant defects.”

Tenebra flushed. “I admit, it is a relief to know that I won’t have to... bed him. Still. All this... sex... well... it just doesn’t seem all that appropriate.” Ah. Thankfully, after Glory, I could better understand her madness. ...About general prudishness. Whisper was still a bit...

“Speak for yourself,” said mare replied. “The breeding program’s been a huge hit with most of the younger batponies here. Stygius wasn’t the only one who wanted to get out and sow his oats.” The batstallion grinned at me sheepishly. Whisper shook her head and smirked at me. “Well, hopefully Hades will be able help you out, Blackjack. He’s really isolationist, though. As far as he’s concerned, this is their world and we’re just visiting. So keep that in mind. This is like dealing with a stable. A really, really inbred stable.”

We were approaching a pair of glittering black diamond doors that slowly groaned open at our approach. Inside was a throne room of cavernous proportions. I wondered if Nightmare Moon had some insecurity issues when she made this place. You could easily fit the population of most of the Hoof in here. A dozen or so batponies haunted the dais at the far end of the chamber. On closer inspection, there was definitely some genetic damage visible in a few of them. One with mismatched ears, the left larger than the right. One with a small, almost vestigial wing. Another with missized fangs pointing in different directions, standing next to a mare with eyes

that did the same thing. Most were normal... ish. Still, I couldn't help but imagine what these ponies would look like in a generation or two.

A single throne stood at the far side of the chamber. Seated in it was an impressive piece of pony. The stallion was almost jet black with red, dragon-pupilled eyes and a powerful, athletic frame. He wore intricate ebony armor inlaid with silver scroll work. At his side, hanging on the edge of the throne of jet, was an impressive-looking sword. This was not a pony that I wanted to fight. I cleared my throat, smiled as best I could, and gave what was probably a rather maladroit bow.

"Father," Tenebra said formally. "This is Blackjack. Blackjack, this is our king, Hades."

His red eyes narrowed at me, then glanced back at Tenebra. "Who?" His armor or a talisman under it must have had enchantments beyond just making his squeaks and chirps audible; instead of a normal voice or Royal Canterlot Shouting, his speech was deep and thunderous, rolling ominously through the chamber, echoing off the walls, and vibrating through our hooves.

The yellow pegasus gaped at him. "Seriously?" He glowered at the four of us. "It's Blackjack. Security. The badass mare who's causing all kinds of trouble over in the other world!" Whisper said with a wave of a wing in my direction.

He gave a dismissive sweep of his hoof. "The concerns of that world are none of mine. If she's another of your breeders, set her to work."

Wait? Breeders? I suddenly felt like I was on the other side of Medical in 99. "No!" I said sharply. Not that it wasn't tempting on a tiny, immature level, but... "I need to get back to my world. I need to find my friends, get my body back, and stop a mare from either destroying the world or conquering it completely!" He gazed down at me dispassionately. "Look. Show me the door, and I won't bother you again."

"No," he rumbled darkly, perfunctorily.

Tenebra stepped forward. "Father, please. Blackjack has many—"

But he raised a forehoof, silencing her, and turned his eyes to Stygius. "I will not risk our discovery by outsiders." His voice was solemn and grave. "My son did a great disservice to our kingdom when he left to go looking for a... rut mare. I have only allowed others to be brought here with the understanding that they will restore my kind to our former strength." His glare made Stygius wilt.

"Oh, Darling. Must you be so grim?" a mare asked, her voice light and airy and lifting the gloom of the place. From a doorway in the side of the room emerged a

pale gray batpony in a white dress. Silver earrings glittered in the wan magical light of the chamber.

“Mother! You’re up!” Tenebra said, swooping towards her and helping the mare over to a seat.

“Of course. I heard we had more new visitors from the outside,” she said in a frail but friendly tone.

Stygius held up his blackboard. ‘Persephone. Mom.’ I read it and then smiled, giving another, less awkward, bow to her. “Your Majesty.”

“Please forgive my husband; but he takes his royal duties so *very* seriously,” the pale batmare said as she gazed at the flustered stallion.

“I will not relent, Persephone,” Hades said, scowling at us. “Do not ask it of me.”

“Perish the thought, dear husband. Go on. Be kingly,” she said with a little wave of her hoof as she leaned against Tenebra.

Hades coughed, glancing over at her and then back down at me. “As I said. The only outsiders we will admit are for... procreational uses.”

“I think quite a few are fond of ‘recreational’ too,” Persephone said, making Tenebra blush.

“Mother!” she said in scandalized tones.

“What? If I were in better health, I’d join you. With my darling, of course.” She looked archly at her husband.

“I like her,” Whisper whispered to me.

“There is more to life than survival and gravity,” Persephone continued. “These outsiders can teach us much.”

“They are for breeding, nothing more,” Hades contradicted flatly, fighting his own embarrassment.

“My husband can be terribly possessive,” Persephone said with a frown. “It’s one of his less admirable traits.”

“*Possessive*? Are they slaves?” I asked, bristling and wondering if this really was like being on the other side of Medical.

Whisper jumped in immediately. “They were refugees, Blackjack!” she said quickly. “Ponies who lost their homes when Thunderhead fell. Or escaped former slaves. Or

scavengers. They have rights.”

“We are not barbarians, Blackjack,” Persephone added with a sober nod. “I’d happily accept many more of them.”

“So long as they breed,” the king interjected. “It is my fondest wish that, in a few generations, we will not need outsider blood any longer,” he continued with a distasteful curl of his lip. “Until then, I will bow to genetic realities and do what I must to save my people. But the survival and wellbeing of the world of light is none of my concern!”

“A weapon is going to go off that might destroy everything in that world! My friends. My loved ones!” I stared around the court. “How can you not care? If the other world is destroyed, what happens to this one?”

Slowly, he rose to his hooves, his armor creaking. “Are you saying that this weapon will destroy the entire planet?”

I balked a little. “Well, no. From what Trottenheimer said, it sounds like it’s *just* going to kill everyone!” I put as much scorn into that as I could. “Doesn’t that matter to you?”

“No,” he replied as he started to limp towards us; his right hindleg had an odd hitch to it. “The world of shadow is not affected by such things. Balefire Bombs. Megaspells. They only affect your kind. Your people. Ours will be kept safe here.” He gestured around at the immense palace. “And eventually, we will return to the world of the light to restore it in our Goddess’s image.”

“But... but so many will die!” I protested weakly.

He gave another wave of his hoof. “Very well. A few dozen more breeders can be brought over, your friends included. Will that halt your wailing?”

I sputtered as I stared at him. “What about everypony else? There’re thousands, maybe millions, who will die when Horizons goes off. And if Cognitum manages to catch that damned stone, she’ll control weapons that will dominate Equestria for a thousand years or more.”

“Darling, perhaps this is one time we should let her go. It sounds quite serious,” Persephone said quietly.

“I will not make an exception for a mare who should not be here.” He rolled his eyes as he turned and limped back to his throne. “She will dominate your Equestria, not ours,” he said scornfully. “Your world is not our affair. Your problems are not

mine.” He gave a dismissive wave of his hoof. “Be gone from my presence. Breed a batpony or three, and perhaps I will send you back.” And he settled back onto his throne and stared silently at me.

I stared at him. “You... I... How can you—” I was silenced by a mouthful of yellow feathers.

“Thank you for your time, Your Majesty,” Whisper said, then bowed to him, giving me a sharp glare before we trotted away. I clenched my jaw. There had to be another way out of here. There just had to be!

Outside the throne room, I pointed a hoof back the way they came. “What is his deal?! How can he just write off a whole world like that?”

“Pretty easily,” Whisper replied. “Rulers aren’t always smart, Blackjack. His world is this castle. I don’t think he can even imagine something that isn’t like this place.” Whisper had been right. It was a stable mentality.

Tenebra and Stygius flew to us. “Mother is talking with him, but I don’t think he’s going to change his mind. At least not soon. He wasn’t fond of the... ah... orgy idea...”

“If you know a better way to rapidly spread genetic material through a population, be my guest,” Whisper retorted. “Or a *funner* way...”

Anyway! “Okay. So how do I get back? Do I have to recite a spell or something? Praise Celestia and get the boot? What?” I said with a little scowl. If this place was just a big, fancy stable, then I needed some way to open the big rolling door between me and my friends.

Tenebra regarded her sibling. “Stygius’s talent lets him cross just like father, but only he alone can use it travel from this world to yours. As king, Father controls the portal allowing all passage.”

“And he really thinks that Horizons won’t destroy this place too?” I snapped.

Whisper shook her head. “I don’t know if he’s aware of it, but he seems convinced that nothing reaches this place. So... I don’t know. I don’t know how many super massive explosions like that there’s been. The balefire bombs and megaspells didn’t touch this place, so... maybe?”

“But... I... we... he...” I stammered, then sat down hard and pressed my hooves to my head, letting out a scream of frustration. I’d survived Cognitum and gotten out of the Core, but now I was stuck here! In my rage, I teleported away. I just wanted

to be out of this place and somewhere... anywhere... else!

I landed on a pile of scree and loose rocks. The light provided by my horn revealed a few dozen feet of broken, shadowy landscape. There was no moon or sun to light the world, but a faint twilight glow provided just enough illumination to make the darkness of the land vaguely perceptible. Near me were the outlines of a ghostly building amidst spectral trees. I reached out and felt the bark. It didn't feel like a tree. It was... firm. Neither warm nor cool, neither wet nor dry. I moved slowly through the grove, the rocks not shifting under my hooves. It was utterly bizarre trying to walk over the uneven surface. I couldn't move so much as a twig or pebble in this shadowy world.

Then the door to the building opened, and a pony-shaped form emerged. Like everything else around me, she was ghostly and translucent like smoky quartz. A pale white glow in her chest spread light through her. I reached out and touched her wing as she trotted around to the side of the building and sat down. I stared at her face, slowly picking her features out. I stared for a minute, then whispered softly, "Glory?"

She didn't react. I bit one forehoof to keep from crying out as I reached out and touched her cheek with my other. Like everything else here, it was the same hard, immutable surface. "Glory. Oh Glory. I'm here, Glory. I'm finally here."

I watched as tiny, smoky tears crept along her cheeks and fell off her chin. Her lips moved silently as I wept as well. I put my hooves around her neck, holding her as close as I could. I didn't know if she could feel me, but at the very least I could be here for her.

The door to the house opened, and a dark shape emerged. It appeared like an alicorn of black ice. Within, a dark purple shape seemed to strain against its confines. A small mote of light lingered in its belly. I watched as it walked slowly away. Glory moved through me as she pulled away and stepped in front of the alicorn, her lips moving quickly.

I slowly approached them, wishing I had Sekashi's ability to read lips. Clearly, Glory wasn't happy. P-21 emerged, followed by Rampage. I started at the sight of an ethereal filly inside her, following her movements, along with a whole cluster of motes. Walking slowly, I made my way around the smoky, wraithlike pony shapes of my friends.

I scowled at myself. "I want my body back, you cunt! I want my baby!"

The dark purple shape turned and looked at me, its head slipping out of the cloudy shell of my body. Step by step it emerged, regarding me with cool teal eyes. "It is not in my power to grant you that, Blackjack."

"Princess Luna?" I asked in shock. The motions around me congealed, moving at a crawl, as I stared up at the spectral alicorn. Then my gaze sharpened. "Or are you Nightmare Moon?"

"That is the question, is it not?" she replied coolly. "Princess, or Nightmare?"

"Really? I have to deal with riddles now?" I asked flatly. "Which is it?"

"Are you Blackjack, or Security?" Luna countered with her own question. I don't know if it was her size or the presence of her alicornness, but I balked and swallowed hard.

"I'm Blackjack. Most of the time. I'm only Security when I need to be," I answered. She smiled slowly. "So... are you saying you're... both?"

"Ponies are not simple things. This is something that I understood better than my sister. Ponies are complex. Twilight often let her desire to please override the wellbeing of others. Applejack lied to herself when she believed her family innately trustworthy. Pinkie Pie laughed long after the joke stopped being funny. My sister believed that ponies were simply, innately, good. That all people were. I understood the nuance of dreams. The subtle differences of thought. You ask if I am Princess Luna, or Nightmare Moon. The answer is yes. The more important question is which was I *more*... and that, I cannot answer."

I considered a moment, then sighed and decided to focus on the present for the moment. "Cognitum stole my body and put you in it. Can't you... I don't know... help me take it back?"

"Why would I fight against myself?"

"Cognitum's not you," I said to her.

"No? She has ambition. Pride. A determination to prove herself. How is that not me?" Luna walked slowly away and lifted her head to the sky. "I was ambivalent when Celestia abdicated. On one hoof, I'd seen what rule had done to her. On the other, I craved acknowledgement and respect. I resented her. A thousand years, and little had changed. I was in her shadow again, the lesser princess... but I was wiser than I had been. I would not rebel; I'd felt the cold bite and loneliness of a

millennium of exile. So when she stepped aside for me, I was terrified and thrilled all at once.” She turned and regarded my frozen body. “Who is to say she cannot be me reborn?”

“She is evil!” I snapped. Luna gave a sad smile. “She is! She collected ponies like they were toys. Prizes! She manipulates, deceives, and violates others.”

“Blackjack, I ordered the deaths of ten million ponies and caused the deaths of sixty million zebras over the course of the war. You’ve seen Nopony’s Land. You haven’t seen the multitude of other battlefields, but I assure you that there were many worse. And if you consider how many lives the megaspells took, the number of corpses at my hooves becomes incalculably higher,” she bowed her head. “No matter how you regard it, I am evil too.”

I know ponies whose fuckups have killed millions. I wanted to tell her that she was wrong. That she hadn’t been responsible for all that. But hadn’t I been kicking myself for months for the ponies I had killed? How would I feel if I’d killed *millions*? I swallowed hard, struggling to find an answer contrary to one condemning her. “It was Fluttershy... she made the first megaspells. The zebras made the balefire bombs. Goldenblood... he... he manipulated you! He was working behind the scenes, doing things.” Luna’s smile looked almost pitying. “And the nobles and those business ponies started the war. And if Celestia hadn’t started it in—”

“Shhhhh.” She hushed me and reached out with her ghostly purple wings, holding my cheeks. “Do not speak ill of my sister. I beg you. Do not.” She closed her teal eyes. “It is my fault. I knew what Fluttershy was doing, and Goldenblood. I could have ended the war. Surrendered. Worked out a compromise with the Caesar. It would have been difficult for Equestria, but ponies have been through hard times before and triumphed. I refused. I resisted. I used the war for my own ends. The blood is on my hooves.”

“But Goldenblood... the O.I.A...” I stammered weakly, trying to find somepony to blame.

She smiled and raised her head. The darkness above us filled with wavy, waxy light. It coalesced into Goldenblood and Princess Luna. “So the ministries will be behind the war effort, out in public,” the spectral – well, *more* spectral – Luna was saying. “The military will actually fight the war. What am I supposed to do?”

“Smile and wave to the adoring public,” Goldenblood rasped. “Social events... royal functions... that sort of thing.”

Luna frowned down at him. "I refuse to be a puppet of my own bureaucracy," she said firmly.

"Princess, this is messy business. It's best if you aren't involved directly. Anything you do that is taken badly by your subjects will come back on you. When this war is finished, you'll clean house. Unleash the courts on the Ministry Mares, replace them with your own loyalists. Push any unsatisfied generals to retire and promote faithful majors to positions of control. The pivot from war to peace will be the mechanism to convert you from puppet to benign monarch for the next thousand years."

"I will not sit idly by, Goldenblood," Luna retorted. "I won't let the Ministries run amok and simply rubberstamp everything they do with the expectation that, when the time is right, I'll sweep in and end the war. I have to be involved. I can't sit on the sidelines giving rousing speeches while my country is at war!"

Goldenblood stared at her, then looked away. "Perhaps there's a way."

"What?" Princess Luna asked, leaning in.

"Since we're concentrating the government functions in the Ministries, we're going to need some way to coordinate between them. A paper pushing bureau. We don't want the Ministries doing it themselves or they will bureaucratize you out of power." He thought some more. "If we create a very passive, low-key office to conduct affairs outside the normal Ministry operations, we'll be able to keep tabs on the actions of the Ministries and manipulate them. We could expand on that. Infiltrate layers of your own government to know what they're really doing. Control and influence indirectly." He paused, wracked by a sudden fit of coughing. "Officially, you'd be a virtual figurehead. Unofficially, you'd be pulling the strings and running the country. When the time is right, we'd end the war, clean house, and put you fully and openly at the top."

Luna smiled broadly. "Oh, I like that. I really do. And I know just the pony to put in charge of it." She patted his feverish brow with a wing.

"Princess Luna, I'm going to die. This pink cloud is killing me," Goldenblood said weakly.

"Nonsense. I need you, Goldenblood. You and I, together, are going to create an Equestria that will last a thousand years. You can live for that, can't you? Can you live for me?" Luna asked, her eyes wide, lashes fluttering.

Goldenblood let out a long, wheezing breath. "As you command, my Princess."

The image faded, then shifted to a new one. Goldenblood sat behind a desk, a

mask covering his muzzle connected to quietly hissing air tanks. Luna stood nearby, levitating a scroll. "This Trueblood certainly has some interesting theories about the application of chaos magic to living systems. He actually thinks he can use it to merge living creatures."

Goldenblood didn't look up. "If Twilight Sparkle finds out about that, she'll resign. You know how she feels about anything related to Discord."

"Yes, well, you make sure she doesn't find out. Keep Chimera out of the M.A.S. as much as possible. Fluttershy should be much more amiable to its potential to make injured ponies better," Luna replied, then continued with a teasing smile, "And it would let you spend more time with her. You keep dreaming about her. *Such* dreams."

Goldenblood flushed. "You told me you wouldn't do that anymore."

"Now, Goldenblood, I could hardly avoid such intense dreams and call myself a Princess of the Night, could I?" she said as she trotted over to him. "You might want to pursue it."

"I'm hideous, and I can barely breathe. There are far better, far more whole ponies for her to spend her time with than I," Goldenblood said sourly. "Besides, she's not interested."

Luna just chuckled. "Trust me, she's interested." Goldenblood gaped at her from under his mask. Luna smirked as she waved the scroll at him. "Get this Trueblood some funding and see what you can pull together. I think the results of his research should be interesting."

The scene faded again, and a whole and healthy Goldenblood rutted vigorously with Fluttershy in a forest clearing. When he finished and they'd collapsed together in the grass, he gazed at her, then frowned. "Princess Luna?"

Fluttershy smirked at him, wrinkling up her nose. "Just wanted to pop in a minute. Completely accidental. Really. Though, while I'm here, do you think you can find out more about these 'megaspells' that are floating around the M.o.P.? Anything with the word 'mega' in it is something I want to know about."

"Why not just peek into her dreams?" Goldenblood said sourly.

"Because when she dreams, she dreams of babies," Luna said with a roll of her eyes. "And bunnies. And you."

That made him smile a little. "Fine. You could have waited until I woke to ask me

that, though, Princess.”

She pushed his shoulders down and straddled his hips. “Oh? You prefer this?” Her belly swelled more and more as wrinkles appeared in the corners of her eyes. His pristine white hide suddenly became striped with livid pink scars, and he coughed and struggled for breath. She leaned down, kissing him firmly, and the fantasy reasserted itself. She slid him back in with a sigh and a blissful smile. “Enjoy the fantasy, Goldenblood. You deserve it.”

“Thank you, Princess Luna,” he said a touch sarcastically, his hips moving. Suddenly the image changed again, now looking down at a double bed with a pregnant Fluttershy next to a sleeping Goldenblood. His hips twitched under the sheets as he murmured in his sleep ‘Princess Luna’. Fluttershy lay next to him, her eyes wide as she stared up, tears running down her cheeks.

I tore my eyes away for several moments. “No. That wasn’t you. This is some sort of... something.”

“I wasn’t a prude like my sister, Blackjack. True, I almost never did such things in the flesh, but dreams are another story. After all, the night is the time for lovers,” Luna replied softly, shame in her eyes. The image reasserted itself in another office. Luna paced back and forth angrily in front of a dour Goldenblood. “I can’t believe she did that. I can’t believe her! Five years. Five years out of the throne, and she pulls something like this! She could have gotten herself killed. Or worse!”

“Possibly much worse,” Goldenblood said quietly. “She won’t try it again. She blames herself for Big Macintosh’s death.” He didn’t look up from the scroll he was reading. “What will you do with Psalm?”

“Psalm...” Luna murmured. “I don’t know if I should give her a medal, a prison cell, or both. For now, keep her on ice in the O.I.A. Don’t let her kill herself, or worse, go to the press. For now, we’ll just play the part of mournful ruler. Tomorrow, we’ll have Rarity go to town on making Big Macintosh a hero known all across Equestria. How will the Ministries respond?”

“Applejack. . .,” Goldenblood said thoughtfully. “She’ll stay. Pour herself into work. That’s her normal M.O. The others should be neutral. Twilight, though... she’s taking it almost as bad as Applejack, and I’m not sure why.” He was silent for a moment. “I want to resign.”

Luna’s head snapped up. “What? Goldie, is this a joke?”

He shook his head slowly. “I think it would be best. You can use your Eclipse

persona to manage the O.I.A. You don't need me anymore," he replied, keeping his eyes down.

"Why?" Luna demanded flatly. "If it's for more pay, I can easily increase that."

He sighed, that rusty choking noise. "Luna, when we started this, I expected I'd have been dead for four years by now. I'm not. I'm grateful to you and the doctors for saving my life, but I'm tired of all this. I want to go back to teaching. Maybe a rock hunting expedition. Something that's not war and death."

"And you want to try and fix things with Fluttershy," Luna retorted. "Don't deny it. I've seen your dreams. Will your resignation resurrect your dead child, Goldenblood?" The question made him flinch as if she'd struck him. Luna sighed and trotted over, putting a hoof on top of his. "I need you to see this through to the end. Trueblood is making breakthroughs that might allow us to stop using ponies altogether. Silver Stripe's augmentations are already making a difference. The fact is that nopony could do this as well as you can. You're an artist, and your medium is politics."

"Princess!" He lifted his head in anguish, and she just looked on calmly, arching a brow. Slowly, he crumpled under her teal gaze. "I don't want to do this anymore."

She stared on. "Very well. If that's what you want. We'll process your retirement." She turned and stepped away from him. "Of course, we're going to have to redact your memories for the last five years. You know enough to make you an incalculably valuable asset if you were ever captured. For safety's sake, we'd have to take everything. There's no telling what might be of use to the zebras."

Goldenblood gaped at her. "Everything? But... I..."

"Everything," Luna replied, her voice softer as she glanced back at him over her shoulder. "Wouldn't that be easier, Goldie? No more painful memories of her leaving you? No more dreams of dead, bloody foals? You could go on to whatever life you wish, never knowing what you did. It's a gift, really."

Goldenblood stared at her. "And when it comes time to clean house?"

Luna didn't answer for several seconds, then turned to face him. "Well, I imagine that that won't be your concern. As you said, I can manage without you now. But some of the Ministry Mares are going to have to answer for the things they've done." The threat was lightly spoken, but it hung in the air like a sword.

"Very well," Goldenblood said as he averted his eyes. "I'll stay."

"Good," Luna said as she trotted over, putting a hoof on his shoulder. "I'd rather do

this with you than without you.” Then she turned and trotted away, leaving him sitting alone with a horrified look on his face.

“You made him stay,” I said softly as the image evaporated. The lingering light from her horn cast stark lines in the shadows around us.

“He was valuable and useful to me. Of course I made him stay. I manipulated him into doing what I want. Something my sister would never have done,” she said quietly. “Still, our relationship was never the same after that. He was increasingly... resistant. Effective, ruthless, oh yes... but a wall had gone up between us. He avoided sleep, waiting until he was exhausted and fell into dreamless slumber. He kept secrets from me. I didn’t think he could, but he did,” she said with a slow shake of her head.

“Horizons. And Gardens of Equestria,” I said evenly.

“Yes...” she murmured. “Gardens concerned me more, honestly. I knew Twilight had the Elements of Harmony, the artifacts that had banished me so long ago. I always worried that, for whatever reason, they might be used again. I couldn’t, of course, ask her for them. I never had the relationship with Twilight that my sister had. If the bombs hadn’t fallen, I don’t know how long I would have waited before arresting her and her friends. I had a list of ponies to purge from the Ministries, and all of them were on it. I’d ride the public sentiment following the end of the war over their dead bodies. Everypony would blame them. And Goldenblood. Especially Goldenblood.”

“Because Goldenblood made something that could destroy Equestria?” I asked.

“In part, but also because I had to be clear of all the things done via the O.I.A. I believed a pardon for Fluttershy would ensure he died quietly, with no problematic last minute confessions.”

“Why did he make Horizons?” I asked, looking above us for answers. “That’s what I don’t understand.”

Luna’s horn glowed. A prison cell formed in the air above us. Goldenblood was chained upright to the back wall. A collar around his neck barely let him breathe, and his forehooves were held above his head. “Why?” Luna asked the chained stallion. “Why did you do this? After all we’ve done together. All we’ve been through... why?”

Goldenblood didn’t answer her. He just stared flatly, his yellow eyes steady. “I was used.”

“By me?” Luna asked flatly. “You knew that when we started this.”

“By many people. I let myself be used. I thought it best.” He closed his eyes. “I should have died in Littlehorn. Then none of this would have happened. You would never have ruled as you have. The war would have fizzled out. No Ministries. No more nightmare.”

“No Fluttershy,” Luna said coldly.

He was quiet for almost a minute. “Are you going to execute her along with Twilight and the others?”

“I deeply respect Twilight and her friends. They’ve done good work for me,” Luna countered.

“But you don’t like them. They aren’t your friends,” Goldenblood wheezed. “Not like me.”

“You? You dare?!” Luna’s eyes flashed as she loomed above him. “You betrayed me! You deceived me. ME! And you dare to call me a friend? I am a royal princess. I do not need friends!”

Goldenblood, filthy and exhausted, slowly smiled. “You’re wrong, Luna. You do. We all do.”

“What is Horizons? Gardens I can disassemble without you, but where is the other?” Goldenblood didn’t answer. “Speak! We command it!”

He closed his eyes. “No,” he murmured. She gaped at him, and he went on, “Here are my terms. Abdicate in favor of your sister. Let her end this nightmare. Then I’ll tell you everything. Banish me after that, if you want. Execute me, if you want. But leave the throne, Luna.”

She glared down at him in disgust. “Keep your secrets, then. Let them hang you,” she said as she turned and walked out of the cell.

“He wanted you to quit?” I asked the luminous alicorn.

“Yes. I cannot comprehend why. For nearly a decade, we had worked together. Built a new Equestria together. Then, suddenly, he wishes all of it torn away. Why?” She shook her head, looking to the side where a massive pink and green dragon blasted Goldenblood with flame. Every bit of him was burned away. Every bit. By dragonfire...

“Wait...” I muttered as I stared at the memory. “You didn’t have him executed, did you?” Luna gaped at me, and I glared at her. “You’re still playing games!”

"He's dead," Luna murmured. "Burned to nothing."

"Dragonfire doesn't always kill, though!" I snapped at her. "LittlePip used Spike's to travel into the S.P.P. hub! You did the same thing to Goldenblood, didn't you?"

Luna stared at me a moment, then whispered, "Yes."

"He's alive," I said. "The golden son of a mule is actually alive." Given how many other ponies I'd run into who'd lived through the apocalypse, I couldn't say I was surprised anymore. "Where is he?"

She stared at me for the longest moment. Then she whispered softly, "I don't know."

"Stop playing games. Tell me the truth. Where is he?" I insisted.

For a moment, I didn't think she was going to tell me. I started to turn away, but then she said quietly, "Here. He's here. In my fortress. My Redoubt."

I felt a cold prickle go up my spine. He was here. And so close. So very close. "Thank you," I answered, not looking back at her.

"I just wanted to protect my people. I just wanted to do better than Celestia... for once," Luna begged. I glanced back. The purple soul was slipping back inside the dark shell of my body. If only things were different... if only things had been better...

If only so many things...

The time around us thawed, and my body continued walking away. I sat there, my eyes clenched shut in this desolate, shadowy world. If Hades had his way, I'd get to see all of them die or enslaved. And there was nothing I could do about it.

Except find that golden bastard and beat some answers out of him.

Footnote: Loading, please wait...

(Author's notes: So, another step closer to the end. Thanks so much for following along for so long. While I'm not sure if I'll get to the end before 70, I do hope I will get it done soon. Thanks to everyone for being fans and sticking with the story as long as you have. Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and equally huge thanks to Hinds, Bro, swicked, and Heartshine. The school I'm working at decided not to give me a job, so I'll be moving home in a month. Tips at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal will be appreciated greatly, given that I'll be unemployed for 3 months. Yeah. Here's hoping I get a reply to one of my applications. Sigh.

Anyway, hope the story was decent.... and I really need to get a girlfriend... boyfriend... lyra plushie... something! ::hurries off in shame::)

(Editor note: Just to be clear, when the wires in Charm's brain snapped taut, she flipped over her back. swicked.)

67. Goldenblood

"No. You won't. You may have made it impossible for Shining Armor to perform his spell, but now that you have so foolishly revealed your true self, I can protect my subjects from you!"

The shadow world played with my senses of distance and time. A dozen steps took me halfway to Chapel. A hundred more got me to the village itself. Spectral ponies moved in unnatural jerks and starts like images on a broken projector. With no sun, I had no grasp of any direction other than up once I got away from familiar landmarks. I had tried to teleport back to a room in the Citadel but hit some kind of magical barrier that kept me from reaching my destination; every time I'd attempted it, my horn had sparked and I hadn't moved. And with no idea where it was or even if I *could* eventually walk back, I was left alone in the shadows.

I sat beside the dark, empty bed of the Hoofington River and laughed bitterly. I'd died two, maybe three times, and now I was stuck in a shadow world, unable to do anything to stop Cognitum and Amadi, return to the castle, or contact my friends. And most maddening of all: the realization that Goldenblood was alive. That shouldn't have surprised me. Twilight had survived as part of the Goddess. Rainbow Dash a ghoul. If LittlePip had been right, Fluttershy was a *tree*. At this point, I could come across Rarity's brain in a levitating robot, a Pinkie Pie spritebot, or the ghost of Applejack and not been terribly surprised.

Goldenblood. On the one hoof, I desperately wanted to talk to him, and on the other, I wanted to put a magic bullet through his head. He'd been the enabler. Maybe Luna would have ruled the same without him; maybe she'd have done even worse than she had with his help... or maybe, without him behind the scenes, the war would have ended peacefully instead of in fire. I didn't know. All I knew was that I had to find him. Above all else, the question of *why* burned inside me. Why had he suddenly broken down towards the very end? Had he really gone mad, as Cognitum suggested? A doomsday weapon that killed everyone on the planet? Why did it go off on Cognitum? Was it mad too? I'd had plenty of experience with crazy machines! Madness. It was the simple answer, and that wretched stallion didn't have a simple bone in his body.

The shadow world had water of a sort; it trickled out of the rocks cold and clear and sterile. It didn't have life, though. Just shadowy parodies. Ghostly trees shifted and

flickered around me as I walked, disappearing when I stopped. Translucent ponies trotted by, froze at a crawl, and then suddenly blurred away in long streaks. Then some zoomed backwards like a rewinding recording. The silence was absolute; there were no echoes, and it didn't matter how loudly I yelled. This strange place seemed to render every noise I made a whisper.

Sweet Celestia, forget Goldenblood and Cognitum. I was going to go crazy myself if I didn't get out of here!

"There you are," Tenebra, clad in dark purple armor, said as she flew out of the blackness with perfect timing. "I thought for sure you'd end up dead out here."

"There are dangers here?" I asked, skeptically glancing around me. "I haven't seen any."

"Blackjack, there are pockets here where time flows so fast that a pony will live out their lifespan in ten seconds... or so slow that you'd be frozen permanently like a fly in amber," the gray batpony said as she landed. "Cracks in space that can split you in half. Distortions that can turn you inside out. Granted, they're all rare, but you only have to run into one once for it to kill you. And yes, there are... *things* here. Unique. Deadly. And nothing I want to fight. We should get back to the castle."

"So it's a place that kills me just by existing. Haven't ever dealt with that before," I said a touch more sarcastically than I'd intended. I sighed, peering out into the bleak twilight around me. "I'm sorry. I'm just..."

"Frustrated?" the mare asked innocently. That simple little word made something snap in me.

"Frustrated? My whole life has been people telling me what to do," I said as I started pacing. "And you know what? I was cool with that. I was! Mom. The Overmare. Didn't matter. So long as somepony had a modicum of virtue or a little bit of authority and a direction for me to go in, I went. I did." I laughed, my voice echoing like a chorus of whispering ghosts in the shadows. "I let a robot send me on a wild mare chase all across the wasteland. A quest! A Luna-damned quest for secrets and answers, going against the bad ponies who hurt people and trying to justify all the collateral damage I caused by trying to be good! I ran myself into the fucking ground rather than taking my loved ones and getting as far from here as I possibly could. When a bony hallucination started giving me advice, what did I do? Did I ignore it? Did I tell my friends? Did I mention it even in passing to any pony I met with a stethoscope and a theoretical doctorate? No, I gave him a spot as my chief fucking advisor!" I snapped towards her. "And do you know what it's gotten me? Huh? Do

you?”

“Uhhh. . .” Tenebra backed away from be a step or two.

“This!” I shouted as loud as I could, spreading my hooves wide as I gestured to the gloomy void all around. “Nothing! I didn’t even get a decent death. Three times!” I said as I paced even faster. “Outside of P-21 and Scotch, everyone I knew prior to six months ago is dead, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg. People I didn’t even know died because I was too hasty, or too slow, or too stupid to do the right thing. I lost my body for one made of steel, and then I lost that when my enemy decided she wanted to trade up! I got myself knocked up, and now she has my baby. She has my friends. She has my very special pony and made her cry!” I hissed through my teeth at Tenebra, who stared at me as if I was deranged. “She took my fucking cutie mark,” I said in a murderous mutter, jabbing at my flank with a hoof. “She took my talent.”

I grimaced as I stepped towards her. “And you know what? I’d be okay with THAT too,” I hissed at her, jabbing my hoof at her chest. “I can deal with losing shit. I’m an expert at that. I can try and get it back. Talk to Glory. Talk to P-21. Tell them I fucked up again and see if they can work something out. Only I can’t, because I went from being stuck in a city filled with swarms of pony-eating robots to being stuck in a world of eternal darkness *and your father won’t let me out!*” I roared at her, making her take another step away. “So yes! I think ‘frustrated’ is one way to put it!”

And then, because no utterly foalish tantrum is complete without it, I clenched my eyes and screamed as loudly as I could. I put as much of my rage, frustration, and self-disgust as I could into it. . . and this damnable place bled my outrage down to an anemic cry. When I finished, my throat ached and my eyes stung with tears as my heart thundered in my chest. I sat down hard on the rock, bowing my head. “I just. . . I didn’t want to lose it all. I can’t even be a mother here. This body is sterile,” I muttered raggedly, forlornly. I’d blown out all the fury inside me, leaving behind nothing but cold cinders and ash.

I felt a wing tentatively drape itself over my shoulders. “Please, don’t yell,” Tenebra said quietly, quickly. “I’m going to assume at least half of that was true. Are you going to give up? Are you done?”

I took a deep breath of the cool, sterile air. “No,” I said, so low I could barely hear it myself. I glanced at her. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

She gave a small shrug. “I’ve grown up wanting to smack my brother upside the

head for his stupid plans. Like gluing all the furniture on the walls. Or trying to do a pantomime of Nightmare Moon's demise. Or using oral sex to ease into the fact that eventually I was expected to do the deed with him knowing that every biology textbook said it was wrong. Never mind morals. I know what it's like being trapped, so I can sympathize." She gestured off into the darkness with a wing. "Shall we go?"

I nodded, and we started walking quietly along the dry riverbed. "How'd it get so bad?" I asked with a frown. We walked past an immense, broken black obelisk, now lying on its side by the riverbed, engraved with icons of an alicorn. As we travelled past it, it shimmered and disappeared into a ridge of broken rock, evaporating like a mirage.

She took a while to answer, glancing back at me several times as she struggled to find words. "Stygus and Father aside, most batponies don't have the ability to travel from here to the world of light. Luna blesses us each in different ways. Most have to use the portal to the Citadel. Since the majority of our kind were in towns and cities, they died along with the rest of Equestria. Those that didn't were left trapped in the Wasteland. Only a few made it back."

"And those that did?" I asked.

She gave a wry smile as a forest of ebony trees flickered into existence around us, disappeared, and flickered back again. "You're a stable pony. We bottled things up and got busy doing nothing. King Ebonstar ruled us, but generation after generation things simply... dwindled. We trained. We studied. We did all we could to excel... then we bred with second cousins, then first cousins, then half siblings..." She shook her head. "Genetic death."

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

Her tufted ears dropped. "Not as much as I am. Stygus is an utter idiot. I'm twice as smart as he is, but he was the one who left our home to try and save our species. I thought he was a randy fool. What he's done... it may just work." Then she glanced back at me as the ground beneath her shifted into an obsidian road. "Of course, if you're right, we may only have bought a few generations."

"If I'm right." I sighed. "Sometimes I don't think anyone's right. Not me. Not Cog-nitum. Not Princess Luna. Not anyone." I tapped the side of my head. "I have the memories of... at least two dozen ponies in my head. I can't think of a single one that had it all together." I closed my eyes. "Does the name 'Goldenblood' mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?" she asked as the shadowy road flickered back to uneven piles.

I let out a grunt. "I guess not. Tell me, do you think it's possible for one pony to manipulate an entire country from behind the scenes?"

"Of course," she answered. I glanced at her in surprise, arching a brow. "Princesses. Caesars. Generals. Everypony always remembers the leaders, but dig down a little more. Commander Ebonstar served Princess Luna's night guard. Just what did he do under her command? How did he execute orders? Was he loyal? Did he bend rules? What of the ponies under them?" She shook her head again. "No pony really knows everything. But if a pony was skilled enough, certainly. The thing you'll never be able to answer, though, is the question of who was manipulating *them*."

Her words echoed in my head, but again everything came down to that one question: Why? Why did Goldenblood do what he did? Why make Horizons? Why betray Luna? Why did he freak out at the end?

All about us sprang a shadowy metropolis of buildings. An entire city of black stone. "What is all this?" I asked, whirling at the looming gothic architecture.

"Princess Luna's capital," she said with a wing sweep at the grand structures of flickering, shadowy rock decorated with a moon and star motif. I gaped, then peered at her skeptically. "It was never built," she said with a wry smile. "This was Princess Luna's dream, before the Nightmare. Her own city, her Canterlot. But Celestia refused, and it drove Luna to darkness. Imbrium was never to be. But it persists here."

"So this place is a dream?" I asked. "Or is the dream a place here?"

She gave a silent shrug as we trotted past soaring buildings with flying buttresses decorated with bat wings and pointed arches. Obsidian statuary dedicated to the night was everywhere. I'd seen pieces of Canterlot in memories; this place was dark but no less grand. What if Celestia had let Luna go and found her own kingdom of the night? Would she still have rebelled? Been banished? Returned and been forced to rule a realm that was never her own? Would Twilight and her friends have met, formed their bonds, and then watched those bonds melt in the fires of war? Would I have ever been born?

Everything was connected, whether I wanted to admit it or not. Had I killed Sanguine, or Dawn, or Charm, I wouldn't be here. When you examined the intricacies of a life, any life, it all seemed so contrived, yet what else was there to do but accept it and move on from there?

As the city melted away around us, we approached the only thing that seemed real: a looming black fortification rearing up into the eternal dark sky. Then I said words I didn't expect to say. "I need to talk to your father."

She jerked her head, eyes wide. "That is not wise, especially so soon after—" I saw her ear twitch again and she froze. We stood motionless in the Hoofington riverbed, the dry sand and pebbles shifting around us silently as if an invisible current flowed past.

Freezing wasn't good, but it was better than talking and getting killed. My magic lifted the dark purple spear I'd taken from the armory. "What is it?" I whispered.

"I hear an echo," Tenebra whispered back, her yellow eyes narrowed in focus as her ears twitched.

"That's it?" I asked, sounding let down. With all I'd faced, this seemed a little anticlimactic.

"Not an echo of sound. An echo." She paused, and then I heard it too. A wailing noise mixed with sobs. It would have been pitiful if it hadn't sounded so big. "An echo of a life."

"Ghosts? You're telling me there are actually ghosts here?" I said, both skeptical and freaked out. I talked to the soul of Princess Luna, so my credulity limit was set pretty high. "What do we do?"

Suddenly, from the darkness, a shape appeared. Its body seemed to be that of an immense weeping serpent. In its wake, the shadowscape was ripped up as if by a potent current. Dimly through the darkness, I thought I heard the immense creature sobbing over and over, 'What a world' and 'It hurts! It hurts so much!' "Flee!" Tenebra shouted, turning and racing away from the immense beast.

The floating serpent creature turned towards us, weeping and thrashing through the air. While its smoky quartz body wasn't actually touching anything as it swam after us, its motions were releasing waves of force that I could feel, even from this distance. I tried to teleport to Tenebra, and my focus popped like a soap bubble. Eyes widening, I fled by manual means after her.

Surprisingly, I caught up with her inside a minute. The batpony had an odd hitch to her gait which made her stumble every dozen or so feet. "Why is it chasing us?"

"It's an echo of a life. It's not a real thing! It just wants to be experienced. Live its life again," she shouted, her flapping wings barely keeping her from faceplanting.

“What’s so bad about that?” I asked, glancing back at the storm that was ripping up the riverbed behind us. The closer it got, the more clearly I could hear something like screams and the unmistakable ‘Skoom’ of balefire bombs.

“It died!” she shouted back. “You want that to happen to you?”

Okay. Fair point! “It wouldn’t be my first time,” I retorted, but I wasn’t sure if I’d come back this time if it happened. I tried to get off a teleportation spell again, but the disruptive field around the serpent kept scattering my focus. I gritted my teeth, trying over and over again, and finally my horn flashed and I teleported up to the rim of the river. I turned and saw Tenebra stumbling along. “Okay! You can fly now!” She didn’t. The spectral serpent had ghostly balefire bombs going off above it as it swam through the air. Dear Celestia, what was wrong with her? “I’m clear! Fly!”

But she still didn’t fly. Her wings flailed about unevenly and only threw off her stride even more. Then her eyes rolled back and her legs spasmed out from beneath her. She collapsed onto her side, jerking in the throes of a seizure. The ghostly creature zoomed in for the kill.

I didn’t think. I simply acted. I teleported to stand atop Tenebra and let the monster hit me first.

At the contact, I was jerked in a way that felt similar to the effect of a memory orb or the Perceptitron, but far more intimate. I swam through the Hoofington bay alongside the massive battleship as it prepared for another mission. I didn’t like the pony war, hated it, in fact, but bad things happened to non-ponies who didn’t support the ministries’ war effort. Patrolling the bay for talisman mines was far simpler than resisting, and it wasn’t like I was killing anyone.

Suddenly alarms went off at the base, and sirens sounded further in. Sailor ponies ran back and forth along the buildings and on the ships. Contrails snaked across the sky; not one or two, or even a dozen, but hundreds. It seemed surreal. Then they started to fall, and instantly the naval base was silhouetted in a garish rainbow glow. I went blind, hearing the screams and then the concussive roar as it rolled across the bay. I dove for the safety of the water, and then. . . the *Luna* exploded. The blast was so intense, I felt myself burning even beneath the waves. I swam down, buried myself in the mud, and prayed for the pain to end.

It didn’t. When I emerged, my magnificently coiffed mane began to fall out, and my scales sloughed off. Then my skin. Then the muscles beneath. I was larger than the ponies dying in the green snow; it took me weeks to finally perish. And when I did, I died thrashing and blind on the banks of this river. I hadn’t wanted to die. It

hadn't even been my war. . .

I don't know if it was my blank body, the fact that I had way too much experience dying, or simply that the echo wasn't fatal after all, but the ghostly serpent whisked through me and continued down the river. The screaming faded away, along with the roar of balefire. Soon, the only sound was Tenebra spasming at my hooves.

I had exactly enough medical knowledge to put the haft of my spear between her teeth to keep her from biting off her tongue, then wait for the seizure to pass. Thirty second later, her jerking slowed, then stopped. I pulled out the spear haft and held her as she went from seizing to crying. Stygius couldn't speak coherently. Tenebra had seizures. I wonder what would have happened if they actually had kids together, then shoved that ugly thought aside.

"Well, that was an interesting death," I said as I held her.

She opened a teary, yellow eye and wiped her snotty muzzle on a hoof. "You. . . you experienced it? And you lived?"

"Well, honestly, on a scale of one to ten, it was about a four. I mean, dying of radiation poisoning sucks butt – I mean, I should know; I've nearly gone that way twice – but being in a room of screaming, melted flesh and metal is a whole lot worse." She stared at me for several seconds, her incredulity shifting to shock. "Really," I said with a small smile. "I've had worse."

"I suppose Whisper is less of an exaggerating braggart than I thought," she murmured as she carefully rose and adjusted her armor. She dripped wounded pride. "I'm sorry I was not able to fly to safety," she said in a faintly tremulous voice. 'I wish you hadn't seen that,' added her posture.

"I'm guessing this wasn't the first time?" I asked softly.

"No. It happens quite frequently when I am. . . apprehensive and stressed. All batponies have physical, social, and educational regimens to keep us fit and sane. I've. . . frequently. . . failed them. My brother's. . . *mare*," she said delicately, as if she'd much rather have said something else. "She found them quite amusing at first. Thankfully she found organizing orgies much more diverting."

"Your parents are. . . um. . ." Well, this was getting into awkward territory.

"Half brother and sister. They share the same father," she replied. "Mother suffers from acute angina. Father from frequent migraines."

I stared at her for several seconds. "You guys can't stay here," I told her quietly. "If

you're at the point of genetic collapse, bringing in a few dozen ponies isn't going to save your people. You've got to convince him to let me go."

"Even if I told him about your rescue, he would criticize my weakness, not reward your courage," she said as she pulled herself to her hooves.

"But her mother would thank you," a gentle voice said from above us. The pale Persephone landed before us, along with Whisper and Stygius. She trotted towards me and gave me a firm hug, then a second to Tenebra. "Thank you," she said, looking at me with her pale red eyes.

"You're welcome," I replied. "But I meant what I said. I can't stay here in the shadows. Every second, who knows what Cognitum is doing? Can't you do something?"

"Perhaps, if we had a month, but according to you and my son, we don't," she said, glancing over at Stygius.

I turned to face him, and he held up his board. 'Fighting. Zebra & ponies. Bad'.

"Oh, isn't he just so *eloquent*?" Whisper cooed, stroking his cheek with a powerhoof. Tenebra made a gagging face behind his back.

I groaned, rubbing my temples. "That was the plan. Harbingers and Brood build up. Brood start to attack. Harbingers save everypony in the Hoof. Cognitum takes over."

"Security takes over, actually," Whisper said. "The heavy metal version of you apparently wasted no time asserting she was the biggest badass in the Hoof. I can only imagine how pissed Big Daddy is."

I sighed and looked at Persephone. "Queen Persephone, if you can't help me get home, then can you tell me if the batponies have a prisoner here named Goldenblood?"

Her expression sobered immediately. "You know of him?" I gave a slow nod.

"Is he still alive?" I asked.

"I..." she swallowed, then looked at the Citadel behind her. Then back at us. "When the bombs fell, we followed the Princess's orders. The Citadel was sealed, and all members of the O.I.A. were kept out. Apparently, this was quite a surprise to them. But there was one we fetched when we realized we could not save Princess Luna. We retrieved this Goldenblood, brought him here. He instructed... demanded, really... that we fortify his cell. He's been there ever since. I am not sure what he is, but he is alive."

"Please. I have to see him. I need to know why he did what he did," I said quietly.

She seemed to struggle with the choice. Finally, she gazed at Tenebra and answered, "Only my husband is supposed to have any contact with him. His cell is completely automated. But." She nuzzled her daughter. "You saved my child, and this I can help you with."

Together, with Stygius and Whisper carrying me, we returned to the Citadel.

I'm not a very well-read pony. In Stable 99, I'd flunked reading two years in a row. It hadn't seemed all that important to me, given that I was a C shift security mare. What did I need to read for? There'd been one book though that I'd read quite extensively as a filly: Daring Do and Dungeon of Darkness. It had cool pictures, and Textbook hated it on account of it giving young ponies ideas of leaving the stable; that made it literature as far as I was concerned. She'd finally fed it to the recycler a year or so ago. Still, the images in that story of a hole dug into the earth with bars and chains had been burned into my mind an image of what a dungeon was. We passed by several strange chambers on our way. Libraries that I had no doubt Twilight would have given a few molars to examine. A cold, defunct chemistry laboratory that still held an acrid tang. A huge purple gemstone carved in the shape of a heart that filled me with a sense of numb fear.

When Persephone, Tenebra, and I reached the bottom of a winding staircase, I beheld a massive, round, gear-toothed door with the symbol of the O.I.A. on it set in the wall of dark basalt. A modification had been made, though: the crescent moon in the center had been turned on its side, points upward, with wings drawn up and out from the sides and a star-topped wand rising from the center. Persephone trotted to the control panel set beside it and typed something in. "There's a stable down here?" By reflex, I checked my hoof for a PipBuck location tag.

"Indeed. Where did you think we got our food and water? While Stygius and my husband enable us to bring in fresh food, there's no way we could both rely on just that and stay hidden." The door groaned and hissed, then rumbled slowly away. "It took almost three years to build, using a wide variety of clandestine contractors and secret arrangements with Stable-Tec."

Goldenblood's arrangement with Scootaloo, looking the other way while she planned her stables and their various social experiments. "But why are you living up there if you have a stable down here?" I asked as the door rolled aside. I half expected there

to be a whole crowd of ponies within, but the door opened to a large, empty, and dimly-lit entry chamber. Tables were set in rows beneath banners that read ‘present identification’, ‘military personnel’, ‘government personnel’, and ‘civilian personnel’. “Did something happen to the stable?”

“Not at all. We’d simply prefer to live in our ancestral home rather than a hole in the ground. We also lacked the technical skills and numbers to run this facility,” Persephone said quietly. “Our ancestors simply put as much on standby and automated maintenance as they could and left it down here. Every year we come down, do what we can to keep things tidy, and raid the food stores and water talismans.”

There was something amiss about this stable. We walked from the entry into what I’d assumed was an atrium. Instead, we walked past directories pointing to the left and right. ‘Atrium A’, ‘Atrium B’, and ‘Atrium C’? “How big is this place?” I said as I gaped at the map on the directory. ‘Big Macintosh Megastable Redoubt’ was printed at the bottom.

“As large as the castle above, and then some,” she said as we trotted to an elevator. We stepped in, she pushed a button, one of twenty, and the car started to descend. “This place was built with the intention of protecting critical features of the Equestrian government in the event of a catastrophic attack. Being in the shadow world, even the most powerful assaults could be endured. The war, if necessary, could be commanded even if Canterlot were lost.”

“And after Luna learned about Horizons, she made sure nopony used it till she was sure it was safe,” I said, Horse’s memories niggling at me with impressions of him trying to weed out who was loyal, who was useful, and who he could purge to win points with Princess Luna. “The evacuation plans were all messed up. No wonder only the pegasi were able to regroup and organize.” And the Steel Rangers, by commandeering other stables and smaller bunkers.

“Yes. Only a token skeleton crew remained. We took over, but even then we didn’t even have a tenth of the number this place was made to hold.” The doors hissed open, and I immediately shivered. Our breath turning to mist in the frigid air. Persephone started forward, and a minute later I followed. “Without the Redoubt, Equestria was in chaos. Command networks were destroyed, but there were still some agents that continued with the old plan.”

“Garnet. You shut the door on her,” I said with a small smile, remembering her dying slowly of radiation poisoning. Normally I wouldn’t wish that on anypony, but Garnet had been abnormally vile. I could appreciate the fitness of the batponies’ decision.

If Garnet had made it in here, she'd have probably killed everypony who crossed her. "What about Goldenblood?"

"I don't know what he said to my ancestors, but somehow he convinced them not to execute him, or throw him out into the green snow to die. I know not why, but he was entombed, by his own request, within this empty place. Every year we come down and find him still sealed."

I shivered as we trotted along. Behind glass walls were racks upon racks of boxes. "What is this place?" I muttered, levitating one box off its shelf. My magic brushed off the frost. 'Seed stock AJ-2011-BM: Wheat' was printed on its side, along with an expiration date almost three hundred years in the future!

"A storeroom. One of many. Some, like this one, hold seeds and spores. Others hold animal embryos." I twitched at the word; I'd gotten a D in reproductive education, but I'd answered that one right on the multiple choice test. "Hundreds of different species." There had to be enough seeds here to cover the Hoof in food. Or more. No telling how much of it might have spoiled, but still.

Tenebra added, "There's a surprising amount of material for fabrication. Machine shops. Almost no weapons though. Curious, given the purpose of this place."

We reached the end of the hall. Etched on the door was one word: 'Nopony'. I glanced at her, then at the door. It hissed open. There was a second door on the far side of the cubic room within, one every bit as heavy as the entrance door above. A desk and a terminal sat in the middle of the room, facing me, with with a beam turret in each corner. A trio of memory orbs sat in a sealed glass case beside the terminal, each one radiating that golden yellowish light. I tried to tug the case open, but it remained shut.

"What the heck is this?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at the four turrets. Was it just me, or did they look like the extra hot beamy death model? Glory'd know for sure. Damn, I wished she was here.

"They were installed per Goldenblood's request, to discourage idle attempts to access his prison. My husband has the override to the turrets, but I'm afraid I do not know it. Since a unicorn is needed to use these memory orbs, we've never risked opening those doors." She gestured to the terminal with a snowy wing. "Once you turn it on, the case will open. I can only assume they contain memories to help you open the door."

I looked at the three in their case. "Oh, is that all?" I said sarcastically.

“No,” she replied evenly. “There is supposedly an enchantment upon them. If you do not know the password, your heart will stop and you will never wake again.” I gaped at her, and she gave a faint smile. “You asked.”

I sighed, then chuckled softly. “Yeah. I did,” I said as I sat before the terminal. “I don’t suppose I could just chat with him without going through all this, could I?” I asked lamely, hoping the answer would be a surprise ‘yes’.

Persephone smiled and shook her head sadly. “That is not the way these things are done, Blackjack. Good luck,” she said simply as she leaned in and hugged me. “May the night comfort and bring you rest,” she said solemnly before turning and walking out of the room.

Tenebra averted her eyes, then moved closer and gave me a shoulder nudge. “Thank you for your assistance in the riverbed.” She backed away, glancing over her shoulder at her retreating mother. “I...” She met my gaze again. “You don’t have to do this. Give me a few days. I’m sure between us we can get Father to relent!”

“In a few days, none of this is going to matter, one way or the other,” I replied with a quiet smile. “Either Cognitum or Amadi will win, or Horizons will obliterate everything I care about. Goldenblood has answers. I need to know...” I trailed off as my eyes returned to the terminal. “You should get out of here. Knowing my luck, I’ll sneeze and seal you up in here with me.”

“Right,” she said with a sheepish smile, then started for the exit. I turned, examining the terminal keys. Okay. Time to do this. I stretched out a hoof and— “Because I just...” Tenebra blurted behind me, and I froze, my hoof inches from the button. I turned, glancing back at her with a hard stare. “I just wanted... I mean... Whisper said how you like mares, and...”

“I’ll ask Glory,” I said as lightly as I could, then gestured to the door with my horn. “Now excuse me, but I need to set off the room of death for answers to questions.”

“Come, daughter. She’ll return on her own later,” Persephone said in that offering-condolences tone of voice.

“Right. Right,” Tenebra said as I returned my attention to the terminal. I sighed, checked to make sure she was going, then reached out a hoof again to the buttons. Time to get this party— A thunderous sneeze detonated behind me, and I jumped in shock, landing with my hooves splayed to either side of the terminal. I glanced back at the blushing batpony mare standing in the doorway as she wiped her muzzle with

a wing. "Sorry. All this dry air. . ."

Funny how a spike in anger can give you just enough telekinetic force to toss a batpony down a hall like a paper airplane. Persephone watched her sail overhead and sighed, gave me a shrug of resignation, then, shaking her head, moved down to assist her offspring. I trotted back to the terminal and smacked the keys with a hoof before the universe conspired some way to somehow accidentally throw her into the chamber and seal her inside with me.

As soon as I did, there was a flicker as a magical shield was erected around the room. The turrets hummed, all four orienting on me. Finally, the memory orb case popped open. I saw each orb was conveniently numbered. I stared at the cursor on the terminal.

> Who did it?

Well, that was refreshingly vague. "Rarity, in the atrium, with the candlestick," I drawled sarcastically as I lifted the orb. I stared into the golden depths. "Okay, Goldenblood, deal the deck and let's play." With my courage and bravado running neck and neck, I touched the orb to my horn.

As soon as contact was made, I felt a growing pressure building in my head, the world's strongest migraine. It felt as if my skull was going to explode, and for all I knew, it was! A rasped question thudded in my skull with each throb. 'What did I teach?'

Betrayal and lying? Secret conspiracies 101? But with each flippant thought, the pain increased. The thudding was starting to grow and grow, yet every muscle in my body was frozen in place. Was it just me, or could I feel blood dripping out my nose? Think. Think! It'd been before Luna. . . at Littlehorn. Geology? No. . . arrgh, my head. No, he'd taught something else. Something that'd made Luna pick him. Politics? Government? Nnnnnngggh... things were getting really blurry. History! He'd taught—the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

I didn't recognize the body immediately. Goldenblood always felt like a sack of rusty nails in all the memories of his I'd been in thus far. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought that this was Vanity. He lay in a bed in a room filled with books. A hoof rapped on the door over and over again. "Mr. Goldenblood? Mr. Goldenblood?" a colt said to accompany each knock.

Goldenblood sighed and slipped out of bed, his body fatigued. He shook with a

yawn and then walked to the door, opening it and staring down at a gray unicorn colt with a small frown. "Icebrand? What's wrong? It's two in the morning."

"There's a problem with a zebra, sir. The dean wants you to come talk to her and calm her down before something bad happens," he piped. Goldenblood gave a small nod and immediately stepped out into the amethyst and ebony-lined hallways with decorations depicting silver stars and crescent moons.

"Are you adjusting well, Icebrand?" Goldenblood asked in quiet tones as they walked past doors. Through one that was half open, I saw a half dozen bunk beds. "It must be a big adjustment from the orphanage to here."

"A bit, sir. Mum always wanted me to get an education. She wanted me to be smart enough to avoid stupid fights," he replied. "I didn't expect the school to be so big though."

"Littlehorn has almost two hundred students, and it had been built for a thousand. Unlike Princess Celestia's school, we accept any pony of merit who yearns to learn," he gave a little smile. "Not that Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns isn't a fine institution, of course."

"I'm just glad they took me. My grades haven't been good since Mum. . . ahem. . ." he flushed and dropped his eyes. "I didn't expect them to, mister."

"Special accommodations were made for orphans and victims of the war effort." There was a pause, and then a muttered afterthought, "I didn't think there'd be so many, though."

As they walked along, I could see through windows that the school was shaped like a giant crescent with a round structure in the middle of the arc. Four stories below us were a cluster of a half dozen wagons. Ponies and zebras could be seen sleeping and keeping watch in the moonlight. At the end of the hall, we stepped into an open-topped cagelike elevator hanging in a vast central shaft. The car dropped silently in the grip of levitation talismans. "Um. . . sir?" the colt said hesitantly.

"Yes, Icebrand?" he asked, his eyes staring straight ahead at the wall of the shaft as it slowly passed by.

"Is it true you used to live with zebras?"

"When I was your age. Maybe a little younger." Goldenblood smiled a little. "Mother liked to travel. She went all over the Zebra Empire, and I went with her."

"What're the zebras like?" he asked, shuffling his hooves.

“What do you mean?” Goldenblood asked, glancing down at him. “Which zebras?”

“All of them,” Icebrand said as he shuffled on his hooves. “Thimble said they’re all witchdoctors with spooky masks, but Briar Rose told me they have big cities. And Sweet Grass, he... ah... said they... um... did...” He went bright red, the rest of his words lost in a mumble.

“Sex stuff?” Goldenblood asked with the arch of a brow. Icebrand let out a faint squeak, and the pale unicorn chuckled. “The Carnilia celebrate life. All life. And the creation of life. For details, see Mrs. Amber Jewel in health class.” He watched the colt squirm in embarrassment for a moment, and then went on, “These zebras were a different tribe, though; you can tell by the feather decorations they wear.”

“On their clothes?”

“In their ears.” Goldenblood chuckled. “These are Tappahani. Refugees. The Tappahani are jungle hunters and shamans. Excellent cooks too, by the by.”

“I thought all zebras were the same,” the colt muttered. “The way they live and fight...”

“Tappahani? Fight?” He laughed softly, shaking his head. “No, Icebrand. They’re not fighters.” He rubbed his chin with a hoof. “Though, their duels are rather interesting. Some will attempt to cook meals so spicy that their enemy is incapacitated with tears. Or they’ll compete to see which can steal the egg of a giant roc. Or shoot the leaf from the tallest tree with a blowgun. They are not Roamani fighters yearning for combat and battle. This war has been harder on them than on us.”

That sounded like my kind of zebra! Make lunch, not war. I wondered how Glory’s cooking would stack up against theirs.

The doors chimed and opened, and the pair stepped out into another hallway. The shrieks and cries of a mare could be heard in the distance, echoing off the dark walls. “I can find the way. Get to bed, Icebrand. And remember, you have a test on the Champions of Harmony tomorrow.”

“Still?” the colt whined. “Sir, there’s a camp of zebra refugees in the school courtyard. How can we have a test now?”

“The Tappahani aren’t going to hurt us. Not unless they plan to cook dinner for us. Now get to bed. I’ll see to the dean.”

The colt nodded, started to reenter, then paused. “Mister Goldenblood? Can you tell me more about zebra tribes tomorrow?” Goldenblood smiled and nodded once

to him. Icebrand beamed. “Thanks!” He pressed a gemstone, the cage doors swung shut, and the lift rose silently out of sight.

“Such a good kid...” Goldenblood muttered trotted in the direction of the cries.

As he approached an office door, it flung wide, and a sallow yellow unicorn emerged. “There you are! What’s taken you so long? She’s been screaming and babbling for an hour in her savage tongue. I nearly cast a sedation spell on her.” His angry scowl instantly made me want to buck him upside the head.

“I came straight here, Dean Bitterbrew,” Goldenblood said evenly. “Is she okay?”

“Okay?” The yellow unicorn sneered. “She’s a sneak thief. We caught her away from the others, skulking about. Soon as we caught her, she started babbling and jabbering.” He looked back over his shoulder. “Probably poking around for something to steal. The principal said a whole box of spark batteries, a mana capacitor, and some conductors have gone missing from the student lab. Who knows where she stashed them.”

“She was likely looking for a bathroom, sir. If things have gone missing, we can take it up with the arcane sciences club. They’re likely working on a project.”

“How do you know she didn’t take it?” Bitterbrew asked, narrowing his eyes.

Goldenblood replied coolly, “She’s Tappahani, sir. If she wanted to hide from us, we wouldn’t have spotted her. And she wouldn’t have hidden a belonging. The Tappahani are communal. They share everything.”

“Savages,” Bitterbrew muttered before opening the door to the office. A young zebra mare sat curled tightly in the corner, crying out in rapid fire speech. Three other unicorns stood to the side, looking tired and uncomfortable. “Go. Get her to shut up. See if you can find out what she did with the things she stole.”

Goldenblood nodded and approached. He took a seat, cleared his throat, and then flung his hooves wide. “Sastimos, sendrin a Tappahani. Du’ dera o ushalin zhala sar o kam mangela.”

She stared at him, falling silent for several seconds. “Rakesa tu Propli natsia?” she asked in bafflement.

“Me shavora xari Propli.” He paused, then laughed. “Ne me ohano kushi tràshful.” The mare relaxed just a little. Her mane and face were speckled with dozens of dots of red and blue dye, and there were bird feathers piercing her ears. She didn’t share the laugh, though, and Goldenblood soon frowned.

"What did she say?" one of the unicorns asked.

"I said hello. Made some standard greetings for her tribe. Joked about my horrible pronunciation," Goldenblood said, trying to smile, but it died on his face. "She didn't laugh. They always laugh at jokes. Even my jokes." He glanced over at the yellow stallion. "Something's very wrong."

"No, really?" he said sourly. "Get her to shut up and tell her to give back what she stole!" Bitterbrew demanded. "Damned zebras probably have it in those wagons."

"They have their mares and foals in the wagons, sir. They're not going to hide a hundred bits' worth of equipment you can buy at any hardware store in them." Goldenblood rolled his eyes and said, "Me boro ri kam jenesi tu dika fiz? Spark kurrimu? Ohano scienzie?"

The mare blinked, then shook her head rapidly. "Ni. Niksus kam keda." He frowned at her, and she said in greater earnest, "Te merel muro muri dei, wowa ne kaerawa dowa!" The expression of fear returned.

"She doesn't have it," Goldenblood said flatly.

"Roadapples!" Bitterbrew growled. "She's lying!"

"Tappahani do not lie. Propoli lie. Zencori lie. Roamani lie if ordered to. Tappahani do not."

"Me diktom tam lendi-le!" the mare blurted out, trembling.

"What was that?" Goldenblood asked, then repeated himself in zebra, "Who?"

She shook her head. "Me ne kur pen!" she said, near tears. "Kako nashti zhas vorta po drom o bango!"

"She did take it, didn't she?" Bitterbrew said with a triumphant smirk.

"No." Goldenblood said. "She doesn't want to tell me who."

"Well, of course she has it! Who else could have taken it?" the sallow stallion snapped crossly.

Goldenblood regarded the zebra mare. "Kai lelled fiz?"

The mare closed her eyes, trembling. "Kako. . ."

"Kai lelled lendi?" Goldenblood repeated in a softer voice as tears ran down her color-speckled cheeks.

“Starkatteri,” she whispered. “Starkatteri kinshna-wowah lelled lendi. Diktom-ye lendi wi-ye mok vardos. Kako muk-me. Te shordjol muro rat. . . Kako. . .”

“What did she say?” the others asked.

“Starkatteri. She said a Starkatteri took it,” Goldenblood murmured. At their baffled expressions, he sighed. “They’re a different tribe from hers. Cursed. Dangerous.”

One of the unicorns adjusted her glasses. “Actually, ‘cursed’ is a misnomer. There actually aren’t really curses but instead—”

Goldenblood spoke over her. “Thaumaturgical nomenclature distinctions aside, she wouldn’t have spoken their name unless she was deadly serious. Naming them brings a curse of misfortune down upon you. Normally they’re called the Fallen One, or just, the One.” He looked from one to the next. “Did any of you see a zebra with magical markings on their face? Or maybe a zebra that took great pains to cover himself?”

“I think there was at least one, but everything was so crazy with the injuries and all,” the unicorn mare said nervously. Then a low, cynical laugh interrupted them both.

“Oh, please. This is just too much,” Bitterbrew said with a sneer at the trembling mare. “She steals from us and then conveniently says the ‘evil zebra’ took it. She must think we’re foals.”

“She wouldn’t have said that name if she wasn’t serious,” Goldenblood snapped. “It would be like us joking about Nightmare Moon returning.”

Doubt began to show on the assembled unicorns, and even Bitterbrew seemed a little less contemptuous and a little more unsettled. “Fine. Take her back to the others. Everyone should go out in pairs and see if they can find this mysterious evil pony. I’ll wake the principal and find out if we can’t get those soldiers from Canterlot here any faster.”

The orange mare in glasses who’d tried to talk about why curses didn’t technically exist stepped up to Goldenblood as he talked in low, earnest tones to the zebra mare. She nodded her head, gave a thickly accented ‘thank you’, and walked slowly from the office, followed by the other pair of ponies. “We’ll take the north wing,” the orange mare said, and together they went out into the quiet school. “Everypony is nervous.”

“They’ll get the refugees out in the morning, and the children can have an early break,” Goldenblood replied evenly as they walked along the hall, unlocking, checking, and securing each classroom in turn. Their horns cast beams of light into still,

quiet chambers loaded with even rows of desks for the dozens and dozens of students above. “If there’s a Starkattari here, though, we need to find him.”

“Why? I mean, we can’t have any of them running around the school, but are these zebras so bad?” she asked as she peeked through the window of an office. Inside there were more than two dozen wounded zebras in an improvised hospital, cared for by a half dozen ponies and a harried looking school nurse. The attack must have happened only a few hours ago.

“They’re... complicated. Millennia ago, they tried to enslave the other tribes. They were marked with magic so that all that were born into the tribe would be noticed. Most zebras think of them... well... the way Bitterbrew thinks of zebras in general,” he said as he swept his eyes across another classroom. A foalish scribble of Princess Luna. Paper pegasi dangling from a mobile. A graded paper left on a table top, B-.

“Why didn’t they just kill them if they were so bad?” she asked.

“Because they’re still zebras. They’re hated, but tolerated. That’s part of their punishment. They know serious dark magic though. Powerful zebra curses, and the calling of malevolent spirits to harm their enemies.”

“Ugh. Why does everypony make that mistake? They’re not curses! They’re—” she began to lecture again when he silenced her with a hoof over her mouth. Very softly, he heard the click of a door closing. “Everypony is either asleep, patrolling the other wing, or watching the zebras, right?” Her eyes wide, she nodded, and he trotted down the hall, checking doors. The one to stairwell wasn’t locked.

“Oh no... The children...” she said as together they made their way up.

“Try and stay silent. We don’t want a panic,” Goldenblood said. “If you see him, be careful. He could be up to no good, or he might have been thrown out of the wagons for his marks. I don’t want to provoke a Starkattari if we can help it.”

Hoofbeats echoed distantly down the hall, and together they made their way back towards the stairs in the middle of the dormitory wings. There was a soft thump from a closet marked ‘linens’, and Goldenblood glanced at her, and then opened it slowly with his magic. “Haja nanka—” Goldenblood began to say, then froze at the sight of two colts in an embrace, blushing furiously as they sat amid rumpled sheets. “Really?”

“Sorry, Mister Goldenblood. Miss Silverspire,” one of the two said ruefully.

“We just wanna to say goodbye in case we got sent home,” the other explained as

he flushed.

“Will you get them back to bed?” Goldenblood asked with a groan as he rubbed his temple.

“Of course. Come on, you two,” she said as she nudged them back down the hall the way they’d come. Goldenblood sighed, looking around at the closed doors. Then, across the large central rotunda, he spotted a doorway ajar. He made his way slowly around towards the doorway, a filly’s bathroom. From within came a wan glow of light and a soft thump. Carefully, he pushed the door wide enough to peek through.

Within, a cloaked figure worked furiously, attaching wires and cables to an hoofball-sized slab of pink quartz with a dark purple talisman glyph within. The zebra was in the process of duct taping the spark batteries to other equipment. “What are you doing? Keena-te sa ru?” Goldenblood asked, and the zebra in the ragged cloak turned to peer at him, breathing hoarsely. “Kasana—”

“Don’t profane my language with your foul tongue,” the zebra snapped back.

“What are you doing?” Goldenblood asked as he stared at the talisman. “Stop. This is a school.” Then he turned his head and snapped, “Silverspire! Bitterbrew! Anypony!”

The zebra finished taping the wires to the talisman. Goldenblood’s horn glowed, and he yanked it into the air. “I don’t know what you think you’re going to do with this, but—”

In a flash, the zebra closed the distance, spinning in the air and slamming his outstretched hoof across Goldenblood’s neck, snapping his focus. Smoothly, he caught the wired talisman on his flank and ran over Goldenblood, out into the hall. Silverspire, who’d been running back, let out a shriek. “Who are you? Stay back!”

Goldenblood groaned as he rolled to his hooves. More teachers were appearing, some thundering up the stairs and others coming out of their quarters. The zebra backed away as the talisman began to glow. “What is that, Silverspire? Is it a bomb?” Goldenblood asked tensely.

“No! I think. . . I think it’s some kind of industrial strength lye generator. For manufacturing. But he’s modified it and wired it to those capacitors. . .” she trailed off, then her eyes shot wide. “Grab it! Quickly! He’s overcharging it!”

Three teachers lunged for him, their horns glowing as they tried to grab the wired talisman from the zebra. He spun, dodged, and flipped away from his attackers with

grace and swiftness. He just wouldn't let them get a grip on the device, and when a unicorn did, the zebra struck out, smashing horns, throats, and eyes with lightning kicks and punches. The pink talisman began to glow.

Goldenblood charged in and tackled him, hooves wide. The zebra tried to spin out of the way, but Goldenblood powered both of them towards the edge of the rotunda, looking down at the ground floor forty feet below. The zebra clasped the talisman in his hooves as they both went over, the onlookers screaming in terror.

Goldenblood tumbled through the air and landed with a crash in one of the hovering elevator cages ten feet down, making it sway and bob wildly in the air. His whole body ached as he rose and crawled to the edge of the elevator, looking down at the prone form of the zebra. Goldenblood hit the control talisman with his magic, and the lift lowered itself quickly to the floor.

The achy white unicorn approached the prone zebra. The fall was at least forty feet onto hard black marble. Blood spread outwards from the zebra's head as he curled around the pink talisman. It was humming and throbbing, and a sharp tang filled the air. Goldenblood peered down at the body.

"Get back! Get back!" Bitterbrew shouted as he approached, then stopped short of the corpse. "Is he dead..?"

"I think that's some of his brain by your hoof," Goldenblood said, gesturing to a marble-sized glob.

"Ah good," Bitterbrew said before the unicorn levitated out a pair of wire cutters, reached down and held it to the wire. Goldenblood took several steps back. "Now, is it the red wire or the blue wire?" he mused.

"Dear Luna, don't cut it if you're not sure!" Goldenblood cried out. There were more hoofbeats as an older unicorn mare and a half dozen others trotted up to the fallen body.

"Hello, Principal Dew Blossom. I was just about to deactivate it." Bitterbrew smirked. "And don't be so fearful, Goldenblood. It's always the red. . ."

The corpse reached up and grabbed Bitterbrew's head, yanking him down towards the nightmarish ruin of his face. "Yur firsh!" he cried out, and then he flicked the talisman with the tip of his tail. From the end of the device, a twenty-foot-high plume of pink vapor blasted out. Bitterbrew's head disappeared in the spray, and when his spasming body fell back, a dripping stub was all that remained. The jet of vapor started to die, but then a white mote was pulled into a silver ring around the pink

talisman, and it surged and vomited forth an even more intense stream.

“It works! It works!” the zebra cackled as he turned the plume of pink gas on the adults around him. Every second, the jet grew more intense and thicker. As Goldenblood watched, the cloak’s blood-matted hood fell away, and he saw the zebra clearly for the first time. The black stripes ran like ink, but every second his horrible injuries were restored. The stripes on his face didn’t look like natural zebra patterns but the glyphs of some horrible arcane spell. And as Goldenblood fell back into the lift, the zebra turned and looked back as the last of his skull popped back into place. With cold, terrifying certainty, I put a name to the face.

Amadi.

Goldenblood desperately hammered the elevator control and winced as a little patch of the pad remained behind. The lift jerked up into the air as the pink cloud spread, billowing in every direction and rising higher and higher. Screams of terror from far too many children and teachers alike began to echo as the pink vapors thickened and rose. The cloud spread like a rising tide, the zebra whirling this way and that.

I’d been in pink cloud before, so the terrible burning sensation felt familiar. Everything inside and out burned horribly as he rose up to the dormitory floor. Vapors were already curling upwards as the lift continued to rise, and he slumped against the bars in a desperate bid to stay upright. “Stop the lift! Stop the lift!” Silverspire screamed, levitating up a foal as the lift continued upwards toward the observation tower.

Goldenblood tried to hit the controls to stop the lift, but his body was stuck to the bars of the elevator. He stared down at the sight of his hide melting against the pink coated metal and cried out, then broke into hacks and coughs. With that much pain, I couldn’t blame him for not being able to stop the lift. Still, he gave a herculean heave, and fire exploded along his side as he pulled free, leaving a dozen strips of his hide attached to the metal. The movement made the lift lurch, and he slammed against the bars on the opposite side. He screamed, but his scream was one of dozens filling the central shaft.

He watched as the teachers and students fell back from the edge of the balcony as pink cloud began to curl up over the edge and outwards. The panicked ponies tramped each other as they fell back from the stinging vapors. The other lift rose, but it was filled with a squirming mass of a half dozen ponies, and from how they moved, it was hard to tell where one ended and another began. Tiny white flashes could be seen in the depths as the cloud spread more and more.

The third lift dropped with two adult ponies coming down. Goldenblood tried to call for them to stop, but all that came out were rasping, gasping coughs. The two disappeared into the swirling pink without a clue as to how dangerous it was. He heaved once again, his Pink-Cloud-softened hide tearing, but this time he adamantly remained standing in the center of the lift.

When it reached the top of the tower, he slowly stepped out, every footstep burning. His whole world was pain. Two more unicorns rushed over. "What's going on? What's that screaming?" Along the far wall, large bulky electrical equipment pinged and crackled. "Mister Goldenblood? Is that you?"

"Dugghh tusshhhhh mehhhh!" he grasped and then started coughing and rasping, bloody drops fanning out from his mouth with every breath. "Pinghh... posson..."

"Posion?" the mare asked. Both of them stared in horror, and then one said, "Hold still, Gold. I got you." She shot a bolt of magic up at the roof.

"No!" the other shouted. The bolt struck a talisman in the ceiling, and suddenly water began to rain down on Goldenblood... and the equipment. It sizzled, crackled, and finally popped with a great cloud of gray smoke coming out the back. The machine fell silent as the second unicorn rushed to it. "No no no... the radio..."

The pain abated a little. One mare saw to him, casting healing spells that mended his hide, but they did little for his chest. The stallion fussed over the radio. Out the tower window, far below, a pink fog bank rolled across the wagons and camps. Zebras fled towards the forests, but the school gates barred their path. Some began to scramble up, hooking their hooves around the bars and scrambling over with a haste I'd never imagined before... but they weren't fast enough. The pink cloud blasted past them, and their screams reached the tower before being cut short. Most hadn't even made it that far. In the courtyard, more jets exploded here and there. There were still yells and cries for help from the levels below.

"Why? Who did this? How?" the mare asked as tears streaked down her cheek.

"Zeee... bra..." Goldenblood gasped weakly as he collapsed on his side. "Sta... sta..." but then he broke off, coughing and hacking.

"A zebra did this?" the stallion asked, looking up from the equipment. "No. How could they? This is a school! Why?"

"Do you think they need a reason?! They're monsters! They used their own refugees to get in to the school and then killed us all after we helped them!" the mare snapped through her tears.

“No. . .” Goldenblood murmured as things started going dim, his chest feeling as if it were full of molten rock. “Sta. . . aaaaah. . .”

“Don’t worry, Goldenblood. We’ll get you help. Just hold on,” the stallion said as the pain abated with another healing potion. “We’re going to survive. We’re going to make damned sure everypony knows what happened here tonight!”

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory orb, swayed, then straightened. Amadi. He’d been there. Two centuries ago. . . he’d *been* there! No wonder, when Goldenblood had seen him in the Image archives, he’d freaked out. The zebra who’d started it all had been there!

“But why couldn’t he tell them after he recovered?” I asked myself as I stared at the screen.

Suddenly, the terminal flickered, and the grainy image of a mare appeared. At the bottom of the screen read a tagline: zebras responsible for school attack. “. . . multiple eyewitnesses to the massacre say the zebra were responsible for the attack. . .”

The image changed to an picture of a bandaged-covered Goldenblood as a stallion voice said, “. . . teacher saw with his own eyes the zebra commando responsible for this attack. . .”

A new image. The mare from the memory orb appeared on the screen. “It was horrible! We could hear them screaming, trapped in their dorm rooms, as the poison gas got stronger and stronger! I can still hear them screaming!” she said, sobbing brokenly.

Another picture of several formally adorned zebras surrounded by reporters. Behind them was an angry mob. ‘Zebra officials deny Littlehorn Massacre,’ read the tagline. ‘Denounce Equestria for the murder of ‘refugees’. Suggest Littlehorn School front for chemical weapons lab. Hoofington burns. Follow-up terrorist attack?’

Finally, an image of Celestia with Luna standing beside her. I’d never seen her look so. . . old. Even with the grainy picture, I could see the prominent shadows around her eyes and the heartbroken stare. “. . . national period of mourning. I regret to inform you all that I am stepping down for an extended leave of absence effective immediately. The events of this war have become. . . more than I ever imagined. Not since ancient times has Equestria suffered as it does now, and I fear there is no way for harmony to be restored. Fear not, though. I am passing control of the kingdom to my dearest sister. As she has sheltered us all through the night, so shall

she protect us all through these dark times. She has my absolute confidence.” The camera then focused right on Princess Luna as dozens of flashbulbs went off. I’d never seen a mare so terrified in my life.

“I... I want to... um...” Luna began as her eyes darted from one reporter to the next as a long, tense silence went on.

“How will you retaliate for the attack on Littlehorn, Princess Luna?” one reporter finally said. Princess Luna’s mouth worked silently for a second, a shadow of pain flickering across her face as she struggled to answer.

However, before she could express the feelings, another reporter waved a hoof at her. “Can you respond to Prince Blueblood’s comments about peace with the zebras being impossible?” shouted another.

“Princess Luna! Princess Luna! What about the burning of Hoofington and the rumors that a zebra was responsible? Can you comment?” hollered another.

Luna’s mouth moved silently as she looked from one to the next. “I... well... I just wanted to say...” But whatever she wanted to say was trampled by more questions.

Then Princess Celestia cleared her throat, and the questions stopped immediately. “Naturally, you have many questions and concerns. Princess Luna will undoubtedly answer them all in time, later. Excuse us.” Together they turned, but I caught the momentary downcast eyes, the worried expression... and the furrowed brow.

The screen returned to the first question.

>WHO DID IT?

I typed in ‘AMADI’, then stopped. That was the right answer, but was it the right answer for *him*? No one could blame him for the rage that was unleashed after Littlehorn. Amadi was the killer. Goldenblood had been near death. If he’d died, the two up in the tower could have come to the exact same conclusion, regardless of what Goldenblood had said. Everypony could have died, and nothing might have changed.

But I imaged how Goldenblood must have felt... watching the world die... his Equestria die... I knew what it was like to survive things like that. How I blamed myself for things that hadn’t been entirely my fault. How it’d torn me up inside. Slowly, I typed the answer.

>GOLDENBLOOD.

The terminal went blank, and my breath caught in my throat as the beam guns hummed.

Then:

> WHAT DID HE DO WRONG?

I glanced down at the remaining two memory orbs. “Gee, where to start?” I carefully levitated the next orb and eyed it. “Why can’t you ever make anything easy, Goldenblood? Even now?” I sighed as I glared at the orb. “Okay. Round two.” I touched the orb to my horn and made the connection.

‘My only friend’ came the rasp. Friend? Goldenblood didn’t have friends, he had accomplices. He had minions. He had...

Okay, why wasn’t I breathing? I sat down hard trying to perform the simple motion of pulling air into my lungs and not quite remembering how. Luna? Sadly no. Psalm. No. She might have been closer than that. Twilight Sparkle? Fluttershy! No... starting to get light headed. Rainbow Dash? Applejack? Pinkie Pie? Rarity? No no no no. Princess Luna? Damn, I was repeating myself! Why were there all those black spots in my vision? Somepony he regarded a friend... Spike... Horse... no... not Horse. Garnet? No... somepony else... Somepony who actually gave a shit about him. Fluttershy? No... Lacunae... no... think... Somepony... Some...

Trottenheimer...

oooOOOooo

Okay. Once again I was reminded why pink cloud wasn’t your friend. Having fire erupt with every shallow breath sure was distracting. Still, the sensation of breathing was quite welcome after trying to get into this damn orb. Memory orbs that shut down your breathing? That was fucked up. Knowing my luck, the last one would stop my heart. How long could a pony go without their heart beating?

Worry about that when you get to it. Pay attention now. Goldenblood was walking down a very seedy back street in Canterlot. In the distance I could see the ministry buildings, their colorful spires hung with black banners. A layer of wet slush covered everything, and it dripped and drizzled into the alley. A gaunt cat hissed at him as he trotted past, but he paid it no mind.

A scar-covered brown pony quivered between two boxes, one forehoof ending in a truncated stump. “Spare a bit for a vet? I fought with Big Macintosh,” he pleaded as he held out his remaining hoof.

Goldenblood stopped, peering down at him with tired eyes. At the pony's hooves, barely covered by the rags, was a red pamphlet with a large green apple half upon it. "No. You didn't," he replied in cold, hard tones. The crippled stallion flinched back and pulled his rags over him more. Then Goldenblood levitated three bits from his bag. "Go stay at the Ministry of Peace shelter tonight. It's going to be cold."

He left the stallion behind and walked down an even narrower, dimmer side street. I wondered what sort of horrible things he would be meeting in a place like this. Zebra infiltrators? Equestria death squads? Mad scientists?

Outside a doorway, a batpony mare guard stood at attention. "Is she still inside?" Goldenblood asked.

"Yes sir," the guard replied with a salute of her wing. Then concern crossed her dusky blue face. "She's. . . in a bad way, sir."

"They're all taking Big Macintosh's death hard. It's been a rough week. I expected this of Applejack, but not her." He frowned, looking over towards the immense tree that, from LittlePip's descriptions, was the Ministry of Peace. "I wish I knew what they talked about the other day." What, something that Goldenblood didn't know? Be still my. . . strike that. "I'll see if I can help her. Are the premises secure?" he asked as he looked at the door. Sad music played through it.

"No one's going to touch her, but. . . I can't be sure they won't talk," the batpony said with a frown. "Should we detain them?"

"No. Clear them out discreetly. I don't want her upset any more than she already is. Image will keep it from getting further than this. Make use of the slush account to compensate them for their inconvenience. If they want more, they won't like the more they get. I'm in no mood for blackmail attempts these days," he muttered as he walked through the doorway and into a kitchen. He glanced at the kitchen staff and nodded to the door. Then he stepped through.

The bar was dingy, smelly, and dim. Dingy in the fact that whoever owned it didn't seem inclined to fix the carved table tops, the dented flatware, or the chipped mugs. Smelly in that 'sour hops and faintly spoiled wine with just a tang of sharper whiskey' scent kind of way. Only the dimness seemed intentional, as if the owner had tried for cozy and intimate and landed squarely in creepy and sinister territory. Actually, I kind of liked it. In the corner, a jukebox played a sad Sweetie Belle tune. 'When is my stallion coming home?' seemed to be the refrain. A dozen or so patrons waited tensely in one corner watched by two larger, bulkier batpony stallions. The mare followed Goldenblood in and walked over to them. A few quiet words were

exchanged, and then, single file, the ponies vacated the bar. One started to give a drunken protest, but the stronger stallion incapacitated him, wrapping leathery wings around the inebriate's head and then hauling him across his back.

"Thanks, Lionheart," the mare said with a little nod as the stallions trotted out. "All yours, Goldenblood."

He nodded as he stared at the lone figure at the bar. This was the last place I'd have expected to see Twilight Sparkle. Her mane was a rat's nest of tangles; her eyes were puffy and bloodshot. On her head perched a tiara with a six pointed star atop it. In front of her was a mug of something smelling strongly of apples.

Only the bartender remained, the scruffy brown unicorn tilting his head towards the scarred pony as he approached the bar. "You're ruining the party," Twilight Sparkle slurred, "Go away."

"Thanks for contacting me, Scruffy," Goldenblood said to the unicorn behind the bar. The brown unicorn nodded to Goldenblood. "The usual."

"Of course you know each other," Twilight grunted in disgust, levitating her mug and trotting towards the jukebox.

Goldenblood remained at the bar, watching Twilight. "How many of those has she had?"

"She hasn't even had that one," the brown stallion replied with a grunt. "I don't think she's figured out she needs ta drink the damned thing first." He paused. "You think she's spit her bit or something? She's played that song a dozen times already."

"Something. I don't know why this is hitting her so hard. Applejack, yes, but Twilight? It makes no sense. If she has. . ." then he shook his head and glanced at the pony. "How're the wife and kids?"

"Wife's in Zebratown now. Took your advice. The kids..." He shook his head. "Dunno if they should stay here with me or go stay with her. Nobody wants zonies anymore." He set a glass of something sharp down on the tabletop. "She's got another packet ready. Her aunt with the Propoli got it to her."

"I'll send somepony for it. Thanks for being discreet," Goldenblood replied, then paused and added, "I'd send them to be with their mother, Scruff. Zebras might resent them, but their stripes might get them hurt." He then took the glass and trotted towards the jukebox as Twilight selected the same sad song again.

"Go away, Goldenblood. I don't want to talk to you right now," she said as she stared

into the jukebox.

“Fair enough. I’m just here for a drink,” he said as he slipped into the booth nearest to the jukebox.

Twilight snorted and stared into the machine as Goldenblood waited, sipping his drink. When the song ended, Goldenblood asked, “Can you pick ‘Away, away my heart’ next? Just for a little variety?” Twilight Sparkle grimaced, then glanced over at him, and her horn glowed. The tune changed, still just as sad.

Twilight stared into the jukebox’s glowing, shining talismans as they whirled and played the record. “I’m leaving the ministry.”

“Mmmm...” Goldenblood replied, gazing out at nothing in the dim interior.

“I’ve had it with this war. This killing. This... everything...” she said as tears ran down her cheek. “I keep trying to come up with something that’ll end it. Some spell or trick or enchantment or... something!” She thudded the jukebox in frustration. “I can’t do this anymore!”

“Mmmm...” Goldenblood said again.

“Is that all you’re going to say?” she snapped waspishly.

“No,” he answered. “I’ll start processing the paperwork this afternoon. Speak to Princess Luna. We’ll frame it as ‘extended leave’ and next week work in the retirement. Mosaic and Gestalt will take over the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. I imagine Princess Celestia will be glad to have you as a teacher at her school.” He glanced at her, and his lips curled in a small smile. “I think you’ll like it, Twilight. Teaching can be... surprisingly rewarding. Just don’t fall behind on the grading. It can be a killer.”

Twilight stared at him, appearing shocked. “That’s it?” He gave a little nod and sipped his drink. “You’re not going to try and talk me out of it?”

Goldenblood gave a little shrug, then broke off coughing for several seconds as the magma in his lungs erupted for several seconds. He levitated over a napkin and spat a pinkish red blob into it. “If it’s what you really want, I won’t stop you. I imagine that Princess Luna will want to know why, but I’m sure that, as long as your friends know why you’re quitting, that’s all that matters.”

Twilight Sparkle winced at the word ‘quit’. “I’m just sick of it all. At my ministry there’re ponies who don’t seem to know that there’s a war on at all. Even I feel that way sometimes. It’s all projects, puzzles, checklists, and reports. But now Big

Macintosh's dead, and... it hurts, Goldenblood. It hurts so damned much and I can't figure out why!"

"You saw Fluttershy. Did she..." he began, but she shook her head.

"She prescribed some drugs and therapy. Drugs." She rubbed her face with a hoof. "Sweet Celestia, hasn't she seen what they're doing to Pinkie Pie? I can't take them."

"Not all drugs are the same, Twilight. There's a big leap between Mint-als and aspirin. And you know that too," Goldenblood answered. Twilight sniffed and arched her back a little. He watched her passively as she shook her head. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know!" Twilight cried out, flinging the mug away from her, the dark contents splashing across the floor. "I just feel... I hurt! And I don't know *why*! I see pictures of Big Macintosh and *think* that he was my friend's brother and he's gone and that's bad... but I don't *feel* that way. And every time I try and figure out why it... it hurts even more!" She bowed her head, eyes shut, tears falling on the glass cover of the jukebox. "We can't even talk to each other about it. Rainbow Dash just says soldiers die but... but we knew him. Fluttershy just cries. Rarity..." she shook her head. "We knew him, Goldenblood. We knew him."

"And now he's gone," he said softly. "You've never lost someone close to you before, have you Twilight?"

She sniffed and shook her head. "I don't know what to do. I've read books and asked Celestia and... and... I just don't know how to make this hurt stop."

"It doesn't stop, Twilight. What you're feeling... millions have felt. It's normal," he said in his rusty, wet voice.

"It is?" Twilight asked. "But when... how does it stop?"

He didn't answer for a moment. "It doesn't, if you're lucky. It fades with time, bit by bit, but it never completely goes away." He levitated a napkin to her and dabbed at her tears. "It's like a scar that lingers and aches when the weather is cold and wet. It reminds us of those who have gone so that we keep on living. The most important thing is that we don't miss them so badly we go and join them."

She sniffed and peered up at him, then lowered her eyes back to the dirty floor. "You feel this way a lot?"

"I've had a lot of practice," he replied in his rusty, wet voice. He helped her over to

the booth and waved a hoof at the bartender. Twilight breathed a little more steadily now. "You're not going to quit, Twilight. You don't know how."

Twilight frowned at him. "You don't know that. I can too quit," she said, almost petulantly.

"No. You can't. You'll stick it out, because that's what you do. Your whole family is incredibly tenacious," he said calmly as he folded his hooves on the table before his face. "You'll get over this, Twilight. People are counting on you. You won't let them down. We have to win this war."

Twilight sat back in her seat. "Win this war? For what?"

Now he frowned. "For what?"

"That's what I'm asking you. What are we fighting this war for? You know better than anypony. You've been in the government since before the ministries. So what is all this for?" Twilight asked.

Goldenblood didn't answer right away. "Well... to protect ourselves from our enemy."

"And they attack us to protect themselves from us. Seems like the better protection would be if everyone stayed home," Twilight countered.

"It's not that simple. There's economics to be considered too. Our energy requirements—" Goldenblood began before Twilight cut him off.

"Aren't what they were fifteen years ago. We've got the Hoofington dams for example. We're researching gem energy reactors that don't require coal. I know the M.W.T. is looking at solar energy. Heck, the zebras aren't any different. They're less and less dependent on gems than they were at the start of the war." Twilight sniffed and rubbed her eyes as she drilled her gaze into his.

He took a moment, fighting for breath before he murmured, "It's not... that simple. Twilight... what you're feeling for Big Macintosh, everypony is feeling. We've all lost friends and loved ones to this war. They want revenge and payback for all we've lost. We can't just stop after we've given so much to—" he began when she cut through his words again.

"That's a sunk cost fallacy, Goldenblood. We can't stop fighting now because we didn't stop fighting in the past because we won't stop fighting in the future. We have to spend more lives for lives spent. No. I refuse to accept that," Twilight said firmly.

"It's not just that. The zebras... they have a religious fear of Princess Luna. A

superstition. They attack us because they feel they have to. Especially now with the peace talk blown to pieces.”

“And do you really think that in a choice between superstition and peace, they’d choose superstition?” Twilight asked sharply. Goldenblood almost physically wilted under her glare.

“We’re fighting. . . because we have to. That’s all there is to it,” he finished lamely, dropping his eyes to the table. He sighed, shaking his head a moment, and then said, “You’re right. There isn’t any good reason to fight. But that won’t stop this war, Twilight. You know that. And we need you. You know that too. In a few more years, the zebras might be open to another round of peace talks. Maybe we can work out an armistice then. But in the meantime, we have to keep fighting.”

Twilight leaned back in the booth with a sigh. “Sometimes I think Princess Luna really doesn’t want peace. I can’t imagine why, but it just feels. . . wrong.” Goldenblood said nothing as she looked at her hooves. Twilight was silent too, then sighed. “At this rate, there’s not going to be an Equestria left worth fighting over.”

“What do you mean?” Goldenblood asked with a little frown as he peered at the wistful purple unicorn. His rough rasp had grown more rough and wet. He coughed something foul and oily into the handkerchief.

“I mean that at the rate we’re going, all that’s going to be left is a poisoned, polluted wasteland. I know you’ve seen the reports. Do you even know how much alchemical waste we’re producing, Goldenblood? Or chemical waste? And don’t get me started on that Flux junk that Flim and Flam got their hooves on. This stuff is dangerous and reactive, and we’re making a whole lot of it.”

“That’s why the M.A.S. facility was set up in Splendid valley. To store and protect—” Goldenblood began.

“It’s not enough,” Twilight interrupted.

“There’s more than twenty miles of tunnel under Maripony,” Goldenblood said with a faintly pained expression.

“And I’m telling you it’s not enough,” Twilight replied. “Our alchemical waste is so toxic and reactive that we can’t even put it all in the same caves. There’s already been a serious incident. Thank Celestia nopony died, but the product was so corrosive it was eating through our suits. And that doesn’t start to address the industrial waste being made. Everypony is churning out all kinds of stuff for the war, and in the process they’re making stuff so toxic we can’t do more than bury it. But it’s not

going to stay buried forever. Even our most corrosion-resistant drums are going to leak eventually.”

“Something Princess Luna can deal with after the war,” Goldenblood said with a small frown.

“And by then it’ll be too late, Goldenblood. You don’t seem to get how much stuff is sitting around. There’s tens of millions of gallons of it all across Equestria. And if you talk about it, a pony in a uniform says ‘war effort’, and the debate gets shut down. And bad as magical waste is, this ‘Flux’ seems to go out of its way to mess things up,” Twilight said with a scowl, then sighed.

“We have to keep on fighting. Equestria is worth it,” he said as he looked away from her, staring off into the gloom.

“You really mean that?” Twilight said skeptically.

“I spent most of my colthood travelling around the world. To me, it was an adventure, but Mother travelled to keep me safe from Father. Celestia finally forced him to acknowledge me, and he never forgave that. Scruffy over there was one of our retainers, helping to keep the baggage from getting lost or a wayward colt from wandering into a poppy den.”

“Keepin’ ya from those Carnilia fillies was more a chore,” Scruffy chuckled.

Goldenblood actually blushed as he went on, “Yes, well, I always had stories of Equestria. I dreamed of this place. When Mother died and I came here, it was the first time I felt like I was home. Certainly, Father didn’t make things easy for me, but I woke up each morning glad to be here. I hiked all over it, collecting rocks, minerals, and gems. I’ve always been in love with Equestria.” He spoke like... I didn’t know what. As if he was looking at some distant dream.

“Well, enjoy it while it lasts,” Twilight said quietly. “You heard what Rainbow Dash discovered?”

His smile vanished, and his eyes fell. “Yes. The zebras have megaspells.” There was the sound of a bottle smashing, and both looked over at the horrified bartender.

“M’sorry,” the pony muttered as he levitated over a broom and dustpan.

Twilight sighed, “I don’t know how they got the framework. Pinkie Pie must have been taking more of those damned drugs and missed it while she was bouncing off the walls. Or worse. What if someone at the M.o.P. gave it to them?”

"They didn't. I'm completely certain that neither Fluttershy nor anyone in her employ was responsible," Goldenblood said firmly.

Twilight arched a skeptical brow. "Regardless, you know what this means. They're using the megaspell matrix to supercharge weapons grade talismans. It'll be Little-horn all over Equestria."

"Not if we have megaspells of our own to counter them," Goldenblood said.

"Yeah. Funny how fast that research went. Research I didn't even want my ministry to do. Suddenly I turn around and there's all kinds of megaspell weapon theories practically lying around in the hallways," Twilight said sourly. "If it all goes off, will there be an Equestria left?"

Goldenblood said nothing for several long seconds. "There's nothing we can do about that," he said quietly, once again looking away.

"Maybe there is," Twilight said as she took the tiara off her head and stared at it. "It's something I thought up this morning. Megaspells. . . they operate like the Elements of Harmony. What if we combine the two? A megaspell array powered by the magic of the Elements to cleanse and restore Equestria if the worst should happen?"

"The Elements?" He frowned at the tiara. "I thought you couldn't get them to work."

"True. I couldn't, but that doesn't mean somepony else couldn't be a bearer. I don't think that the six of us were meant to be the bearers forever anyway," she said as she looked away. "I have to do something, Goldenblood. If I don't. . . I just have to do this."

"Luna won't allow it, Twilight. I'm sorry. She doesn't want to risk the Elements falling into the wrong hooves. Besides, she won't tolerate any talk about losing the war. Building something like this is just that. Especially if she thinks it could be repurposed into a weapon," Goldenblood said, giving the mare a long frown.

"You honestly think that I would make a weapon with the Elements to use against Luna?" Twilight asked with a laugh. Goldenblood didn't share it, and it sickened and died. "Goldenblood, are you saying Luna doesn't trust us?"

"Luna respects the six of you greatly and values your contributions, but you used the Elements against her once," he said levelly. "She won't risk you using them again."

"She was Nightmare Moon at the time!" Twilight said with a wave of her hoof.

"I'm sorry, Twilight. I don't even have to ask her. She'll say no," Goldenblood said. Twilight stared at him, and something inside her crumpled. She slowly collapsed

back in the booth seat. "Have faith, Twilight. Soon, this will be over, and Equestria can get back to normal."

"Normal?" Twilight said without looking at him for a second. Then she raised her head, her mane covering half her face with one eye glaring at him. "You think Equestria will return to normal? Before the death? Before the corporations and the guns and the poison? Do you think Equestria will ever be a land of sunshine again?" She suddenly levitated the table up and flipped it away, pointing a hoof at Goldenblood. "You told us these ministries would help Equestria. Well, I don't see anything in this war that's *close* to normal! It's just getting worse and worse. And you had a hoof in that. Do you love Equestria or Princess Luna, Goldenblood?"

His mouth worked a moment as he stared up at her. "I don't understand... I love both..."

"No," she contradicted. "You can't. Either you love the Equestria you used to dream about, or you love the ruler who's changing it to suit her own vision. I respect Princess Luna too, but this is wrong. So which is it? Equestria or Luna?"

He didn't answer. He just closed his eyes for the longest time. "I love Luna, Twilight. I do." He opened his eyes and looked at the unicorn as she slumped and seemed to age before his eyes. "But I love Equestria even more. And you're right. If we lose this war, we're going to need something like what you're proposing. And if we win..." He trailed off. "If we win..." he repeated, and once again went quiet.

"If we win? What?" Twilight asked with a frown.

He opened and closed his mouth before stammering, "N-Nothing. Just... I had a thought." He closed his eyes and nodded once. "Make me a list. Tell me what you need. I'll get it however I can. I know ponies who are experts at fudging requisition orders and misfiling papers. They could make a battleship disappear if they needed to."

"Are you serious? Goldenblood, this could take months. Maybe years. I'd have to research specific spells to place in the megaspell matrix. I can't begin to imagine where we'll get the processing power to make it work."

He stepped towards her and took his hoof between hers. "Just tell me what you need as you need it. Spike is a trustworthy intermediary. He can be our point of contact. Stay at the M.A.S. Do what you need to. And I'll make this work. You're right. We do need something to take care of things if we lose the war." And then he added, softer and almost to himself, "And if we win it..."

Twilight nodded. "I... thank you. I didn't expect... I don't know what I expected. But still. Thank you."

"I do love Equestria, Twilight. Anything worthwhile is done for love," he said with a small smile.

She nodded and flushed, then turned back to him. "I feel... better. Thank you. I... goodbye." And with that, Twilight trotted away, still hurt but moving once more. Goldenblood's small smile melted away as he walked to the middle of the bar.

"I have to say, that was some smooth work. I'd heard you had a silver tongue, but I think it's pure gold," the batpony mare said as she trotted in from the kitchen. "She was ready to quit, but after a liberal application of bovine fecal matter, you had her back on the job."

"I meant every word," Goldenblood said calmly as he sat, then broke into coughing.

"Yeah, right. 'Love Equestria'? Really? I didn't think anyone older than a blank flank could fall for that," the mare said with a grin. "Let me guess: you're going to let Twilight build it and then hand over the keys to Princess Luna?"

"Something like that," Goldenblood said quietly. "Where's the others?"

"Escorted everyone away from here. Standard BS about security and a gas leak," she said with a sharper grin at Scruffy. "Want me to take care of the loose ends?" The brown stallion fell back, his eyes wide.

"No. I'll take care of it," he said as he levitated from his saddlebags a small, compact pistol and calmly screwed a silencer on to the end.

"M... master Goldenblood! I've known you since you were a colt! You can't!" he stammered as he fell back against the wall.

"I'm sorry," he replied, as he stood beside the batpony. Then his horn sparked, and she collapsed. The pistol was turned aside, and he bent over her, focusing intently for a few moments as Scruffy gazed on in confusion and fear. Without meeting his eyes, Goldenblood coughed and added softly, "The less memory I have to modify, the better."

Scruffy didn't take his eyes off the gun. Given it hadn't been put away yet, I couldn't blame him. "Okay..."

"We need to make this quick," Goldenblood said calmly as he looked towards the doors and then down at the still mare. "Do you still have that secret trap door in the cellar?"

Scruffy stared at the mare, then at the scarred stallion as if he'd never met him before. Then he gave a jerky nod of his head, "A . . . aye."

"I'm afraid you and your family are going to have to go much further than Zebratown," he said as he began to levitate the bottles, spilling them all over the bar. "Get to Applewood. Talk to Greasy Rag in the O.I.A. motorpool. He'll get your family to the Crystal Empire. Tell him it'll come off his bill. He'll understand." The brown unicorn glanced down at the batpony again. "Scruffy? She'll be fine." Goldenblood said, calm and cool, and even I'd have shivered at the soft menace in his voice if I'd had my own body.

Scruffy's eyes went wide as he met the firm gaze of Goldenblood, the pistol still levitating in his magic. Then something in the brown stallion firmed up, and he gave a little nod. "A . . . aye. I can do that. But . . . you really are going to help Miss Sparkle against the Princess?"

"Everything Twilight said was true. If we lose this war, the damage to Equestria will be phenomenal. And I was right that Princess Luna would never authorize this project; she'll see it as a sign of no confidence. So it must be this way. But that I can handle. What I'm really worried about is . . . something else," he said as he put the gun away, pouring more spirits around the bar. I wished I could lick my lips at the perfectly good eighty proof Wild Pegasus going to waste!

"What's that?" Scruffy asked with a frown, rescuing a bottle and taking a long pull from it.

"Twilight is worried about saving Equestria if we lose the war, but I've had an epiphany: what if we win? What will happen to Equestria then?" Goldenblood asked.

"But . . . isn't winning the war the point?"

"Yes, but I'd never thought about what was best for Equestria, only what was best for Princess Luna. She wanted a government that would stand for a thousand years. That's exactly what I helped her create. But when the war is over . . . what then? Luna could easily be a worse tyrant that Equestria has ever known. It's been five years and we're already taking ponies away and brainwashing them for thinking the wrong thoughts. Erasing ponies' memories to keep secrets, or just killing them outright. What about in five more years? Or ten? Or twenty?" He sighed and closed his eyes. "Luna may turn out to be a good and kindly ruler, but a contingency should be in place for what happens if she turns tyrant. Something that will sweep all of this away and give Equestria and the world a second chance."

“That’s treason,” Scruffy said as he pulled open a trap door behind the bar. “Yer talking treason.”

“No. Not treason. Responsibility. I created a government where she has absolute power with almost no accountability. Even Celestia could be held responsible for her actions. Luna will rule as an apparent figurehead, shielded by layer upon layer of bureaucracy and obfuscation. No. Something must be put in place. A plan. A contingency. Otherwise, we may win the war, but Equestria may lose its very soul. . . if it hasn’t already.”

“The games yer playing are going to cost you yer life, boyo,” Scruffy said as he started down the stairs.

“The games I play may cost everypony far more than my life,” he replied, giving a fond smile. “Take care of yourself, Scruffy. Get out of Equestria as soon as you can. When you get to the Empire, keep your head down. Hopefully, Cadance will prove wiser and keep out of the war,” he said as he levitated up a lantern and walked back into the kitchen. There was a thump of the door closing. He set the lantern on the bar with his magic, then hooked the gas pipe by the stove with a broom handle and, with a shaky grunt of effort, pried a pipe joint open. A hiss filled the air, and he quickly stepped out into the alley, levitating the unconscious batpony mare with him.

A minute later came a curiously muffled ‘fwoosh’, and fire billowed out the kitchen door. Smoke rose into the sky as he calmly walked back the way he came, fire in his wake.

oooOOOooo

I pulled myself out of the memory orb fugue, swaying on my hooves. Gardens of Equestria, and I was guessing Project Horizons, born from the same fear. One that we would lose the war and the world would be uninhabitable, and the other that we would win it. Equestria under the control of a pony with absolute power and no responsibility for that power... it was a chilling prospect.

And of course, he couldn’t just quit. He’d been like Twilight. He couldn’t have simply stopped or confronted Luna about it. He had to be there, in the thick of it. He couldn’t stop playing the game any more than I could stop rushing to ponies’ aid when they needed it. He also couldn’t have sabotaged Luna by that point. Everything had escalated; I doubted the zebras would have let Luna go for any peace project.

>WHAT DID HE DO WRONG? So many answers. That was the point, I supposed. *Goldenblood* hadn’t been perfect. For all his ability to structure, manipulate, and

arrange, he hadn't been perfect. Getting caught? Betraying Luna? Helping Luna in the first place? I sighed as I stared at the screen. I had one chance at this.

It had to be like before. What did Goldenblood think he'd done wrong? Trusted Luna? Maybe, but he hadn't made it sound like he'd been terribly wronged by her. More the opposite. "He loved Luna," I murmured. "Not sexually... but he'd loved her. And he'd loved Fluttershy. And Equestria." I stared at the screen. Would Goldenblood think falling in love had been a mistake? After Littlehorn, he'd been sure he'd die. A relationship with Fluttershy... Seeing that his plan had been too effective... Love had changed everything.

If it hadn't been for love, would anything have stopped Luna, or the zebras?

I swallowed and hoped there was a little wiggle room in an answer like this. Maybe one or two critical words to prevent me from being zapped? But what if entering one wrong word took me out? Oh, what I wouldn't give for P-21 to be here, get at the guts of the program, and pick from a dozen or so possible passwords. Or just Glory, so I could bounce my ideas off her. I swallowed hard, typed >LOVE, and clenched my eyes closed again as I hit the key.

Five seconds later, I opened them again. "It worked," I muttered as I read the third prompt. >WHAT DID SHE KNOW?

She? Which she? Goldenblood had a whole lot of shes complicating his life. Luna? Fluttershy? Twilight? I levitated up the third orb. "Okay. One to go. Just one." I tapped my horn to the tip.

Huh. Nothing. Then the phrase rasped like a rusty file across my brain: 'Who did I betray?' And then I felt a very familiar stillness in my chest as my heart stopped. Instantly the edges of my vision darkened and I felt myself start to collapse. One second. 'Luna!' Two seconds. 'Fluttershy!' Three seconds. 'Twilight'. My face hit the terminal keys. Four seconds. 'Yourself!' Everything went black as my brain gave one last feeble thought: 'Everypony!' Then it all went to black.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood sat behind a garish pink desk, the starmetal tuning fork beside his head as he stared out the window at a rainy Manehattan day. His basaltic lungs crackled slowly as he pinged the tuning fork against the edge of the desk. From the view, the kitchen in the corner, the safes set in the wall, and the gaudy balloon wallpaper, I guessed this was Pinkie's office.

His eyes slowly panned along the walls. The scribbles and doodles of her friends

on the desk. A mirror half-covered by a cloth, sitting in the corner with the tag 'Move to fun house ASAP!' He pulled open a drawer and looked down at a dozen tins of Party Time Mint-als.

The calendar on the desk had a number of entries written down for the next week: Arrest Badpony List F. Cake testing. Interrogate. Get confessions. Arrest Goldenblood, Garnet, Onyx, and Quartz. Play time with Gummy. Interrogate Goldenblood. Arrest Badpony List G. Interrogate. Review party procedures for GGG. And on the week after that: Raid 4stars. Arrest Badpony Lists H, I, and J. Arrest Princess Luna. Throw retirement party.

Goldenblood's eyes lingered on the second to last, the tiny screaming note resonating in his ear when the door opened and Pinkie Pie trotted in. I hadn't seen her like this before. Her normally curly mane was flat and dull. Dark shadows lay under her blue eyes, giving them a haunted, hollow appearance. She didn't seem to realize he was there as she trotted over to a filing cabinet and pulled out a file marked 'Badpony List F'. When she turned back to the desk, the pink mare jumped and dropped the file on the floor.

"Goldenblood? What... how... who... huh?" She shook her head hard and glowered at him. "What do you think you're doing here? You're not director of the O.I.A. anymore!"

He levitated out a tin and set it on the desktop. "Have a Mint-al, Pinkie." His ghoulish voice was barely a whisper as he opened the tin with his magic and levitated out one of the pills, setting it on the desk before him.

Her glower deepened. "I could have you arrested. I'm going to have you arrested. I know all about you. You're a bad pony! All of you. Bad ponies." She stormed to the door and yelled, "Pumpkin! Pound! Stardust! Gambol! Get in here!" A few seconds later, a light gray mare and light green stallion, both earth ponies, stormed in, followed by a yellow unicorn mare and pegasus stallion. Pinkie grinned at the scarred pony. "Goldie here was so nice to come here to save us some time! Take him down to Room Fun oh One."

"Director?" the gray mare said in bafflement. "What are you doing here?"

Pinkie gaped at her and pointed a hoof at Goldenblood, hissing, "He's not the director of the O.I.A. anymore! Take him out of my office! Now!" But the four hesitated. Goldenblood just sat there, not moving a muscle as he stared at them. Pinkie's glare slowly changed to one of bafflement. "What are you doing? He's nopony now but a criminal! Luna fired him. Get him." But none of them moved.

“Have a Mint-al, Pinkie,” he repeated softly.

“Pinkie,” Pumpkin cake said as she trotted up to the mare. Pinkie started, almost jumping away as their shoulders brushed. “We can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t? He’s right there. I’m your boss. Arrest him!” Pinkie said, thrusting a hoof at the scarred stallion.

“But Princess Luna is your boss, Pinkie. And... we’re not allowed to arrest him without her order,” Pound. “There was a memo.” Pinkie’s eyes grew rounder as she stared at the four and then back at the scarred stallion.

“But I. You... he...” she stammered.

Goldenblood continued his refrain. “Have a Mint-al, Pinkie.”

“We’ll be outside when you’re done, sir,” the green stallion said, trotting from the room.

The gray mare trotted from the room after him, touching an earbloom. “Stand down. It’s just Pinkie being Pinkie again,” she mumbled as she left.

Pinkie stared at the unicorn and pegasus. “Pumpkin Cake? Pound Cake?”

“Sorry, Auntie Pinkie. We’ll be outside,” the slim orange unicorn said, followed by the guilty-looking buff pegasus. “Don’t hurt her, sir,” Pumpkin warned with a frown. Then, fighting tears, the unicorn and pegasus stepped out of the office. Pinkie stared at the doors as they closed behind her, eye twitching.

Goldenblood tapped the tuning fork, making her jump. She pointed a hoof at him, the older mare’s limb shaking slightly. “You... what did you do to them? What... a spell... blackmail... what?”

“Have a Mint-al, Pinkie,” he repeated as he levitated the pill off the desk towards her. Her eyes focused on the little round tablet, pupils constricting as she trembled, and then she smacked the pill aside. That made him smile a little, and he set the tuning fork on the desk before him. “To answer your question, few law enforcement officers respect a commander that is routinely drugged to the tip of their tails and who blatantly, flippantly flouts the law she is supposed to uphold. Princess Luna and I have made certain they know where the real orders are supposed to be coming from.”

“But Pumpkin... Pound...” Pinkie said weakly.

“Don’t respect you either. They *love* you. That’s not the same thing. They want

to help you. Like the others. Like Twilight.” The name made Pinkie Pie twitch. He levitated up another pill. “Have a Mint-al, Pinkie,” he rasped as he floated it towards her once more.

“Stop it!” she snapped, swatting it away as well. “You’re a bad pony, Goldenblood. I’ve known it for years.”

“Right. Because your rump twitched or your ear flopped or your hoof itched,” Goldenblood said low and skeptically. “I don’t think that’s admissible in court.”

“You’re the reason why the ponies I arrest keep ending up back on the street,” she hissed.

“Correct. You were useful when you were scaring the aristocracy. You have no idea how much money they paid me to keep you off their backs. Business ponies, too.” He rose to his hooves. “You don’t get that those minor crimes and offenses don’t matter. The war needs certain ponies running things and keeping things going smoothly. So long as they don’t go too far, they get their autonomy. In return, Princess Luna gets her war materiel.”

“It’s wrong. Everywhere I look, I can feel bad things happening.” Her mane curled a little. “Only the little ponies aren’t bad. They’re the only good ones. Everypony else... everypony...”

Slowly he approached her, levitating the tin of Mint-als. “Have a Mint-al, Pinkie,” he said as he levitated out another tablet and floated it towards her mouth. For a second her mouth opened, watering, before she stiffened and it bounced off her nose. “What’s the matter? You’re normally so fond of them. They make your body twitch and itch and you use that to justify arresting ponies that I need. That Princess Luna needs.” He levitated up another pill. “You have no idea how infuriating it is,” he said casually, tossing the pill at the older mare.

“I might,” Pinkie growled back. “You’re dirty. So’s Princess Luna. So’re Twilight and Rarity and everypony!”

“So are you,” Goldenblood said, and Pinkie jerked as she glanced over at the half-covered mirror, then glared at him.

“You think I don’t know that?!” she snapped. “I know I’m not a good pony. But I... I haven’t done half of the things you have,” she said. “You’re a sneak and a liar and a manipulator and—”

“None of which are crimes,” Goldenblood rasped, his rear hoof tapping upon the floor.

Pinkie glared at him for several seconds, her face going from pink to red. “You just admitted to taking bribes from criminals!”

“Oh behalf of Princess Luna,” he answered, tapping faster beneath the desk.

Pinkie narrowed her eyes at him. “Did you murder for her too?” His hoof froze.

He didn’t respond for several seconds. “Did you know that I didn’t want any of this to happen? When Luna came to me, I was quite ready and happy to die. But Equestria was at war and needed her. She needed me. I needed Equestria. So I helped make her a government she could control... and she’s done so brilliantly. There are some ponies now who actually don’t know a Princess rules them. It’s all ministry, ministry, ministry. And when we finished organizing the ministries, I was ready to step aside and let the whole bloody plan commence. But I was connected. From my travels as a foal, I knew zebras in the Empire who were sympathetic to us. My lineage gave me access to the aristocracy. My work with Luna gave me access to the bureaucracy. And if I didn’t have access, I knew a pony who could help me get it. And suddenly I had my hooves deep in the greatest sociopolitical piece of performance art in history!”

He paused, then narrowed his eyes, jabbing a hoof at her. “But don’t think that it was easy, Pinkie Pie. Don’t you dare think that. None of it. Keeping you six apart and focused on the ministries was a constant battle. You in particular. I had to keep you distracted, because if you dropped out, then one by one, the others would have followed. That was why I told Luna to indulge your ‘law enforcement’ farce! I’ve struggled for ten years to keep everything together for Equestria so that when this war ends we can all go back to normal. So that it will be good again.” He slapped a hoof on her desk. “But you are insisting on making it difficult!”

Pinkie Pie’s mane curled a little as she giggled. “Have a Mint-al, Goldenblood. No, really! You could really use an orange one. My achy butt says so.” And then she stuck her tongue out at him.

Goldenblood started at her for a moment, and then there was a click as the doors to the office locked. “Achy butt, is it?” he said as he levitated out a dozen mint tins, emptying them out so that a cloud of pills hovered beside him. “Tell me...” he said as he advanced, and Pinkie’s smile slowly evaporated as her eyes went even wider. “What’s itching now, Pinkie?” he yelled as he jumped upon the older mare. “Have a mint-al Pinkie! Have all the fucking mint-als!”

She opened her mouth to scream, and he shoved a dozen tablets into her mouth. “Chew them up! Swallow! What’s itching now? What’s twitching? What’s your Pinkie

sense saying! What!” The door thudded and pounded. Pinkie swallowed if only to keep from choking to death, but the second that she opened her mouth, he shoved more in. “Have another Mint-al! Aren’t you having fun yet? Isn’t it fun, Pinkie?!” he yelled, dumping the Mint-als on her face. She struggled, flopped, gasped and choked as he climbed off her. “You are done. Stay in your office and binge to your heart’s content, but you will not interfere any longer.”

Pinkie retched, bringing up a slurry of pills in a reeking heap, coughing and gasping as she lay on the floor. He levitated over his tuning fork, struck it, and listened to its tone. His whole body relaxed as he turned his back and started towards the office doors.

“You serve the Eater of Souls,” Pinkie rasped, and he froze. “That’s what my Pinkie Sense is telling me.”

Slowly, he turned and looked at her. “What?” he murmured. “How do you know that name?”

But Pinkie didn’t answer. She started eating from the scattered Mint-als like a mare obsessed. He jumped on the older mare again. “How do you know that name?”

“I can feel it. It’s dripping off you like razor blades. It screams all around you!” she said, her pupils mismatched, wide and staring. “You serve it! It sings inside you!” She laughed madly before grabbing more pills and forcing them into her mouth.

“That’s a myth. A story. It’s a zebra legend!” Goldenblood retorted.

“Look in the mirror!” Pinkie sobbed and laughed all at once. “Look in the damned mirror. It’ll show you! It’ll show you my Pinkie Sense is true! Look if you don’t believe me!”

Goldenblood rose off her, staring at the mirror in the corner. He trotted towards it and then brushed the cloth away with a forehoof. The single cold pane shimmered, framing a reflection perfectly. That reflection, though, didn’t appear to be him at all. It was an unscarred stallion covered in blood. He stood on a field of salt and ashes, the air above him black and rolling. And in the background, something horrible was breaking out of the barren land, clawing from the earth like a colossal ghoul. Its head broke the surface, and it let out a scream, and the blood-drenched stallion let out a small smile. A star fell into its wide jaws and world split in two as something horrible was reborn.

“No! No, it’s a trick! It can’t be true!” the stallion on this side of the glass shouted.

His reflection smiled as more and more of the monstrosity pulled itself free. “Of

course it's true," it said. "In trying to save Princess Luna, you have slain her. In trying to preserve Equestria, you have ushered in its annihilation. You destroy all you hold most dear."

"No!" he said as he threw the sheet over the mirror. He looked over at Pinkie, stretched out prone, her body twitching. "No..." he murmured, rushing back to Pinkie, and his horn glowed as he undid the lock on the doors. He held the mare as she jerked and shuddered in his hooves. "I'm not that thing, Pinkie. I'm not!"

Pumpkin and Pound Cake rushed in. "What happened?" cried the former as the latter shoved Goldenblood away from Pinkie.

"She kept on eating them," Goldenblood murmured. "She knew. She always knew.... and I didn't believe her." He looked at the covered mirror and sobbed. "Oh Luna, she knew..."

Pinkie spasmed, foam on her lips, eyes wide and her pupils pinpricks as she stared at Goldenblood. "I'm so sorry, Blackjack!"

"What?" Goldenblood said as he backed away, but Pinkie Pie kept babbling and sputtering over her self as she struggled to string words together. "The Cakes! Spike! Twilight... Goddess! Murky... how..."

"Call an ambulance, Pumpkin!" Pound shouted, and the unicorn rushed to the phone. Goldenblood knelt beside the jerking pink mare. "You should get out of here, Director," Pound growled, hugging Pinkie close. "Before I do something you regret."

"One moment. Please," Goldenblood replied. "What do I have to do?" he said to Pinkie. "What can I possibly do to prevent... to... to change what I saw in that mirror?" Pinkie was foaming out the corner of her mouth, and Pound cake turned her on her side. The pink mare pulled more white tablets to herself and ate them before either could stop her.

"No!" Pound swept them all away with a swish of his wings, glaring angrily at Goldenblood. "Get out of here, teacher. I mean it!"

"What can I do? Please. Please!" Goldenblood begged, tears running down his cheek.

"Tell Twilight..." Pinkie gasped, going still a moment. "Tell Twilight what she wants to know. Show her how... Show... Be what you are..." And then she stretched out a hoof towards the sodden heap of pills and finally passed out.

Medical ponies rushed in, and Goldenblood was shoved away. He stood there,

watching them levitate Pinkie onto a stretcher. Pound and Pumpkin Cake glared at him, frowning in worry and confusion as she was carried out.

"What happened, Director?" Pumpkin Cake asked. "We heard you shouting."

“Tell us, or orders from the Princess or not, I’ll bust your legs and arrest you,” Pound threatened as he glared and held Pinkie tighter.

“Pinkie kept eating them. You saw her...” he murmured weakly. “I have to go,” he said, then looked at them. “Go with her. Get her friends, if they’ll come. Stay close to her. I have... I need...” he glanced at the covered mirror and shook. “I need to... to make some decisions...”

Pound lunged at him, but Pumpkin stopped him. “No. We need to be with Pinkie Pie now. Hurry.” The stallion snorted, and together they rushed out of the office.

Goldenblood staggered out of the office and down the hall, around the corner, and out of sight, then grabbed a waste bin and vomited violently into the receptacle. When his guts were empty, he sank to the ground. "It's not true. She's crazy. Just like Mother..." he whispered, rubbing his face with his hoof. Then he glanced over at the starmetal tuning fork, floating next to him as if it had his own magic. "Is it possible...? The legend? Have I really been serving the..." He shook, swaying slightly back and forth. "Oh Luna... somepony... anypony... please... help me!" he whimpered to the empty air, the silver fork gleaming at his hooves.

○○○●●●○○○

I came out of the memory orb with my face mashed against the keys. Goldenblood finally snapping. It was like me at Yellow River... horrifying and yet making perfect sense. I didn't know if I should cry or not. I felt as if I'd seen something obscene, and I couldn't stop it. I wanted to beat Goldenblood on Pound Cake's behalf and then some. Still, I needed to stay focused. I deleted the '>HRRGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG' my face had entered on the terminal and sat back.

What had she known? Well, Pinkie Pie had known many things. She'd outright said that Goldenblood served the Eater. That he was a no good badpony... It was almost quaint, considering other badponies I'd met. I closed my eyes. These passwords were written by Goldenblood. They weren't the kinds of things you could just guess by watching the memory orbs. Goldenblood had wanted whoever reached him to know him, and I probably knew him better than most. What could she have known?

No. Don't think about Pinkie Pie. Goldenblood was a lot like me, now. He may have had me beat in spades where intelligence was concerned, but he had the same self-destructive streak. He'd wanted to die for years, and when he'd screwed things up with Fluttershy, Big Macintosh, and Luna, he'd probably felt like he'd deserve to die regardless. Goldenblood wasn't just a bastard. "That's it," I murmured as I stared at the keys.

>HE WAS A PUPPET. Hoping it wasn't some other word like peon or slave, I hit the button.

For several seconds, nothing happened. Then two lines popped up.

>ANSWERS ACCEPTABLE.

>ACCESS GRANTED. WELCOME, EXECUTIONER.

Wait. What? I stared at the words as field dropped, then tore my eyes away as the door ahead opened. Beyond was a room not much bigger than this one but packed with strange equipment that beeped and clicked, cool mist creeping around the devices. In the center of it was a pod just like the ones in the Fluttershy Medical Center. Within lay the reposed stallion, and upon his head a mesh just like the one Cognitum had used to transfer my memory. Beside the pod was a machine identical to the ones I'd been hooked up to in Happyhorn. A dozen monitors were arranged facing the door; when I stepped in, they flickered to life with a dozen green images of Goldenblood.

"Welcome, Executioner. If you've gotten this far, you are clearly familiar enough with the accused to render final judgment. This subject has been interrogated one hundred thousand four hundred and twelve times since being interred here, and I believe that every crime this individual has committed has been accounted for," the green Goldenbloods said. One monitor changed to a list of crimes, starting with Conspiring against the Throne: 2 counts and First Degree Murder: 1 count and ending with Jaywalking: 12 counts.

"You're a machine," I said warily. "Like Happyhorn."

"Indeed. Repurposed by the M.o.M. and M.o.P. to extract every last detail of the accused's life. Any memory can be used against the accused in a court of law. If you have accessed this room, it means that you are qualified to pass judgment. Please list whatever execution you deem appropriate from the list." A different screen began to scroll with words like 'Burning Alive', 'Defenestration from Shadowbolt Tower', and 'Drawing and Quartering'.

I stared at the list in horror. "You want me to kill him?"

The green ponies in the monitors all looked thoughtful. "Well, you could, I suppose, but why get your hooves dirty? I can increase his neural sensitivity to the point that the shock will eventually kill him. To him, it will be real. In fact, you may wish to choose several different choices to queue to save yourself the inconvenience."

I shook my head. "I want to talk to him. Let him go."

The computer froze a moment. "I'm sorry. That's not on my list of executions. If I may recommend, any execution involving Fluttershy is high on the psychological stress level."

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. "I want you to let him go. I'm not his executioner," I said flatly. Clearly, this computer was on the crazier side of programs. Just my luck.

Instantly, the four turrets in the room behind me all whirled to aim at my back while two more dropped from the ceiling of this room and immediately pointed right at me. "I'm sorry, but there must be some mistake. Only a pony who would want to kill Goldenblood would want to come here. A lackey wouldn't have made the appropriate responses. No, I'm afraid only an executioner will do. Please make your selection, or you will have to be disintegrated."

"What?" I shouted. Seriously, I couldn't win with robots! "Why?"

"Password security. Can't have you writing the answers on the door. Then just anyone could get in," the computer said as if it were perfectly reasonable rather than perfectly insane. "What do you believe would be a fitting death for Goldenblood? Thanks to accelerated neural perception, even slow, lingering deaths are possible. Colon cancer? Certainly possible. Venereal disease. Easily done."

I rubbed my face with my hooves. "I want to talk to him. Is that possible?"

The computer frowned. "He's currently queued in a round of interrogation simulations. Forty-eight hours until completion. He might have a brief window to interact with you at the end of each simulation, if you wish."

"I'm not waiting forty-eight hours. I need to talk to him now," I insisted, scowling at the computer. I needed to do something truly radical here... I needed to *outthink* an obstacle. The computer wanted me to kill him and torture Goldenblood. "If I can taunt him, I'll be able to select the perfect death."

The computer monitors flickered and flashed. "Mmmm. Very well. There is an observation helmet for an observing interrogator. When this interrogation session

ends, you should have a brief window for your questions.” A small door opened at the base of the machine, revealing a second golden net. I carefully levitated it over and set it atop my head.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I said as I stared at the scarred pony in the pod. Time to call. The machine beeped and flashed, and once more, everything swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood sat in a cell, his body aching and a sick sensation in his stomach. A foul taste lingered in his mouth as he slumped, surrounded by a dozen pegasus, unicorn, and batpony guards. On a table to the side were a half dozen bottles. His mouth moved slowly, his words, the few he spoke, slurred. A frowning and powerfully built batpony officer trotted up, glaring down at Goldenblood, then spoke with grim authority. “Is he prepared?”

A unicorn glanced at the scarred stallion, then said in a low voice, “Yes, Officer Lionheart. He’s drugged to the tip of his horn, sir. He keeps on trying to rant and rail, but he shouldn’t cause a fuss.”

The other guards fidgeted and muttered softly to each other. Lionheart eyed each with a scowl. “What is it?”

A pegasus fluttered his feathers, shifted on his hooves, glanced at each of the other guards, and mustered his courage. “Permission to speak freely, sir?” Lionheart pursed his lips, then nodded his head. The pegasus took a deep breath. “Execution, sir? Is the princess serious about this? A public execution? Like this?”

“Princess Luna has made her decree. We will carry out her orders,” he said simply as he looked around the room. “This pony has betrayed Her Majesty, and all of us. He will be punished accordingly.”

The pegasus stiffened. “No pony is questioning that, sir. But public execution? That’s never been done before. That’s something the enemy would do. If we refuse—”

“You are relieved,” Lionheart said firmly. The white pegasus jerked as if he’d been struck, then saluted with his wing and marched from the room. Lionheart’s yellow eyes swept across the rest of the guards. “Now hear this. This is going to happen. If any of you have moral or professional objections, so be it. They will be noted in your record. But we do not decide for Her Majesty. We execute Her Majesty’s decisions. This will be done. Is that understood?”

He stared around the room, meeting the eyes of each pony. Some dropped their gazes, shamed, and trotted out. Others stared back defiantly, then left as well. In

a minute, only three guards remained, all of them batponies. Lionheart sighed, slumping. "So be it."

Lionheart himself ducked his head and scooped Goldenblood up across his shoulders. The scarred stallion hung limply, his lips continuing to move numbly as he was borne through the hallway. The sound of a crowd grew like the rumbling of a waterfall. Eventually he was carried out into the bright sunlight of a large plaza in the middle of Canterlot, his yellow eyes blinking blearily at the rows upon rows of ponies. Some shouted, but others looked on with worry and pity.

A platform stretched along one end of the plaza. At its center sat the ruler of Equestria, looking tall and cool, beautiful and terrible. To her left sat a number of dignitaries and officials, among them Trueblood and Prince Blueblood. On her right, however, sat six seats adorned with the ministry icons. Only one was occupied; Rarity sat stiff as a board, her eyes fixed on her hooves. The seat for princess Celestia was also vacant.

"Mistake. . ." Goldenblood murmured.

"Yes, you made a mistake. But it's too late to—"

"No. Princess Luna," Goldenblood muttered. "She shouldn't have empty seats. Makes her look weak." The batpony stared at him incredulously, and the corner of the scarred unicorn's mouth curled. "Should have filled them with representatives."

Lionheart's eyes showed doubt, but he set Goldenblood down in the middle of the plaza, then trotted off to the side. Goldenblood struggled to remain upright as he faced the stage. Luna gazed down, cold and impartial, then said in a thunderous voice, "People of Equestria! It is Our solemn duty to present to you the greatest traitor in our land's history. For years, Goldenblood has conspired to undermine the authority of the ministries, the government, and the people. He has maintained clandestine contacts with Our striped enemies, extorted money from the aristocracy, misappropriated materials for his own ends, and allowed wanton profiteering by dozens of enemies of the state. Many more crimes of his are more disturbing still and unfit for the ears of you good ponies.

"These are grave and disturbing revelations that shake us all to the core. And for crimes so grave and so audacious, what penalty is sufficient? Shall We throw him in a cell to reflect on his crimes?" she asked, and some in the crowd began to shout 'no' and booed. "Shall We exile him from our land and run the risk of him returning to our striped enemies?" Louder shouts now. Luna sighed and shook her head. "Were that the times allowed Us to banish him for a thousand years, but even that

would be insufficient for his deeds and conspiracies. He has plotted the overthrow of Our crown and the death of Our beloved sister. There is no imprisonment, exile, or banishment sufficient for one of his evil.”

The shouts were mixed now. Some were roaring for blood, but there was also worried muttering. Luna glanced at the crowd, then down at Goldenblood. “The only response for such crimes against Our subjects is the same penalty given to our enemies on the battlefield: death.” There were shouts and whoops and stomping of hooves, but far too few for the crowd assembled. “The condemned has prepared a statement,” Luna thundered, her voice a little waspish.

Speakers turned on. Goldenblood’s harsh breathing filled the plaza, a touch of deep reverb with every breath, and then there came a deep and angry tirade, full of insults and rage, started against the weak, ineffectual, pathetic people of Equestria. The Goldenblood present in person sat quietly, a small smile on his face. His eyes were locked on Rarity, but the mare didn’t meet his gaze. When the recording ended, Luna said solemnly, “As you can see, his contempt is absolute, his loathing for our people unflinching. Thus, it is Our solemn and unwelcome duty to condemn Goldenblood to death.”

The crowd was so solemn that the ones trying to cheer and whoop were shamed into silence. From the edge of the city, a green and purple behemoth swooped up into the air, looped around, and an enormous dragon landed on the other end of the plaza. Goldenblood could barely look up at the beast above him. His eyes fell and met Luna’s. His mouth worked weakly, and he rasped, “Luna. . .”

She stared down at him, cold and imperious, then her head gave a little jerk.

The dragon made a noise eerily similar to the noise made in Goldenblood’s lungs when he breathed in, but when the noise ended, an all consuming green glow filled his entire world. Then darkness. . .

. . . and he reappeared in a cage, every nerve of him burning inside and out. He lay weakly, gasping as his heart thundered in his chest. Above him, Princess Celestia stared down at him contemptuously. The alicorn appeared. . . old. Tired. His eyes rolled, and he gaped at the heaps of golden coins lying all around them. Then, without a word, she turned away and strode towards a tunnel.

“Wait,” Goldenblood rasped. Celestia stopped but didn’t face him. He struggled to sit up in the cage. He swayed, staring at her back. “I’m sorry,” he choked.

“And what, exactly, are you sorry for, Goldenblood?” she replied.

He stared at her silently for a minute. Then he slumped against the bars. “Everything.”

“You should be,” she said in solemn finality, walking out and leaving him to collapse into a heap in the bottom of the cage.

He lay on his side for a long time before the ground rumbled. A green and purple dragoness strode in and stretched like a cat, shaking her body as she strained every muscle. “Well, that was overdramatic,” she said in a rumbling voice as she scooped up a massive heap of gold coins and flopped down upon it with a sigh. “I don’t know why she went through all the trouble. If she wants to kill you, she should just kill you.”

“She wants to interrogate me first,” Goldenblood rasped weakly. “Something more substantial than just digging through my head.” He closed his eyes, resting his cheek on the cage’s cool metal bottom. “She’ll dispose of me then.” He opened one, looking over at her as she flipped open a chest loaded with gemstones. “Maybe she’ll have me eaten.”

“Pass,” the dragoness said, sticking out her tongue. “Pony wreaks havoc on my waistline. Plus, I have no idea just how many potions they crammed in you to make you survive my flame. You’d probably turn my scales blue.” She tossed a dozen of the gems into the air and caught them with her mouth. “Give me gemstones any day.” She chewed a moment, then observed dryly, “You seem rather composed, all things considered.”

“I have things to tell Princess Luna. Important things. Mistakes I’ve made.” He closed his eyes and shook his head, rocking his cheek against the floor. “She doesn’t trust me now, but when she rips the secrets from me, she’ll know. Then, maybe, she’ll do the right thing.”

“And not kill you?” the dragoness said wryly, toying with a handful of gems.

He chuckled. “No. I deserve to die,” he answered, struggling to make himself heard. “I’ve done things you can’t imagine. Overseen nightmares that I didn’t realize were nightmares until it was too late. Far too late.”

“Such melodrama,” the dragoness said with a roll of her eyes. “You ponies thrive on spectacles. It’s not healthy. If you were a dragon, you’d just do things, and if someone killed you for it, so be it. ‘Might makes right’ may not be the fairest world view, but it’s far less hysterical.” She scooped up another handful of gems. In the midst of the heap was a large hoof-sized chunk of bubblegum-pink quartz. It

seemed to have a silver ring set about it, and a talisman glyph glowed in the middle.

“Wait!” Goldenblood rasped, but he was too weak. Too slow. Too late. The gemstones tumbled into her maw, and she smacked her lips. Goldenblood struggled to his hooves. “Where did you get those gemstones?”

“I don’t know,” she said with a shrug. “Wherever you ponies get them from, I suppose.”

“You need to vomit! I think there was something in there!” Goldenblood rasped weakly.

The dragon rolled her green eyes. “Ponies. Always with the drama,” she said as she lay back down on her bed of coins.

“I think there was a talisman in there!” Goldenblood said in alarm.

The dragoness rolled her eyes. “Sure was. Those are extra tasty.” She smirked at him. “Relax. In a day or two, it’ll pass like all the rest.”

“Please, tell somepony—” Goldenblood began, but the dragon thumped her tail down beside the cage.

“Hush up and go to sleep. I’m sure they’ll come and get you soon enough,” she said with a snort.

Goldenblood tried repeating his warning again and again, but the dragon squeezed two handfuls of gold into her ears, curled up, and resumed sleeping. Finally, his throat throbbing, he fell silent. The dragoness occasionally gave a soft groan in her sleep. Goldenblood finally sank to the floor of the cage, dropping into unconsciousness.

He was awoken by an especially loud groan from the dragoness. From somewhere high above came a soft ‘whump’ noise again and again. He opened his eyes, seeing her on her back. “What’s going on?” Goldenblood asked as he looked at the dragon. Pink foam flecked off her jaws.

“Some sort of attack. I’d be out there swatting down those missiles except all of a sudden... I feel... sick!” She rolled back and forth on her bed of gold coins. “I never feel sick.” And then she was interrupted by an enormous belch, and a cloud of pink roiled in the air above her. She stared at it with pained eyes. “That’s... not right...”

Goldenblood’s eyes went wide. “Guards! Guards!” he screamed, rising to his hooves, his rusty, harsh voice echoing in the gold filled cavern. She gasped, her belly becoming distended, eyes bulging. Another thunderous burp erupted, but this

time it was accompanied by a larger blast of pink vapor. He froze, staring in horror as she let out a horrible retching sort of noise and thick, pink gas blasted out across her hoard like burning napalm. The gold bubbled and began to run like wax as she rolled in agony.

“AHHH!” she screamed. “What’s wrong with—” and whatever else she might have said was stolen by a continuous, flaming, pink torrent erupting from her mouth. Fortunately, it was pointed away from Goldenblood, splashing across more of the hoard as she thrashed. The pink fluid seemed to dissolve her lips so she couldn’t keep it within, but her thick hide contained it for the moment. Her tail slashed back and forth as she writhed in agony. A squad of soldiers rushed in and immediately collapsed, screaming, as the bank of pink mist rolled over them.

The same mist covered Goldenblood, but at most all it caused was the faintest irritation. He hammered his hooves against the bars, but it availed him nothing. Then the dragon’s tail, dripping both globs of gold and purple scales the size of his hoof, smashed the cage. It bounced away over the mounds and slammed up against the wall. The lock snapped open, and Goldenblood staggered out and followed the wall through the thickening mists. The dragon’s body was ballooning out grotesquely as her tough hide stretched. Liquid pink cloud dripped from her mouth as she fought to contain it. He reached the door beside the half dozen guards groaning and twitching as their skin fused to their armor and the floor.

Goldenblood galloped along the hallway as fast as he could. He reached an empty guard post, hit the intercom, and started calling furiously, but nopony answered. He tried again and again for several minutes... and then Pink Cloud rolled down the hallway and through the guard station. He stared as it began to flow down numerous side tunnels.

He tore down a hallway, galloping as fast as he could until he found a staircase that led him out of the pink mist. He stormed up to another security station that was similarly abandoned save for one baffled-looking stallion guard. “Hey. You’re not supposed to come up that way!”

Goldenblood advanced on the reedy blue stallion. “What’s going on? Where is everypony?”

“We’re under attack! The zebras are launching attacks all across Equestria! It’s nuts. How—” but Goldenblood raced out the doors and gaped up at the sunny Canterlot sky. A massive blue dome extended overhead like the inside of a bubble. Every few seconds, there was a detonation that made it flicker.

“How long has this been going on?” Goldenblood asked.

“The bombardment started a while ago. The Princesses themselves are holding that shield up. Had to extend it underneath the city, too, after some stripes smuggled mortars into the woods around Zebratown. Then he froze as he stared at Goldenblood. “Wait. I know you! You’re that traitor we executed yesterday!” His eyes widened. “You’re supposed to be dead!”

“You need to get on a working intercom. Contact the palace! Let them know there’s a gas weapon that’s been activated under the city. She has to order an evacuation immediately!” he said.

“All I’m doing is taking you back to a cell! I don’t know how you got yourself undeaded, but I’m not about to let you trot all over the city right now, trai—” He froze as a pink mist crept out to the stairwell and started spreading along the ground.

“Stay away! It’s poisonous!” Goldenblood warned. “It’s making its way through the larger passages first, but it won’t be long before it has enough pressure to spray up every drain pipe in the city!”

But the blue stallion glared at Goldenblood. “Poison, eh? Then how come you’re not dead, eh? How come—” The mist rolled past their hooves, much warmer than it had been in the hoard below, and the guard jerked. “I... I... I don’t feel so good.”

Goldenblood backed away, but the guard stood in place, trying to tug his hooves from the floor. “I... I can’t move... Why...” he said as he stared down in helplessness.

Goldenblood turned and ran, galloping towards the towers of the ministries and the palace. All around, guardponies were telling ponies not to worry, to get inside and wait for further instructions. And there were many ponies who didn’t seem even that concerned. They trotted along in clear urgency, but they obviously weren’t panicking.

“I’m not missing this hooficure appointment,” one mare said sharply as she waved her PipBuck at a guard. “They have to be scheduled months in advance!”

A mare carefully herded her three colts along the sidewalk. “Let’s get home. Don’t be scared. Princess Luna will keep us safe.”

Goldenblood whirled from one pony the next. A fruit vendor set up on the corner. A soldier helping an elderly pony up some steps. A small cluster of children laughing that the zebras got them out of school early. He finally froze, tears streaming down his face as he sat down hard before a fountain. It lay right beside the plaza where he’d been burned just the other day. “No...” he whispered.

Then the ground shook. From the storm drains came a sharp whistling as a pressurized front of gas displaced the air. The fountain suddenly sprayed twice as high, then twice again, the drains bubbling furiously in the basin. Everypony froze, staring in shock as the world seemed to scream around them, and then the whistle dropped to nothing. The world was quiet and still. Even the barrage seemed to have paused as everypony looked around in bewilderment. Down the street, a pink fog drifted from the doors of the guard station, looking as if somepony had set off a smoke bomb within.

Then another pulse shot through the tunnels, and from the two storm drains at the end of the street blasted plumes of roiling pink gas, then the next closer two, then the next, erupting down the street in quick succession. Metal utility covers were thrown into the air to rain down with clangs and clatters. The fountain sprayed a jet of pink cloud, the ever-expanding gas swirling into the sky.

The thuds of the missiles hitting the shield resumed, but they were drowned out by the horrified screams of Canterlot dying.

Goldenblood sprinted along the road, dodging past and around the terrified, milling ponies. The Cloud swirled in banks and eddies, and where it drifted, ponies died. Not all at once. The tiny pink droplets seemed to take some longer to kill some than others. Where they touched, cloth dissolved, hide oozed, and even metal seemed to visibly corrode. The horrible chemical ravaged all it came across. Mares, stallions, foals. They ran. Screamed. Died.

A modern-looking apartment building's facade shattered with an eruption of the gas, a great billowing plume of pink rushing out in a shower of broken glass. Ponies threw themselves from windows, trailing streamers of the deadly toxin and smashing into the ground with horrifying wet noises. Foals curled up in corners, screaming and sobbing for parents as the mist thickened around them. They didn't scream for long. Goldenblood, however, barely felt the burn of the Cloud. His lungs crackled with every inhalation, but nothing more. The droplets stung with mild discomfort, but they just rolled off his scars.

Others weren't so lucky. Pegasi and batponies struggled to find clear air, fanning their wings to blow the mist away, but the magical bubble keeping the missiles out kept the Cloud in. No matter how hard they flapped, eventually the air curled above, beneath, and behind them, slipped around their frantically flying forms, and sent their screams to join the others. As Goldenblood ran, ponies fell through the fog, sounding like wet fruit being dropped on the sidewalk. Not everypony seemed to be dying fast. Some lay in agony, gasping at the toxic air, their lives bleeding away with

every inhalation. Others staggered around, eyes and lips melted shut.

The city began to fall silent... horribly silent. But not completely. Broadcasters on the hooves of some ponies crackled, the gas apparently reacting with the magical components, many of them issuing an Enervation-like scream that made Goldenblood's ears bleed when he passed too close. Too many times, he had to double back and make his way through an alley. All the while, the Cloud thickened and the quiet grew. Eventually, even the missile detonations ceased.

Goldenblood raced past the front of the M.W.T. hub, a limp crowd of ponies slowly oozing their way into the pavement. His hoofbeats were terribly loud, echoing off the silent edifices surrounding him. He passed a mare sitting oddly upright on one bench, her hoof stretched out towards him as she softly whimpered for help. The bench had fused with her back. "I'm sorry," he told the aquamarine unicorn.

And then he raced towards a giant tree. The doors were open, and pink mist curled through the halls indolently. "Fluttershy!" Goldenblood croaked. "Fluttershy!" he screamed, making his way past all the bodies. He poked his head into an amphitheatre, then heard a noise behind some double doors. He trotted to them, hesitated, and then pushed them slowly open.

The office was in disarray, but the mist was thinner here. Thin enough that Goldenblood could see, albeit indistinctly, the mare by the window. "Fluttershy?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

There was no answer for a second, and then a mare said quietly, "I'm afraid she's not here, darling. Terribly sorry." Goldenblood slowly approached the unicorn. Her coat seemed to be running like a beautiful painting splashed with turpentine. Her magnificent mane had a plastic appearance, the individual strands glued together in a purple mass that had fused with her hide. Her hoof pressed to the glass panes on the window, the end smeared like a blob of glue to the cracked glass. Her eyes streaked her cheeks like running make up.

"Rarity," Goldenblood murmured.

"I'm sorry, Darling. This mist has gotten so accursedly dark," she said as she tugged her hoof. "And I fear that I am stuck," she added quietly. "Who is it? You sound like..." She stilled. "No. It's impossible... unless... I'm dead?"

"No, Rarity. No. It was a show," Goldenblood said quietly as he moved closer to her. "I think she just wanted a few months to interrogate me properly."

"Ah," the mare breathed softly. "So bothersome not to be forwarded the memo."

"Rarity, where is Fluttershy? Is she... is she here?" Goldenblood asked, his voice tight with dread.

"No. I sent her away. Used every bit of my magic to send her and Angel Bunny to safety," she murmured. "It was the most I could do for my friend," she whispered.

"Where, Rarity? Please. I need to find her." Goldenblood begged. He reached out to touch her mane, and it stuck to his hoof like chewed gum, making the mare quiver with a gasp of pain.

"Why should I tell you?" Rarity whispered.

Goldenblood sat beside her. "I want to make sure she's safe," Goldenblood said softly. "I... I love her, Rarity. I always have, even if I hurt her."

"We tend to hurt the ones we love," she murmured, then shuddered again. "Then again, loving nopony is its own kind of hurt." They were both silent, and then she whispered, "Zecora's cottage, near Ponyville. She's at Zecora's cottage in the Ever-free. It was the safest place I could think of. She wouldn't be happy in some metal tomb in the earth."

"No, she wouldn't."

The mare made a soft choking noise, her body shaking, and a whimper escaped her lips. "Tell me. Do I look dreadful?" she said with a sniff.

"You're always beautiful, Rarity," Goldenblood said. "Nothing could ever change that."

She sniffed again, the corner of her mouth curling. "Liar. You always were such a liar. But thank you..."

"Thank you, Rarity," Goldenblood murmured. "For saving her, and for telling me."

Rarity quivered again, then took a deeper breath. "I always was... too generous... for my own good..." Rarity murmured. Then the breath left her, and she sagged. Her body started to fall, but Goldenblood's magic caught her and steadied her so that when he released it, Rarity almost appeared to still stare out at the city with her hoof pressed to the window.

"Goodbye, Rarity," Goldenblood murmured, and then he turned and trotted quickly from the office. He continued along through the thickening mist towards the vague shape of the royal palace. He passed a few ponies in emergency hazmat equipment, but the concentrated pink gas had liquified them as well. Goldenblood picked his way across the steps with their slain guards and trotted through the foyer. The

Pink Cloud was dissolving the elaborate tapestries, making them drip in clumps of reeking fibrous matter. Even the marble seemed to pit and hiss at the pink vapors.

And then he came to the throne room.

Princess Luna stood before the throne in a nimbus of cool purple light, but as Goldenblood stepped closer, he could see the burns covering her dusky frame. The chemical wasn't liquefying her just yet, but the agony on her face was clear. From her horn, a blue beam projected towards the roof.

Slowly, Goldenblood approached. "Your Majesty," he rasped softly as he approached the dais and bowed before her.

"You!" Luna hissed through her teeth, the blue beam wavering. She gasped and then grunted, restoring the beam. "Of all those who should die, you live! By what treachery do you persist?"

"I don't know, your Majesty. I suppose my partial exposure at Littlehorn of exposure made me immune to the chemical. It doesn't matter," he said, keeping his head bowed. "You must flee this place, your Majesty."

"Flee? To where? Manehattan is lost. Cloudsdale is gone. Fillydelphia is annihilated. Hoofington is dead."

"To the Redoubt. Equestria must have a ruler," Goldenblood said. A horrid choking noise, half sob and half laughter, ripped from her throat. "You can drop the shield. The city is lost."

"But the countryside is not. I may at least grant my subjects a few hours more to flee," she gasped.

"Equestria needs its ruler, your Majesty," he said. "There must be emergency plans enacted. Orders given. Evacuations organized."

"Another pony shall do so," she said, swaying. "I have released EC-1101."

Goldenblood slumped. "Your Majesty."

"It is only fitting. May it find somepony more worthy." She closed her eyes, tears running down her cheeks. "I wished to rule for a thousand years. To prove to my people that I was kind and loving, that I would care for them and protect them from the things they feared. That I was not Nightmare Moon. My reign was a mere hundredth of that, and I protected them from naught!" She spasmed in pain. "At the very least, I can do this. Protect the people of my land for a while longer."

"Princess... I wish to confess," Goldenblood said solemnly. "I have conspired against you. I feared that, with victory, that you would become a tyrant. I lost faith in you. I tampered with EC-1101 so that, if it was ever deleted by you or the enemy or found an unworthy pony who tried to use its power for harm, it would unleash a weapon to destroy any victors. But I was manipulated, Your Majesty. It is a poor excuse, but it is the only explanation I have." For some reason, that made her smile sadly. He bowed his head. "If you wish it of me, I will conduct my own execution."

Luna stared at him, trembling. "Frankly, Goldenblood, I don't really care anymore. Go die if you wish. I will remain here until I can no longer."

"Princess Luna, I don't want you to die," Goldenblood rasped. "I betrayed you, but I never wished you... this..." he said, sweeping his hoof at the blackening tapestries. "I don't want you to have to die here, alone."

"She will not," Celestia said from behind Goldenblood.

"No!" Luna cried out. "Sister! Why aren't you in Stable One?"

"Why aren't you?" Celestia said with a gentle smile. Her horn flared, and a second beam, thicker and golden yellow lanced up towards the heavens. "Rest a moment, sister. I will hold it for now."

"Princesses, please... you must not... you should not... you..." he faltered as Luna stopped casting the spell, panting as they both looked at him.

"Still trying to advise me, traitor?" Luna asked, and Goldenblood jerked his head away as if he'd been struck. "We are past the points of mustn'ts and shouldn'ts, Goldenblood. We will do what we think is right. My reign is done. I will use the last of it as I see fit. I will hold the shield as long as possible."

"But your people..." Goldenblood protested.

"Were you not the one who worried I was a tyrant, Goldenblood?" Luna retorted, and once more Goldenblood jerked. Both were silent a moment, and then the dusky princess continued in softer tones. "I'm glad you took steps, Goldenblood. I thank you for putting Equestria above me. I wish they'd been more moderate ones, but still. You tried to do what was right." Slowly, Goldenblood looked up into the burned face of his princess as she smiled at him.

"I know I have no right, but... please forgive me," he begged.

"Forgive *me*. I wish I'd been a wiser princess," Luna replied, then glanced at her sister. "I know what it means to betray another. And I know what it means to be

forgiven, and to feel remorse.” She turned to Celestia, adding to Goldenblood as she did, “Now, my final order is to go. I release you from my service. I wish to speak to my sister alone.”

Goldenblood bowed his head. “I know I have less right than any to ask anything of you, Princess Luna, but could you please send me to Ponyville? I... I have one last apology to make.”

Luna seemed to consider it, then gave a small smile. “Fluttershy?” He gave a short little nod. “I thought... nevermind. She is in Ponyville?”

He swallowed and gave another little nod. “I don’t know if she’ll hear it, but I owe it to her to try.”

“Sister,” Celestia said in a warning tone. “Are you certain?”

“No, but I suppose that, in a small way, it is due.” She slumped against Celestia and began coughing. “Could you help me please, dearest sister?” Luna said as her horn glowed.

The white alicorn sat and hugged her close, their horns touching. “Always, Luna.”

A white glow formed around Goldenblood. “Goodbye, Goldie,” Luna said quietly.

And Goldenblood gazed at the pair, embracing, dying, tears running down his cheeks as time seemed to slow. “Goodbye, your Majesties.”

The castle disappeared, and so did the gas. He found himself in a dusty cottage decorated with flowers and butterflies. For several seconds, he simply stared, sitting in the middle of the living room, and then he began to shake. He clutched his head in his forehooves and started to sob, rocking back and forth as he choked and wept.

“No time,” he rasped after a few moments, pulling himself together and to his hooves. “I have to find her... tell her... get her somewhere safe. The Redoubt. Stable 2. 101. Somewhere.” He rose to his hooves and staggered out of the cottage. Far off in the distance, he could see the solid pink sphere obscuring Canterlot. Beyond that, radiant mushroom clouds rose on the horizon. Dozens. Cloudsdale was nothing but glowing mist. Ponyville lay in the distance, the village oddly silent, as if a bomb had fallen and the remaining buildings were just a memory.

Slowly, he turned towards the forest. The dark trees loomed above him as he walked, hooves tripping over vines as he wandered along the trails. It was more than an hour before he spotted the tree hut decorated with colored bottles and masks. Instantly, his heartbeat quickened, and he rushed in. “Fluttershy! Flutter-

shy!” No answer. His eyes darted around the forest, and then atop a nearby hill he saw a flash of yellow and pink.

He tore up the hillside. There, at its peak, sat Fluttershy. Her teal eyes were old as they stared out at the roofs of Ponyville, tears dripping slowly down her cheeks. Yellow feathers drifted slowly in the breeze towards him, her gray-tipped mane waving in the ghosts of distant blast waves as she watched her world die.

“Fluttershy...” Goldenblood said as he stopped short. She didn’t turn. Didn’t acknowledge him at all. And then he took another step closer. “We need to—”

That was all he got out. A white missile flashed out of the grass, smashing into him like a bullet. He staggered back, and the white blur rammed him again and again. He slid halfway down the hill before he came to a stop.

Atop a rock sat a white rabbit, glaring at him flatly. Without taking his eyes off Goldenblood, he reached behind him and from seemingly nowhere pulled a tablet of Buck, which he proceeded to chow down on. His free paw pointed back the way Goldenblood had come.

“Please, Angel, I need to speak to her. She can’t—” Goldenblood began, trying again to climb towards her, but a fuzzy foot hammered his face and knocked him back down the hill once more. Goldenblood sat up, horn glowing. “Damn it! Let me talk to her one last time.”

The white bunny reached behind again, plucked out an inhaler, shook it three times, and drew in the contents in one long pull. Goldenblood charged up the hill, and the white bunny kicked him back down again. Up. Down. Up Down. A half dozen times Goldenblood tried to storm past Angel, and a half dozen times he was knocked back. “Damn you! I need to speak to her! She—” And then the rabbit stopped holding back. In a series of kicks so swift that the beast could barely be seen, Goldenblood was flipped backwards into the air, slammed back down into the hillside, and struck so hard that all he could do was curl up. Every time his horn glowed, a white furry foot struck the spire, shattering his focus.

The rabbit knocked Goldenblood out of his curl and left him face down in the dirt, twisted one forehoof behind his back, stomped hard on the back of his head, and wrenched it up and pointed back toward Ponyville. Fluttershy still hadn’t moved. She stared ahead, eyes sad and broken. Goldenblood heaved as if to move one last time, and Angel Bunny brought a foot down on Goldenblood’s spine with a resounding crack. Goldenblood cried out in pain, but his hindquarters instantly went numb.

His cry died in his throat as the shield covering Canterlot began to flicker. Then it popped like a soap bubble, and the air around the city became filled with pink: pink gas exploding into the sky and pink water cascading down in an annihilating sheet of poison. Angel Bunny hopped off the crippled stallion and raced back up to hug the weeping mare. Goldenblood lay sprawled on the grass. Slowly, he tried pulling himself up the side of the hill, dragging his limp hindlegs. Even with the bubble gone and the gas dispersing, a hazy cloud clung to the spires, as if it would always linger. For the longest time, he stared at the rolling vapors as they filled the sky and plunged along the mountainside. Almost five minutes later, a roaring boom echoed like thunder across the land.

A few minutes after that, Ponyville was backlit by three immense balefire blasts tearing through a forest. "Whitetail woods... why?" Goldenblood murmured weakly, his vision now filled with blurs and spots. Slowly, he continued up. Inch by inch. "I just... have to tell her. Angel can kill me then, if he wants... but she has to know..."

"Traitor Goldenblood?" a stallion asked, and Goldenblood turned his head to look up at a batpony guard standing above him. Three more hovered above

"Please..." Goldenblood begged, then stretched a hoof towards Fluttershy. "Please..."

"We have orders to take you into custody for interrogation," the stallion said. "I don't know how you escaped to here, but I can't wait to make you tell us."

"No... I need... please..." Goldenblood said.

One of the batpony mares landed next to Fluttershy, keeping a bit of distance between herself and the bunny. "Ministry Mare Fluttershy? Do you need... anything?"

Fluttershy didn't answer. She only shook her head slowly back and forth.

"She's not a part of our orders," the stallion said, scooping up Goldenblood and draping him across his back. "We need to hurry back to the Citadel."

"No..." Goldenblood begged. "Please..."

The batpony mare looked from unicorn to pegasus. "Um, ma'am? Mister Goldenblood would like to speak to you? Would that be okay?"

Fluttershy didn't say a word. Didn't look at him. She closed her eyes, hung her head, and let her pale pink mane shield him from her view. Then she gave the tiniest shake of her head. Goldenblood stared at her, tears of anguish rolling down his face. "Let's go!" the stallion said, and together they lifted into the air.

"No! No! Fluttershy!" Goldenblood screamed as he was borne up into the air, his

eyes locked on a yellow mare who grew ever smaller. “Fluttershy!” he screamed as she became just a tiny yellow dot atop the hill. “Fluttershy!” he raggedly screamed one last time, and then he sagged on the batpony’s back, weeping once more as everything faded to black.

I felt my body shift. I was sitting on something, on that firm plastic smooth nothingness that existed in places like this. A beam of white light illuminated me in the void. “So, you’ve finally come,” Goldenblood said softly from behind me.

I turned to see him sitting in another beam of light. He looked as I remembered: middle aged, scarred, and tired. His yellow eyes locked with mine, and his lips curled up a tiny bit. “Blackjack.”

“Goldenblood,” I replied as I turned to face him. “It is you, isn’t it? No... hologram? Or computer simulation?”

“It is,” he said calmly. “I’m glad it’s you. I knew that only you or Cognitum would have any chance of finding me. And I knew only you would be able to appreciate what I’ve done.”

“What you’ve done?” I said with a small frown.

“The crimes I’ve committed,” he amended. “You’ve finally come to judge me for all that I’ve done.”

I rolled my eyes a little. “Yeah... no. Actually, I’m here to ask you some questions, and then I’ll be on my way. You can go on experiencing horribleness as long as you want.”

Goldenblood’s mouth opened and closed a few times as he seemed to struggle with what I’d just said. “Blackjack, you know what I’ve done. You know who I am better than probably any pony who has ever lived. Between sessions, I’ve used this machine’s connection with Hoofington’s system to keep tabs on you. Watched what you’ve done. How could you not do anything about my crimes?”

Oh brother. I rubbed my face with a hoof. “Goldenblood, I hate to break it to you, but this isn’t about you. I agree, you fucked up big time. I have to admit, I’m pretty good at doing that myself, but you beat me hooves down. Congratulations.” I clopped my hooves together weakly. “Now, what I want is for you to tell me about Horizons.”

Goldenblood turned his back on me. “Get out.”

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. If you're not here to kill me, then clearly you haven't been paying attention. Good day." He turned and started to trot out of the circle of light.

"Right. So you're just going to wait another two hundred years for somepony to come down here with the answers to your little riddles so they can give you an appropriately horrible death? I don't think so," I said as scornfully as possible, making him pause. "You going to go back into memories and spying on the Wasteland, leaving it to rot? Fine. Maybe I can give the king a *really good* blowjob to get him to let me go. I'll do what I have to do. But you know things, Goldenblood. You could help me, if you just pulled your head out of your masochistic, egotistical, self-loathing ass long enough to!"

My words seemed to have broken through. He turned and regarded me coolly. "I deserve to die. I deserve to be punished."

"Oh for the love of..." I muttered. "Yes. You did bad things. Really bad things. So have I. In some ways, worse things than you. No pony's perfect. The difference is, I haven't shoved myself into a computer waiting for somepony else to come along and put me down." And construct ridiculously elaborate death traps to test their worthiness to execute me. I pointed a hoof off to the side. "I'm out there, trying to do better."

"Better," he muttered. "Blackjack, have you ever thought that maybe you *should* have given up? That by trying to help, you've caused nearly as much pain and misery as there would have been if you'd done nothing at all?" He walked slowly towards me, the shaft of light moving with him. "I saw you at Yellow River. I saw what you did to that foal."

I stared at him for several long seconds. "You plugged me into Happyhorn," I said.

He gave a small nod. "I directed this system to access the robotic orderlies and put you into a therapeutic mindscape, yes. I rather didn't expect you to come out of it. Quite surprising, actually," he rasped softly. "After that, I occasionally peeked in on you from time to time, like Watcher. You were... interesting."

"I get that a lot," I said as I stared at him. "That wasn't the first time, though, was it?" He smiled a little, looking a touch impressed.

"No. Not the first time. The first time was when you managed to fire Trottenhiemer's Folly. Then when EC-1101 was connected to a broadcaster. I worked with Echo on EC-1101's development. I knew the backdoors to follow it."

"Which is why Dealer could do things with it without setting the damned thing off," I said. I seemed to have his attention. "Dealer... Echo... his soul was bound to the program."

Goldenblood let out a soft 'Ah' of comprehension. "I'd wondered about that. I couldn't understand why you kept on going."

"He'd needle me and keep giving me vague answers. I wouldn't give up, but I also never stopped and really questioned things." I sat back, crossing my forelegs and tapping my cheek. "And in the labs under Hippocratic. You were the other source cutting off Cognitum, keeping the robots from storming the place."

"I merely ran what interference I could," he said lightly. "You had EC-1101, and you were taking it to Cognitum. Am I correct in thinking that Echo was helping her?"

"She had his body. It was the only way he could survive," I replied.

"I hadn't realized that. I thought he'd died in Canterlot, and the Dealer was just some variant of Wasteland psychosis. Clearly, I should have observed you much more closely." He sighed and shook his head. "A mistake I've made all too often."

"One of many," I replied.

"Oh, so many. In this place, I've had ample time to review my life," he said as he trotted in a circle around me. "Where to begin?" A glowing square appeared in which I saw him talking with the Tappahani zebra in Littlehorn. "I could have sounded the alarm the moment she mentioned a Starkatteri was here. Evacuated the entire school." Then an image of him in the hospital bed, covered in bandages. "I could have simply declined Luna's request for help." Then an image of him with Fluttershy. "I could have put Fluttershy first, and not neglected her when she needed my love and affection most." Another window of Fluttershy in the rain. "I could have simply arrested her. She'd have been disgraced and fired, but the megaspells would have been secured." Horse appeared, grinning and looking suave and confident, then Garnet, then Trueblood. "I could have put somepony less ambitious in charge of the M.W.T., removed ponies I knew were corrupt and dangerous, and considered the actual harm other ponies did." A picture of Goldenblood in Scruffy's bar. "I could have had faith in my princess and never conceived of Horizons." He finally came to a stop, and the last gap around me was filled with an exhausted Goldenblood being arrested. "I could have told them about Amadi sooner." Dozens of smaller windows appeared around him. "There're plenty of other mistakes, too. Over twenty thousand various things I did wrong. I haven't even hit all the highlights."

"Pretty impressive. I can do it too," I replied, then launched into the list, punctuating each item with a jab of a forehoof in his direction. "Scoodle. Fluttershy Medical Center. Brimstone's Fall. My home. Almost killing myself. P-21. Going underground. Fallen Arch. Using Folly on the *Celestia*. Not dying. Neglecting my friends. *Endless* self-loathing. Yellow River. Boing." I hesitated, tilting my head. "Stygius... eh..." Then I glared at him again and resumed jabbing. "Tulip. Hightower. Lying to Silver Spoon. Dawn. Lacunae and the damned Goddess. Lighthooves Lighthooves Lighthooves! Councilor Stargazer. Thunderhead. Shadowbolt Tower. Dealer. Rampage. Cognitum!"

I became aware of a great glow behind me and glanced back at around two dozen windows of shame. Some computer was being cocky. I returned my attention on to Goldenblood. "Do I deserve to be punished for those screw ups? Abso-friggin-lutely! And I'm pretty sure that half the shit in my life *is* punishment for those screw ups. But do I let them stop me? No! Because the second I did, I'd be you. Maybe not plugged into a machine, but being curled up on a mattress somewhere, positive that I deserved to die, is just as bad! And what good would that do? None." I spat the word with as much contempt as I possibly could.

Goldenblood didn't answer. He just stared at me as if I were a painting or some piece of performance art. "You can't begin to compare... the consequences of my actions were..." he finally muttered.

I jumped on him, smacking him upside the head with a hoof. "It! Is! Not! About! You!" I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "What about Luna's fuckups? What about Celestia's? What about Twilight and her friends'? Do you seriously believe you were to blame for them and their fuckups? That if you'd never existed, the war wouldn't have happened? Everypony's got blood on their hooves!"

"But without my actio—" Goldenblood started to stammer, but I slapped him silent.

"Maybe it would have been different. Maybe it would have been better. Or maybe it would have even been worse. That's the problem with 'what if's and regrets. There's nothing you can do about them, and you'll never know for sure. Even with all this." I waved my hoof at the countless floating windows. "None of it will change what has happened. And neither will killing you."

He just sat there in horrified silence for a long while. Then he closed his eyes. "How can I go on after what I've done, Blackjack? To Equestria? To Luna? To Fluttershy? How do you move on after you've hurt so many?"

I sighed. "You try and do better. You make each day count. You don't punish yourself

eternally for your mistakes; you try and learn from them. And you never, ever, give up,” I said as I put a leg around his shoulder. “And there is one particular way you can do better, right now, and that to tell me what you did. Tell me about Horizons.”

He sighed and held out his hoof, looking up at the window of him talking with Princess Luna about the ministries. Then, as if he was shifting away an enormous weight, he waved the hoof to the side, and all the windows faded away.

“What do you want to know?” he asked.

I took a deep breath. “Cognitum thinks she can use Tom and the Tokomare to restore the Core. Is she right?”

He didn’t reply at once. “She is correct that, if she catches the stone and holds it at the Enervation threshold, she could use the power to restore the Core, yes. And a great deal more besides. With that much raw magical energy, she could rebuild all of Equestria. And then some.”

That made me shudder. “And that would be bad. But Amadi seems to think something different, something even worse, would happen,” I said, and Goldenblood closed his eyes. “Is he right?”

“Very likely, depending on what you believe,” Goldenblood whispered.

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Is it a machine, or a monster? Cognitum believes one. Amadi the other. Whichever one is right will be victorious if Horizons fires.”

“So which is it?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Ancient legendary abominations seldom have warnings such as ‘may resemble impossibly advanced technology’, and most alien technology fails to point out features like ‘unholy souls may be present’. Regardless, both outcomes are undesirable and frequently inevitable,” Goldenblood said simply.

“So how do I stop it from firing?” I asked. He did another hoofwave. A sphere appeared, orbited by two smaller spheres, the larger of the two further away and the other closer in. “The sun and moon?” I asked. He nodded. Then I jabbed a hoof at a red icon on the moon. “And that’s the Lunar Palace?”

“Correct. Because it was placed on the richest deposits of moonstone, it never points directly at Hoofington. Thus, it has to wait for a perfect alignment of sun and moon to hit.” A dotted line rose out of the palace, then started to curve. It looped

around the planet, then around the sun, then back around the planet, back to the moon, and finally down right on Hoofington.

Buh? “Why does it zip and loop around like that? Shouldn’t it go straight there?” I asked.

“I once asked Trottenhimer the same question. He just sighed, patted my head, and called me a ‘poor Euclopan pony,’” Goldenblood said with a ghost of a smile. “Suffice it to say that it does. If you can tamper with the firing timer, the odds of it hitting Hoofington are miniscule. The impact would be terrible but hardly world-threatening. Indeed, it might not hit Equus at all.” Seemed simple enough.

I stared at him. There was something missing. Something he wasn’t telling me. “Why’d you build Horizons at all?”

He jabbed a hoof at the blackness, and a diagram appeared of a building that seemed to be built underground. “Project Horizons was my reset button. If the Caesar won, or Luna won and became a tyrant, the possibility for atrocity were unimaginable. There were plans in the Zebra Empire on those last days. Factions that wanted complete genocide of the pony race. The hatred in those twenty years was absolute at the end. But the zebras knew that they were losing. Eventually, Equestria would have enough megaspells that, with a word, the Empire would be annihilated with no chance of striking back. And Luna had so much power that she would have been unstoppable. A figurehead controlling her own puppet government. Mind magic. Drugs. Power-armored soldiers. Alicorn troopers. Cybernetic mind control. She could have been invincible. If my worst fears came to pass, the world would need to be reset.”

Killing all the innocents in the process. Nice. I didn’t say that aloud, though, given that he was finally talking. “Horizons is in two parts. The weapon and the Redoubt. The weapon was built on the moon with Robronco’s mechasprites and, later on, computer-controlled Flux clones from a supply of Flux shipped up in one of the rockets. The Lunar Palace.”

“It looks kinda like a stable,” I said, thinking back to Stable-Tec R&D, and then I glared at him flatly. “You ripped this off from Apple Bloom too, didn’t you?” He smiled, and I sighed. “Why did I even ask?”

“I like to call it *appropriation*. Given what Scootaloo was up to with the stable program, it was an easy arrangement. I keep the M.o.M. from poking into Stable-Tec, she let me pick out the tastiest of Apple Bloom’s designs. Then, later on, I used that leverage to get materials for Gardens and the Redoubt completely off the record. I

had more than sufficient dirt on multiple executives to get cut rates,” he said casually.

“So the Lunar Palace shoots a big wad of moonstone at Hoofington. It hits a big wad of starmetal. World goes boom. Everypony dies,” I said dryly. “Let me guess: the Redoubt was to add an ‘almost’ to that last part.”

“Yes. It would be the ultimate stable,” he said as a second stable diagram appeared. The Big Macintosh Megastable was even bigger than I could have imagined. “Built under the premise of being exclusively for Equestria’s elite and government agents, at least those who could reach it instead of having to shelter in Stable One, it wasn’t hard to get permission and materials. Few realized that it was shifted into the shadow world, where the power of the detonation would miss it entirely. The idea was simple. If EC-1101 was ever deleted, say by a tyrant who had had an interest in there being no way to transfer her power, or if it could not find a successor, say because the zebras killed us all, then Horizons would be activated.”

“And an alert would go out for everypony to get to the stable,” I said as he brought up a window with a list of hundreds of names.

“Of course not,” he replied quietly. “No pony would come at all. How could they, if Equestria were under martial law or occupied, or if they were all dead?” He looked quietly at me. “You forget, I had Projects Chimera, Steelpony, and Eternity as well.”

I stared at him. “You weren’t going to save ponies. You were going to *make* them,” I muttered.

“Flux for the raw material. Thousands of blood samples. Thousands of memory engrams. And the soul binding rituals, courtesy of Rarity.” He said it all matter-of-factly. “The first generation would act as incubators for the embryos in storage. And so the world would be saved.” He glanced at me. “You know the flaw in the plan, don’t you?”

Where to begin? “Cognitum said that Flux clones can’t carry fetuses to term,” I answered.

“Correct. I don’t understand the biology, but apparently blanks lack the ability to form the placental support system. Regardless, a critical flaw. One of many,” he muttered as he looked at the diagrams. “And not the worst.”

“Still. Even if the Redoubt wouldn’t have worked at the end of the war, we could use it to save a lot of people *now*, if Horizons goes off. Thousands, at least.” Though that would still mean *losing* millions...

“The Redoubt will never save a single soul,” Goldenblood nearly whispered.

“What?” I asked. He turned his head away, and I stepped closer to him. “What did you do?”

“Blackjack... please... I just wanted what was best for Equestria,” he murmured.

“What did you do, Goldenblood?” I asked, trying to keep my temper even. *You’re not an executioner, Blackjack...*

“I knew that, even with the Redoubt, it would take decades, even centuries for life to be restored to Equestria. That perhaps the Redoubt would fail. But I had an... epiphany,” he said as he looked sorrowfully into my eyes. “The first star impact was terrible, but the spiritual life energy released was immense. I theorized that if Tom was infused with that same amount of spiritual energy, the world might recover far faster. Perhaps in as little as a generation...”

I stared at him. “Are you saying...”

“Yes,” he answered solemnly. “There’s a star spirit bound within the moonstone.”

Footnote: Loading, please wait...

(Author’s notes: Sorry for the long wait. Things got busy the last few weekends and we weren’t able to get finished till now. I’d like to thank everyone who’s followed along up to this point. It’s been a long haul. I hope that we can finish this year.... I really... really want to finish this year. As always, huge thanks to Kkat and my editors. It can be a little crazy at times, but Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine have carried me through.

I’m also done with sub work until I can pick up some temp work. I have no idea what I’ll get, but hopefully I’ll pick up something. Folks who want to help me out with bits can do so through paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com. Also, some folks want me to go to Bronycon. I have no idea how to make this happen, but some folks are trying to put together a musical collection as a fundraiser to get me there. I don’t know if it’ll happen, but it’d be nice to meet some folks face to face.

Next chapter, reuniting with friends, new and old. Hope it finishes well. Thank you again for reading.)

(editorial wisecracks:

swicked: DUN DUN DUNNNNNNN!!!

Bronode: Still loading. Lolbethesda. Also, OH GOD MY MOUTH.

Heartshine: I hope we finish this year, too. Otherwise I’ll probably end up under Somber’s desk as he tries to write. For ‘motivation.’ (Somber: :D) Bronode says he wants motivation. I’m too flirty for my own good. Hinds was confused. Swicked said I would regret this for the rest of my life. He may be right.

Hinds: I was told that I had to put a wisecrack here and that this would count. :)

Oh, and apparently math has a very low LD50 among Heartshines.

swicked: IT'S A MATHACRE!

Somber: I love my editors. . .

Bronode: I like how we've kicked you off your own footer section.

Hinds: We do seem to be getting a bit silly. . .

Bronode: No, we're 'MERRY WITH TIREDNESS'.)

68. Morning

*"We must escape before it's too late
Find a way to save the day"*

When I'd left Stable 99, it'd been with the intention of leading Deus away and saving my home. Over time, I'd been drawn into a web of secrets and backroom dealings culminating in the mysterious Project Horizons. It was surreal to think that something created two centuries ago, in the madness of that war, might now annihilate everything that I held dear. Yet, day by day, struggle by struggle, I'd drawn ever closer to the truth. And now, I had it.

For all the good it did me.

"You put a star spirit in a giant rock you're going to fling at Equestria? That's what all the fuss is about?" I asked, feeling oddly deflated. He gave a silent, shameful nod. Really... this was just... what? "How? Why?"

He waved his hoof, and suddenly a unicorn blank appeared in the void around us. Then cybernetics appeared around its head and magically merged in without any of the meaty, bloody action I was familiar with in the real cyberization process. "Instead of trying to send actual personnel to the moon," Goldenblood began, "who could have learned of Horizons and disabled it, we programmed the mechasprites to build a Tree of Life and cybernetics facilities." Images of the golden Project Chimera tree and the cyberization machine I'd used in Shadowbolt Tower appeared. "In another rocket, we sent up a large supply of Flux and a unicorn template—"

"And used computer-controlled Flux clones to build the gun," I interrupted. "You said that. What does that have to do with putting a star spirit in Tom?"

"Unicorn Flux clones," he said, rather annoyed. "The mechasprites built the gun. We used the clones to enact rituals uncovered by Rarity in the course of Project Eternity. While Rarity never let me study the Black Book directly, I did have exclusive access to all her research notes. That, among other lore she'd confiscated from libraries and zebras all across Equestria, allowed us to work out how to make the blanks draw in a star spirit and bind it to the stone."

"And this spirit was okay with this?" I asked skeptically.

"I don't know, actually. I expected more of a struggle, but the spirit seemed to allow

itself to be placed in the stone. At the time, I naively assumed that it was unaware of the ritual's ultimate purpose until too late. Now... I simply don't know," he said as more windows opened showing fifty augmented blanks casting magic around the colossal wad of moonstone that was Tom.

Then the visual aids disappeared, and he looked away. "As for the second part of your question... the *why*..." He paused, then gritted his teeth as if admitting a shameful perversion. "I was... manipulated. I *let* myself be manipulated," he spat in disgust.

Really? I couldn't help myself from snorting out a short laugh. "You? *You* were manipulated?"

"Yes, Blackjack. Me." He summoned a window showing the scene in the bar with Twilight. "When I left that day, I knew that something had to be done to protect Equestria from the possibility of a victorious Princess Luna turning tyrant, but I had no idea what. I didn't immediately start intensive work on the problem, either; I kept it in mind, but I devoted most of the time I could spare from more mundane matters to assisting Twilight with Gardens and keeping it secret from others. But as Gardens progressed, I was struck by inspiration." A window appeared showing Horse's lab. The Goldenblood there levitated the tuning fork, struck it against the counter, and held it to his ear.

My eyes widened. "The starmetal."

"It spoke to me on a subliminal level. Nothing so crude as mind control, but it was suggestive. Over time, I believe, it inspired me. The binding of the star spirit was the last inspiration I received." He rubbed his face. "Then... the war turned bad. I was fully occupied with just keeping Equestria from flying apart. Worse, I struggled with fear, paranoia, and anger. As you saw with Pinkie Pie."

I nodded a little. "I thought you were a little more... well... violent than usual."

"It couldn't be helped," he said. "I was so angry at her constant meddling and interference. Unreasonably so. I'd always handled Pinkie by letting her catch the violent criminals and the overtly corrupt. The bad ponies. But towards the end, I hated her." He paused. "No. I hated her Pinkie Sense. Her... her meddling."

I remembered Amadi's rant against Discord. "Why did what she said... Why did you react like that?"

He closed his eyes, and a window appeared of a kindly white unicorn mare in a pith helmet. "My mother, Sundancer, took me all across the world." Images appeared

and disappeared of the colt and mare travelling across burning deserts, through sweltering jungles, and into ancient ruins. “She was protecting me from my father’s abuse, but I didn’t realize that at the time. We explored the zebra lands extensively, and my life was filled primarily with the wonder of learning. However. . .”

The window expanded till I was pulled into it. I found myself in a room reeking of incense, sweat, and bodily waste. A sickly unicorn mare lay in a bed, surrounded by zebra doctors. There were masks adorning the walls, flowers in pots, and all sorts of bottles of potions on shelves. The wasted mare muttered softly, writhing in agony as the half dozen zebras and three ponies in the room looked on. One of the ponies, I was astonished to see, was the maroon-colored Trueblood. At the bed’s edge knelt a white-coated colt, his eyes red with weeping, and by the wall stood a younger Scruffy sadly watching the scene.

“My mother had a terminal growth in her brain. Despite their skill and knowledge, there are limits to what the healers’ magic could do,” Goldenblood said beside me, gravely regarding the scene before us. “Mother fought for six months, alternating between lucid agony and delusional rambling, before the pain became too much for her to bear and she stopped fighting.” He pursed his lips, then said, “It was a difficult death.”

“Arrhythmia,” noted a zebra with a stethoscope. “It won’t be long now.”

“You can’t do anything for her?” colt-Goldenblood asked with a resigned sadness I’d rarely encountered in ones so young.

“We’ve given as much poppy tears as we can,” another zebra said, checking the bottles. “Any more, and. . . well. . .” She trailed off, meeting the unicorn colt’s sad eyes, then looking away shamefully. “Might be a mercy to do so anyway.”

“No,” his mother groaned. She shuddered in pain, twisting her forehooves around the sweaty sheet. “I need to talk to him. Alone.” A feverish citrine eye stared at those assembled. “Thank you for all your hard work. I’ll take it from here.”

One by one, the zebras threaded out, followed by Trueblood. The scruffy brown unicorn stallion hesitated, then nodded respectfully at the mare, patted the colt on the shoulder, and left the room, closing the door behind him. Goldenblood climbed slowly onto the bed and embraced the mare. “I don’t want you to die, Momma.”

“I know, my dearest, but it’s time. I’m so sorry,” she said as she held him. “You’re such a fine boy. So handsome, like your father, but so much kinder.” Tears rolled down her cheeks as she whimpered in pain and grief. After a moment without any

other sounds save the colt's sniffly breathing, she said "I've made arrangements for your return to Equestria. It's a beautiful land. Your aunt Celestia will see to it that you're cared for."

Goldenblood wept as he held her, and she murmured over and over "Shh. Shh," and "It's alright." But as she stroked his mane, I saw her face twist and contort. Her hooves grew tighter around his neck as they started to shake. He grunted and tried to pull away. "Momma! You're hurting me!" he cried out.

"Shut up!" she hissed, spraying spit as her hooves tightened even more. "You're a horrible child! A monster! I know what you're going to do! Who you are going to serve!" She screamed. I lunged forward, trying to pull her legs off from around the boy's neck, but my hooves passed through her as if through mist.

Fortunately, the zebras who stormed in did pry her legs off the child. She screamed, flailing her legs against them as the colt was pulled back into Scruffy's protective embrace. "No! He has to die! He serves the Eater! He serves the Eater of Souls! He'll kill us all!" she howled with blood on her lips, the hanging bottles seeming to ring in sympathy. The scene faded from view.

Goldenblood hadn't moved. He gazed passively at nothing as if still seeing that horrible room. "She took a few more minutes to die. At the time, I was told it was the pain and the poppy tears that had made her try and kill me. For a while, I even forgot what she'd said. Let my fond memories bury those terrible seconds."

"Then Pinkie Pie said the exact same thing," I said in understanding. "Do you think your mother saw, somehow...?"

"I don't know," Goldenblood replied, and then the emaciated mare reappeared, standing still as a statue. Pinkie Pie appeared on her left. Discord on her right. An old, decrepit zebra with facial tattoos like Amadi's appeared next to Pinkie, clutching a black book to his chest. "There's been no lack of people claiming to know the events of the future. The sick. The odd. The alien. The mad. All are rumored to have insights that most ponies scoff at." He glanced at me and gave me a small smile. "Or are you one of those who thinks it'd be wonderful to know the future?"

"Nah. That'd take all the surprise out of life," I replied honestly. "Granted, I would have liked to know about Cognitum before I left 99, and that Rivets hadn't purged the system... EC-1101... you..." I trailed off, frowning. "I guess what would really matter is whether I could change those or not, though."

"And that's the nightmare. Knowing what will happen and being powerless to change

it." He shook his head. "We like to believe that we have free will. That we are in control of our destinies. Then we find out that we have far less control than we'd like."

"You were manipulated by the Eater?" I asked.

"By many ponies. I thought myself a fine puppeteer and thus made myself the best kind of puppet. Luna and Fluttershy managed me far better than I ever realized. And, of course, the Eater." He sat and rubbed his face again. "The Eater. No great hammer of mental domination for me and others to see and fight against. No seizing control of me and then blacking out my memory once I'd done its work. So subtle. The work under Hoofington. The slow evolution of the idea of a failsafe to check Luna into... more. Maybe the plans were mine after all. I've spent two hundred years being tormented by that thought. Blaming the Eater feels like an excuse. But the binding of the star spirit... that, I think, *that* was certainly from the Eater, however far it had to take me to get to that point."

"Why?" I asked. "Why would it want a star spirit?"

"I suspect that 'Eater of Souls' is a slight misnomer. Or, rather, an accurate name that gives a false impression. I think that the souls the Eater truly feeds on are those of stars, not mere ponies and zebras. If I'm right, the spirit in Tom will be enough to restore it to its full life and power, doing in an instant what it would take an uncountable number of mortal souls to accomplish. It would rise and consume Equus, the sun, and the moon to add to its mass, and it would return to perpetrating destruction on a scale quite possibly beyond our ability to imagine. And that is why I am now sure that the Eater of Souls, whether some ancient demon from the void or a machine of staggering complexity and terrible purpose, is every bit the horror the legends claim."

"Cognitum is sure it can be used safely," I pointed out... but I didn't really believe she was right. I'd heard the voice from the pit.

"Well... the data available to me is limited. She has had much longer to study the Eater itself than I did, and I have only been able to steal a small part of what she's found. I suppose there's a small chance that she could be right. Hmph. What has the world come to when 'Insane computer uses giant alien artifact to take over world!' is one of the *better* possible headlines?" The tiny spark of levity died. "If she's right, if Amadi is just a deluded fool worshiping a machine, she will sweep around the world unstoppably, eliminating 'destructive and unnecessary' free will and the vagaries of personality flaws with cybernetics and mind magic. Equus will

survive, will appear to *thrive*, and there will be no difference between the ponies and the robots. If, as I think, she's wrong, and those centuries of studying the Eater have *also* been centuries for it to fool her into thinking that she could use it, she will resurrect the most destructive being in the history of Equus. Perhaps even the universe; I shudder to think of what might be out there worse than the Eater of Souls."

I sighed and rubbed my face. If Cognitum failed and Tom missed Hoofington, it would kill everyone around where it landed, at least, and could kill everyone on Equus if it hit hard enough. Maybe if it hit the ocean... would that be better? Or would a great big rock in a great big ocean make a great big wave? Ugh, smart pony questions. Either way, that was bad too. If Cognitum succeeded and was right, she'd take over and lobotomize everyone on the planet. If Cognitum succeeded and Amadi was right, the Eater of Souls would... well, eat the world. Only one good option...

"You need to help me stop Horizons," I summarized. That was all there was to it.

"I cannot," he said with simple resignation. "The firing system is a copy of my own synaptic net. It will wait until the moon is perfectly aligned, then fire. I can't order it to stop. When Princess Luna arrested me, my back door to the system was blocked."

"Then you need to go with me to the moon and find some other way," I said. Of course, that was skipping the step of getting out of the shadows... which meant getting out of this mindscape first... and the problem of actually *getting* to the *moon*...

He interrupted my thoughts with a chuckle. "Unfortunately, you're missing the fact that you have to kill me. You're my executioner."

"No," I contradicted flatly.

"You must," he countered. The bastard sounded almost happy, a shadow of a smile playing in the corners of his mouth.

"I'm. Not. An. Executioner," I snapped, poking him in the chest sharply with each word. "I don't decide who dies because I think they should. I don't do that." He froze for a moment, and then his eyes narrowed.

"That seems... both hypocritical and somewhat cowardly," he pointed out as he regarded me flatly. "You decide that ponies deserve to die all the time. The ponies you've killed didn't throw themselves on your bullets. You chose to shoot them. You could have run. You could have surrendered. Instead, you resorted to violence. You

might call it 'self defense' but your self defense is exceptionally hazardous to those who challenge it."

I turned away. "I don't care. I'm not an executioner. Do you understand?" Before me appeared an image of the Fluttershy Medical Center. Me, Glory, and P-21 staring at the terminal screen surrounded by all the pods. "What... what are you doing? Stop it!"

"I'm not doing anything," Goldenblood replied. "This is all you."

The younger me turned her head and regarded me. "What am I except an executioner? I made the choice to pull the plug. I didn't explore any other options."

"Shut up," I said as I tried to back away, but of course, this was in my head. The scene moved to follow me. "I didn't have any other choice."

Glory looked at me flatly. "That's not true. You could have left them alone. Tasked the Collegiate with screening them and weeding out the deadliest ones."

P-21 glowered at me. "Or you could have chosen not to choose. Leave it up to Glory or me. We might not have been happy with that, but it would have been on us. Not you."

I covered my face in my hooves. "Shut up!" I shouted. "Why are you even talking to me? I thought you were supposed to be tormenting him!" I pointed a hoof in the general direction of Goldenblood without looking at the image.

"You're in a therapeutic mindscape repurposed for interrogation. Did you think yourself exempt?" Goldenblood replied wryly. "I've endured decades of this and worse. Watching Fluttershy die. Reject me. Kill herself for giving up megaspells." He shook for a moment like a sheet caught in a stiff wind. "Yes, the program was fond of that one for almost twenty years. But any pain grows numb when it's been endured long enough."

"Damn you. You like this," I growled at him.

"Well, I *am* trying to get you to kill me," he said with that rasping chuckle. "And it's hardly as if this is the only time you've been an executioner." The hospital room around me disappeared, and I was surrounded by my stable. I stood in the Overmare's office, my hoof over the button, looking down into the atrium.

How'd I know he'd bring me here? "You're wasting your time. I'm over this," I said flatly, pulling my hoof away from the button and turning my face away so I didn't see those still forms. That didn't stop me from smelling that chlorine reek.

“Over this?” Midnight asked as the black unicorn appeared before me, her kissable mouth covered in foam. “How do you get over this, exactly? How does anypony get over *this*?”

“I know that I caused this,” Rivets said as the old gray mare appeared next to Midnight. “But did you even try and talk to us? Work out who else might not be infected? Gave us a choice?”

“I was going to die with them,” I said, fighting to keep myself calm.

“So the mass slaughter of hundreds is okay so long as you’re one of them?” Midnight said contemptuously. “That’s Goldenblood’s logic.”

“I didn’t have a choice! The virus was making you increasingly paranoid! Any day, you would have started eating each other!” I snapped.

“Oh?” Rivets asked. “Did you ask the ponies in Medical? Call out to the Collegiate? Tell Glory?” That last one made me wince, and Rivets took in an eager breath. “Oooh. If what you did was so right, why keep it to yourself?”

“They would have tried to stop me,” I muttered, not looking at them. “They wouldn’t have understood what needed to be done.”

“You didn’t even tell Rampage,” sneered Midnight. “Face it. You knew this was wrong. And you did it anyway!”

“I fucked up!” I roared at both of them. “I’ve admitted it over and over again! I fucked up! I’d give anything to have done it differently. What do you want from me?”

“To push the button,” Goldenblood said coolly as he stepped between the pair. “To do what you did then to me now. Kill me. If you could do it to your stable, doing it to me should be foal’s play.”

“No,” I snarled. “I’m not an executioner.” The effort to say that made me shake.

The stable disappeared, along with Midnight and Rivets, and Goldenblood stood along before me in the blackness. He eyed me calmly and arched a brow, then asked quietly, “Ever thought that maybe you should be?”

Steel Rain appeared, sans armor, just like he’d been outside Blueblood Manor. “If you’d put a bullet in my head then, you might not have been taken by Cognitum.”

Lighthooves appeared next to him with a calm smile. “Yeah. If you just hadn’t been so caught up on me saving Glory, hadn’t let that give you an excuse to overlook what I was doing, you might have saved thousands of lives.”

Four stallions appeared next to him. One leered at me, the one from the bridge over the Hoofington River. “Gotta say, didn’t think you’d be dumb enough to let us walk. I thought we were dead for sure.” He grinned even more. “And the second time we met, you almost couldn’t kill me. Admit it.” He moved around behind me. “Or maybe you wanted another round, like the good little fuckma—”

A magic bullet blasted his face out of the back of his head and flipped the body over backwards in a spray of gore that vanished as soon as it got more than a yard away. The five ponies remaining clopped their hooves together in applause as I stared at his body. This wasn’t real. That wasn’t real. “That’s the spirit. Now you just have to do it to the pony who matters. One who, as you know better than anypony else living, deserves to die.”

I sucked in my breath, feeling my heart thundering in my chest. “No,” I whispered. The clopping stopped, the five gaping at me in bafflement.

“No?” said Goldenblood. The conjured visions disappeared, and the pale stallion came back into view. “What is the matter with you? I’ve had a long time to analyze ponies, but you might be one of the most perverse cases I’ve seen. Is it because I’m male? Some deep festering guilt over what you did to stallions like P-21 back in your stable? You only kill mares because of lingering resentment of the Overmare, Daisy, and your mother?”

“No,” I answered.

“Then why? Why is it so wrong for you to kill one more miserable pony who deserves it?! Because you’re too good? Because of your pitiful refrain of doing better? Because you pine for some father figure?”

“Because it would be easy!” I screamed at him, wanting to crush him with my bare hooves, tears on my cheeks. “It took me all of a minute to make the choice, and just like that, I killed forty children! And it was so damned easy to do!” I sniffed, fighting myself. “Goddesses, you stupid fuck, I’m good at killing. I’m a fucking artist at it. And at *getting* people killed, too.”

The images disappeared as the pale pony gaped at me, struggling for a response. “I do not understand. Big Macintosh was also an excellent soldier. As was Psalm. As were all the Marauders. And they were *heroes* for being killers.”

“Wrong! They weren’t heroes. Especially not for being killers,” I countered. “All that killing did was turn Equestria more and more into the Wasteland. Defeat... Surrender would have been better than that!” I hung my head in shame. At the end,

Big Macintosh had been the only one who had been a hero. All the rest had been corrupted, betrayed by the demand to kill for others.

The scarred stallion didn't have a response. He stood, frozen, his eyes wide when I glanced at him. My lips curled. "Do you want to see me as an executioner?" I asked. The scarred lips curled in a smile, and he nodded.

I don't know how I did it. Maybe the machine was feeling really accommodating right now, but I felt myself change. My white hide was wrapped not in cybernetic plating but in dyed-black Security armor stitched to a ponyhide base. More scars crossed my skin, and my mane lay a little more chopped and wild. A pair of mirrored shades covered my eyes, reflecting the world back at him, and they gleamed along with the pair of hoofcuffs on my belt. A well-used security baton hung at my side, and I levitated up the pump-action shotgun and pointed it at his face.

"This is me as an executioner, Goldenblood. Corrupted justice," I said in a low, rough sneer. "I would have been a Reaper, right up there with Rampage. I would have started killing ponies I thought deserved it, but eventually I would have settled with killing anypony who pissed me off. I would have been great friends with Rampage and Psychoshy. Would have taken Gorgon's spot and never looked back. Hell, I probably would have given Sanguine EC-1101, because I wouldn't have given a fuck."

I lowered my face to stare at him over the top of the glasses. "I also wouldn't have given a shit about Horizons, Cognitum, or Goldenblood. I'm pretty sure I'd be a law of one. Me, myself, and I. Kill anyone else that crossed me. If I were an executioner, Goldenblood, I wouldn't have talked nearly this much." I pumped a shell into the chamber. A thrilled expression of hope and horrified fascination crossed it, making me scowl even more.

"BANG!" I yelled, and he staggered back, collapsing in a heap and breathing hard. Slowly, I lowered the gun, staring at him as he gaped up at me. "Except, to *that* me, you wouldn't be worth a bullet, a baton, or a bucket of piss to drown you in. You're nothing. Everything is nothing. Fuck, I'd probably help Amadi if I gave two shits about him. You want me to be an executioner? I'd rather be dead." I tossed the gun aside and looked away. "Now stop fucking around and bring back Goldenblood."

A soft chuckle came from the air, and Goldenblood appeared next to the sprawled stallion. "Told you," he said with a wry smile.

"That should have worked," the fake Goldenblood stammered up at me. "My psychological profiles say you should have killed him. How did you know?"

I glanced at Goldenblood and felt the Reaper me melt away. If things had been different... if I hadn't killed forty foals with a button... if I hadn't done so many things... might I have been a Reaper wondering what it was like to do better, or a corpse waiting for a bullet? "Goldenblood's better at this than you are. He wouldn't have tried to talk me into killing him by telling me I'm something I'm not and will never be. Now go away. The big ponies have business."

He opened and closed his mouth several times, then disappeared. "Impressive," the real Goldenblood commented. "Flattery aside, how'd you really know?"

I sighed and closed my eyes. "It knew too much. You might know a lot about me. I bet you're pretty adept at spying from here. Two hundred years of practice and all. But I doubt you knew how many ponies were on Seahorse."

"Very astute," he said with a small nod. "You really are good at this," he continued with a gesture at the emptiness all around us. "But then, you've probably had more practice in mindscapes than any pony since Princess Luna."

A table and chairs appeared, the wood and fabric patterns I recognized from Star House. A bottle of whiskey manifested, and, a second later, a cup of tea. We each took a seat, and I stared across at him. "Was she Princess Luna, or Nightmare Moon?"

He sighed, closing his eyes. "That is the question. I'd like to think that, at the end, she died as Princess Luna. But as she was progressing, with the steps put in place, she would have ushered in a very dark thousand years. And few would have been the wiser. Princess Luna might never have become Nightmare Moon in fact, but she would have had a reign infinitely longer and more terrible than that of her alter ego."

"Alicorns," I agreed. "Power armor. Cyberponies. Memory spells. Thunderheads. The S.P.P. The M.o.M.'s spy network. And the war would have given her an excuse to silence any pony who criticized her." I took a sip, the fiery fluid giving a wonderful familiar burn as I swallowed. "Maybe she might not have been bad, but who knows what she could have done." I stared at him evenly. "Still, you might have tried something other than killing everypony on the planet."

"As I said, I was manipulated... but you're right." He sighed and took a sip of tea. "I saw what Twilight did for Gardens and attempted to do something even grander still. Pride was my downfall. Ironical..." He shook his head and then looked at me again. There was something calculating in his gaze, and some amusement, too.

"So, now what?" I said when it became clear he wasn't going to continue.

He gave a little smile and shrug. "Now I wait for you to complete my execution. I'm not going to try and talk you into it. I'm simply going to wait. Because you want to get back to your friends and stop Cognitum. I want to die. Eventually, you'll see it as a mercy killing and be on your way."

"Suicide?" I muttered. "I've tried suicide, Goldenblood. There's lots faster ways to bring it about than this."

"True. But remember... egotist?" He chuckled again. "I wanted somepony who understood me to do it. I didn't want to put a bullet through my head in the gutter, or to throw myself off Canterlot. How would that be appropriate for a monster such as I?" He sighed and looked out at the darkness. "I wanted somepony, anypony, to realize the full breadth and scope of what I'd done. That's all. Even Princess Luna didn't know."

I took another pull off the bottle. "You are one fucked-up stallion, you know that, Goldenblood?" I said. "I am trying to save ponies' lives, and you're still fixated on you. Still. Even now." I sighed and took another drink as he sat there, looking wretched. "Why don't you help me?"

The question seemed to rouse him a little. "You'd accept my help?" He laughed jovially, then trailed off as I continued smiling at him. His lips curled in sickly, horrified disbelief. "...Wait, you're serious?"

"You haven't been paying attention to me, have you?" I said with a laugh. "So long as you keep trying to do better, that's all I ask. The computer was right when it pointed out I kill a lot of folks that didn't need to die, and I save folks who I probably shouldn't have. Can't do anything about the former other than try my best not to do it again. But sparing others... I like to believe that ponies want to do the right thing. To be better. Killing just leaves corpses."

Goldenblood closed his eyes and covered his face with his hooves. "And would it be good, if I tried harder?" He slowly pulled them down until he stared at me with his haunted eyes. "I did so much—"

"You're going to make me hit you again," I said, flipping the table out of the way and leaning towards him, giving him a hoof-poke-punctuated list. "One. It is not about you. Princess Luna, Twilight Sparkle and her friends, and even Princess Celestia all had their share of the blame. You didn't rub your hooves together and cackle about how you were going to rule Equestria from behind the throne. Two. It is not about you. I am trying to save ponies now. That's me doing better. If you really are such a shit that you can't be trusted out of this pen, then eat a bullet and get out of the way."

But if you really are as smart as you pretend to be, then get your ass in the game. And three. It's not about you. You're smart, but you're really not that important. And now that you've told me about the star spirit, I think I'm starting to understand just how ridiculously big this really is. But if you really don't want to help, then I will give you what you want and be on my way." I crossed my hooves in front of myself. "I am not an executioner, but I am a mare on a mission, and if I have to get rid of you to complete it, then so be it." I paused, pointed a hoof at him, and added, "I will probably whine, angst, and beat myself up about it later, but if that's the price for saving everypony else, then I'll be damned and pay it."

"I'm sorry," he muttered, looking away.

"Me too," I said, turning my back to him. "Fluttershy would be ashamed."

"Fluttershy?" he said like I'd slapped him. . . again.

"She never gave up trying, even when she messed up. Do better. That's what she told us all. Be better. Try. And never give up." I gestured to the blackness. "This? This is the lamest giving up I've ever seen. A mattress is still a mattress, even if it's made of machinery and mind games instead of stuffing and springs." Okay, maybe not the clearest analogy but still!

I didn't know where I was walking to. Eventually the program would get the hint, I supposed, and get me out of here so I could 'execute' Goldenblood by death in his sleep. But a moment later, he called out, "Wait." I didn't look back, didn't dare to breathe. After a second's pause, he said, "If you could get me out. . . if you could. . ." I glanced over my shoulder. For a moment, a terrible hope guttered in his face before it dimmed under a veil of doubt. "I don't know. . . maybe. . ."

"Well, that's better than you've been doing, Goldenblood," I said quietly, then glared up. "Now, get me out of here, Computer. We have to have a chat."

* * *

I came out and immediately pulled the net off my head. My head spun a bit, and I sat blinking before it finally settled down. "I will not release my prisoner," the computer said flatly. "You must select an execution method."

I twisted and smirked at the machine. "That was fast."

"Your psychological profile says that you will not accept the terms as they are presented to you and will attempt to find a solution by negotiation or force that will prevent you from accepting them. I warn you, any attempt to teleport out of this

chamber will fail and prompt immediate execution by beam turrets,” the computer threatened. I smirked at the irony.

“Relax, Computer,” I said as I rose to my hooves, shaking the lingering fuzziness from my head, and walked around to stand before the pod. “I meant what I said. If I have to kill Goldenblood, I will. My friends come first.” I sat down before the stasis pod, regarding its occupant for a minute. Then an idea came to me. “Quick question. Your main priority is to kill Goldenblood, right?”

“No. I am to hold him until an executioner arrives with the capability to decide an appropriate means of killing him. Then I shall kill him,” the computer sounded absolutely pissy that I hadn’t agreed to splatter Goldenblood all over the virtual landscape.

“And you’re supposed to spend the wait interrogating him for information, right?” I didn’t get a reply. “Who are you authorized to give that information to?”

“Princess Luna, a cleared member of the M.o.M., or any senior ministry official,” the computer said testily.

“Right,” I said, thinking back to a statue I’d seen what felt like a lifetime ago, and the little yellow statuette. Damn, I missed those six. “I have decided my form of execution.”

A thousand different kinds of death popped up on the screens. A thousand horrible ways to go. “Please make your selection.”

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and killed him.

“Kindness.”

The computer was silent for several seconds. “You wish him. . . hugged to death?” the computer asked hopefully.

“I want him let go. I am going to be killing him through kindness,” I said firmly. I couldn’t allow for any doubt or debate in this.

“I’m sorry, but your choice is invalid,” the computer said with what might actually be snappiness. “Please select an appropriate death.”

“But it is appropriate. The most appropriate form of all,” I said as I kept my eyes locked on the pod. “You want him to be executed properly. Well, that’s impossible here. He wants the deaths you can give him here. Throw him to the Wasteland, where he can die like he should have two centuries ago, in some nondescript hole. Or so that he dies to his creation, Horizons. Here, he’ll never die as he deserves.”

The computer didn't answer for a minute, and I waited each second of it. "That is a compelling argument. While we have run numerous simulations of him dying to Project Horizons and found the psychological trauma to be quite minimal, it would at least be a method of execution. Additionally, the potential alternative of an insignificant death would be, as you say, very appropriate." Another pause. "And we've detected a sixty percent spike in his brain waves associated with panic caused by your suggestion, a new record. Still, it is outside my mission parameters."

"That's where your secondary mission comes into play. You've been through his brain, but what are the odds there's some small bit he's holding on to? Some last little secret. You know how clever he is." I gave a tiny little smile. "Let him go and observe how he acts. See what else he's hiding. As a descendant of a ministry mare, I should be a valid recipient of any intelligence you've extracted."

Again, another long pause. "Interesting. I've never seen anxiety levels this high before. He's making numerous counterarguments to yours, Executioner. And he is attempting to subvert my programming and delete the release commands."

That was it! I knew that Goldenblood had to have worked out some back doors. Now or never. "Then let him go. You were originally from a place that healed ponies. If Goldenblood is to have any hope at recovery, he can't do it here. Dreams and nightmares can only do so much. Let him go, to die as he deserves or to recover as anypony should!"

No answer. I waited a minute, counting to sixty. "Computer?" Still no response. My ears wilted a bit. Then the pod let out a hiss of noxious, acrid gasses, not the flesh-melting vapors of Pink Cloud but still unpleasant. Goldenblood's hooves worked weakly as the lid slipped up.

"Subject revival in progress. Notify the M.o.P. for medical care. Terminal data damage to this program. Conducting a remote transfer to an available mobile unit. Deleting hoofprint program. Catch you on the flipside," the computer buzzed, and then it went dead. Buh? Remote what?

"Robots," I groaned, shaking my head, then paid attention to the pod's stirring occupant. Goldenblood squirmed and opened his yellow, bloodshot eyes. They drifted over the dead machinery, then slowly focused on me. "Welcome to your parole, Goldenblood."

He lunged... if molasses could lunge... leaving the net on his head and collapsing towards me. "No. Can't... shouldn't... wrong..." he muttered as I caught him and lowered him to the ground. Behind us, the doors ground open, showing the empty

hallway. I supposed that Persephone and Tenebra were waiting up above, if they waited at all.

“Oh yes you can and should, and I don’t care,” I contradicted as he struggled on the ground. “Come on. This place has to have a café somewhere. I’m starving, and I imagine that after two centuries, you’d like a bite to eat too.” It was a gnawing discomfort in my gut, familiar and natural and so very welcome. Despite Goldenblood’s feeble objections, I shoved him across my shoulders and soldiered up to the atrium. Still no sign of Tenebra and her mom, but then, there wasn’t exactly a high expectation of me coming back, and I had been in those orbs a while.

The café was extant and all ready to go, with food on shelves in the back. I helped myself to some Sugar Apple Bombs cereal; they were no cyberpony cake, but then, what was? For Goldenblood, I found some bags of dried apples. There was easily enough food in the café’s pantry to feed a hundred ponies for a month, rows upon rows of it. I walked along the bank of refrigerators and snagged a pair of Sparkle-Colas. . . wait a minute! It took me fifteen minutes to find it, but yes, there it was, the glass bottle with its amber contents seeming to possess a faint aura accompanied by the singing of holy spirits.

I returned to the table, finding Goldenblood slumped back in his seat, watching me with a mix of wariness and dislike. “It’s too bad Glory’s not here. She could whip all of these into something fantastic. She really should have a cooking cutie mark,” I said as I took a seat, popped the cap off my bottle of amber heaven, and took a long pull. Oh, it burned! It burned like hell, and the warmth lifted me right to the tip of my horn. “Oooooooooeahhh. . .” I groaned long and low, looking at the bottle. “I missed you.”

“You’re drinking?” Goldenblood asked incredulously as I returned. The purple bat-pony armor I’d liberated from the armory pinched in the seat, but pretty soon I wasn’t going to care about that one bit.

“You betcha,” I said with a smile, levitating a pair of glasses over and pouring a half inch in both. “I broke you out of there because I needed a drinking buddy.” I paused to take few mouthfuls of cereal and dried apple. “I also did my quota of thinking for the day. Now it’s your turn. Take a moment, then you’re going to help me get out of the Nightmare Citadel and back to my friends. Then you’re going to help me stop Cognitum, Amadi, and Horizons. Then. . . I dunno. Decide what to do with your life. Take up rock collecting. I hear rocks are very big in the Wasteland.”

“You’re mocking me,” he muttered flatly.

"Noooo..." I said with a smirk, then rolled my eyes. "Well, maybe a little bit." I chewed, his annoyance was as delicious as the contents of my bottle. "So... how do we get out of the Citadel?"

"We don't," Goldenblood muttered.

"Well, if you want to stick around, that's up to you. Personally, I'd take the Wasteland over this place. Not that the drinks aren't nice," I said as I settled back in the booth, taking another one. "Come on. Eat up. Have a drink. Put that amazingly conniving mind to work."

"There's nothing to work. This place was one of Nightmare Moon's fortresses. It was designed to be impregnable, impervious, undetectable, and inescapable. The only gap in its defenses is a hole as big as your hoof carrying data cables to the real world. Beyond that, only the King can permit travel." He spoke as if addressing an idiot, which I couldn't fault him for. He'd had a bad day.

I munched some more and pursed my lips, furrowing my brow. "You know him?"

"Of him. With two hundred years, I'd convinced the program that surveillance views of the outside were somehow torment," he said with a little shrug. "An insecure leader of a doomed population unable to react to the fundamentals of survival. He's not a bad person, but he's certainly not anypony who should be in a leadership role."

I swirled the glass and took another drink. "How do you do that?" I asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were a teacher and a politician. How do you just... summarize someone like that?" It seemed a little ridiculous.

My question made him smile. "Every teacher's a little bit of a psychologist. We have to understand students. Parents. But really... it's art. My talent is appreciating the value of people, what they can contribute... how they can best be used. I can tell pure metals from base alloys in seconds. I know their strength, their malleability." He sighed as he stared out at the stable. "I'd considered a career in engineering, but I couldn't handle the math."

"Math. Pfft. What's it good for?" I snorted and took another drink. "So what's my metal?" I asked. "What's my value?"

He opened his mouth, paused, and then said, "I'm not quite certain. You're incalculable, for now."

"I think you're lying," I murmured, then shook some more cereal into my mouth,

watching him. He might have been off the mattress, but he hadn't gotten far. His eyes were still back in the machine. "Hard, isn't it?" He blinked at me. By now, I felt a nice warm buzz spreading through me. I smiled and leaned on the table, propping myself up with a hoof. "Moving forward after fucking up big time. I know that look."

He gave me that appraising gaze again. "I was played. I let myself be played."

I shrugged. "What do they say about good intentions? The road to hell is paved with them, right?" Sighing, I offered him the bottle again, and he shook his head. "Look. Let me share the biggest thing I've learned. . . There's no going back. What's done is done. You can kick yourself to death over the past, but the important thing is to move ahead, and learn from it. I need to stop Cognitum, Amadi, and Horizons. To do that, I need to get out of here. So how is that going to happen?"

Goldenblood closed his eyes for several minutes. I wasn't even sure he was breathing, he sat so still. But as much as I hated waiting, I hated being stuck here even more. "The king is insecure," he said finally. "Asking, pleading, and demanding won't work now. If you work on his vanity for a few days, though, he should bend enough—"

That was nothing Persephone hadn't told me. "We don't have a few days. I need something direct and to the point. I need. . . woo. . ." I caught myself. Wow. Only a fifth of a bottle, and I was already getting tipsy.

He sighed. "There's no way to do it faster, Blackjack. I know his type. He'll deny you just because."

"Come on, Goldenblood. There has to be something you have that I can use," I said in annoyance.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. The king controls the phase talisman. He's not going to give it to you, and he'll likely kill me on sight if he realizes I'm free."

Wait a minute. . . "What 'talisman'?" I said, giving him an obnoxious grin. "You said something about a 'phase talisman'?"

He was silent for several seconds, then sighed in defeat. "It's the talisman created by Nightmare Moon to access her strongholds. And he's not going to just give it to you."

But it did tell me how to get out of this place. I'd believed the ability to make the gate to be a power unique to the king and that I'd therefore be screwed if I couldn't get his help. If it was something I could borrow, beg, or steal, though. . . "Well, I did just save his daughter from a spectral ghost, his wife likes me, and I banged his son

pretty good not too long ago. Maybe his daughter soon, too,” I said with a smirk, watching the ghoul’s blank face. “I tried asking nice. If he still won’t send us back, then I’ll have no choice but to kick his ass, take that talisman, and send us both back despite him.”

“You?” Goldenblood said skeptically. “Blackjack, I know you’ve overcome much, but—”

I shut him down with a look. It was the first time I’d given that look since Cognitum had torn my cutie mark away. It was the perfect blend of overconfidence and malice sprinkled with just the right amount of mad audacity, soaked masterfully in ethanol. My shooty look. “But nothing,” I said with a grin. “I’m getting out of here. I getting back to Glory. My friends. I’m going to stop Cognitum and Amadi. I’m going to get my baby back and be the best damned mommy I can be. And do you know why?”

His eyes widened, and he shook his head ever so slightly, as if afraid that the wrong answer might set me off.

“Because I’m Security, and I think I’ve had one too many,” I said, glancing at the bottle. Then I took one more pull and swallowed hard. “Yeah. Definitely one too many. Let’s ride, Goldie.”

I’m sure that there are many ways to conduct negotiations. Sit down, lay out your positions and reasons, work out what your opponent wants, and reach a compromise. Threaten or flatter to try and shift those positions. If necessary, try to force your position either through deception or... well... force. I knew this because Goldenblood spent the entire ten minute trip telling me so. That the king, for his personal faults, was more than capable of annihilating me through brute force or his own shadow magic, which would mean my overarching goals would fail. I should contact his family, work around him, and negotiate this behind closed doors. Goldenblood was just missing one important fact:

He was trying to negotiate with a fifth of whiskey.

I kicked open the doors to the dining hall, the heavy slabs of dark wood booming as they struck the walls, and strode down between two rows of tables towards the one in the back with the king and his family. Goldenblood crept after me like he couldn’t believe any of this was happening. “Hey, Kingy! It’s checkout time!” I shouted, pointing my spear at the monarch. “I’m leaving, now. You’re sending me back to my friends.”

Hades, huge and muscled and gorgeous, rose up from behind his table. “You? You dare challenge me before my whole court?!”

I narrowed my eyes, took an indolent pull off the bottle, smacked my lips, and grinned back. “Ayep.”

The rest of his family gaped at me, while Whisper grinned in joy. “Blackjack, have you lost your mind?” Tenebra asked.

“Ayep,” I answered again. “Your daddy’s king. I get that. I don’t care. I don’t care about him, his privacy paranoia, or anything else. I. Want. Out. And I’m sick of wasting time to get it.” My eyes returned to the stallion in question. “You want to show your worthiness to be king? Send me home. Simple as that. Otherwise, I am going to kick your ass, take that talisman, and get the hell out of here. Either way, I’m leaving.”

“Yes, you are. To Tartarus,” the king said as he snapped his wings once and landed at the other end of the aisle between the rows of tables. “You think you can defeat me?”

I took another drink off the bottle, rolled it languidly in my mouth, swallowed, and grinned. “Ayep.”

“Husband, perhaps we should—” Persephone began.

“No!” He stomped his foot. “It is time for these outsiders to know their place. I have tolerated that yellow strumpet. Tolerated the debaucheries she’s introduced. Tolerated the inclusion of more outsiders. Enough is enough!”

Persephone rolled her eyes. “Perhaps we should take this to the throne room where there is more space, fewer innocent bystanders, and less furniture to break?” she finished sharply, glaring at him and then me.

The king blinked. “Oh. Yes. Of course, dear. I need my sword, anyway.” He jabbed a wingtip at me. “I will obliterate you anon!” And then he turned and started towards the door.

Tenebra, Whisper, and Stygius flew around Goldenblood and me. The ‘reformed’ Reaper grinned, and we smacked our hooves together. The king’s children, however, proved far less enthusiastic. ‘R U Crazy?!’ the batpony stallion asked.

“What are you thinking? He’ll kill you, Blackjack!” Tenebra squeaked with an edge of panic in her voice.

“Hey, Blackjack, who’s the scarred dude?” Whisper asked with a nod of her head at Goldenblood, who was keeping to the back with his eyes low.

Screwing my face up, I answered them in turn. “No.” To Tenebra, “I’m thinking I’m going to kick his royal ass till I get that talisman from him.” And then I swooped a hoof around Whisper and shoved her in front of Goldenblood. “Whisper, meet your father, Goldenblood. Goldenblood, meet your daughter, Whisper. Enjoy!”

I’m sure that, had I not been inebriated, a much more touching reunion could have been arranged. As it was, you could really see the family resemblance in the matching expressions of complete bafflement and shock. She had his eyes. He had her mane. Both just gaped at each other as they were both broadsided with emotions that neither had been very good at dealing with. Both of them clearly didn’t know if they should laugh, cry, or kill me. To preclude that last one, I trotted out of the room as quickly as my hooves could carry me, whistling a merry drinking tune as Stygius, Tenebra, and the other diners who hadn’t already gone to claim seats followed.

‘Her father?’ Stygius’s board read. He started back, but I hooked a hoof around his neck and kept him going along with the rest of the herd, which seemed to have been thrilled by my challenge.

“Yup. She was born premature. Placed in stasis ‘till she was thawed out by a psychopath who needed a little bit of Fluttershy’s genetic material for leverage on Goldenblood,” I said as we trotted after the crowd who were filing into the throne room to watch. I turned to Tenebra. “What’s your father’s shadowy talent power thingy?”

“Oblivion,” she answered.

I stopped in my tracks. “Seriously? *Oblivion*? What kind of power is that?! Why not just have an ‘I win’ power?”

“He does.” Tenebra glowered at me. “And you might have asked that before you challenged him to a fight!”

I took a deep breath. “Okay. So this oblivion thingy power. How does it work?” I asked as I resumed the walk towards the doorway, the alcohol fueled anger now contesting with the possibility that I just fucked up big time.

“He casts a field of dark energy. It rips a pony apart until nothing remains, not even blood,” Tenebra said flatly, then hissed. “How could you do this? I thought...” her eyes fell, and I turned and seized her, giving her the strongest hoof-curling kiss I possibly could. Maybe it was the proficiency with kissing, or possibly it was the

booze breath, but either way, it floored her with a dazed expression.

Stygius now appeared positively alarmed as I nudged him along. “Now. This oblivion thingy. Is it instant?” He shook his head. “Quick as you teleporting?” A slower, more unsure shake of his head. “A second or so to go off?” He paused, thought, then gave a tiny little nod. Okay. I could deal with that. “Has anyone ever challenged your father like this before?” He blinked in surprise, then tapped his hoof once. “Recently?” I asked. A head shake. “Before you were born?” A nod.

Okay... I gave him a hug and a brief kiss on the lips... then a firmer smooch... damn, he was a nice kisser... at the doorway to the throne room. “You’re a good pony. Thanks for helping me. Go and see to Whisper.”

I started in, but he stopped me. ‘Don’t kill my dad,’ he wrote with a worried expression. Then he erased part with a wing tip. ‘Don’t die.’

“Pfft. As if that would stop me,” I said, leaving Stygius behind. I levitated my spear and gave it a few trial swings. Hmmm... my horn glowed, and I started to shed my armor. If I was going to win this, it wasn’t going to be with fancy purple armor. I took another swig of whiskey as Hades strode out before his throne. He’d donned resplendent black gothic armor topped with a silver crown set with a huge black jewel. The whole thing had a gothic motif and looked like it belonged in a different millennium. His huge sword resembled a great black bat’s wing. There must have been somepony here with fancy magic armor-donning spells or something for him to get it all on so quickly. He launched himself into the air, huge sword clenched between special curved hooks in the vambraces on his forehooves, and stayed aloft easily. Huh, never saw that before! He had the advantage on me in size, strength, armor, weaponry, flight, and destructive magical power.

I had the advantage of being too drunk to care.

Persephone stepped between us. “A challenge has been made. The duel will be fought until surrender or a challenger is slain or incapacitated. Blackjack, what are your terms if victorious?” Persephone asked me coolly, clearly not happy with me this moment.

“I want his shadow talismany thingamajigger that will get me home,” I said. “Are there any rules? Like, no gelding?” My question made him blink. “What? I’ve only done it onc... er... twice! I think. Maybe three times...”

“I would greatly appreciate it if you didn’t,” the pale batpony said coolly. “We’re trying for a third.” Hades blushed and spluttered, and Persephone smiled and gave a small

nod. “And husband? Your terms?”

The question shook him from his embarrassment. “Her life!” the stallion said, pointing the sword at me dramatically. Persephone sighed and shook her head. She looked at me. “The terms are set. Do you agree?” I nodded. I didn’t have anything left to lose at this point. Persephone nodded and walked to the sideline. She closed her eyes, and a shimmery field of white formed a large cylinder in the middle of the throne room like a veil with the two of us inside. “Any who leave the circle of moonlight will forfeit. Begin.”

Hades wasted no time. I watched him hook the sword with both grips and launch himself at me like a comet of darkness, roaring a battle cry. Goldenblood had been right, damn it. He should have used his magic and just obliterated me, but it looked like he wanted to put on a show. The king appeared like a force of pure annihilation, the huge weapon certain to cleave me into Blackjack chunks. I’m sure plenty of ponies would find it terrifying but my drunken haze blurred all that away; I thought only one thing: ‘Goddesses, he’s slow.’

I had time to fill my mouth with whiskey and set the haft of the spear perpendicularly to block his vertical chop, raising my hooves and magic to brace the pole. I wasn’t an expert at fighting with spears, but blocking seemed simple enough. The blow bit three quarters of the way through the wooden haft, and Hades sneered at me. “You shall regret your foolish and presumpt—”

I spit my mouthful of whiskey right in his eyes. Too bad he hadn’t included a visor on that armor of his. The crown might have looked awesome, but it didn’t bring much to the fight. And as he flapped back, I snapped the spear over my knee at the cut. Then I tossed the pointy bit aside as he recovered, levitating the two-foot-long stub far more easily. Now I had a baton tipped with a nice metal cap. “Okay. Let’s dance, Kingy!”

“You outsider tart! I shall—” he began grandly, but I wasn’t going to wait around for speeches. In an instant, I was inside his reach. That sword might have been huge, ridiculously sharp, and probably magical to boot, but it was damned useless when I was this close in and repeatedly hammering a baton against his head like a drummer. He unhooked a hoof, raising it to shield his face from my strikes. “You cowardly knave—” he started to say, and then I teleported to the other side of him and smashed my baton against his head from that side. Now he couldn’t even unhook his ginormous sword. “Stop it!” he roared in pain and frustration, flying up and away from me.

Till I teleported onto his back and smashed the crown from his head. “Yer sure a talker for a fight. Yee haw!” I crowed, hitting him again.

I really should have known better. Instead of more insults calling me a coward, he launched himself straight up and smashed me into the roof. Now I really missed that armor! The booze took off a lot of the hurt, but I sure didn’t want another of those. He reared up again, and I teleported off and back to the ground.

“Enough!” he roared, and I felt something jerk inside me as a dark field started to form. It didn’t hurt. . . precisely. . . but I teleported again several feet away in time to watch the black basalt floor rip away, the field tearing the stone to rocks, the rocks to dust, and the dust to. . . whatever dust became when you tore that apart. Oblivion! Okay. Not— another pocket of darkness began to crackle around me.

Shit. I teleported out of it again, and once again his dark magic enveloped the floor and empty air. And again. Since losing my armor plating, teleportation had become a lot easier. . . but all these teleports in succession were starting to make my horn ache. He sweated with his own arcane exertions, but where my magic was gone once I’d spent it, his dark fields remained where he cast them. I was running out of places to teleport to. And worse, he swooshed around like an overgrown. . . well. . . bat! I teleported onto his back again, but this time he flipped upside down, and I scrambled to hang on, let alone attack.

Funny. This had all gone differently in my head. I’d challenge. Beat him. Get home. Why was this not happening? I fired a string of magic bullets, but all they did was beat up the back of his helmet. A half dozen rounds later and I felt like I was pushing burnout.

Damn it. Why didn’t I have a super monster horn like LittlePip? That’d be so useful right now!

Fortunately, his fancy armor had enough decorations for me to grab that I was able to cling to his back like a tick, levitating bottle and baton. Couldn’t oblivion himself, now could he? And now that I was stuck to his rump, I brought my baton around and fell back to a tried and true crotch strike! The weighted head came down. . . and clanged against something metal that rang like a bell! “Oh come on! No pony ever armors that!”

“Unscrupulous strumpet! Do you think you’re the first so craven?” the inverted bat-pony said. . . and then stopped flying. We dropped between two fields of darkness, and he fell down on me like a dropped armory. I heard several things in my chest making crunchy noises, and even with the whiskey, I felt like I’d just taken a twelve

gauge buckshot blast to the chest. “Drunkards make horrible fighters.”

Hades heaved himself off me, becoming airborne once more as I struggled to keep my focus. He wanted to gloat? Fine. I reached over with my magic and scooped up his crown, plopping it on my head. “There! Oblitawhatchit me now, jackass!” Ow. Talking hurt. Strike that, breathing hurt. Oh, that wasn’t good.

To my shock, he didn’t. I supposed he liked his crown. “You wish to be rent limb from limb? So be it.” And again he went aloft as I pulled myself to my hooves and backed away amidst the patches of darkness. Why didn’t he just get rid of them? It’d sure make his flying easier. . . unless he couldn’t! Maybe these dark patches were like fire: once he lit them he couldn’t just unlight them. I supposed eventually they’d go out. . . or he’d need a new throne room. The sword attached to his forehooves ripped down at me again and again. I tasted blood on every breath. This fight was going to be over for me soon. I needed. . . I. . .

“Aw, shit. . .” I muttered. This would be low. “Sorry about this.”

“No apology can save you now!” he roared as he dove at me with another swing.

I sighed, raised my baton, and then flung my other weapon straight at his face. The glowing whiskey bottle arched straight and true. Of course, a bottle, even half filled with the fluid of heaven, wouldn’t do much to him. It might not even break. He could have deflected it. . . but he wouldn’t. No, he brought his sword right through the spinning glass. Time seemed to crawl a moment as it shattered into a dozen glistening shards. Glowing shards. . .

That I directed straight into his eyes.

The scream of agony that ripped out of him echoed through the throne room, and I dove in time to prevent him from crashing right into me. He flailed and staggered, crippled and blind. With the weapon on his hoof, he couldn’t even stand up right. He launched himself into the air and crashed against the ceiling. “Go out, you blind moron,” I shouted up at him. Instead, though, he crashed right back down at me as he screamed in rage, humiliation, and agony.

“Surrender! This fight is over, love!” Persephone begged.

“Father, please!” screamed Tenebra.

“No!” roared the king. “I’ll die before I surrender!”

I could have killed him by simply staying put and letting him stagger into one of his patches of oblivion. Others of the court were trying to stop him too, but he was in

a frenzy, slashing wildly at all who came near. He'd left the circle in his rage and blindness; I'd won, but that was beside the point now. "Get back, everypony!" I shouted. I levitated over the pointy end of my spear as he swung his sword around, half of it being torn to pieces as it passed through a shadow field. A flash, and I was on his back as he lifted himself once more.

A half dozen thrusts with the pointy half shredded his wings, sending us both to the ground for the final time. That would have been enough for most, but he still had fight in him. I threw my forehooves around his neck and squeezed as he struggled. "Hold him!" I yelled as my ribs felt like they were exploding.

Whisper was there in an instant on his other side, grappling with him. "What do you think I am, an earth pony?" she said as she tried to keep him from plunging through a patch of black energy. Stygius and Tenebra also tried to keep him put, the batpony mare struggling with her own jerky motions.

Finally I'd had enough. My magic unhooked the clasps on his helmet, and I tore it off. Time to finish this. I raised the baton and brought it down on his head again and again. "You. Should. Have. Let. Me. Go!" I hissed with every strike. On the sixth, he finally, finally collapsed. His head was a bloody mess, but he was still breathing. I collapsed against him too, leaning back and coughing up blood. "Oh. But you can have this back," I said, negligently lifting off the crown and tossing it at his hooves. The ring landed on edge, bouncing and rolling away from us both. I turned and smiled at Persephone. "Where's the talisman, and the nearest doctor?"

But all the batponies weren't looking at me. They were staring at the crown. Tenebra was down with a seizure, but Stygius and five other ponies scrambled for the rolling crown. The circlet deflected off of one pony, then another, then off a pillar, and then disappeared into a patch of black energy. I watched dully as it seemed to expand then burst in a shower of gold and gem. A stunned silence filled the air. "Uh... hello?" I asked dully. "Talisman?"

Persephone gaped at me in horror, as if recognizing me for the first time. "It was on... the crown."

...

Oh...

"So... what happens now?" I asked, the adrenaline wearing off and... oh... wow... gravity was heavy... I struggled to concentrate as I peered blearily around at the assembled batponies. Their looks of profound bafflement answered me. "Oh, shit..."

I muttered.

Suddenly, everything in the room inverted color, and I stared around in bewilderment as I struggled to breathe with the broken ribs. A moment later, the room returned to normal. One by one, the fields of energy dissipated, and nopony dared move. Then I heard it.

Rain. Rain on the roof. I turned my eyes to the stained glass windows, beholding them as faintly lit. “Back. I’m back,” I said as I stood and started towards the door. “I’ll be right there, Glory...” I muttered with a smile... and then everything went black.

It would have been nice to come out of unconsciousness in a nice warm bed with Glory snuggled up on one side of me and P-21 spooning on the other. Nice, but unrealistic. So when I woke up in a bed sans snuggles and spoons, I at least took solace in the facts that the bed was warm, the sheets were clean, and the sound of rain told me that I was home... or at least back in the normal world. And I was hungry again! Really, the hungover feeling really didn’t bother me all that much. Yay for nausea.

Unfortunately, the alcohol I’d drunk was demanding to be let out, so I had to leave the comfy infirmary bed for the bathroom. The light coming through the windows was dim enough to be only a *small* knife through my head, fortunately. Soreness. Tiredness. Wonderful fatigue. I felt a little wobbly, but my mouth was full of the aftertaste of healing potion; I’d be fine-ish. If my head didn’t explode in the next ten minutes. After using the facilities, I stood in the bathroom doorway and stretched. It felt odd; I’d expected... well... more of being a patient. This room was a dozen beds surrounding a large cart loaded with healing potions and stacks of bandages in cardboard boxes marked with the Stable-Tec logo.

If I had been stuck in bed, though, I’d have had plenty of company. King Hades lay on the opposite side of the circular room with his eyes and wings bandaged, and the bald and bandaged Charm watched me from her own bed. Tenebra and Stygius hovered around the king. The other beds were all occupied with batponies wrapped up in strips of gauze. Was this really the most emergency care they had? I’d left Charm in the care of a... well... I’d assumed he was a nurse. No doctors? Even Stable 99 had had more medically trained personnel than this!

“You’re a cunt, Blackjack,” Whisper said sourly from a chair beside the bathroom

door, startling me so much I half fell over.

Steadying myself, I turned to face the angry yellow mare. "So Deus said... many... many times," I groaned, rubbing my head. "What'd I do?" I asked, blinking.

She growled, "You introduced me to my dad, that's what! Fuck." Oh. Yeah. I did do that, didn't I? Her blue eyes were troubled, and she glared off to the side. "I thought he was dead."

"Sorry. Lots of folks did," I replied. Public immolations via dragonfire left that impression. I narrowed my eyes as I peered at her. "You're not going to try and fuck him too, right?"

"Fuck you," she growled, running a wing through her mane. "I don't even know what the fuck to think about this. Fuck me."

"Clear it with Glory first," I said flippantly and received a hoof to the shoulder. Hard. "Ow... seriously though, how are you two doing?"

"How am I doing? How do you think I'm doing?" she said crossly. "Why do you have a talent for fucking up the lives of everypony you run into?" She thumped her head against the wall and then gave a little half smirk. "You fucking shredded Hades's eyes. Fuck. I knew you were going to fuck his shit up. Now I don't know what's going to happen to things here."

"Well, I had to do what I had to. Not like I wanted to," I muttered, my head throbbing.

"Well, you excel at fucking things up," she said, returning to smoldering resentment.

Hey, that wasn't fair. "Most of the ponies I meet have fucked-up lives already. Not my fault if I'm a catalyst for what's already there," I countered, and to my surprise, she smiled. "What?"

"Nothing. Just expected you to say you were sorry or some shit like that," she said as she leaned back in the chair. "It's... fuck. I don't know. Sanguine was my father, or as close as I had to one, and he treated me like I was... I don't know... a specimen. I knew he wanted his family back, but... I just assumed I'd be a part of it." She smiled over at Stygius. "Then I met a good stallion, and now I'm doing all I can to start a family of my own." And then she glared at me. "And then you throw my real father in my face without even a warning. And I missed the fight!"

"To be fair, I was drunk. I'm sort of a cunt when I'm drunk," I said, staggering back to the bed and contemplating a few more hours... meh... save the world, or sleep? Damn it. I looked across at the King and his family. Oh, look: an easy segue! "How

is he?”

“Do I look like a doctor?” she said sourly, but then answered, “Probably blind. They had to pick all the shards of glass out of his sockets before using the healing potions. Things had dust on ‘em. None of these batponies had a medical cutie mark, it seems. They just popped a few boxes of healing potions out of the stable. Stygius went to Meatlocker for a dose of hydra, but by the time he got back. . .” she shook her head.

Damn. “And how’s Charm doing?” I asked, nodding to the still, bandaged filly.

“Again, do you see a M.o.P. mark on my ass?”

“Almost...” I grinned, examining her flank closely. Her eyes narrowed angrily.

“You are a cunt,” she said, smacking me with a hoof and— ow. Head. Body sliding... I took a seat on the floor. She smirked down at me, then turned back to Charm. “Anyway, I don’t know. She’s hurt and confused. Again, like most people you come in contact with,” Whisper growled, looking over at the filly. “They gave her a healing potion, as that, as I may have mentioned, is the beginning and end of their medical skills. Except for wrapping ponies in bandages, and they’re not very good at *that*.”

The Collegiate would be better able to help Charm. I needed to see what had happened to them... uuuuugh... I hissed softly through my teeth; Charm had given up a lot to save me. I owed her. But *then* Glory! Nothing but Glory. And smooching Glory! Nothing else ‘till that. No sir! A lot of things would have to happen *after* I saw Glory.

The yellow pegasus smirked as if she was reading my mind. She rocked forward out of the chair and stepped towards me. “If you’re going to get back to Glory, you’d better go soon. Dad’s staying here till we’ve talked some more.”

“I need—” I started to say when her hoof came around and smacked me upside the head. My dehydrated brain suddenly reminded me of the fun of hangovers.

“Right now, I don’t give a fuck what you need. When we’re done talking, I’ll bring him to you. You and he can do the whole ‘preventing Horizons from blowing up’ thing. I just wanted to let you know that you need to get out of here before we’re attacked again.”

“Attacked? By who?” I asked in bafflement.

“The Brood, the Harbingers, and a few dumb scavs who thought discovering Black Pony Mountain is actually Nightmare Citadel meant good looting grounds. Perse-

phone and I are handling the defense.”

“Black...” I blinked. “Is that why the mountain...” I rubbed my forehead with a hoof as I sat back.

“Yeah. That great big black rock on the edge of the city? It was this castle. A placeholder, or something like that. Now that the talisman’s gone poof, the castle’s back. As you might imagine, it’s drawing a lot of fucking attention all of a sudden.”

That must have been a doozy of an enchantment, but now thinking back there had to be something special about the mountain. I immediately trotted to one of the clinic’s windows and stared out – oh damn, light sucked! – at a rainy... morning? Afternoon? My sense of time was all bonkers without a PipBuck. I looked out at the Core several miles distant. Hard to think that I’d been there just hours ago. “Were you able to repel them?” I asked.

“Most of these ponies may be inbred, but they can still fight. Sort of. Half of them practically shit themselves when they saw the sky for the first time. Tenebra managed to knock one of the enemies out before going all spasmy. That’s basically her version of a victory dance. I’ll give her caps for having the ovaries, but her bad wiring’s gonna get her killed,” Whisper said with what might actually be concern. “The Brood were the only ones that were difficult. Those Harbingers seemed to think all they had to do was waltz through the front door. Dumbasses,” she snorted.

“Flyers? The Brood can’t...” I started to say, then guessed, “Cyberpony wings?” How could they have gotten the design? It hadn’t been accessed until Shadowbolt Tower!

“Bingo,” she said sourly. “And they’ve got zebra unicorn ones, too, doing magic. If they start showing up half dragon...” she trailed off and shook her head. “Anyway, you should get out now while you can.”

Great. I agreed. “Cyber zebra unicorns...” I frowned, something niggling in my mind. “Are they all mares?”

“The three I saw were.”

“And did they look identical?”

“Yeaah... Why?” she asked with a scowl of bafflement. “You know them?”

I scowled. Cyber zebra unicorns... I really... really wanted to see Morning Glory again, but if I was right... “I think I might.”

Whisper and Tenebra got us clear of the Citadel, flying Charm and me ponyback through the rain; fortunately, none of us were struck by the lightning flashing in the roiling clouds above. As we flew, I looked back at the majestic gothic castle rising up on the edge of the city. Its spires and minarets suggested it had never been intended to be attacked; after all, how could it be, hidden in the shadow world? Under siege, the Harbingers attacking from the west and the Brood from the east, it was already showing some damage. The number of little sporadic flashes and distant crackles suggested how bad the fighting was, but at the moment neither side appeared to have an advantage.

The pegasus and batpony set us down just north of the Skyport on Celestia Boulevard, in front of the lingerie shop my friends and I had sheltered in so long ago. “Be careful. You’ve been gone for three months. There’s no telling what’s happened in the meantime,” Whisper warned.

“Don’t worry. I’m going to get help for Charm, then get straight to Glory,” I said, omitting mention of the short stop I’d have to make.

“You think maybe she’s better this way?” Whisper asked, gesturing to the filly now slung over my back underneath a black cloak to keep the rain off.

“I think that that doesn’t matter,” I said firmly. “She helped me. She gets helped. If that turns her back into a bitch. . . well. . . not like I don’t have experience dealing with those, right?”

“Are you trying to tell me something?” she asked with a sharp grin, then laughed. “It’s your head, either way.”

“Blackjack, I. . .” Tenebra began, then averted her eyes as she flushed and pawed at the mud with a hoof.

“I’ll ask Glory. See what she says,” I told her brightly.

“Perverts,” Whisper snorted, rolling her eyes. “Come on. Let’s get back. I want to hit the next wave from behind and really fuck their shit up.” She smiled at me. “Take care of yourself, Blackjack.”

I adjusted my purple armor and sword – really, a baton was more my thing where melee weapons were concerned, but if I was lucky, I’d find somepony I could trade the sword to for a gun – and checked Charm one last time, then teleported straight to the Collegiate.

In a flash, I appeared at the gates, scaring the piss out of a guard. “See? That wasn’t so b–” I started to say, over my shoulder, and then I realized that I was alone.

“Oh shit!” I teleported back to the filly sprawled and wet on the road. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry! Are you okay?”

“Ow,” was all she muttered as I levitated her back onto my back and tried to teleport again. . . and again she fell with a shriek. At least this time I caught her before she landed in the mud.

Teleporting with another pony was. . . a whole lot trickier when I wasn’t falling to my death. I could take myself no problem now, but teleporting somepony else just. . . didn’t happen. Six times I tried to teleport with Charm, and six times I failed. Charm, for her part, was amazingly patient. She didn’t scowl, or make sarcastic remarks. . . or. . . much of anything. And so I fell back to my old tried and true method: walking. However, lacking cyber limbs and mechanical endurance, plus having to carry the filly. . . well. . . I found myself missing my old clanking limbs.

As we skirted the edge of the river, I kept my eyes open for raiders, gangers, ghouls, or giant talking frogs. Instead, there was nothing. The murky waters were still and empty. I wasn’t exactly shooting sparks into the air, but at the very least I thought a suicidal bloatsprite might make a run at me. Instead, the only life I saw were some maggots wiggling furiously along some sopping wet boards. . .

Away from the Core.

I stood up and stared at the towers. It looked less like a city than ever. The soaring structures were now so heavily cabled together that it appeared as if giant spiders had moved in and webbed up the place. A glaring bolt of lightning struck the towers, and I watched it crackle down the sides. *Just wait*, I thought furiously. *Just wait*.

We reached the front gates of the settlement built on top of the college, without the element of surprise, and the agitated-looking guardponies brandished their weapons, made me halt, and demanded that I identify myself and state my business with the Collegiate.

“Blackjack. Need to talk to Triage and Professor Zodiac, and maybe Sagittarius if he’s around,” I said crossly. “I’ve also got a filly who needs to use her miraculous healing machine.”

“Oh Celestia. . . get the fuck out of here! I’m not dealing with more of this shit,” the guard shouted, not in fear or anger but in. . . annoyance.

“Uh, maybe you didn’t hear me. I’m Security. I need to talk to Triage. Right now,” I said as I approached the gate guards.

“Right. And I’m the Lightbringer,” drawled the earth pony guard, a stallion to boot.

“Go piss off.”

“I’ve got a kid who’s hurt!” I snapped. “You guys do healing, last I checked!” I shifted the cloak enough so they could see the filly beneath.

The two looked at the filly sourly. “You got caps? The machine’s not cheap,” a stallion said.

My jaw nearly hit the mud. Why no, actually, now that he mentioned it. “This is Charm, Grace’s sister. I’m sure she’ll cover the cost.”

“Right. I gotta remember that line,” smirked the other. “I’m not going to pay for it, but I’m Big Daddy’s second bastard twice removed. I’m sure he’ll cover it.”

“Get lost,” laughed the first. “Take your kid to Meatlocker.”

I couldn’t believe this. How many black-and-red-maned white unicorns were there? I was on the verge of putting a magic bullet into both of their asses when a green unicorn stallion trotted up and saved me from doing something probably pretty stupid. Sagittarius didn’t seem too happy either, though, what with the rain and all soaking his golden mane and goatee.

“What’s going on here?” he asked, his yellow eyes sweeping over me.

“This is Security. She’s broke, but wants us to run the machine on account she’s carrying a member of the Society,” one stallion said so obnoxiously it set my teeth on edge.

Sagittarius stared skeptically at me. “I’m afraid that, even if you were Security, the fact is that even she has to pay for services here.”

I nearly choked. Seriously? My mind raced and latched on something to barter. “I’m wearing authentic armor from the period of Nightmare Moon. Even if you can’t use it, the fact is that someone will be willing to buy it.”

His eyes swept over my barding and he twisted his lips. “Mmmm. Maybe. I’d feel better if Triage were here to make that call. She’ll have my tail off we run up the machine for anything less than a thousand caps.”

“Triage isn’t here?” My ears folded back. “She’s always here!”

“Yeah. She was called to a big meeting at the Society. By Security. Imagine that.” The guard sneered at me, and I felt my confidence waver. If nopony believed who I was... if Glory and P-21 didn’t believe...

No. Don’t think about that now. “Look. I’m Security, and she needs your help. There

has to be something we can work out,” I said, trying my best to keep my fear in check and stay reasonable.

Sagittarius regarded me for several desperate seconds, and then the green stallion gave a small shrug. “Well, I don’t think you’re going to cause trouble if you’re giving up your barding.”

“I’ll throw in the sword, too. Matching set,” I said with a winning smile.

He finally nodded. “Deal. This way.” He led me into the Quad, and I saw the damage that Cognitum had wrought. Two of the academic buildings were gone, the first blasted to its foundations and the second a scorched wreck. Fortunately, neither of them were the medical school or the observatory. “Sorry if we’re less than hospitable. We were hit by an attack recently. Incinerated a lot of good ponies.”

“Are Capricorn and Pisces okay?” I asked with a worried frown, getting a curious look from him in return.

“Yes. They were on a job,” he said as he walked up the steps. There was a large chalkboard next to them; ‘Modifications’ and ‘Augmentations’ were written at the top with columns of names and prices beneath. Brain augmentation for only two thousand caps? Heart modification for fifteen hundred? “Cancer and Aquarius were vaporized,” Sagittarius continued. “Libra had a wall fall on her.” He shook his head. “You know, there was a time I thought we might have made Security a Zodiac, but Big Daddy declared her a Reaper first. Pity.”

“I am Security,” I said flatly as we stepped inside and I doffed the cloak, passed him Charm, and removed the armor. “Are you seriously telling me you don’t recognize me, Sagittarius?”

He rolled his eyes with a long-suffering sigh as he took my belongings and the filly. “Yes. You are a very good Security. You got the mane and coat down perfectly. Bravo.” He pointed off to the side. “You can wait down there in room 104, if you like. We’ll put her in and see what the machine can do.”

I nodded, feeling quite shaken. How could he not see who I was? I turned and walked slowly down the hall to the room he’d indicated; it’d been made into a combination lounge, rec room, and café. My stomach growled as I was hit by the smell of fried hay, but I didn’t have a single cap—

My thoughts stopped as I saw her. Dusky gray hide and wings... bright purple mane... Dashite cutie mark. I walked towards her as if in a dream. The universe had finally, finally thrown me a bone. Of course Morning Glory would be back here.

She was a super smart medical pony. Why shouldn't she be here? I didn't pay any attention to anything but her as I raced over. She turned her head in surprise as I threw my hooves around her and kissed her so hard I thought my horn would burst. It was...

Wait. That's not a mare's tongue.

I broke away and goggled at the gray effeminate stallion I had my hooves around. "Oh, don't stop there!" he begged with a lazy grin. "I live for moments like this."

"Habazahaaaaa..." I shrank away, feeling the last fuses in my brain going. Had breaking the talisman sent me to some bizzaro Wasteland? "You're not Morning Glory..."

Then I looked at the mare he'd been talking too. A unicorn. White. Black-and-red-striped mane. Card cutie mark, though she had a different suite, hearts, and was about ten years older and twenty pounds heavier than me... and with a much more... substantial horn. She wore blue combat armor with 'Security' written on it. "He does make an awesome Glory, though. Can't blame you," the armored Security said.

Two ponies impersonating me? And a *stallion* impersonating Glory?! I felt such rage I wanted to jump into S.A.T.S. and blow them both away... but I didn't have a PipBuck anymore. "What... why... how could you..."

The male Morning Glory patted my shoulder with a wing. "Now hun. You look fine. I mean you got all the basics done right. You just need to get some barding. Leather maybe. Some leg braces. A shotgun. Oh! An eyepatch, too. Then you'd be a fine Security."

"I wanted to be Velvet and him Calamity..." the armored Blackjack said with a pout.

"Not on your life! That twang, ugh!" He stretched out his wings, and I saw the undersides of them had patches of light blue. "Besides, gray and purple are much nicer, don't you think?"

"I always thought so," I whispered. I stared around the lobby and saw another Security watching me. Her legs were covered in some kind of faux cybernetics, armor leggings made to look like they were the real thing. "You're... actors?"

"Heroes," male Glory said with a pat of his wing. "Isn't that why you dressed up like Security?"

"I am Blackjack," I said in a daze.

“Oh! You did your homework! That is her real name. Brave!” He clapped his hooves, then sighed, rolling his eyes. “Seriously though, Darling, your peepers are all wrong for it. I mean, Security’s eyes are supposed to glow. They’ve always glowed. But some mares won’t get their eyes done,” he said with a sharp look at the armored Security next to him.

“Hey! Don’t look at me,” she said sharply. “Velvet Remedy’s eyes don’t, and she’s who I *wanted* to do. I’d go with the Lightbringer, but no one’s one hundred percent sure what she looks like. Gray and brown. Green and brown? Who can say?”

I could, but would anypony believe me? “You’re too big anyway. She’s tiny,” I murmured.

“Well, so’s Security’s horn, but there’s no way I’m getting a reduction, either,” she said. “Inspiring the Wasteland to do better is one thing. Taking a belt sander to my horn is another.”

I swayed and sat down hard. “It’s compact. . .” I murmured.

The pegasus patted me again. “Anyway, if you’re going to make a serious run for playing Security, and who can blame you, use a cutie mark decal.” He nodded to armored Blackjack, and she rolled her eyes and levitated over a small box. Inside was a decal of Velvet Remedy’s nightingale cutie mark and a small can like a dash inhaler. “Just get one of Blackjack’s cutie mark, spray it on your flank, and voila! Get some old stable barding and you could be Security, fresh from the stable!” he said in a breathless voice.

“Just ignore him. He takes this thing way too seriously,” the armored Security said with a small smile, earning a very Glory-like glower from the pegasus. “He was a soldier, defected at Tenpony, we became friends, and since then we’ve been trying to live up to the examples of the heroes. Saw some other ponies dressing up as the Lightbringer’s friends and thought we could do it too. Half the time, it works. Half the time we get shot at, but they’d shoot at us anyway. Raiders, ugh. . .”

“Security, Morning Glory, and P-21 are all very popular out east, anyway. And this way I get to look fabulous!” he crooned. “And just the other day we saw a Lacunae that was just perfect.”

“That was a real alicorn, you idiot,” Armored Security said flatly.

“And she was perfect,” he retorted with a little pout.

“Honestly, Aero...” she said as she covered her face with a hoof. I staggered away, leaving the two to argue about if ‘being an alicorn’ counted as a costume or not. I

got out into the hall, my mind racing. Multiple Blackjacks running around the Hoof. I'd assumed Cognitum, in my old body, would be the only one I'd have to deal with. But if there were two impersonators here, how many were at Megamart? Or the Society? Or Chapel?

Suddenly, I struggled not to teleport away then and there. I had something I needed to do here. And since Sagittarius obviously thought I was another fake, I couldn't ask for his help. If Triage had been here, I might have been able to prove to her that I was me, but she wasn't. I'd have to do this alone.

I walked back out into the rain and looked across at the observatory dome. There were guards stationed out in front. I wouldn't even try and talk my way past them. I simply got close, slipped out of sight around a corner, and teleported into the observatory foyer. The guards didn't even glance behind them at the noise as I trotted to the side and searched for the entrance to the projection room.

Inside, there was the collection of parts on concentric shelves I'd seen before, with one addition. A robot floated around, similar to the Mr. Gutsy models but with a large clear dome holding a brain in fluid. Two flat panels showed eyes, and a half dozen legs dangled around a levitation talisman. Off to the side, at a table between the observatory wall and the outermost ring of shelves, worked a young pink unicorn mare, Virgo I thought her name was, the one who had ambushed me a lifetime ago outside Miramare.

Now or never. I didn't have a gun or even that fancy armor. All I had was my magic and whatever I could improvise. A smarter pony would have gone after Triage. Maybe tried to convince Sagittarius. Come back later... except... Except after talking to those two, I needed this. I had to show that I was the real Security, not those fakes. Not Cognitum.

I looked over the racks and found what I needed. Good thing about a workshop was all the useful things lying around. I crept along, much quieter without medical braces, heavy barding, or steel limbs, moving around to where Virgo was working with a half dozen partially-disassembled PipBucks. They weren't as sleek as the black Shadowbolt one, but still, PipBucks! Ooooh, and a broadcaster!

No no no! I'd never get to Glory at this rate. First things first. I reached around and grabbed Virgo while shoving a wad of dirty rags into her mouth, then tied the gag in place with duct tape as she squirmed. "Don't make me hurt you," I whispered in her ear, ashamed of the cowardly threat, but I needed her. Fortunately, she stilled. A blindfold would hinder her magic, I hoped. One tube of wonderglue later, and all

four of her hooves were secured to the floor. Professor Zodiac was working on the far side of the room. I whispered softly, "I'm Security. The real one you tried to trap with a box of badly-named 'deadly' neurotoxin that would put me to sleep. I need you to listen. Just sit tight."

She didn't squeal or squirm, just stilled and then gave a little bob, which I was pretty sure was a nod.

Then I took a deep breath, walked slowly out of the rings of racks, and said loudly, "You were the spy. And you're still a spy."

Professor Zodiac slowly turned, her two eye panels focusing on me and widening in shock. "Blackjack? I... how did you get here?"

There. The last bit of confirmation I needed. "You were a spy during the war. The zebras' inside mare in the Projects," I said as I trotted towards her. "You were the one that Goldenblood put Fluttershy in contact with."

The synthetic voice became more amused. "Fluttershy so wanted to give the zebras megaspells, poor dear. Goldenblood wanted them so they could be weaponized early. How could you possibly think I'm a spy?"

"My old eyes." I said, pointing at my sockets with a hoof. "Or more precisely, your eyes. I don't know when you had them replaced, but I'm guessing it was early on in the war. You had a transmitter set up so whatever you saw, they saw. I'm guessing you worked with Trueblood?"

"He was positively giddy to apply megaspells to his chimera research. The eye transmitted to a receiver wired into my optic center, bypassing the need for threading a wire along a scarred-up nerve canal. It also transmitted to several select terminals," she said as she narrowed her eyes at me. "I didn't need to copy. I simply needed to look."

"And you were the spy Zecora was supposed to flush out," I said as I kept my eyes on her. For all I knew, she'd had a radio in the robot and had sent for help. I needed to keep her talking.

"Zecora?" She blinked, and then her eyes widened. "Oh my. I'd nearly forgotten. Yes. Zecora was working with me to get the power armor designs! Cybernetics were so invasive back then. Many zebra attempts turned out like Deus. It seems so many ponies have problems with augmentation..." She shook her chassis. "So Zecora was a double agent? I'm shocked. I was certain she'd come to her senses, too."

“Why?” I asked with a frown. “You were half pony, too.”

“Because zebras are not half the hypocrites that ponies are, that’s why!” she snapped back. “Ponies are good, wonderful, nice people, right? But give them one excuse and they will turn on an outsider. Marginalize us. Segregate us. Violate us. I was a university professor, and I was defiled by ponies. What horrors can you imagine were foisted on zebras who had called Equestria our home for generations? Turning on the Ministries was easy.”

That was the easy part. “Except you never stopped being a spy, did you? Even two hundred years later, you’re working for others. Cognitum and the Legate.”

Professor Zodiac said nothing for several seconds. “My my my. You actually worked it out. I didn’t think you would.”

“I’m not a smart pony, but I get there eventually,” I said as I looked at her. “You knew about EC-1101, and about Steelpony. Is that why you were so willing to give up your eyes to me?”

“Indeed. I knew you were special. You evaded and destroyed Deus, and you were unthreading Goldenblood’s little rat’s nest of secrets. Cognitum immediately started to put out feelers for getting an improved body, and she knew I was involved. I put her in touch with the Legate, and voila. Match made in heaven,” she said gleefully.

“Why? What do you get out of it? You’re a brain in a jar,” I scoffed.

“Oh, still not there yet?” Professor Zodiac said in mocking sympathy. “Well, first of all, I get the Core, regardless of who actually wins. I’ll be able to see the ultimate cyberization technology realized. I will be able to restore an honest and humble Equestria. One that will never see a mare violated by the horrible actions of an ignorant populace.” The eyes turned sly. “There’re others benefits too, if you think harder about it.”

“Right. Hurrah for you,” I said evenly. I saw no reasons to tell her about the Eater and the star spirit Cognitum was going to deliver to it. “I want to see what my old body is up to right now.”

“You... aren’t here to stop me?” she asked in a baffled note.

“You want to serve the Legate, more power to you. I want my body back,” I replied flatly.

“Oh?” Zodiac floated closer, her arms coming up and clacking in the air. “It would be much simpler just to augment the body you have.”

Oh no, we weren't going to be playing that. I smacked her pincers aside. "I want my old body back. I want my baby back. And I want to make that bitch pay for what she did to me and my friends." I stared at her screens. "Certainly you can understand that?"

She didn't answer for several seconds. "I suppose," she said evenly.

One of her eye screens crackled, and I saw the view of the 'throne room' of the Society. I'd stood there myself, what felt like half a life ago. In my eye, I could see a multitude of ponies I knew: Big Daddy, Triage, Bottlecap, Charity, and the ghoulish mayor Windclop. In front of them were Grace and Splendid, both wearing carefully offended masks. In the periphery, I could see Glory far off to the left beside P-21 and Scotch Tape. I made out a few of Rampage's spikes on the right side. Other ponies I could make out were Finders, Paladin Stronghoof, and several other well-dressed ponies in the back.

"...glad to remind you that only in unity can we stand against this threat. The zebras have begun their final assault. In every corner of the Hoof, they have begun a slow advance in to our territory. The Harbingers will require all your assistance in repelling and annihilating this dire threat to Equestria," Cognitum said calmly, making the word 'our' sound remarkably like 'my'. "As one, we have the strength of unity to end this threat and unite into a glorious future!"

There were no cheers to this. Just dozens of blank stares and low mutters. "You think we're just going to march on your say-so?" Big Daddy asked, the old stallion glaring Cognitum. "No one tells the Reapers what to do, Blackjack. Not even another Reaper."

Suddenly, two crimson beams lanced out and struck Big Daddy in the chest. The assembled ponies cried out, falling back as the old stallion roared and launched himself at Cognitum. Rampage dashed into his path, hooves spread wide. The armored mare had no chance of stopping him, but she did slow him down enough for a second set to blast into him. Smoking, he fell back and was shot a third time. "You will find I am far more than a mere Reaper," Cognitum said coldly, then shot a fourth pair of beams. Astonishingly, he didn't disintegrate, and Cognitum advanced on him.

"Stop!" P-21 shouted, running over to stand over Big Daddy's smoking body. He glared up at me. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Blackjack?" I saw the anger and confusion in my friend's features. I could imagine Cognitum calculating whether it was advantageous to kill one of my friends as a show of power or not. Go for not, I

prayed softly.

"The Remnant are attacking us, P-21. This is no time for the petty bickering and strife that defined the past. We must look to the future and our self defense," Cognitum replied.

"Has anyone even tried talking to them?" Glory asked loudly, walking over the stand next to him. "The zebra refugees from the Remnant have no clue about these attacks. If anything, they've been attacked too. We haven't heard from Lancer yet. Sekashi and he must have some idea why they're attacking suddenly for no reason."

"They're attacking us because they hate us. It's as simple as that," Cognitum said coldly. "The Legate has made his interests abundantly clear. He wishes to annihilate us all!" If only she knew. "The Harbingers are keeping them at bay for the moment, but if they are to keep up the defense, we must be united under one leader."

"But why you, Blackjack? You've never wanted to lead anypony before. We could work as a war council. Each group can have a seat and we can work out the best way to resolve this," Glory asked, reasonably. An equitable share of power. Great idea.

"That's a terrible idea," Cognitum scoffed. "You'd let us be paralyzed by indecision and bickering? Only united under one ruler can things be accomplished. I'm the only one that has demonstrated the requisite strength and determination. And under me, the Legate will be crushed. Under me, Hoofington will rise!"

Glory glared long and hard into my face. "Blackjack, what's happened to you? Since you got back... I don't know what's gotten into you."

"You'd be wise to drop this imper—" Cognitum began when Rampage cleared her throat loudly, drawing her eye. Rampage scowled at her and gave a tiny little shake of her head. Cognitum looked back at Glory, then said in a calmer voice, "Dear Glory, if we hadn't had to struggle with the divisions of Thunderhead, the city might have been saved. Think of how many died needlessly because of strife and conflict. Think of how many might yet die if we continue to argue among ourselves. Think of the children," she said with a wave of her hoof at Charity and Scotch Tape.

"The *children* are adding a five percent sanctimony fee, so thank you for your thought," Charity snapped back.

"The fact is that we don't have a choice," Rampage said loudly. "The Remnant surround the city on all sides, and they're attacking. *Why* doesn't matter. What does matter is that they are, and we have to stop them. No different than two hundred

years ago.”

“And look how well that ended,” Glory retorted.

“Enough,” Cognitum said with dripping disgust. “I’ve learned the zebras have a superweapon on the moon. While you fight, I shall go and disable it. Once it is destroyed, the Core shall be reborn, and with it, all of Equestria! You’d all be wise to think on your future in it,” she said as she walked out, obviously going around instead of over the groaning Big Daddy only because Glory and P-21 were in her way.

The image crackled out, and I was staring into an enormous eye. “You can let me go now,” Professor Zodiac said flatly, and I realized that, about the time Cognitum’d begun threatening Glory, I’d grabbed the screen between my fetlocks, squeezing so hard my legs ached. I released the screen, backing away from the machine. The eyes looked coolly at me. “As you can see, it’s rather easy to learn all kinds of special things when you can see through important eyes and ears.”

I stared at her for several seconds, weighing a decision I didn’t want to make. Being a spy two centuries ago was one thing. Working for the Legate now, even if she didn’t know about Amadi’s true motives, was another matter. “So now you make implants that let you spy through eyes and ears. But that’s not their only special feature, is it?” The professor fell silent, but I could almost hear her mind whirring. Or maybe that was some pump in her inequine chassis; who knew? “When I was in Thunderhead, Lighthooves used a command to murder all the Cyberponies under his command. ‘Snapped Strings’, or something like that.”

“I... I have no idea what you... why...” she stammered. For a spy, she was a bad liar; I supposed she was more into peeking than fibbing. “Lighthooves must have...”

“Lighthooves was a director. The Enclave didn’t have cyberization until I came along and gave it to them.” By accident, but still... “They were working entirely off Steelpony. Your designs.” I readied myself. “So, I’m curious... those augmentation you’re selling so cheaply... Would they happen to have a similar response to certain secret words?”

The mechanical limb snapped out, shockingly fast, grabbing me by the throat and lifting me off my hooves. “Oh, Blackjack. Why’d you have to get smart?” she asked as she brought the limb with the sawblade to my gut.

By ‘why’ I had my focus, and by ‘smart’ I had a magic bullet aimed right at her dome. The impact cracked the seal where dome met metal, and an acrid fluid that vaguely

reminded me of pickle juice began to spurt out. If I'd had S.A.T.S., I could have put four more in the same spot, but the second shot was off and ripped a hole in her metal plating.

Then her saw cut into my side. It wasn't a big blade, just a small surgical saw. Still, it had more than enough bite to split hide and then chew into a rib. I was just thankful the angle of the cut made slicing my throat impractical. Needless to say, the focus I needed to teleport away was lost almost instantly; I wasn't done yet, though. I raised my hooves and smashed them against the cracked seal, and the purple trickle became a deluge. The robot began to jerk erratically as the brain sank to the bottom of the case. One more hit and the dome came loose and flew off, the brain flopping out on the ground. The robot screamed and then fell prone, the blade in my side stilling.

"Oh that hurts. That really hurts," I muttered as I withdrew my neck from the twitching metal claw, then pulled free of the saw. "Oh, fuck!" I screamed, the blazing agony gradually dropping to a fiery pain that throbbed in time to my racing pulse. "Healing magic. Make it a frigging priority to learn healing magic!" I muttered. The wound wasn't exactly deep, but it was still hurting and bleeding pretty freely.

I walked away from the professor, towards the bound and hidden Virgo, but slowed. Something was off. I slowly scanned the room, lacking any EFS to help me out. Nothing... yet I couldn't help but think something was wrong. That'd been too damned eas—

Something invisible slammed me off my hooves, and I staggered back into a rack of spare parts. I didn't think, I simply threw a wave of every last little part I could in the direction I'd come and watched them bounce off a pony-sized shape. Then my brain registered that my cut ribs had become broken ribs and that blood loss was starting to make me lightheaded. "Of course. Cognitum transferred my mind. Why not yours?" I said as I kept throwing wads of loose screws, nails, and pieces of broken metal in the direction of the distortion.

The invisibility dropped, and a cyberunicorn appeared. Silver Stripe had taken quite a page from my own augmentations. Black armor in place of hide. Red cybernetic eyes. If it weren't for a striped motif of glossy and matte black, she'd be indistinguishable from a pony. "I swear," she said, "Cognitum should die a hundred deaths for not killing you immediately."

I sent a magic bullet at her head, but it didn't do much beyond scoring the armor. Her magic bullet, on the other hoof, nearly blasted me off my hooves and informed

me that, in addition to the hole in my side, I was now looking at a few more broken bones. Instinct recommended curling up and crying. Instead, I reached out and pulled myself through a gap in a shelf, pushing it back at her as she slowly advanced. "I have to admit, I really was looking forward to that ace in the hole. Cognitum is sure that the masses will buy her dog and pony show, but I know better. Two hundred plus years has taught me that." She easily shoved the shelves over, showering me in metal parts and scrap as I continued my backwards scramble through the bottom gap of the next shelf. Her magic tossed it aside. "You kill anyone and everyone who might even think of disobeying you, and then... then... you kill a few more just to be safe. Only when you have absolute and utter control do you let them live."

My back hit the rear wall of the planetarium. She casually knocked the last shelf aside, smirking down at me. "Time to fix her mistake."

Then she exploded. Well, not all of her. Just everything from horn to shoulders. Her head evaporated in a directed blast that continued into and through the wall above my head. "Y'hal talsh ta much," a stallion drawled in a muddled voice from the doorway. A heavily bandaged brown pegasus in a floppy black hat pointed the largest rifle in existence at where the cyber unicorn's torso still stood. He limped closer, and I took in the heavy bandages covering the right side of his body and his left wing.

"Calamity! What did you just do?" a mare said from the door behind him as he slumped under the gun's tremendous weight. The charcoal gray Velvet Remedy entered and stared at the devastation, then at the cyberpony body, then at me. To her credit, she immediately rushed to my side and applied her wonderful, soothing healing magic. Oh, it was like fresh strawberries. "I thought we talked about talking first, shooting later."

"Pretty shure tha thing... twernt feelin mighty talky," he said as he sat down, his words slightly slurred, but I was picking out what was accent and what was the bandages covering him. "Saw it'd killed the professor. This filly was next," he said as he started to break down the gun with a deft wing and hoof. Even clearly in pain, his skill with the gun's mechanics was something to see. I'd be hard pressed to do so half as fast with my horn.

"Thanks, Velvet," I said, certain that this had to be the real pair and not some fans. From the uncertain fold of her ears and the sigh that followed, I doubted they felt the same.

"I know imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but you really should be yourself,

young lady. I know that Blackjack would want it that way.” Her paternal tone so reminded me of Glory that my chest ached.

“I know it because I am Blackjack,” I said as I trotted over to Virgo and started to free her, grabbing flasks of turpentine and pouring them on her bound hooves. My magic undid her bindings, and I looked over at the skeptical pair. They shared a glance that said I wasn’t the first person they’d heard this from.

“Now miss, y’all don’t have to be like tha’. I admit it’s a touch annoyin’ at times, but I know Blackjack’d be right proud of what y’all are doin’,” Calamity said with a nod, then actually came over and patted my head with his unbandaged wing!

I might have given up if he hadn’t done that. Instead, I stared into his eyes and said levelly, “I went adventuring with LittlePip the night she talked Red Eye into giving her the balefire bomb. We came back flying on a wing of alicorns, with me wearing a crown of whiskey bottles.” The rest of the details were pretty fuzzy, but at least I could remember that.

Calamity chuckled. “Y’all musta studied somethin fierce, that’s fer sure.”

But Velvet frowned at me. “Wait a minute. Calamity! That wasn’t in LittlePip’s book!”

“It weren’t?” he asked, blinking at me.

“LittlePip removed that memory from herself and told us not to tell. The only people who saw were us, Homage, and...” Her eyes grew even more round and troubled.

“Me and my friends,” I concluded for her with a small nod.

Calamity gaped from her to me and back again, “But... she’s... normal! I mean no metal legs, no metal parts at all.” He pointed a hoof to the side, “And if that’s Blackjack, then who was that mare in metal makin’ all them grand statements o’ unity and all that junk?”

“It’s a long and complicated story,” I said, then sat down and looked over at the dead cyberunicorn. “She’s... I mean... Long and... complicated... and...” I shook a little as I ran my hooves through my mane. “Sorry. I just... you really believe I’m Blackjack, don’t you?” Celestia, why was I starting to blubber like this? I had things to do!

Velvet Remedy and Calamity suddenly glanced at each other in concern. “Well... I don’t rightly know,” Calamity said. “Things out east are mighty... ah... wut’d Homage say?”

“Surreal,” Velvet supplied as she trotted to my side.

“Right. Though ‘barn bucked loco’ is what I’d call ‘em,” Calamity said as he looked back at me. “Shoot. Folks out east is twigged like nopony I ain’t never seen before. I mean, sure we were the only ponies there, but maybe somepony said somethin’. I dunno.”

“Well... it’s just... I really need you all to believe I’m Blackjack. I am. And those others... they’re not me. Because...” because what if I wasn’t the real me? What if I was just a copy? A thing. Maybe there were implants in my skull controlling me like a puppet! What if I wasn’t in control? Suddenly my heart beat spiked up and I couldn’t quite breathe in fast enough. Whisper and Tenebra had believed me, but they hadn’t had copies of me running around. What if I couldn’t convince Glory I was the real Blackjack?

Virgo wiped turpentine and wondergoop off her hooves. “Well... I don’t know if you are or not. I mean, I only met you that one time. But you didn’t kill me...” She looked towards the slain cyberpony’s bodies. “And the professor seemed to believe you were Blackjack too. It’s just there’re all these impersonators these days...”

“Yeah. Wut’s the matter with you easterners anyhow! Why, I nearly bucked the noggin off one fool dressed like me, trottin’ around talkin’ in a funny accent,” Calamity said with a snort.

“I think that’s my fault,” a mare said from the doorway. The dusky gray mare with the striped blue mane gave a slightly sheepish smile as she walked into the lab. A PipBuck and broadcaster glittered on her hoof. “When I said folks should emulate their heroes, I didn’t think they’d take me so literally. I mean, for years, decades, most of the Wasteland didn’t care about being like a hero. Then these ponies with costumes all start showing up, and... yeah. Kinda crazy.” There were more ponies coming in after her. The whispers began to spread, and somepony cried out that the professor had been killed.

I pushed myself to my hooves. “I need to see Glory. Once I see her...” Then I’d either be okay or just fall apart completely. I got ready to teleport the hay out of there and leave Virgo to explain it when a green field of magic shot through the crowd and formed a bubble around me. I tried to flash out but just smacked right against the solid wall of the field. “Oh come on!” I cried. “I did the right thing! Let me go!”

Sagittarius walked in, the bubble connecting me to him by a thin green tendril. “I’m afraid you’re not going anywhere till we have some answers.” He glanced over at Calamity, Velvet, and Homage. “You three are welcome to join in.”

I beat my head against the wall of the bubble.

Apparently, when the leader of a powerful group dies, there're quite a few questions asked. We relocated to an old conference room in the medical school that appeared to be a command center for the Zodiacs. The table was a large oval with a hollow space in the middle. One wall was covered with bounty posters from all over Equestria. One of them was even mine... gosh, fifty thousand caps dead, a hundred thousand alive. Those were the days... 'Not worth it' was written in red ink across my face.

The room was pretty packed. There were Sagittarius, Virgo, Aries, and Aquarius. Homage, Calamity, and Velvet Remedy, along with the red-and-pink-maned unicorn stallion Life Bloom, were all in attendance. A trio of alicorns, two greens and a purple, startled me. There wasn't any animosity in their steady gazes, though, and at least one smiled at me.

"Wow. With this many horns in the room, we're either going to produce a megaspell or a gaming group," Life Bloom quipped, prompting a few meager chuckles. They died quickly.

Sagittarius set me down in the empty space in the center of the table, sat down across from me, folded his hooves on the tabletop, and said, "Tell us what happened." I sighed, took a deep breath, and got to it.

It took about two hours for me to convince Sagittarius that I hadn't murdered the professor. That the professor had betrayed them. That the implants likely contained kill commands like the ones used by Lighthooves, and that she'd been working for the Legate. Of course, that lead to me talking about Cognitum running around the Hoof, proclaiming to be Security, and uniting the Hoof against a zebra threat that she and the Legate had manufactured... almost literally. The only mention I gave about Horizons was a nebulous reference to a superweapon on the moon, though.

And I didn't make one mention of the Eater or who the Legate really was. Even I wasn't that stupid.

When I finished, it seemed like everypony was sharing my headache. Calamity summed it up best. "Remember them good old days when the worst we had to worry 'bout was raiders killin' us and usin' our insides fer decoration? I sure do miss them."

"They certainly do things big in the Hoof, that's for sure," Homage said with a slow nod in agreement.

Sagittarius reached up and rubbed a thin scar on his temple. “Is it true, Virgo? Could these implants really be used for spying on us? *Killing* us?”

The young pink unicorn licked her lips and set a small plastic disk on the table. In it was something that looked like a huge... well... sperm. A flattened, round glob with tiny fuzzy hairs radiating out from a metal disk in the middle, attached to a long thin wire. “Well, I never thought about it till today, but... yes. They could. The implants have a low range broadcast field to coordinate their activities within a single body. Otherwise... well... things get ugly. It’s just like a PipBuck in that respect. But if you knew the frequency, you could do anything. Download data. You could also give the implants additional inputs. Accelerate the heart till it stops. Crippling migraines. Maybe even brain hemorrhage.”

“Can you block it?” Sagittarius croaked. “We’ve put these implants in hundreds of folks. Maybe thousands.”

“Like me,” Calamity said with a frown. “I’m mighty grateful to y’all fer fixin’ me up, but I sure don’t want muh heart ta blow up on account some zebra’s in a bad mood.”

“If they’re receiving, I could try to write a patch for them to ignore any additional input. If the implants malfunction, folks with the implants will have to come here to get them extracted and fixed. We won’t be able to adjust them remotely,” Virgo said with a small nod.

“I’m glad you’re not thinking of using this control yourself, Sagittarius,” Homage said, both in admiration but also with an edge of worry.

The green stallion waved a hoof. “The Zodiacs were founded to protect the Wasteland. This...” he looked at the implant in the plastic dish like it was a plate of road-apples. “She put these in us, all of us. I’ll take a pony in a fair fight. I won’t make him dance on the end of a wire.” He glanced at Homage. “Besides, you three know. No point in trying it, since you’d just tell everypony.”

“Y’all bet we would,” Calamity said with a look at Homage.

“Now can I please go?” I asked as I rose to my hooves. Tired. Sore. Hungry. Grumpy. Honestly, I was on the verge of just saying ‘buck it’ and running. Damn responsibility...

Sagittarius raised a hoof, and I suppressed the urge to flash out of there. “Wait. Blackjack, if what you’re saying is true, then this is big. Really big. The Remnant went hostile all of a sudden just a few days ago. Months of them just sitting around, and suddenly they attack. The Harbingers are fighting back, but something’s been

off from the start. When the Zodiacs fought these Brood things, we barely survived the engagement. And we're good fighters. Even the Reapers are having it rough. The Harbingers are barely breaking a sweat. If you're right and all this is a show, what happens if the show stops?" he asked gravely.

...Nasty things. "Worse case," I said simply, "the Brood and Harbingers team up and curbstomp the Hoof into a bloody slurry. Slightly less worse, the Brood smash the Harbingers, then us."

"So we've got to be ready when the tables turn, or we won't have a chance," Sagittarius said as he trotted over to a map marked with small colored magnets. The ring of red markers around the Hoof looked particularly ominous. "Blackjack. I'm going to need you to wait."

Oh, fuck that. "I've waited months! I'm not going to—" I started to say.

"Blackjack, think! If the other you really is part of this show, how long do you think it'll last once she finds out you escaped? How long until the show ends and the killing starts?" he asked me. I stared at him, quivering. I could go. I could just teleport out before he bubbled me again. It hurt! He softened his tone. "Just give me a few hours. I'll send out the Zodiacs to make contact with the other factions. We need to meet up. Organize. Discuss everything that's going on."

Homage put a hoof on my shoulder. "Please, Blackjack."

I glanced back at her and saw her gentle smile urging patience. She was going to be kept from LittlePip. She understood the frustration of being separated from the one you loved. As painful as it was, I couldn't go rushing off. I had responsibilities. Duties. Obligations.

I hated every last one of them.

I reared onto my hind legs and smacked my forehooves on the tabletop. "Fine. But I want the meeting in Chapel. We can meet in the remains of the Blueblood Manor. It should be a wide open and neutral place." And hopefully Glory would be there. At which point, fuck the whole world. We'd be together forever and screw anyone who said otherwise!

Right?

I didn't stick around to hear the planning past that point. I left the conference room, feeling the knot of frustration inside me condense. I headed down the hall, out into the quad, and straight to the building blasted by the beam attack. It wasn't just about

me. It wasn't just about Glory. This was bigger than any of us, certainly too big to ignore.

Still, I had to let the frustration out, somehow. I screamed and cried in the rain, kicking my hooves and stomping the wreckage and lashing out with my magic. Broken debris was sent flying as I thrashed like a foal in a tantrum, accomplishing nothing but getting more tired, sore, cut, bruised, and angry. I went like a dervish through a burnt-out classroom, flipping tables and throwing chairs with my telekinesis. At one point, I even bit some waterlogged curtains and ripped them down with my bare teeth.

All pointless... all futile... all keeping me from Glory.

I still wasn't used to the limits of my new body, though. Strength left my muscles, and I sat down hard in a puddle in the midst of the gutted structure. My tantrum had been a pitiful amount of destruction compared to the devastation that the one beam from the core had wrought. The kind of destruction Cognitum could do...

It was all so much bigger than me.

"If it helps, I think you really are Blackjack," Homage said as she trotted into the ruins. "And I think that Glory will believe you are, too."

"I don't know anymore, Homage. I really don't," I said as I stared down into my own reflection, looking at eyes that I hadn't seen in months. "Something Cognitum did hurt Glory. I think that when they met, Glory asked her to prove herself. Some question... some something... and she did. And then she hurt her."

The gray unicorn walked over to me. "And when you tell her, whatever pain she inflicted will be shifted to Cognitum, where it belongs. But it's not just that, is it?" Homage asked as she sat in the puddle beside me. "I noticed that you never once mentioned killing your old body to stop her."

Crap. I was too exhausted to fight it. "I'm pregnant. My old body, I mean." Her eyes widened in shock. I turned my face to the rain. "I keep feeling like I'm going to lose everything. Not *die*. Fuck dying... I'm not afraid of that. But that I'm losing things that... that I can't really bear to lose. That I'm going to fuck it all up. And I'm terrified of what's going to happen. Will Cognitum abort my baby? If she wins, will she raise the child as her own? What about Glory and P-21? What about Scotch Tape? What about LittlePip and you?" I asked, facing her and seeing the shock on her face. "If Cognitum wins, she won't just ignore the S.P.P. I don't know if she can get LittlePip, but I know she'll try."

Homage's face hardened. "I had no idea," she said as she peered through the ruins at the dim outline of the Core. "We've barely heard anything about what's been going on here. Since this storm started, some interference has been blocking LittlePip's control of the towers here and my access to the MASEBS. We came for Calamity, but I personally was also worried about what was actually going on in the Hoof."

"Crazy times," I said, shaking my head.

"Tell me about it." She sighed, flipping her sodden mane out of her eyes. "I mean... I know I was pretty cheery on my last broadcast after the big battle. But... well..." she tapped her hooves together.

"Aren't you supposed to be Honesty?" I asked with a smirk.

"There's honesty, and then there's Honesty!" Homage countered with a frown. "I told everyone everything was alright because I hoped that, after the S.P.P. was under LittlePip's control, things would calm down. Get back to some normalcy. And it wasn't an outright lie. Things are better out west. Kinda. Order's returning, communities are working together, there are already a few attempts at agriculture, and raider activity is starting what seems to be a steady decline. And on a personal note, Calamity's getting better, and Life Bloom thinks that, with the implants, he might actually recover fully. So while everything's not quite as peachy as I said it was on my broadcast, it's still much better than it was."

"Except out here," I said, looking to the Core once again.

"Yeah. Except a lot of places. Things are settling out mostly around the area of Junction Town, really. A bit in Manehattan. Everywhere else... well... it's going to take some time." She forced a grin. "Till then, got to keep people's spirits up and put a positive spin on things, right?"

"Right," I said as I stared at the black towers, lightning flickering and dancing around them every few seconds. Even this far out, the tang of ozone was so strong that I could taste it faintly on my tongue. "So what is everypony doing?" I asked in lieu of things like 'When can I get out of here and back to Glory?'

"Velvet's using the alicorns Apogee, Perigee, and Ghostshine to send Zodiacs to the major parties. Calamity's going to have a chat with the pegasi... and I really hope that that goes well. Life Bloom is contacting the Twilight Society to bring them up to speed. I got a message to LittlePip," she said as she regarded her broadcaster. "Text packets are the only thing getting through the interference. She's working with Celestia to come up with a solution." She glanced up at me. "She also tells you to

hold on. It'll be okay."

I felt a little relief at that. LittlePip was probably the only pony outside of my friends who had a clue what I was going through. Homage balked a moment. "What?"

"Nothing. I—" she started to say.

"Don't start 'Honestying' me right now, Homage," I said a little more harshly than I should have. "Not now."

She balked again, then caved. "We contacted the Society at Elysium as soon as you left. To tell Triage about all of this and find out what Cognitum is doing. Cognitum's left for the Luna Space Center with only a hoofful of ponies." She hesitated, and I stared right at her. "Glory's returning to Star House."

My mind snapped. On one hoof, my enemy, my baby, and my body. On the other, my friends and the ponies I loved. If I could get the Zodiacs, Calamity, Velvet, the alicorns... maybe we could take my body back. Maybe Virgo could take Cognitum out and put me in. Maybe... and on the other hoof, I knew where Glory was going to be. I could leave right now. The plan was already in motion. The others didn't need me! I could go and be in her embrace again and talk and make it all better.

It was enough to drive a mare mad.

I stood and trotted through the rain towards the nearest blackened wall, pressed my forehooves against it, and banged my head. Each strike seemed to resonate with a word: Cognitum. Glory. Responsibility. Baby. P-21. Everypony. Revenge. Love. Responsibility. Over and over I struck my head against the wall, hearing Homage speak vaguely in tones of amusement, then worry, then alarm. I took all those words rolling in my head and reduced every single one to pain. When she pulled me off the wall, I fell on my back, letting the cool rain pour over my aching skull.

"Are you okay?" Homage asked in alarm, staring down at me.

"There was one time I was okay. This isn't it," I muttered, now feeling like a complete idiot. Ponies like me didn't get to be okay. Still, I'd been successful: I was lying here and not trying to race off in two directions at once. I'd see Glory soon. Really soon. Then we'd say what needed to be said. Do what needed to be done. I struggled to my hooves. "I want that purple alicorn to take me to Chapel," I said as I swayed and fell against her.

"You need a healing potion," Homage said flatly. I groaned and shook my head stubbornly, and the gray pony sighed and said in worry, "Blackjack, Ghostshine can do it, but what about—"

“Everypony will be meeting at the manor, no matter what. By that time, I’m pretty sure that the final showdown will be beginning anyway,” I said as I looked at the two of her as they wavered, merged, and separated again. “If you don’t take me, I’ll start teleporting myself. It’ll probably take fifty tries to get there, but I’ll do it. And I’ll walk if I don’t,” I told her evenly.

She stared into my eyes for several long seconds. “I’ll see to it.”

* * *

‘Seeing to it’ took another intolerable fifteen minutes, but finally Velvet Remedy, the three alicorns, and I all teleported to Star House, after Velvet worked more magic on my skull. As soon as we walked in, I teared up. The familiar wooden walls. The old, worn furniture. The smell of time and family. I peered around, almost expecting all my friends to be there. Of course, they weren’t. It’d take time for them to get from Elysium to Chapel, however they were travelling. If I left, I’d very likely miss them.

How long had it been since I’d last been here? The party with Dawn, wasn’t it?

“I’ve got some work to do, Blackjack. You’ll stay here, right?” Velvet asked.

“Yes. Right here. Safe and sound,” I murmured absently as I slowly walked through the house. When Velvet closed the door, the sound made me jump. I looked about at the neatness. Glory’s doing, no doubt. I walked to the fridge and found Sparkle-Cola, bottles of water, and milk inside. In one of the cupboards was a box of Sugar Apple Bombs. I levitated a bowl over, filling it and listening to the powder-covered red bits tinkling against the ceramic. Then I added brahmin milk and levitated the bowl to the table. Slowly, I slipped into the seat, and... and...

I watched my cereal darken and get soggy. A spoon lay unattended, jutting out to the side. I pressed my hooves to my head as the normalcy began to crush me beneath its hoof. I clenched my eyes shut as tears ran down my cheeks. Oh Celestia, it was too much! Cognitum flashed in my memory. My baby. Shadowbolt tower exploding. Fighting Hades. I curled over as if the weight of everything I’d been through over the last day crushed me down. Too much! Too much!

I wasn’t okay. I wasn’t sure I could ever be okay.

“Breathe, Blackjack,” I whispered to myself, and I focused on that as my heart hammered in my chest. Air in. Air out. Focus on that. A small thing. A normal thing. Something I could do now. “Calm down,” I said next, hearing my heart thunder in my ears and imagining I could turn down a dial. Do not throw things. Do not hurt yourself again. Breathe. Calm.

Fifteen minutes later, I could finally take a bite of soggy cereal.

Then Glory walked in.

Just like that. The gray pegasus opened the door and trotted in, her eyes sunken and darkened, face drawn and taut. She wore her dragonhide leather jacket as if she owned it, and the prism blaster lay holstered at her hoof. My spoon hovered a inch from my mouth as I stared at her. She shook out her long purple mane, eyes still on the floor. Then she raised her head and saw me. Her eyes locked onto mine, and time stopped.

I don't know how long we were like that. Seconds? Eternities? The blob of cereal on my spoon quivered and then plopped back into the bowl, followed a second later by the spoon itself. Glory's eyes bored into me, pupils constricting as she seemed to wind tighter and tighter. Say something, Blackjack, I hissed to myself. Something. Anything!

The corner of my mouth curled up in desperate hope. "Um... hi."

She smiled, and for an instant everything was alright. Somehow, I'd make everything good again. But her smile didn't stop. It became a grimace. Then there were tears springing down her cheeks as she screamed at top of her lungs, "Get out!"

Footnote: Loading, please wait...

(Author's notes: Bleaah. Real life really waged war with this chapter. I'd hoped to get it out week before last, but real life took out my editors. Then last week, I was away for a con. This week, I'm sick. So stick a fork in it and get it out! Horrible chapter, and so frustrating. Looking back at the last 3 chapters, I really wish I'd had Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape there. Then so many things popped up that delayed BJ and I was just as frustrated at the pacing...

Sigh. Always trying to find ways to improve.

Anyway! A little further on in the story. Thanks everyone for reading. Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE and thanks to Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine for their hard work these last few weeks. I've only had 2 interviews this summer for work so if folks want to help out, bits through Paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com would be hugely appreciated. Thanks to everyone that helped me get to Everfree Northwest. I had a wonderful time and it was wonderful to meet everyone I did!)

(PS: Con crud sucks butt...)

(Heartshine: Yeah, the delay is sort of my fault because I moved and then decided to drag Somber up to Seattle for shenanigans at Everfree Northwest. Somber's a great friend, and I was glad that I was able to meet him. I keep telling him he needs to look for jobs up here, so at least he'd have friends to see after teaching. But everypony send positive thoughts his way!)

Bronode: Or money. Money works too.

(Hinds: I was a bit dissatisfied with Virgo's explanation of the implant stuff and wrote some replacements. I was then informed that, while my versions were indeed more technically accurate, they would have left most of the attendant ponies rather uncomprehending; the not-smart-pony explanation was desired. For any interested parties, though, here are the things I made:

"Well, I never thought about it till today, but... yes. They could. The implants have short range networking capability to coordinate their activities with needing even more invasive and complicated wired connections. Even in case where those connections are used, the wireless networking capability is still present, just inactive, due to the standardization of parts. The system is pretty robust where random interference is concerned and is even designed minimize the damage caused by pulse weaponry, but if somepony knew exactly the right way to get in and manipulate it... they could do anything. Upload every bit of data the implants can gather. Or download new programming or commands. Take control of cybernetic limbs. Accelerate the heart until it gives out if the pony still has one; shut down the blood pump if they don't. Cause crippling migraines, or maybe even brain hemorrhage... The details depend on exactly what implants a pony has, but there's a lot of damage cracking the system could do to even a minimally augmented pony."

"I could try to write a patch to make the implants to ignore any additional input," Virgo said thoughtfully, "and send it out over the radio network, but that would be taking advantage of the same vulnerabilities we're trying to fix. And if the professor really was using them like this, she might have put in defenses that I'd have to get through. She's more familiar with the system than me, too. It would be easier if I could connect to the implants directly, and that would be the only way to make it work if I'm completely locked out of wireless access. I'd need the ponies with them to come here for that, though.")

swicked: ...and I have nothing to add! Goodnight everybody!

69. Whiplash

"Well, just tell me what you really think. Tell me, tell me, tell-me-tell-me-tell-me!"

There were no words. I sat there, hollow, cracking inside like glass. She stormed up to me. "Get out! Get out! Get out!" she yelled over and over again. I couldn't move. Couldn't think. She looked at the bowl of soggy cereal and flipped it into my face. "You think you can come here and pretend to be her!?" Tepid milk and cereal sloshed down my chest.

"Glory..." I murmured.

"No! You don't get to speak! I don't... I can't..." she shoved me and the chair right over. "Get out! Leave! Don't you ever come back!"

But I couldn't go. I just sat there, a white lump dripping sugary milk. "Glory."

She sobbed, drew her gun, and pressed it to my forehead. "I'll kill you," she slurred around the mouthgrip.

I just sat there, feeling the barrel underneath my horn. I actually smiled and lifted my eyes to look into her anguished purple ones. "You're the only one allowed to hurt me," I rasped ever so faintly. I supposed that extended to killing, too. Her jaw shook on the grip. "Glory. I've been... I've been a very... very... bad pony." And I smiled up at her as I wept. "Please, Glory."

Her shaking stilled, but her eyes hardened. She holstered the gun. "Oh. I see what's going on here. You're the substitute? To handle me and my gross biological needs?" My smile faded as she stepped back. "Get. Out. I don't need you, and I don't need Blackjack." She pointed imperiously to the door with a wing.

"What?" I asked weakly.

"Like you don't know," she spat with contempt, then added in a mocking tone, "If you can't restrain your carnal impulses, I'll just find a stand-in to handle your biological needs." She gritted her teeth, fresh tears running down her cheeks. She sat hard and just covered her eyes with a wing. "Just... go. Go somewhere else. Anywhere else."

Had Cognitum sabotaged our relationship intentionally, or just in cold, cruel callousness? "Glory... that wasn't me..."

“Stop! I don’t... I am so sick of Blackjack! Of everything!” she said, shaking her head. “Do you have any idea how hard I worked trying to find a way to reach her? And then she returns and... and she’s... go!”

But I couldn’t go. I couldn’t do anything close to leave. “Glory, that isn’t me.”

Still not listening. “She talked to me like I was nothing. Like when I try to help her she says I’m of no use to her now! Like... like everything we’d done together was just...” she said as she paced back and forth.

Now it was my turn. I rose up on my hindlegs and lunged at her. Thank goodness she didn’t still have Rainbow Dash’s body, or she probably would have tossed me *through* the wall this time. She fell back, and I landed on top of her. There was one brief moment when I thought I’d get through to her. Maybe a kiss would seal the deal. I pressed my lips to hers, closing my eyes, trying to will her to realize it was me. For a moment, I was pretty sure it had even worked.

For a moment. Then her hoof slammed like a hammer to my nethers, and she shoved me off to the side. I curled up, pain temporarily overwhelming my brain. Glory rose. “I told you, I don’t want a replacement,” she said coolly as she drew her pistol again, this time to turn me into far less annoying dust.

I’d often wondered when the Wasteland would break me. I suddenly wondered if this was when it would break Glory instead.

Then the door opened again, and P-21 trotted in with Scotch Tape on his back. “Hey Glory,” the filly said. “You won’t believe who we ran—” And then she actually took in the scene before her. “What the hay is going on here?”

Apparently Glory wasn’t comfortable with killing me in front of a minor. “It’s just... she’s just...” Lost for words, she finally just kicked me as I lay there curled up and hurting. “Get out of here. I don’t want a stupid impostor. I don’t want to hear how much you love love love Security. I especially do not care if Blackjack sent you herself. Just go.” Somehow, the second kick hurt worse than the first.

P-21 set Scotch Tape down, trotting towards me with a frown. “Not a very good Blackjack impersonator, is she?” Scotch commented, looking me up and down. “Didn’t do the eyes right, and not even a cutie mark decal.”

But P-21 still didn’t say anything. I just gazed at him with tears in my eyes. I couldn’t convince her. I’d thought Cognitum had taken everything from me; I’d hadn’t realized just how right I was. A former enemy, Whisper, had accepted my identity more readily than the mare I loved. How sick was that? And if Whisper had met Cognitum

and a few impostors with good intentions before I showed up, would she even have believed me? Was I even Blackjack anymore? Maybe there was a good reason I didn't have my cutie mark.

Something cool and glassy bumped up against my temple, and I raised my eyes to see a purple healing potion held by P-21. "Here. Brewed this morning. I know how bad it hurts to be kicked like that, Miss. . ."

"Go Fish," I muttered, taking the bottle and sniffing, then drinking it. Immediately, the throbs to my pelvis diminished significantly. I rose, having no idea where I'd go next, but I couldn't stay here. I wasn't wanted here.

P-21's eyes ran over me again, and he gave a little half smile. "Funny. That's her actual name. Security, I mean." Glory was talking with Scotch Tape over by the door about... something. I was too crushed to care. I wanted to teleport away then and there, but I met his gaze. It was searching for... something. . .

"I know. I am her. It's me, P-21. I'm Blackjack," I said miserably. Scotch Tape perked an ear and looked over at us.

"Oh, Goddesses, it's another crazy one, isn't it?" she said in annoyance. "That's the third one this month. At least it's a mare. Remember that stallion one? Or the alicorn?"

"I try not to," P-21 said with a frown, still not looking away from me. "She couldn't decide if she was Blackjack, Twilight Sparkle, Trixie, or Princess Celestia."

"Bwackjack?" a mare said from the still-open door, and then a white head popped out over Glory's, pale eyes blinking as she stared at me. Suddenly her mouth split in an ear to ear grin. "Bwackjack!" And she bounded right at me, bowling Glory over in her rush to my side. The pale blank looked very much as she had when we'd parted, though her white coat was far dirtier and scratched up and she had sticks and dead grass stuck to her mane. "Ish you! Ish weally weally you!" she said as she lunged at me and wrapped her hooves around my neck, hugging me tightly. "Youw all wight!"

"No no no, Boo! That's not Blackjack. I told you back in Chapel. It's another fake," Scotch Tape said as she tried to tug one of the legs off my neck. "Geeze, she wasn't even close to this clingy with that other one!"

Boo glared flatly back at Scotch Tape. "This is Bwackjack! See?" she said, hooking her forehooves to my head and shoving my face at the filly, her pale hooves stretching my face in a leering grimace. Scotch Tape recoiled, and Boo yanked me back in

a tight embrace. "Dizcord say yous gonna get out, and he was right!"

"Discord?" P-21 asked with a baffled frown.

"Mhmmm! Dizcord was in muh head and tellin' me what I needed ta do while Bwack-jack was dealin' with da bad computer thingy," she said with a beaming smile as she looked me over.

"But... that's not Bwackjac... er, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape said with a flush.

"Ish too!" Boo said with a roll of her pale eyes. She patted me on the head. "Unca Dizcord said the bad 'puter thingy was gonna do swapsies and he was gonna get her to swap somethin' else and I needed ta get Bwackjack's thingies!" She undid her saddlebag and shook it sharply.

From it tumbled a few pistols, black barding, a half dozen little statuettes, Penance, and the bizarre Perceptitron thingy. Instantly a half dozen little mares popped into my head with a baffling rolling chatter of asking me where I was, what was going on, props for me not being all dead and stuff, and if I was doing okay. A great wave of confidence washed through me as pieces of my life and the statuettes returned to me. Wonderful as that sensation was, though, it was secondary to that of lifting up Vigilance and looking at all those names inscribed on the handle. There was mine at the bottom, and I cradled it to my chest. "Thank you, Boo," I murmured.

"No prowblem!" Boo beamed. "Unca Dizcord said you'd be saddy waddy without your swaggy waggy... whatever dat means," she added with her own look of bafflement.

Glory stared at me and the pale mare. "But it... that's... it's impossible!" Glory sputtered. "She knew things. Intimate things that only you knew about, Blackjack! She could fight like you! We watched her take apart three Brood like they were nothing."

"But did she whine and angst about it?" I shot back, making her blink and frown, chewing her bottom lip. Add another little chink of doubt. I'd just keep laying them on till she cracked. "She must have copied my memories when she transferred me," I guessed. Add those to the messed up memories she swiped from Luna and any other lingering remnants and I guessed there was one pretty crazy mare in my body.

"Copied your memories? Transferred you? What are you talking about?" Yes! This was it! My chance! I took a deep breath and spilled everything. Everything about the Core and being too scared and confused to move, then finding Rampage and everything that followed. I then started rambling about how I'd screwed up and

should have left the Core and found her and made sure everything was okay but I'd been tricked and how I wanted to be with her for as long as I could and P-21 too and we'd have lots of babies between the three of us and maybe Tenebra and Stygius and—

She rammed her wing into my mouth, and I came out of my frantic state. Glory just stared at me, her cheeks flaming red. Behind her, P-21 and Scotch Tape looked on, the former arching his brows with a mild smile and the latter with her eyes wide with shock. "It sure sounds like Blackjack," P-21 said languidly.

"Well... I saw Blackjack before the Tower exploded... and... it's just too ridiculous and..." Glory stammered, then scowled at me, narrowing her eyes. "Who's Tenebra?"

I spat out gray feathers and gave a sheepish look, tapping my hooves together. "Stygius's sister," I said meekly. "Really cute. Kinda needy in the attention department. Would be really fun in a threeway though. Or four way, if you're game, P-21. Or fiveway, if Stygius joins in." She stared at me, eyes locked wide. "Of course, just you and me for a while is great too!" I blurted.

"What am I, chopped lettuce?" Scotch Tape huffed, crossing her forehooves. "Never get invited to any of the good parties. Might as well be back in the stable," she muttered with a pout.

P-21 just chuckled. "It's Blackjack. It has to be. No impersonator could be that bad."

"Thank you!" I said, springing on him, wrapping my hooves around his neck, and kissing him as hard as I could. My brain caught up ten seconds later and I drew back, afraid I'd pissed him off. To my joy and surprise, though, he merely looked happy to see me. I nearly kissed him again right there on the spot.

"But wait! Wait! What about Rampage? She vouched for her," Glory said with a little frown. She threw her hooves in the air. "This is just insane."

"Again—" P-21 started evenly.

"Blackjack!" Scotch squealed with glee while jumping forward to give me a hug, cutting him off. He smiled and patted her on the head before turning back to Glory.

"Exactly. Now, why don't we give her a chance to explain... calmly." Glory still looked skeptical, but she nodded.

For the third time today, I explained everything that had happened from the implosion of the tower to now, filling in everything I'd rushed over before. Boo jumped in here

and there, mostly providing dramatic reenactments, with sound effects, of the fight with the Legate. Glory asked questions about Professor Zodiac and how and why I had a new blank body. P-21 asked more about Cognitum. Scotch Tape wanted to know more about the batponies. Two hours later, Blackjack nursed a Sparkle-Cola and a developing headache. Three of the four ponies present were deep in thought.

Boo, for her part, was building a tower of snack cakes, singing “Snack cake shtack-up, shnack cake shtack-uuuuuup!”

It was a welcome disturbance to the awkward silence. Glory seemed completely at a loss, and I couldn’t blame her. “Okay. My turn,” I said at last. “Tell me what’s happened since Cognitum showed up.”

P-21 regarded the others before answering. “Well, it was quite abrupt, actually. We were all set to enter the Core and find you, when suddenly you— I mean, her, Rampage, and a shellshocked stallion all came out. Like she knew exactly where to find us and what we were doing.”

“You— ugh, *she* was really bitchy, Blackjack. Like. . . I’ve seen you whiny, but I’ve never seen you *mean*. She was mean. And as soon as she trotted out, she walked right up to those Harbingers, told them she’d assumed command, and they just. . . accepted it,” Scotch Tape said with a frown. “I expected them to shoot her up a little at least.”

“We talked to her alone,” Glory said in a small voice. “She answered enough questions to prove she was Blackjack, but when we wanted to talk some more, find out what had happened, she said Project Horizons was going to go off and she needed to stop it. Told me to keep my biological urges in check or wait till she could get me a replacement.”

“Then she blew us off when we said we were going to help her. ‘Best way you can help is to follow me and stay out of my way,’ she said,” P-21 said with a frown.

“Honestly, she could have given the Overmare lessons,” Scotch Tape said absently. For a few seconds P-21 stared away from Scotch Tape, his jaw clenched and a dark fury simmering in his eyes.

“And you thought that was me?” I asked, a little incredulous.

“Blackjack, you’ve been gone for months! Last time I saw you, you had more metal than flesh, and for all I knew, something had been put in your brain. It wouldn’t have surprised me!” Glory snapped, then flushed again.

Scotch Tape stared at Glory, then back at me and came to her rescue. “And Ram-

page was there, vouching for 'Blackjack'. She was pretty mean too, though. I mean, she's been rude, but. . . I seriously think she'd have hurt me if she wanted."

"We were confused, Blackjack," P-21 said, drawing a deep breath and recovering. "We didn't know what to believe. And there are impersonators of you and other heroes all over the place now. Some are doing it to try and exploit a famous name, but others are fanatical admirers or just plain crazy."

Glory closed her eyes. "One came here; said she'd had her body surgically restored. She really believed she was you and not some damned raider whose whole family was wiped out by Enclave. Took two days before that story fell apart." Her cheeks burned even more as she rubbed her mane.

"She got you in bed, didn't she?" I asked with a grin. That must have been two days I was watching somepony else through the Perceptitron. Really, how much could you watch other ponies going through their daily routines before dying of boredom?

Wrong question to ask. She immediately burst into tears, covering her eyes with her hooves. "I'm sorry! You'd been gone so long, and. . . she seemed really convincing and. . . I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

I watched her sob for several seconds, glanced over at P-21 and Scotch Tape, and they gave a pair of matching shrugs. "I forgive you, Glory," I said, trying to keep my voice as even and uncondescending as I could. "You love me and so you had sex with a version of me. No big deal."

"No big. . ." Glory stammered, her face streaked with tears. "I cheated on you, Blackjack. I let myself cheat on you. I fell for a cheap fake."

"And I forgive you," I said as I trotted over to her, put an arm around her shoulders, and pulled her in closer. "I don't care that you had sex with somepony else. What I care is that you're happy. That's it. That is all that matters to me. So I forgive you." *So please stop with the weird surfacers hangups about sex, because it's really weird.*

She melted against me, burying her face in my mane. "Oh Blackjack, it *is* you," she sighed.

That was all I needed to hear. That phrase in her voice in that tone made everything that I'd lost somehow manageable again. I swept her up in my hooves and gave her a kiss she properly deserved. After so long apart, nothing would ever separate us again. An eternity, and far too short a time, later, we parted, and Glory and I beheld the amused smirk of Scotch Tape, the delighted smile of Boo, and the calm nod of P-21. She blushed but snuggled up against me. "What now?"

“Okay,” I said with a small frown. There was a large list in my head. And, oddly enough, sexytimes with Glory kept aggressively, passionately bumping up on it, over and over, warm and wet and... um, I mean, later. Right. “Velvet Remedy and the Zodiacs are getting word out that the other Security is a fake and that I’m the real Blackjack. Everypony is going to be meeting at Blueblood Manor to discuss what to do next.” As much as I wanted to strap on the operative barding and go and take back my old body, I couldn’t be reckless. This was bigger than me, and I knew what my old body could do. Cognitum wouldn’t hold back when I came to reclaim it.

“Blueblood Manor? You know it’s a ruin now, right?” Scotch Tape asked.

“Well. . . yeah. But it’s neutral ground and it’s big and open enough for a lot of ponies to meet up there,” I said with a semi-sheepish smile. “What. It’s got a ballroom, right?”

“That had a tank drive through it,” Scotch Tape countered, then frowned. “Oh, yeah. About tanks, you might want to talk with Deus. I don’t speak tank, but the whole drive here from the Society, he was acting weird. Like drifting into ditches and stuff.”

“He is pretty big,” Glory pointed out.

“Yeah, but he doesn’t just wander off the road, or didn’t the last time we rode on him,” Scotch Tape said. “I don’t know if he’s sick or if there’s something bothering him, but something’s wrong.” She surveyed me, P-21, and Glory, then rolled her eyes a little. “Anyway, I’ll go up to the manor. Maybe there’s some corner that’s undamaged enough for us to use. Come on, Boo. Let’s give them some privacy.”

“Awww, but I just got back! I wanna stay with Bwackjack!” Boo protested with a pout.

“Trust me. They’re just going to be talking about love... um... and mushy stuff,” Scotch Tape said, pushing the blank towards the door.

Boo grinned. “Awww. Bwackjack and Glory sitting in a tree... wait... Bwackjack and Twent... uh...” Boo blinked at the three of us. “Who’s gonna be kissin’ who with three of ‘em?”

“Probably all of the above. Now come on. I think that Charity got her hooves on some of those chocolate-packed Fancy Buck Cakes from the Society,” Scotch Tape said with a smile. That perked Boo right up, and the pair departed, leaving me with the two most important ponies in my life.

“I’ve got one other thing to tell you,” I said, holding Glory as I looked to P-21 soberly. Much as kissing sounded absolutely awesome, there were other things I needed to

talk about first. I shifted us over to the couch in the living room and bowed my head. "I'm pregnant."

P-21 arched an eyebrow in surprise, and Glory flushed. "Um... didn't you just get that body, Blackjack?" At least she smiled when she asked it.

"Not in this body," I said with a roll of my eyes. "In my old body." Then I glanced at P-21. "And I'm pretty sure that it's yours."

Both their smiles disappeared. P-21 wore an inscrutable look on his face. "I mean, there's a small chance it's Stygius's. I don't know exactly when my implant got mistaken for a bullet, but I think odds are that you're the father."

"Something I seem to excel at," he said, glancing at his cutie mark. "I wonder, if you took this off, if I'd have a sperm underneath it."

I gave him a hug, and though he stiffened, he didn't pull away. "That's nowhere near all you are. But the reason why I bring it up is because it's why we can't just kill my old body."

"Blackjack! Would you really?" Glory said, looking a little hurt.

"In a heartbeat," I answered, staring right into her purple eyes. "Which I happen to have again." Now she tensed and looked away, but I took her hoof. "I'm not angry with you anymore for what you did. You saved my life, Glory. You kept me fighting. Thank you. But life as part machine..." I shook my head. "It isn't as good a life as you might imagine. Much as I hate Cognitium for what she did, I have to admit, she did me a favor keeping this spare around. I can feel your hoof, Glory. I can feel *you*. You don't know what that's like," I said as I stroked her cheek.

Finally, she gave a little smile and nuzzled me back. "I'll have to go easier on you next time we're together. I wouldn't want to scar you up so soon."

"Knowing my life, that won't take long," I said, then glanced at P-21. He still looked distracted and troubled. "What I need to know," I continued to Glory, "is how long do you think the fetus will be viable in that body."

Glory's eyes widened. "I have no idea. Your pelvis wasn't as heavily reinforced as your spine since the bones are so large, but... If I have to estimate... four or five months. After that, cross bracing will start to crush the uterine wall, and then..." she shook her head.

"Then we're going to need a surrogacy spell. I can't carry the fetus. Blank bodies... well... even though they're a copy, the plumbing down there doesn't really... work."

Now it was my turn to bite my lower lip. I looked at Glory, but she could neither cast such a spell nor be a suitable surrogate. It was supposed to be as close a relation as I could find... I'd need a unicorn, at least... "I'll talk to Triage about it."

"Blackjack, there has to be some way I can help you," Glory said, staring at me in worry.

"It's okay. Thanks, though," I said, pausing and fidgeting a bit. "I just need to know, P-21, should I even try to get my baby back?"

P-21's eyes shot wide as he gaped at me. "What... why... how..." he stammered, then composed himself with a sharp breath. "How could you ask me that?"

"Because as far as I'm concerned, it's your baby too. And putting a bullet through my old body's head is easier than trying to get my unborn baby out of it." I closed my eyes, tears streaking my cheeks as my mind struggled with the horrifying choice before me. It stuck in my throat, and finally I sobbed. "I've given up so much. What's a little more?"

"No!" he said sharply, and I flinched. He sighed, covering my hooves in his. "No, Blackjack. You're not giving that up. What's the point to living if you lose that?"

"The world's more important than me and my baby," I said hollowly. "Aren't I being selfish taking the risk?" Glory stared at me as if suddenly struck dumb, her eyes wide and aghast.

"Technically, sure. So what?" he asked scornfully. "This is something you need to be selfish about, Blackjack. This is our baby. I've had a rough time learning what that means from Scotch. I want to know what it's like to do it right from the beginning. I *want* this. And you need something that you won't sacrifice, Blackjack. Something that is yours. A line in the sand you won't cross." I remembered him once shouting in my face about him killing me if I ever crossed him.

Glory didn't look at the pair of us, her eyes downcast. I turned back to him, smiled, and gave a little nod. Getting my body back would be difficult... far more difficult than getting a few missile launchers, snipers, and spark grenades and unloading on her. Still, we'd find a way.

"I'll go help Scotch," Glory said, starting to get up, and I stared at her in surprise.

"Glory?" I rose and stepped after her. Something about her tone, so small and hurt, was just wrong to me.

"Stop," she said, not turning back to look at me. "Just... let me go, Blackjack." Her

shoulders shook slightly as she bowed her head, her mane hiding her face from me.

“Glory? What’s wrong?” I said as I walked around in front of her. I didn’t understand. . . was this some other Enclave moral landmine I wasn’t aware of? I glanced back at P-21, but he seemed just as clueless as I. “I . . . I’m sorry,” I said helplessly, hoping it would be enough for whatever offense I’d given.

Then she lifted her head, and I felt as if I had my old body back. Everything inside me stilled as she smiled through her tears. “So am I, Blackjack,” she said with a sick little laugh as she sat down. “I was ready to hate you. I really had written you off. And as much as it hurt, I think I was okay with it. And then you show up, and I was wrong, and it turns out you still care about me.” She smiled even wider and added, “And you’re pregnant. Congratulations.” Her eyes were on P-21 with that last word. “You don’t even have your old body anymore.”

“Glory, what is wrong? Talk to me,” I said as I reached out with my hooves to hold her shoulders. “Tell me what I did wrong!”

She cocked her head, smiling at me with a look of pity as she wept. “Blackjack, do you love me?”

“Of course I do,” I said, immediately.

“Why?” Glory asked in that soft voice. So tender. Such yearning to be understood.

“What?” I blinked in bafflement at her.

“Why do you love me?” she asked as she stared into my eyes.

“I . . .” I stammered, trying to think. “You’re . . . good. And smart. And nice. And . . .” I said, but the words felt hollow to me. True, without a doubt, but I knew other good, smart, nice ponies that I didn’t love. “I just do!” I finally blurted.

She just shook her head with that horrible, sad smile. “I know you just do. But that’s not enough. I loved you because you protected me. You were so strong. Too strong. And like my parents you both left me behind and horribly injured yourself in the process.”

I rolled my eyes. “Glory, I had to do that. The first time I was going crazy and the second time I was detonating a megaspell that would have killed you. It almost killed me!” I pointed out.

She brushed my mane out of my eyes. “I know, Blackjack. I know why. And I’m not mad at you for it. But Blackjack . . . I would have rather died than be left behind. Maybe I would have. Or maybe we might have found another way. We could play

what if's all the time. The point is that's not love. Or rather, not the kind of love I need."

"And what is the kind of love you need? Just tell me and I'll give it," I swore. Anything to make this stop.

She actually laughed, and then wiped her snotty muzzle on a hoof. "Just like that? Funny thing is... you would. You'd try to. I know." She sighed. "What I need is somepony who needs me. Not just for emotional support, but who needs me with her. That won't try and treat me like a helpless baby." She shook her head. "I'm not that mare that was trapped under the floor anymore, Blackjack. I haven't been for a long time."

"But I need you," I swore, trying to put as much feeling into it as I could.

"You need someone, Blackjack. But it doesn't have to be me," she said with that wistful gaze in her eyes. "In fact, I think right now that it shouldn't have been me at all. I was just clinging to you in the hopes that, eventually, you'd love me the way I needed to be loved."

"But Glory... I..." I fumbled, feeling gutpunched. "I can love you like that. I can."

"No, Blackjack. You're a good pony, but you can't put me first. You almost didn't put your own child first. That... scares me. I can't imagine the kind of mare who can do that. I wonder if I could ever do what you do so easily..." she said quietly.

I wondered if this was really happening. Maybe any second the sadistic torture program would pop out of the couch cushions and go 'surprise, want to execute Goldenblood now?' Then I'd be free to meet the real Glory and everything would somehow... magically... be fine...

Damn it... LittlePip never had to go through this. Why did I? I looked at P-21, but all he gave me was his own sympathetic gaze. Not a shake of the head or a nod of advice. Not a word. This he was leaving entirely up to me. I returned my eyes to her face. "You've been there for me so many times, even with all my mistakes and screw ups. I don't want to lose you."

"And I'll be there for you in the future," Glory said quietly, "as a friend. But you and I... we don't... have anything anymore. I've always been carried along, swept in your wake, left behind, and picked back up again." She covered my mouth with her wing. "And I know you do like me and care for me. And I'm very thankful for that. But that... that isn't love. You have a deeper connection with P-21 than you will ever have with me. And I need someone I can have that connection with. It isn't going to

be with you.” She sniffed and leaned up, kissing my cheek softly and then pushed my hooves off her shoulders.

She started to walk out the door, and I just stared after her. Then I blurted. “Glory, do you love me?”

She paused and looked over her shoulder at me, smiling calmly amid the wet on her cheeks. “No,” was all she said, and then stepped out of Star House. Her name caught in my throat as I struggled to say whatever magic phrase would change her mind. Something. Anything... The quiet click of the door was like a shearing blade right through my heart. Slowly I bowed my head, and tears began pattering by my hooves as I thought of all the things that could have been... that should have been...

Damn it. It wasn't fair...

“I don't know if I can keep doing this,” I said faintly as I stared at the closed door. “I just... What did I do wrong?”

“That's not a question I can answer. Glory had a point. She could have waited a little bit before bringing it up, but she did.” He came up beside me. “It's not easy being the one left behind all the time. And if you were going to dive into Tartarus, would you be okay with her coming with you?”

I closed my eyes and saw her wing fall off. Heard her anguished screams begging to die. “No. No, I wouldn't.”

“She knows that, Blackjack. We all do. And I know exactly how you feel because I feel the same way with Scotch. Part of me wants to tie her up and keep her here where it's safe, but I can't do that. Not if I wanted to keep her as a daughter.” He smiled and patted my back.

“Do you love me, P-21?” I asked as I looked at him.

He blinked a little, seemed to think a moment or two, and then nodded once. “In a way, maybe. It's not a love I'm used to. I think you're the only mare I could ever feel that way about.”

“Why?” I echoed her question, thinking that if I heard his reasons, maybe I could find some way to fix this mess.

“She's right. We've been through a lot together. We have a common background. We've suffered the same troubles. We have lots of the same feelings. Lots of the same fears.” He sighed and nuzzled my cheek lightly. “Like for instance, I know what you need right now to get through this.”

Nothing was going to help me get through this. Ever. “Like what?” I asked skeptically. He gazed warmly into my eyes with just a look and I blinked. “What?” Then I felt my insides give a twitch. “Oh...”

I’ve been called a bad pony for a wide variety of reasons. As I lay there in bed, I wondered if having rebound sex less than two minutes after the breakup was a valid one. P-21 had taken me upstairs and systematically eradicated my ability to hate on myself with a deluge of dearly missed endorphins. As upset as I was about what had happened between Glory and myself, P-21 had simply given me such a wonderful slurry of sensation that I couldn’t hate on myself right now.

One thing was clear: Stygius had lost his crown. Over the last two hours, P-21 had bit, licked, nibbled, stroked, sucked, thrust, pinned, and spurted me into a deliciously thoughtless lump of exquisitely spent mare. Then, so I couldn’t hate on myself for getting something good after breaking up with Glory, he’d taken a page from her book and tied me down and did me so that I both ached and melted with him. LittlePip once talked about thirty something orgasms? Well, if I ever talked to her again, I’d have to compare notes, because the way my... everything was buzzing, I couldn’t tell if I’d had dozens of small ones or if the one he’d given me a little less than two hours ago just hadn’t ended yet. I was slimy and sweaty and achy and creamy and half a dozen things besides, but one thing I wasn’t doing was crying my eyes out.

“Feeling better?” he asked into my ear as I lay slack on the bed. I could only nod my head, given that the bridle didn’t let me talk. “Need more?” he asked, touching my wonderfully sore posterior and making me groan. I finally shook my head. Tempting as it might be, I couldn’t do this forever. I had enemies to beat and... stuff...

He began to bite slowly down the side of my neck. “Are you sure?”

Well... maybe one more hour.

Okay. I was positively glazed and had difficulty walking, but I needed water, then to use the bathroom, and to wash. “I dunno how you did that,” I slurred. “That... how?”

“Practice. Lots of practice and learning to pace myself. And I had some of those healing potions set aside just to help me push past the refractory period,” he said

calmly, not quite as messy as me but definitely in need of a wash too. "It's a little cheat we use when we're pushing round five, six, seven..."

I slipped out of the bed, feeling him drip out of me, white on white. He'd removed the bit, but the black tack and harness was still tight on me, and I couldn't summon the focus just yet to take it off. Ugh... my hoof for a hot shower. "Are you okay with what we did?" I asked, looking back at him. The question made him frown thoughtfully. If his fur hadn't been spiked in erratic ways, he'd have looked far more moody.

Finally, he smiled. "If it'd been any other mare... no. No in a big way. But it was with you, so I think it's fine," he replied evenly, then raised a hoof. "If, however, I feel myself getting shaky or panicked, I'll let you know." He stretched, and I found my eyes lingering on his athletic, toned rump, making my insides twitch again, but no! I had meetings to do and stuff. Of the six tiny mares in my head, one suggested one more round, one said enough was enough, one couldn't stop giggling, one was taking notes, one offered critique and pointers for next time, and the last had her eyes covered with her wings as she blushed into her hooves.

"Come on. Let's go clean off. We can clean this, too," I said as I gestured to the harness he'd bound me up in. Walking stiffly, I stepped out the door.

"Blackjack, I should go first. I know I heard somepony downstairs a few hours ago. What if somepony came back?" he asked as I walked along the balcony. With my sweaty, sticky mane in my eyes, it was hard to see as I trotted down the stairs.

"Oh please, who could—" I began to say when a throat cleared. I froze and scraped my hoof across my bangs. I stared down at Calamity, Velvet Remedy, Stygius, Tenebra, Goldenblood, and Whisper all sitting in my living room. Goldenblood was at the foot of the stairs, one brow arched as the others all stared at me. Velvet seemed to be struggling to speak. Tenebra's eyes popped wide as a little trickle of blood dripped down her lip.

"Told you she'd totally come down the stairs like that. Pay up!" Whisper laughed, smacking Tenebra's shoulder in her glee. The batpony wobbled like she was made of wood.

"LittlePip never did that," Velvet said stiffly, cheeks burning.

"Th' harness might look good on you though," Calamity replied casually, giving Velvet a wink.

"Might look better on you," Velvet countered, her cheeks flushed as she regarded me. "I do hope you'll forgive us, but we let ourselves in. And you were occupied

and... ahem..." They seemed to be waiting for me to do something.

Walking quite stiffly down to the bottom, I gave Velvet Remedy an easy smile. "Oh. No worries. I mean, I'm glad all of you are here. P-21 was just helping me with some problems I'd had." I gave a deep sigh. "On the plus side, it was really good, on the negative side, my rear is really raw." I beamed a smile at all of them. "Do you mind if I wash up, or do you want to talk first?" I said as I wiped some semen from my muzzle.

Calamity and Velvet both gaped at me as little white gobs fell behind me... drip.... drip... drip... My eyes went from one to the other as the silence continued. "What?" I asked in bafflement.

"Dear Goddesses, she's like the anti-Pip," Velvet murmured, eyes wide in a mix of wonder and horror.

"What? It's just semen and some bondage gear," I said with a shrug and not even the barest hint of a blush. "I'll be right back when I've stopped oozing out my backside," I said as I headed to the door. There was a thump as I opened it, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Tenebra passed out on the floor. Whisper seemed unable to breathe in her wild mirth. I gave P-21 a baffled look as we stepped out into the rain. *Surfacer ponies... who could figure them out?*

After P-21 and I washed up and put the fun away and he'd put his hat back on, I felt... better. Guilty. Upset. Confused. I'd probably be a sobbing mess when it all came back on me. But right now, I was stable enough to do what had to be done. Our little troupe headed over towards Blueblood Manor. Velvet's alicorn friends cast the rain shielding spell to keep us dry and let us talk. They were all beautiful and regal, but it just wasn't the same. I wondered how Psalm was doing. Most of my head, though, was occupied thinking about who might show up to the meeting and running through what I'd say. For all I knew, it would be just a dozen or two ponies curious about the Blackjack impersonator.

The weather, which had been hammering down, now let up into a very un-Hoofingtonlike drizzle. The almost continuous lightning strikes had halted. The winds had died down to an eerie stillness. I didn't like it. If the clouds disappeared, I might have a heart attack.

"Please tell me that this nice weather is LittlePip's doing," I asked Velvet plaintively.

"It's LittlePip's doin'," Calamity said, straightfaced. Velvet glared at him, and the bandaged stallion smirked. "Wut? She said please."

"LittlePip hasn't found a way to cut through the interference. Homage was working on a tower with Ditzzy. Number thirteen, I think. She might have found a way and just not forwarded the message to us yet." She looked over at me. "She should be at the meeting. She can tell us then." She glanced at P-21 talking with Calamity, the former occasionally letting his eyes wander over the oblivious latter, and asked in a quieter voice. "Are you okay?"

"Been a long time since I could answer that with a yes," I said with a small smile. I checked behind me. Whisper was forcing Stygius and Tenebra to have a discussion about me and semen. Goldenblood walked behind them, silently, eyes downcast. I glanced over at Velvet. "Can I ask you a question? Why do you love Calamity?"

The question seemed to surprise and even amuse her. "I don't know. It was the wings, originally."

"Yeah, there's just something about fliers," I said with a rueful smile, making Calamity and Stygius nicker and P-21 roll his eyes.

"Not that," Velvet laughed, then paused and reconsidered. "Well, not entirely that. He's... good. A protector. Loyal. True. I don't have to worry about him."

"So if you met a second pony who was just as good, you'd love him too?" I asked, in complete seriousness. A number of emotions ran over her features with embarrassment winning out.

"Well?" Calamity asked with a grin. "I got to say I'm a mite curious myself."

"No," Velvet Remedy stated firmly.

"And... if he asked you to stay behind? To keep you safe?" I asked delicately.

"Why would he do that?" Velvet Remedy asked with a baffled smile. "He's learned I can take care of myself."

"But what if it's something that would kill you? Or hurt you. Or was different than what you wanted?" I looked at the brown stallion. "What would you do if she died? Or if he died?" I asked her. Both their smiles disappeared as I looked back at the ground. "I just didn't want her to die."

Velvet nudged my shoulder. "No one does. I guess we just try not to think about it. I saw Steelhooves's head cut off right in front of me. It hurt. It almost changed who I

was. And if it had been Calamity or LittlePip... maybe it might have. That's the price paid for being in love."

"And it ain't just you that has ta' pay it. Takes two ta tussle, tango, 'n' tic-tac-toe, as they say," he said with a little nod.

Something in my face must have shown the shame, fear, and anxiety in my chest. Her amusement faded. "Hey, Blackjack. Are you..." she paused as I grimaced. "Something happened between you and Glory, didn't it?" I gave a little nod, and she sighed and glanced at P-21. "When you both... Well... I mean... With you and your... ah... well...orientation... I didn't know if something had happened."

"It's alright. It's nothing I didn't see coming a mile away," I lied... or did I? After all, I knew she was upset. I'd blamed it on her transformation into Rainbow Dash. On her being from the sky. On... everything but me. "That was vigorous rebound sex. Good for the endorphins. I'll pay for it in guilt later."

"Is this separation permanent?" Velvet asked with a sympathetic little smile. The question made me sick to my stomach.

"Probably should be," I said, feeling that ache inside my chest. "I have things I have to do, and she'll be better off with somepony else. Honestly, this should have happened long ago." I faked a smile as happy as I could. Think of sexy, happy inner thigh nibbles. Don't think about anything else. Pretend like nothing had changed. Self-delusion was so familiar that I could step into like it was nothing.

But it wasn't nothing. Part of me asked what was wrong with me. The other part questioned what was wrong with her. Part of me was afraid to find the answer, and another wondered if it was worthwhile.

'Not the most focused pony in the wasteland, are you, Blackjack?' I thought to myself.

She sighed as we climbed up the hill towards Blueblood Manor. Or what remained of it. Between the Crusaders, the Harbingers, and Deus, most of the once-immense building was smashed. Even the wing that had held Vanity was gone. I started to feel both sad and upset. Silly, given all that had happened. Battlefields didn't respect the dead. Still, I would have liked one thing to remain sacred.

Then I spotted a stone slab beside the road that hadn't been there months ago. About six feet high, the flat face had been worked smooth by what I suspected was an arcane disintegration beam. Then somepony had cut in the face:

Vanity

Here lies a noble heart

Goodnight, Sweet Prince

I approached the slab slowly, my eyes tracing the carvings. Somepony had taken great pains to cut those letters an inch deep into the granite. At the base was a smaller phrase: 'In Appreciation'. Then more than a dozen names. I read each one over and over again. "We wanted to remember him," croaked a ghoul's voice, and I started and looked at the teal ghoul pegasus in maid's livery, looking as dry and desiccated as a feather duster even in the humid Hoofington air. Harpica smiled softly. "It's too easy to forget some days. At least this way, his name won't be forgotten."

I choked as I regarded the stone. Forgotten. When I died, how would I be remembered? Would any raise a stone with my name upon it? Probably not, and if they did, it would be undeserved. To be forgotten was true death. With flesh rotted and bones pulverized to dust and the great histories lost to the passage of time, what of the person who had lived? Or had they ever lived at all? There were twelve names on Vigilance's mouthgrip, but what did I know of the first ten but their names? Almost nothing. And when Vigilance rusted away, would anyone ever know?

"Blackjack?" P-21 asked as I trembled, feeling all those happy endorphins falling away. No. Keep it together, Blackjack. Fake it! Smile.

"I'm fine! I'm... fine..." I said as I struggled to regain my balance. I was in control. Or if I wasn't, then I had to act like I was. Just as good. "Just fine." Doubt lingered in his eyes, but he gave a small encouraging smile.

"He would have been honored," Goldenblood rasped silently from behind me. "I never knew a pony more inappropriately named." Harpica blinked her milky eyes at the scarred unicorn but then gave a happy little squeak at the compliment.

"Thank you," she said as she looked at our party. "I was told to wait out here and bring you to the others when you're ready."

"Did Homage, Ditzzy, and Life Bloom make it back?" Velvet asked the teal ghoul.

"I believe so, ma'am. Those are your friends from out west?" she asked. Velvet nodded. "Ah yes. They did ten minutes ago. They're waiting in the garden."

"Garden?" I looked across the ruined manor and spotted the ballroom... the roof collapsed in due to a tank being driven through it.

"It was the only place with enough space. The manor is a terrible mess. Those Crusaders were absolutely ghastly. Children can be so destructive at times," the ghoul said in her whispery rasp. True, and having a battle and a tank driving through it too had done absolutely nothing for the structure. The exterior walls were still intact, but the interior rooms had collapsed in on themselves. There were still some signs of what the rooms had been used for, but I guessed that, in a year or two, the manor would be just another ruin dotting the Wasteland.

Provided Horizons didn't kill us all. Didn't kill Velvet and Calamity. Didn't kill Glory. Didn't kill P-21. Didn't... didn't...

"Blackjack?" P-21 said in alarm as I swayed. For some reason, I couldn't quite breathe. It was all going to fall apart. I was going to get everypony killed. I'd fucked up too badly for too many reasons and I couldn't do it! My heart thundered in my chest. What was I even doing? "Blackjack!" P-21 shouted.

"Anxiety attack..." I heard Velvet say, but it sounded like it was coming from far away. "She needs to go back to Star House. This is bad."

"No!" I choked, trying so hard to keep it together. There wasn't any more time. No more time for anything. Anything at all.

Then P-21 held me and murmured softly in my ears, "Breathe, Blackjack. Just breathe. You're fine. We'll find a way to get through this. Just breathe." Somehow I started to actually take breaths rather than making choking noises.

"You said you'd kill me if I ever fucked up," I whispered, pressing my face into his chest. I could hear his own heartbeat, slow and steady and sure. "I've gotten everyone killed."

"We aren't dead just yet," he told me quietly. "Now just breathe and calm down."

It took me about three or four minutes before my heart resumed a normal rate and I no longer felt like I was going to pass out. Throw up, maybe, but not pass out. I wiped my eyes and gave a rueful smile to Whisper. "Must be funny. Seeing big bad Security losing it."

"Eh..." she tilted a wing back and forth. "Would be if your life wasn't so fucked up. Way I look at it, you're not psycho or dead, so there's got to be something going for you." I actually laughed a little at that.

"Better?" P-21 murmured.

"Yeah," I said, and together we continued around the side of the manor towards the

back. There was a strange murmuring noise, like a babbling brook or overflowing storm drain. “Hopefully enough that I can address all ten people that actually came to hear me.”

“Ten?” Harpica asked, sounding alarmed.

“Fine. Twenty then,” I said with a roll of my eyes as we approached a gate in desiccated hedgerow. “I mean, who in their right mind is going to go way out here for a probably-just-another-imposter Black. . . jack...” I trailed off as I stepped through.

That wasn’t twenty.

That wasn’t a hundred.

It was everypony.

Near as I could tell, everypony I knew sat on the stone steps of a classical amphitheatre. Stone columns decorated with proud, cracked unicorn stallions framed the stage. One wall of the dead hedge had been crushed flat, letting Deus point his turrets in. I wondered if that was intentional: making sure the rowdier guests behaved. The various ponies entertained themselves in a variety of ways. Bottle-cap, Charity, and Keepers seemed to have set up an impromptu swap meet with the Collegiate and Society. The Zodiacs appeared to be talking weapons with the Half-hearts and Flash Fillies. The Highlanders had a jug band and were selling hooch to ghouls from Meatlocker. The Burner Boys were running gambling games with some Thunderhead ponies and a hoofful Steel Rangers. An enterprising trio of Crusaders in the back ran a little food booth and were giving a radroach burger to a sand dog. A trio of hellhounds lingered in the back, with everyone giving the beasts a wide berth.

But for all the busy spectacles the one that stuck out most to me was the simple fact that no one was killing anyone else.

“What are they all doing here?” I gasped.

“You said you wanted everyone who could come. Once word got out that the Security at the Society was a fraud, and that the Lightbringer’s friends and Security’s team vouched for this one... well, suddenly everyone wanted to be here. Between alicorn teleportation, Enclave pegasi, and the clearing weather, this was the place to be,” Velvet Remedy said with a sweep of her hoof.

“They’re all people you helped in one way or another, Blackjack,” P-21 said quietly. I could pick out Windclop and a few other familiar faces from Meatlocker, more

alicorns than had arrived with Velvet, griffin Talons from back west... “They all want to return the favor.”

I just stared and felt everything spinning out around me. “I need... I need a moment.”

“Take a few. Say an hour? As long as there’s food and entertainment, we can wait,” P-21 said.

Velvet Remedy and Calamity trotted to meet Homage, Ditzzy, and Life Bloom over by the band. Harpica went to mind the foals near the Crusader food stand. Not having a clue what else to do, P-21 and I trotted over to Deus. A camera swiveled down to me, and I gave a shaky little smile. “Hey big guy. It’s me. Mind if we talk?”

Deus’s engine let out a soft purr and the tank’s rear hatch popped open. I carefully wiggled in, P-21 slipping in behind me with far more ease. In the middle of the tank, where the driver would normally sit, was the glass jar containing the metal-reinforced brain of the stallion. More cameras whirled to orient on me, and I gave a small smile. “Yeah. I’m really Blackjack. Security the reboot. I’m sure I’ll be shot and mangled all to hell inside a week.” I regarded the jar. It’d been a while since we’d parted ways. “Do you have something you need to tell me?”

Deus’s cameras all bobbed up and down in unison. His aphasia might be killing his speech, but he’d adapted better than I probably would have to being stuck inside a war machine. I considered; I’d gotten better at memory magic since we’d last met. Maybe. “Is it okay if I go into your mind and find the memory of what you want to talk about?” The cameras paused and then moved slowly up and down.

Glancing at P-21, I pressed my horn to the glass. Not quite the same as a pony, but it wasn’t like I jabbed my horn into their brains. I concentrated, felt the connection forming, and waited. I had plenty of experience with mindplay at this point. I felt the world fall away as I dove in deeper than I ever had.

Deus’s mind wasn’t like sinking into a pool of images. I floated in the middle of a plain of slaughtered zebras like a white ghost, looking at a colossal pony caught in the workings of an immense factory. A gargantuan collection of pain and rage and disappointment. I had no clue where to begin as the pony screamed and writhed against the steel pinning him in. Every few seconds, the gears tried to turn, biting deeper into him. But he didn’t have a body anymore! I recalled Glory or Triage telling me brains can’t feel pain. So why...

When I’d lost my legs, I could still feel them. Just because they were gone didn’t mean they weren’t ‘real’ to my mind. Could all this pain be the same thing? I floated

over to one immense gear and gripped it with my hooves. The thing was my size, and in the real world I'd never be able to budge it, but this was the mind. In the mind, will counted more than muscle, and willpower was just a nice way of calling a pony stubborn. I had stubborn coming out my ass.

With several pulls and yanks, I dislodged the gear. Instantly a deluge of words hammered into me as an explosion of gore erupted from his side. 'No good rapist. Fucking rapist. Rapist scum. Rapist asshole. Deserves to die. Deserves to suffer. Just put a bullet in his head.' I pushed through, forcing the gear free of the rest. Rapists fucked up and it was easy to say that all of them were scum, but nopony deserved this. I latched my hooves on another chewing pair and pulled with all my strength. 'Not my boy. Not my child. My son'd never do this.' hammered into me. Well, I'd done some things my mom would be ashamed of too. I pushed through the pain till those toothed wheels tore free.

Again and again I swooped around him, attacking the metal that encased him. I grabbed one and a single word screamed across the plain. 'Cunt!' It was accompanied by the images of dozens of different mares who had rejected and hurt him, hitting me like a sledgehammer. Well, I'd been a cunt in the past too. I strained and pulled as hard as I could, the gear groaning before it tore free in a waterfall of gore and a scream of rage and frustration. I seized another and heard Big Macintosh say solemnly, 'I'm right disappointed in you.' Well, I could empathize with that as well.

I seized a gear and was instantly hit by sensations of all the mares he'd violated. I could feel him going inside them. I nearly cut the connection then and there, but I was here to help him. Then, after several seconds I realized something... he wasn't getting off. It was as if he was just beating them up inside with his cock. I couldn't forgive that... but I could understand why he had done it. He'd deserved punishment, but not this. A little empathy would have gone a long way towards helping Doof be a better pony.

Suddenly the machinery ripping into him shivered and began to come apart. Massive beams and girders began to collapse all around him as the crushed pony within forced his way free. I backed off as he burst cables and bent steel. Finally, with a clanging clamor of an ironworks being dropped, his head burst free, and he screamed a single word that echoed across that plain of carnage.

Not 'Cunt'.

'Why?'

As he sat there, gargantuan and alone, the gray stallion sobbed and bled. I hesi-

tated, then slowly approached his colossal face. "I don't know why, Doof. I'm sorry, but I don't know why anypony put you through what you suffered," I answered. I was just the last in a long life of pain and suffering. "I just know you want to be a better pony, and I just want to give you the chance."

He sobbed, blubbing in the midst of that plain. Finally he wiped his eyes. "I don't hurt so bad no more. You do that?"

"I think so?" I said with a nervous grin.

"Why?" he asked as he looked up at my glowing, ghostlike form.

"Cause... who wouldn't?" I asked back awkwardly.

"No pony, if they think you're scum," he answered back, his voice deep and rumbling. "If you're scum, no pony will give you the time of day. They'd rather you died than give a bit of help, 'cause you fucked up, and you deserve it."

"Well, I don't care if you are scum. No pony deserves that."

The massive Doof just stared at me. He still had metal spurs and shrapnel embedded in him. Some of them just went too deep for me to pull out. I just knew it. There was a limit to how much I could do for him here. "Rampage is in trouble," he rumbled.

"Yes, she is," I said. Then I balked. "Do you mean in general or something specific?"

He pointed ahead of him, and in the air a massive window appeared. The image was grainy, as if captured through a camera. It showed Rampage confronting Cognitum outside the Elysium country club and... what in the world had she done to my body? On top of the two beam rifles she'd added to her sides, she was flanked by two small hovering robots sporting a long beam weapon each. And she'd added spikes. Spikes! They covered the little filly and the cutie mark etchings and made her look utterly ridiculous. Had those been added before or after her little speech?

The striped mare started out grinning. Then snarling. Then she lunged at Cognitum. The cybermare stopped her calmly and efficiently with a raised hoof, then telekinetically lifted her and slammed her once, twice, thrice into the ground. Then the hovering robots disintegrated her.

Suddenly a targeting reticle appeared on Cognitum, and Deus charged towards her. Cognitum gave a chill stare at the tank. I could almost imagine her calculating precisely how to strike to destroy it in a single blow. Suddenly a filly Rampage rose up and threw herself in the path of the machine. The vehicle immediately halted.

"No, Deus! I need her!" Rampage sobbed. "Stop, you big idiot!"

"Interesting," Cognitum purred as Deus ground to a halt. Cognitum smiled down at the little filly. "You will get what you want when I decide to give it. Perhaps in a century or two. But let me assure you that if I die, you'll have eons to contemplate your meaningless, worthless existence, Rampage. I am the only one who can give you the death you seek."

Cognitum trotted away with a satisfied smirk that made me want to run her over with a tank too. But something bothered me. I turned to the mountain of gray and regret. "Why did you care about Rampage?" It would have been great if it'd been about keeping her safe or something, but I suspected that it was something else.

He lifted his great brown eyes. "Because... she's my daughter."

"What?" I asked in bafflement. "She's... how? How do you know?"

More memory windows. Wow, was I actually inventing vocabulary for this mind magic stuff? In it, a board of ponies faced Doof. Vanity was on the far side. The unicorn mare in judge robes in the middle slapped a gavel sharply. "Request for visitation rights denied. The court sees no reason to grant any privileges to a prisoner with such a contemptible record of behavior." The ponies behind the board began to file out.

Doof lunged forward, and four guards wrestled him back. "Let me see her!" he roared. "I'll fuck all of you cunts, let me see my daughter!"

Vanity stopped at the exit. The white stallion appeared... tired. There was gray at his temples and bags under his eyes. He glanced contemptuously at Doof. "Give it up, Doof. In twenty years you'll be free. Sooner if the M.o.P. gives you psychological adjustments. Stop tormenting Twist with these endless appeals."

"In twenty years she won't be my daughter anymore. She'll... she just be some stranger! I want to see her. I want to know what she looks like," Doof said, pulling the guards forward as he leaned towards the unicorn.

Vanity stared at him flatly, then drew from his vest a small photograph. He levitated it in front of Doof's face. In it were Twist, Shujaa, and a little filly with a curly mane. "Peppermint favors her mother," Vanity said coolly.

"Can I have that? Please, let me have that, Vanity!" Doof begged.

For a second, the unicorn seemed about to relent. Then one of the guards shoved Vanity aside. "Out of the way, we need to get the prisoner back to his cell," the mare

said sharply. Vanity hesitated, then returned the picture to his pocket, backing away as a squad of guards surrounded Doof, trying to get him out the door.

"You cunts!" he roared as he was born away. "I'll kill all of you! All of you!"

The window faded and disappeared. "The stripes are different, but I'll never forget my little filly." A dozen more windows opened up, some showing a desolate Arlost in the Stadium. A filly Rampage taking out a raider four times her size. An image of the mare pitting a radroach against Gorgon's, and then when she lost, wrestling the monsterpony instead. An image of her getting fitted for her armor. I could almost imagine Doof looking on.

"You never told her?" I asked.

"I was Deus. Baddest bastard birthed in the Wasteland, and I didn't have a shred of proof. Not like they can do paternity tests anymore. So I tried to make sure she had a place in the Reapers. Besides, if I'd gone soft on her, it would have come back to hurt both of us. Reapers don't do soft," he said low and slowly. "Besides, who wants to know they had a monster for a father? Better I just stay back."

"She would have wanted to know," I answered.

"It wouldn't do any good now. I can't even hold her like this," he muttered. "I just think... I think she's in a lot of trouble. I want her to be happy, and I can't help her like this. Can you promise me... can you promise to help her?"

"I don't need to. I will help her. She's my friend," I said firmly. "I won't give up on her just because she screwed up."

"Even though she stabbed you in the back?" Deus asked with a small smile. "I don't know how you do it."

"I'm really... really... really stupid," I said with a hapless grin. "I want my friends back, and I want everypony okay. And yeah, I know it's immature and naive and... I just want it that way. Call me an idiot."

Deus stared at me with that same look Rampage always used to give me, then slowly shook his colossal head. "Be careful, Cunt," he said, the word about as affectionate as he could manage.

"You too, Doof," I answered, then cut the connection. I opened my eyes and sighed. Well, as much of a screwup as I was, I could at least still help somepony a little. I started to make my way back towards the hatch when I heard P-21 say sharply outside, "No. You need to go somewhere else right now, Glory."

I froze, then slowly peeked out to see the pair arguing behind the tank. “But I need to tell her—” Glory began.

“You’ve told her enough already,” P-21 cut her off coldly. “Really. ‘Why do you love me?’ Isn’t it enough that you are loved? Period? Only you would want to quantify something as elusive and ephemeral as love!”

“P-21, I—” Glory tried again, clearly flustered.

“No. Not you. You cut it off. You could have had her wrapped around your hoof. It should have been you trying to deal with the shitstorm going on in her life. But no, you had to pile it on with another shitstorm, and if there’s anypony that needs shit squared in her life, it’s Blackjack!” he stormed on, pointing a hoof away. “Just get out of here. She needs you like a baton to the kneecap.”

She just stood there, her face stern. “I know you love her, P-21.” P-21 paled as if she’d slapped him. “I also know that as long as she and I are together, you and her wouldn’t be. It took three bottles of champagne to get us in the same bed. Not a good sign for an open relationship, even if it would make Blackjack happy. I know myself and I’m not going to pretend I’d be okay with something I’m not.”

Ugh... but it would have been such a simple solution! Why couldn’t anything be simple? “You couldn’t have waited till this was over? Let her do what she has to and then break her heart?” P-21 muttered.

“There is no good time. You two have a baby together now. You’re...” Glory started to tear up. “Do you know how much it hurt to hear that? You two have something I’ll never have with her. And sure, I could pretend that the foal is mine or adopt or something, but it’ll never be the same as what the two of you share.” She hissed in pain and shook her head. “Better I find some mare I can share that with. Some mare who won’t make me wonder if I’m second best. Who won’t try and make me stay back, even if there’s risk.”

“I don’t know if Blackjack even loves me,” P-21 said uncertainly. “We had sex. Love... is different with Blackjack.”

“You’ll find a way,” Glory said with a small smile. “And what I wanted to say was that Rain— I mean, Mare Do Well has spotted the *Blizzard* and *Sirroco* to the southwest over the Luna Space Center. There’s a chance that Hoarfrost and Afterburner might be working with Cognitum. That’s all.”

She turned and had started away when P-21 stammered, “Glory!” She paused and looked back at him, one brow raised. “I’m sorry it turned out like this.”

Again, that sad smile I hated so much. “You love her. You don’t have anything to be sorry about.” P-21 stared after her, his face troubled and helpless.

I ducked back into the tank, breathing hard. He loved me? Love? Capital-L love? The reactions in my head varied from ‘Whoo hoo’, to ‘we need to carefully consider this’, to ‘aww yeah’, to ‘now calm down, Sugarcube’. But the overwhelming feeling I had rolling through me was...

Huh?

How did that happen? Like me as a friend, maybe. I could understand that. We’d been through a lot together. But Love? Love. LOOOOOVE! El oh vee ee... No matter how I bounced the word off my brain it came back as a raging ball of doubt and uncertainty. How could he give it? How could I deserve it? Did I even want it at this point? And that horrible, nasty little ‘why’ popping up right, left, and center.

I closed my eyes, banging the back of my head against the hatch rim as I sat there in the tank. Why. Why why why? I had way too much going on right this second. I’d just have to focus on getting things with Cognitum finished. Once that was done, we’d have the rest of our lives to talk about love and family and... a wonderful life I could only barely imagine right now.

I slipped out of the hatch and gave P-21 as fake a smile as I could manage. “Hey. Somepony was talking about the Space Center?” I gave an exaggerated look around the hillside behind the tank, ignoring the purple tail disappearing around the corner.

P-21 blinked and stared at me. “Oh. Yeah. There’s word that two Raptors were seen over by the Luna Space Center. The *Sirocco* and *Blizzard*. Might be they’ve hooked up with Cognitum.” He paused, uncertainty gnawing at him. “Blackjack...”

I hurried on before he got to a conversation that I just wasn’t going to be able to have. Not without a lot less stress and a lot more time for sex, cuddling, and soul searching. “Oh, that might be a problem. Well, we’ll deal with it. That’s what I do. Deal with things.” I let out a hearty laugh that I hoped didn’t sound like I was going to vomit. The laugh withered away as I grinned desperately at him. Nope. Not going to have it. Not in a million ye— “Do you really love me?” I asked plaintively.

Luna damn you, Blackjack.

He gaped at me, his mouth moving silently. “You heard...” he finally muttered, lowering his head so his mane obscured his face.

“I heard,” I said with a sigh as I sat down behind the tank and he joined me, flopping down with a sigh. “Love... you... me... yeah...” I muttered lamely. “If you want to put

off this conversation till later I'd be just fi—"

"Yes, I do," he said simply, whacking my emotions across the knee with a baton. "While you were gone. Even before you left, I think, a little." He lifted his head and smiled at me. "You're not the mare who lived in 99 anymore, Blackjack. You're... different. Better. You know things and you've been through things. So... yeah. I really think I do." He swallowed hard and then asked, "Do you feel the same?"

"Love..." I sighed and then made a face. "I hate that word. Looooove. Wuv. We need more words for it. Like the kind of love when you really like a person, and the kind of love when you feel like you'd die without them." I slid sideways and rest my head on his shoulder. "I don't know anymore. I was in love with Glory... but now I don't know what I had with her. I like you a lot, P-21. And losing you... the idea just hurts. Is that love?"

"I don't know. This is new for me too. I feel for you like I felt for him. That's all I can say." He gave a little shrug and kissed my ear.

I took a deep breath. "Well, I suppose you won't get jealous if I have a three way with Stygius and his sister."

He chuckled, "Why would I? I'd definitely like to be there, though. That Stygius has a backside that makes my mouth water."

"He's so adorable when you nibble him down there too. And he has this tongue trick that makes it feel like he's licking right through you straight to your tonsi—" I started to say when a stallion cleared his throat loudly beside us, and glanced over at Big Daddy. The bony old stallion definitely wasn't looking too hot after getting blasted by my old body. "Oh, hiya. Come, join us. We were just talking about sex."

"Oh, I heard," he said with a sigh. "But it just don't have the same zing anymore when ya need ta take a potion ta have it." He stared gravely down at me for several seconds. "I need you to come join us. We're havin' a war council." I shared a serious moment with P-21, and then we both nodded and got up.

Some things were bigger than our love...

"So, do you believe I'm Blackjack?" I asked him as we walked around the hedgerow surrounding the amphitheatre.

"Maybe," he said as he glanced at me with his starry eyes. "When I saw ya before, it was blood and stars. The other you was just blood. You... you're nothin' but stars. So I dunno what ta believe. But you askin' is better than the other you demandin'. That's a start."

“So where are we going?” I asked, looking around, not sure where a ‘war council’ could be held.

“That big dome thing over that way,” he said as he pointed a hoof off to the far side of the amphitheatre. I peered through a gap that opened up to the stage and spotted a large gray rotunda also decorated with unicorn stallions. He and P-21 kept trotting around, but I stopped and frowned.

“Hey, it’s just quicker to go this way,” I said as I trotted out on stage. The pair of stallions gaped at me as I walked out.

Why was it so silent all of a sudden?

I froze in place as one of Deus’s spotlights illuminated me, suddenly aware of dozens... perhaps hundreds of eyes drilling into me. I glanced back at P-21 and Big Daddy, the latter with his jaw hanging and the former covering his face with a hoof. In the middle of the stage was a microphone that Homage and Scotch Tape were working on. Both of them stared at me with equally baffled expressions. Time seemed to freeze as I walked slowly over to it. “Um... hi?” I said, and from Deus’s speakers came my magnified voice, with a squeal of feedback.

Scotch Tape jumped down and did something to some equipment in the pit in front of the stage, and the feedback died away. “Um... thanks for coming. Really appreciate it. Um...” I peered over at P-21 as he mouthed something I guessed was ‘get off the stage!’

“It’s a fake!” somepony in the crowd shouted.

“Another one of those damned impersonators!” yelled another.

“You don’t even have her cutie mark!” guffawed a third. “Get her off the stage!”

“Now wait a minute,” I said, glad for the authority of the microphone, cutting off the hecklers. “I *am* Blackjack, also the pony known as Security. We are all here because this place... this horrible, dangerous place, is our home. It’s a home that is under attack by enemies seeking to either control us or destroy us.” The heckling died away as I took a deep breath. If I stopped, I’d probably never get going again.

“All of you know me. For six months, I’ve travelled all over the Hoof. Some of you know me personally, others through reputation. A few of you might have even fought against me. I’m that idiotic pony who always tries to do better. Who tries to give second chances. Who refuses to be an executioner. Stupid, I know. But stupid that doesn’t stay down tends to stand out.

"Now, some of you have seen another me that came out of the Core talking about unity. That everypony must work together and follow her lead. Has Security ever done that? Have I ever stood before any group and told them that they had to do what I say or die? No! ...Well... not if you don't count slavers. But otherwise..." Okay, keep it together, Blackjack. "Anyway! That is not what I believe. If anyone is to stand with me, I want them to do it of their own free will. Because together, we are stronger than any of us alone."

There was a softer murmuring at this and I bowed my head a little. "I know it's a hard thing to believe. It's an even harder thing to prove. All I ask is the opportunity to do so. Because I am Blackjack, and that other over-cyberized tyrant is the impostor. And if there is some way I can convince you, I'll do it."

"There is," Triage said loudly as she, alongside Boo, trotted onto the stage with a metal box hovering above her. "Blackjack's story is that Cognitum stole her original body, and she ended up in a blank... a magical copy. Well, I happen to have a test for that." There was more murmuring, some of the crowd angry but others curious. She arched a brow. "Anyone doubt the Collegiate running a scientific test here? Anyone?"

"Science sucks," someone in the back of the crowd yelled.

Triage stared flatly in the direction the voice had come from. "Duly noted," she replied monotonically. She set down the box, opened it, and drew out a bucket, a radroach, and a Sparkle-Cola bottle full of rainbow fluid.

She hefted the bottle before the crowd. "This is pure taint. You all know what it does. Tumors. Deformities. Madness. Death. And in case you wondering if I'm lying..." She dropped the radroach into the bucket, then, turning her face away and covering her mouth with a hoof, popped the top of the bottle and dribbled a little of the rainbow glop onto the insect.

The radroach gave a shriek, and then a multitude of legs, much more than a dozen, began to thrash and wiggle out the top. The bucket rocked wildly as something with tendrils or antennae tried to wiggle free. Triage pulled out a beam pistol and fired into the bucket repeatedly. It took several shots before the thing disintegrated. Wiping her brow, she then gestured to Boo. The assembled crowd seemed to draw in their breath sharply as Boo extended a hoof over the bucket. "Boo is a blank. And blanks..." She let the same goop dribble onto Boo to a gasp from some of the assembly. The rainbow sludge clung for a few seconds, then disappeared into her skin. Boo's only response was a little giggle. "...are immune to taint." Some in the

crowd gave a disappointed 'awww'.

She then glared impatiently at me and nodded at the bucket. I sighed, stuck my hoof over it, and waited. Triage dribbled some of the goop onto me, and I winced, my mind filling with thoughts of wiggling eye-tentacle-penises, but nothing happened. My hoof tingled a bit, and I felt... good, actually. Like I'd had both a long night's rest and a full meal. I inspected my leg. "Huh."

"Maybe you need more!" some wit shouted from the audience.

"Oh for the love of Luna," I snapped, rolling my eyes. I seized the bottle and tossed my head back, chugging down the sludge. There was a seminal texture to it, and a flavor that hovered somewhere among wallpaper paste, rust, and raw radroach. The benzene and cotton candy smell filled my nostril as I drained the bottle. When I finished, I looked over at the rapidly-retreating Triage. My guts rumbled, and I groaned as I clutched my stomach, then let out a phenomenally loud belch. A roiling ring of rainbow gas rose up from my mouth, expanded to slide over the unicorn statues atop the pillars, and transformed them into crude and uncouth depictions of Discord. I smacked my lips and peered at the residue sloshing in the bottom of the bottle. "Mmm, pretty good."

A ragged yellow earth pony stallion hopped up next to me, snagging the bottle with both hooves. "It's a trick! See?" And before I could stop him, he drank the dregs of the bottle. He grinned as rainbow goop soaked into his lips. Triage sighed, putting a cigarette in her mouth and lighting it with a precise beam shot to the tip. "That wasn't taint! They put the taint in the bucket ahead of time and used unicorn magic on them statues!" he said with a grin. . . that just kept getting bigger on half his face. The left side unzipped along the jaw and then along his throat. Tendrils began to wave from the breach as his stomach started to bulge like a sack of swelling worms. The crowd screamed in alarm as his head seemed to be in the process of turning inside out, his body jerking spasmodically and flipping over backwards.

Then Triage unloaded the beam pistol into him as I fell back. Thankfully, the incineration beams took hold and transformed the grotesque mass into a pile of dust. "Max charge cartridges. Never bother with anything else," she said idly. She took a pull on her cigarette, looking indolently at the crowd, and levitated the bottle from the dust pile. "Well, that's good enough for me. I believe her story. Anypony else want to check and see if there's a trick?" she asked, pointing the mouth of the bottle at the crowd. As one, they all leaned back as if just the empty bottle were dangerous. Triage dropped the bottle into the bucket, set the bucket into the metal box, and flipped it closed with a resounding clang.

One by one, Big Daddy, Finders Keepers, General Storm Chaser, Grace, and Paladin Stronghoof joined Triage on the stage, flanking me. “I don’t know about the rest of you,” Big Daddy said, the old earth pony pointing a hoof at the crowd, “but if I got a choice between this mare and that cyberized cunt, I’ll take this pony right here. If any one of you has a problem with her, you got a problem with yer Daddy.”

Finders gave a grin. “Well, I know that, until recently, in the last six months, scavenger casualties are down and caravan profits are up fifty percent. It wasn’t the Harbingers responsible for that. I’ll throw my lot in with a mare who asks for my help rather than demands it.” His smile faded. “Also, remember Riverside. We lost a lot of good people there.”

“Three months ago, we had a small problem in the skies,” Storm Chaser said, prompting a little laugh from the crowd. “This mare, who by all accounts had no reason to care about our problems, came to the sky and threw herself into the middle of a battle with the goal of saving as many innocent lives as possible. Whichever side they might have been on. She didn’t want to conquer or condemn; she just wanted to stop the fighting. If we’d had more pegasi like her, we might not have had the war. More than that, if we had more like her, we might have come down to help generations ago.”

Grace gave an elegant nod of her head. “Blackjack has changed every life she’s encountered, sometimes for the worse, but usually for the better. In spite of setbacks, she had never deviated from her ethos of doing better. It is an outlook that has spread beyond her. The Society is instituting reforms for the serfs that work our plantations, thanks in part to this mare’s generosity and compassion.” Her expression turned firm. “I saw none of that in Cognitum, the ‘Blackjack’ who came to us from the Core. In her was a mare who sees us all as her servants. For that, and for personal kindnesses rendered to me and my family, I stand with this mare.”

Paladin Stronghoof was silent for a moment, then spoke in his deep, sonorous voice. “I know the Steel Rangers do not possess a beloved status with most of you. For far too long we hid, safe within our bunkers, protected by technology we denied to others.” He lifted his head, his blue eyes hard. “We’ve often been met with hatred and resentment, and until recently, it has been deserved. We came to this place to restore a weapon we had no right to use. And when we were broken, by her hooves, no less, it was this glorious mare who gave us a new chance at building a future here!” He rose to his hindlegs, the light making his eyes shine and sparkles appear about his shoulders. “Never before have the Steel Rangers encountered such selfless generosity! It is a testament to—”

Triage's magic surrounded the single lock of gold atop the massive unicorn's head and yanked him back down to all fours. "Yeah. We get it. Enough of that," she said sourly, taking a pull off the cigarette. "Point is, we stand behind her. Any of you have a problem with that, say it now."

The crowd murmured back and forth to themselves. I stepped forward. "This isn't an easy place to live. In fact, I'm sure all of you have, at least once, thought how much it sucks to live here. But the Hoof is our home, and that doesn't change no matter how hard it gets. We might all be different. Different people. Different values. Different dreams. But to all of us, this place is home, and all of us are family." I turned and saw P-21 beaming on the edge of the stage. I looked back. "And whether you love your family or not, you stand by them no matter what! So that together, we all become stronger. So that together we rise up, with no one being left behind. Together we rise! Hoofington rises!"

Somepony began to stomp their hooves. Then another. A sand dog began to clap. Some more let out cheers. And then it was like a dam broke, and the amphitheatre filled with jubilation. "Holy shit, we pulled it off," Triage muttered, barely in hearing range. "How about that?" The six on stage began to shift around, murmuring to each other.

As the crowd continued to go nuts, I heard a mare say quietly, "Mother would be so happy right now." I blinked over at Glory, who had come onto the stage with P-21, Scotch Tape, Velvet Remedy, and Homage. "You did it," she almost whispered. "You brought the Hoof together."

I stared at the cheering crowd. Ganger and Society, Collegiate and Steel Ranger, ghouls and griffins, and even sand dogs and hellhounds. "Not quite. I'm missing the zebras," I answered, barely audible over the ruckus. "But give me some time." I started to speak to her, hoping this was the perfect moment to mend things between us, but she turned and walked away.

"War council now, girl," Big Daddy muttered, then addressed the crowd. "Alright. We're gonna plan the best way to stomp the Brood and the Remnant out of our valley, so just sit tight." Spirits were so high right now that even I thought it was possible.

As we trotted off the other side of the stage, I asked him, "You think we can actually do it?"

He glanced back and snorted. "Right now, hell no. There's at least five hundred Harbingers and probably five times that many Brood. But it never hurts to have high

spirits.”

The war council was taking place in a fancy marble rotunda next to the amphitheatre. A large round stone table occupied the center, and Grace, Triage, Finders Keepers, Paladin Stronghoof, Mayor Windclop, General Storm Chaser, Mare Do Well, and Rover were all crowded around it. There were a number of other ponies sitting further back in their own clumps. Goldenblood, Stygius, and Whisper stood off to the side. Velvet Remedy, Calamity, Homage, and Life Bloom were off on the other side. Sagittarius, Candlewick, Dazzle, Storm Front, and Xanthe formed a third knot. Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape took their seats as a fourth. I tried to ignore the overhead friezes of superior-looking unicorn stallions leading earth pony brigades into battle and slaying dragons. It was easier to pay for art than to do half the things those images presented. Instead, I rushed to Rover and gave the big augmented brute a hug. “I thought she killed you!”

“Ponies...” he said with an exasperated sigh. “Dogs dig, and fast. Riverside gone, but Sand Dogs still here.” He made a face as he tapped my leg. “Why is pony always losing augments?”

“I didn’t lose them this time, they were stolen. And I plan on getting them back!” Along with my baby, I added mentally.

“So, first order of business was going to be making sure you’re actually Blackjack, but I think the bit on stage took care of that,” Big Daddy said as he settled into his seat at the table. “Are any of you folks still not sure on that part?”

Everyone looked around to everyone else for confirmation, and then finally Big Daddy folded his hooves in front of him on the table. “So what’s going on, Blackjack? We’ve all heard bits and pieces, but we should be sure we have the full story.”

I sighed and took a deep breath. “It’s a long story.” Then I recounted everything from the destruction of Shadowbolt Tower to the appearance of the Nightmare Citadel. I tried to be as succinct as I possibly could. The only things that I omitted were details about Horizons and about the Eater of Souls. All they needed to know was that Cognitum wanted to fire up an unimaginably powerful machine that would either make her unstoppable or kill everyone on the planet.

After I gave my brief and answered the questions I could, it was time for Goldenblood. The scarred, sour-faced pony gave a soft-spoken and far more detailed account of where Horizons was, how it worked, when it would align to fire, and how long it would take to impact.

"Now," Calamity drawled from the side, "Maybe I'm missin' somethin' here but... why'd you build such a damned thing in the first place?"

Goldenblood took a deep breath, his mouth working a moment like he was chewing on lemons, and muttered something.

"What was that?" Homage pressed.

"Because Princess Luna was a complete cunt who had to be stopped before she took over the fucking world, okay?!" Whisper snapped from next to him.

"More or less," Goldenblood said with a resigned sigh. "Luna had to be stopped if she, or any of the Ministry Mares, became a tyrant."

"So let me get this straight," Mare Do Well rasped from inside her helmet. "You knew Luna was going completely out of control... and decided that the best thing to do was create a weapon that would *kill everypony in the world?!'*"

Goldenblood threw his hooves in the air. "I made a mistake, okay? I screwed up. I was manipulated. I made a bad choice. I am sorry that it's going to kill everyone in the world! Okay? I'm sorry!"

"Sorry. He makes a superweapon to kill everypony, and he's sorry," Mare Do Well scoffed. "Ugh... whatever. At least that explains all the bits the O.I.A. kept dumping into the M.o.A. and mysteriously withdrawing again. That drove m— er, drove Rainbow Dash nuts," she huffed.

"Well, Rainbow Dash had the least financial acumen of the Ministry Mares. I felt she'd never notice," Goldenblood said with a shrug.

"Give a mare two centuries to figure it out," she muttered. Maybe it was the Flux I'd just drank, but everything seemed so much clearer and sharper to me. The map Stronghoof had made of the valley was laid out on the table, the red like the outer ring of a target. From Withers in the northwest, it formed an almost perfect circular arc along No Pony's Land until it met with the sea on the north east.

"Turning Goldenblood into a punishment piñata wouldn't do anything to stop Cognitum or Horizons," I said as I looked at the council. "And that has to be our focus. She's got a deal with the Legate. He has the Brood attack. The Harbingers kill them. Everyone loves her."

"And Cognitum insists we help or face dire consequences," Paladin Stronghoof said grimly, his eyes narrowing dramatically. "A diabolical plan."

"Except that the Legate's going to turn on her sooner or later. Either as soon as

she leaves for the moon, or when she gets back. When that happens, the Brood is going to stop playing around. They'll slaughter everypony in the valley," I said with a frown. "We're going to have to be ready for it when it comes."

"Can the Brood really keep soaking up these casualties?" Storm Chaser asked. "Our scouts reported them taking severe hits from the Harbinger positions."

"Don't think of blanks as ponies or zebras," Triage explained. "If the bodies are recovered, the flux can be alchemically extracted and shaped into a new blank instantly. Then a cybernetic control system is installed, combat routines implanted, and a new soldier is ready. Really, the only losses in combat so far are those on the Harbinger side."

"The Harbingers have been getting more and more insistent on resupply from the Finders," Keepers said with a snort. "I know they might have the fanciest guns in the Wasteland, but they're using up all the bullets for them."

"Which means that when the Brood stops playing around, they're going to push in hard," I said as I glared at the map.

"But how will we do any better than the Harbingers?" Grace asked as she too stared down at the map. "If the Brood are effectively limitless, there's no way we can win either."

"We can win because we're going to be smarter than 'shoot and then shoot some more'," I said, turning to Triage. "They must be being produced by Trees of Life; if we destroy the trees, no more bottomless reserves, right?"

"Right," she said with a nod, and the glow of her magic lifted a pen to the map. "There're three bunkers producing the Brood. Here, here, and here." She drew three X's, one west of Fluttershy Medical Center, one south of Elysium, and one northeast of Happyhorn. "If we can get some ponies in there and destroy the trees, we'll still have thousands of Brood to contend with but won't have to worry about them getting endless reinforcements."

"That's not going to be easy," General Storm Chaser said as she regarded the three. "Any strike teams going in there would be facing severe odds. Infiltration would be extremely risky, too."

I took in the sight of the ponies gathered and a chill ran up my spine as I realized that whatever we planned here might mean the deaths of friends. "Leave it up to the Zodiacs," Sagittarius said. "We'll take out those bunkers."

"Tough as you guys are, you can't take all three," Dazzle said. "The Reapers can

get in there and tear down a bunker or two. Right, Big Daddy?” The old earth pony chuckled and nodded. “Candle, Storm Front, myself, and a few others should be able to get in and out without too much trouble.”

For a moment, Sagittarius seemed ready to argue, but then he smirked. “Bet we get our bunker first.”

“You’re on,” Candlewick rasped with an eager grin.

Xanthe shifted and fidgeted. “Well... I mean... we’re not Reapers or Zodiacs, but my friends and I should be able to get the third.” Two dozen ponies stared at her, and the stealth suit she wore chirped an ‘uh oh’.

“Who are you again?” Triage asked, arching a brow.

“This is Xanthe,” I said as I trotted to her. “She and her friends took down Red Eye’s forces at Paradise Mall. How are you doing, Xanthe?”

“Cursed,” she replied with a tragic sigh. “But well. I am glad you are still alive, Maiden.” I grinned and gave her a hug, the zebra stiffening under my embrace. “Well... what’s a little more curse?” she muttered.

“These three can get the bunkers,” I said, turning back to the table. “But that’s still going to leave us with a couple thousand Brood to deal with. How can we make that number more manageable?”

Triage took a thoughtful drag of her cigarette. “Well, since the Brood are more like organic robots than anything else, they’ve got to have some kind of control system that lets them act in an organized fashion.”

“Then step two is their command and coordination. How can we disrupt it?” I asked as I looked to the smarter ponies.

“They’ve got to be using some kind of broadcast system. Maybe even the MASEBS,” Homage said as she peered more closely at the map. “I used every backdoor code I know, and I still couldn’t get control of the valley’s towers. Somepony has installed a superuser that’s locked all root privileges systemwide, and I don’t have the time or expertise to remove it.”

“So we can’t shut them all down at once. If we could jam it, though, then instead of facing one monolithic force, we’d be fighting thousands of isolated cyberzebras. Much more doable.” I turned to Mare Do Well. “What do you think?”

“Sabotaging the enemy’s communications? Sure. Fliers could do it. We can’t use the MASEBS anyway; might as well deny them access too. No big,” Mare Do Well

said casually, getting a curious look from Goldenblood. The purple armored mare straightened a bit. "We'd need some help for the fireteams disabling them."

"Why not just destroy them with one of those Raptors?" Whisper asked. "Boom. Gone. Problem solved."

"Aside from the fact that Cognitum might have two Raptors of her own," Storm Chaser said, "if we destroy the towers, they'll go to a network of smaller broadcasters. If we can jam the airwaves with garbage, they won't be able to fall back on secondary broadcast systems. We'll need some designated channels for our own communications, of course."

"What about the Legate himself?" Calamity asked. "Seems like one good shot'll take the head off this here serpent."

"The Legate..." I paused, thinking of how to best put it. "He's immortal. Shooting him in the head won't kill him. I know. I tried it already."

Calamity, Velvet, Homage, and Life Bloom gave sickly smiles before they took in the utterly grim looks on everypony's face. "Y'all are serious? Y'all got folk out here that won't die?"

Big Daddy, Grace, and Triage gave a little shrug. "It happens," Big Daddy said simply. "I've dealt with a few in my time. Rampage was that way."

Calamity sputtered, "This place is damned screwed up!"

A multitude of ponies chuckled, along with myself. "Welcome to Hoofington, Calamity," I said with a smile.

"Even if the Legate is immortal, he's got to have a support staff," Velvet said with a troubled frown. "...Unless he has some kind of direct control like the Goddess did."

"Gee. That's a wonderful thought. While he is immortal, though, I don't think he has that level of control, or will. I was in Unity. The alicorns had their own semi-independence while in the hive. If the Brood are acting as just organic robots, then it's different. So somepony has to be actually supporting the combat troops."

"The Remnant is handling it," Sagittarius said, but then the green unicorn frowned. "Though I can't say they seem to be all that happy about it."

"So we just go behind the lines and wipe out the zebras. Simple," Whisper said with a happy shrug.

"Not so simple," I said firmly, before Velvet Remedy could object. "The Remnant are

victims of the Legate and Cognitum too. We need to get in touch with Lancer and Sekashi. They have to be working on this.” Velvet Remedy seemed very approving of my comment.

“Even if we don’t directly target the personnel, we should try to take out their weapons,” Stronghoof said, pointing to the southeast corner of the map. “They’re bringing weapons from Dawn Bay by the cartload to a depot here, southeast of the Luna Space Center. It appears to be their base of operations.” He glowered at the paper. “Short of using a balefire bomb or megaspell, any attempts to wipe it out will be dearly paid for.”

“Still, an unarmed Brood is a lot less dangerous than an armed one,” Storm Chaser said, then thumped her hoof on the table. “Damn you, Hoarfrost and Afterburner! A few Raptors could take out that depot easily if they didn’t have to deal with enemy aircraft.”

“Since when is anything easy for us?” I asked with a wan smile. “How many Raptors do we have?”

“Three that are combat capable: the *Sleet*, the *Cyclone*, and the *Gale*—ahem, the *Rampage*. They need at least another month of love and care to call them combat ready, though. The *Castelanus*... well...” Storm Chaser shook her head. “She won’t drop out of the sky, but that’s about it.”

“What about attacking Dawn Bay directly?” Grace asked. “Could that draw them off? Is it even possible?”

“If we’d had the HMS *Celestia*, possibly.” Stronghoof blew through his mustache. “Since we don’t...”

“The Legate probably wouldn’t care, even if we did. He’s concerned with this battle. He wants to wipe us all out and call it a day,” I said with a frown.

Storm Chaser regarded the map. “We’re going to have to pull back defensively. Concentrate our vulnerable populations into more easily defended camps and keep a line so the camps don’t get cut off.” She reached down and tapped the map. “Stable 99, Megamart, Miramare, the Halfheart headquarters, Elysium, Scrapyard, Meatlocker, the Nightmare Citadel, and the Burners’ headquarters,” she said, gesturing to each in turn as she moved counter clockwise around the map.

Finders Keepers rubbed his chin. “And if we can’t hold those, we’re going to need somewhere to fall back to.”

“Stable 99 and the Citadel have stable doors to hide behind,” Whisper pointed out.

“Right. So their fighters can fall back and keep fighting.” Big Daddy nodded. “The Ironmare station on the bay is another place we can fall back to. Our arena. The Skyport. The Collegiate. And Chapel.”

Triage sighed and tapped the end of her cigarette on the table as she regarded me coolly. “Any chance we could hold out in the Core? It was made to be a fortress.”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’s a deathtrap. The Enervation will liquefy you in a few seconds. As far as I know, that’s the plan. Push us all the way into the Core and call it a day.”

“Well... it’s going to be brutal. We’re completely surrounded. We’re going to need more fighters. Lots more,” Storm Chaser said as the gray pegasus glowered at the map. “This is shaping up to be an organizational nightmare.”

I sighed, tapping my hoof against the floor, before looking over at Velvet. If we just had LittlePip to help us coordinate things, we might... wait... “Stronghoof, how many broadcasters did they get out of Shadowbolt Tower and take to Stable 99?”

“A few hundred,” he said, and then his eyes alighted. “Ah! You want to distribute them across the hoof so we can organize our defense more effectively.” I grinned and nodded.

Storm Chaser rubbed her chin. “With me organizing our air forces and Big Daddy organizing our ground forces, we might be able to pull it off. I will have to be in charge of course,” she said matter-of-factly. “We can’t squander the air power we have left.”

“You in charge. You’re organizing a few Raptors and flight squads. I’ll be in charge of every gang and soldier in the hoof. I’m the one calling the shots here, missy,” he snapped back.

Stronghoof rose to his hooves. “I am not a neophyte to tactics myself, and I would be less likely to employ the brutal tactics you favor.”

“Right. Till you fall back on the tried and true tactic of jumping in your bunker and closing the door, leaving us all alone,” Triage sneered.

“Enough!” Windclop shouted. “It’s seems simple enough to me that Blackjack will be the one in charge. Right, Blackjack?”

But now I frowned. “No. I can’t. I have to stop Horizons, or all of this is pointless.” I saw the defense we needed most falling apart. Somepony had to manage all of these factions so that we had a chance. My eyes surveyed the present ponies and

stopped on the perfect candidate.

“Him,” I said, pointing a hoof at Goldenblood.

The silence was almost louder than the squabbling it replaced.

“Him?!” Mare Do Well growled. “Blackjack, have you lost your mind? That’s Goldenblood! That’s... you... you want him in charge?”

“I do,” I said simply as I trotted over to stand beside the scarred unicorn.

“Are you insane?” Goldenblood hissed under his breath.

“Jury’s still out,” I said with a strained grin. “Goldenblood here liaised with all the ministries,” I said more loudly, “managing resources to keep Equestria going. He’s a neutral party. He doesn’t favor any one of you over any other. No axes to grind. No reason to stab any backs. You can trust him to get you through this.”

Mare Do Well made choking noises inside her helmet. I fixed a stare on her. “Unless you want to run the defense?”

I doubted a Ministry Mare would fare much better in getting a half dozen factions to cooperate, even if she hadn’t been quite as controversial as Twilight or Rarity. Still, it was a plan B if she insisted on spiking plan A. The purple-power-armored pony sat back, then pointed a hoof at the scarred stallion. “You better not screw up this time, Goldenblood. Fool me once... shame on... just don’t mess it up!”

“Is this an acceptable compromise for everypony?” I asked as I looked from one to the next. “Goldenblood will keep everypony coordinated and working together.” None of them liked it, but all of them could accept it.

“Blackjack, are you sure—” Goldenblood began.

I put my hooves on his shoulders. “I want everypony to live. Can you do that?”

His mouth worked as his yellow eyes stared around. “I... I can try.”

“That’s all I want. Keep them from each other’s throats and keep every one of them alive. Listen to Big Daddy and Storm Chaser on tactics, but above all keep everyone alive. Don’t let anypony mess around with anypony else. No backstabby. No betrayal. None of that.” I took another deep breath. “Can you do that?”

He fidgeted for a few more seconds, closed his eyes as if searching his soul, and then gave a firm nod. “Good,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. Then I grinned. “How’d you like my speech?”

His face was pensive, and he took a few seconds to answer. "It seemed hauntingly familiar. Hoofington rises?" He cocked his eyebrow.

"What? I was terrified. It just seemed like an appropriate theme to rip off," I said with a roll of my eyes.

"Well, I hope your plagiarism won't come back to bite you in the tail. After all, look what it did for me," he said, staring in the direction of the Core. The city was so still and quiet. No lightning. No rain. Silent.

Was it wrong of me to prefer the rain and storm?

I stared down at the map. We needed more fighters. Needed... I furrowed my brow. "Velvet? I need to borrow some alicorns."

(Author's notes: Okay! Another chapter down! This is another chapter that started to grow on me and I had to cut it off. Next chapter should finally bring about other things. We are getting closer to the ending... promise. Really! This chapter was very hard to write and I'm sorry if it upset people. All these chapters are just going to get rougher to the very end as Blackjack works to try and stop Cognitum.

I'd like to give the usual round of thanks: to Kkat for creating FoE; to Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine for editing it; to everyone who put in the time to read it; and to everyone that gives feedback either at Cloudsville or FimFic. It's very appreciated. Also, if anyone wants to help support the story, bits can be donated through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com.

Two other pieces of info! First, some incredibly talented and generous musical artists have made a Project Horizons Club soundtrack. It was supposed to get me to Bronycon this year but, sadly, that's just not in the cards. Still, it is greatly appreciated and can be picked up at: <http://hoofingtonrises.bandcamp.com> for seven dollars.

Secondly, I have a new story project I'm working on though FimFic. <http://www.fimfiction.net/story/204342/broken> accords It's essentially a typically overly complex and horribly written story. If you've enjoyed Horizons, hopefully you will enjoy it too.

Again, thank you.)

(Heartshine: This was a fun and painful chapter to edit. Gotta love romantic situations! Also I twitched so much with Blackjack being 'glazed.' That stuff is hell to get out of your hair. . .)

(Bronode: If anyone lost their lunches this chapter, that's my fault. I pushed for most of the drippy descriptions. I'm not sorry.)

(swicked: I enjoy working on these things way too much. And the 'champ' has finally been unseated! Long live our sexy blue demigod of love and his many-horned crown of pre-lubricated, vibrating appendages!)

(Hinds: So... I think that the chapter lives up to its number. There's a lot of good non-sex-related

stuff in it too, of course (I'm interested to hear if anyone has thoughts on Blackjack's speech; there's a lot going on there), but. . . yeah. Chapter 69, everyone!)

70. Calm

“Sure, no problem! So long as Horizons doesn’t fall before you can get there! Which I’m sure it won’t!”

Astonishing how quickly I was marginalized once I stepped aside and let everypony else get busy with the actual organization of the fighting. Goldenblood sighed, levitated over a pencil, paper, and clipboard, and started making notes in tiny, neat little scratches as he listened attentively to the numbers of fighters he’d be able to get from the gangs, the newcomers, and the various mercenary groups. I paid attention to the lowest numbers and made my own mental notes. I could make notes too, though mine tended to be in crayon.

There really wasn’t anything else for me to do. Smarter, better-trained ponies were on the job. All that remained for me was to maximize our chances, get what I needed, and focus on finishing off Cognitum and stopping Horizons from killing us all. I found myself smiling as if a great burden had been lifted from my back. Just like that, the important ponies took it from me and I was left almost forgotten.

The Reapers, the Zodiacs, and Xanthe were talking shop about which bunkers each would hit, what they’d need, and who they would take... and making bets on who would blow theirs up first. Even as I watched, ripples of activity spread out from the rotunda as orders were given and dispatched. The only thing omitted was the talk of who would die in the process. It just wasn’t discussed.

“Well, if there’s nothing else for me to do here,” I said as I walked towards Velvet, Calamity, Homage, Life Bloom, and Ditzzy Doo. P-21 trotted at my side, concern etched on his face. “I could use some help, if you’re free.”

“Well, I got to admit, I was getting a little bored of the vacation,” Calamity drawled casually. Velvet shot him a dirty look. “Wut? Come on, Velvet. Even you got to admit it’s funner getting mixed up in a good fight.”

“No fight is good,” Velvet countered crossly, but then she sighed and rolled her eyes a little. “Still, if we work fast, we should be able to save as many lives as possible.”

“I’ve sat back and watched long enough,” Homage said with a little nod. “It’s time to get back in the battle saddle again.”

“That horn for show then?” Calamity teased, and Homage stuck her tongue out at

him.

Life Bloom shook his head, but his easy smile faded when he turned to regard me. “One moment of your time, Blackjack?” I blinked, then nodded. We trotted a little ways to the side, and the white unicorn stallion looked at me evenly. “Blackjack, I have a message for you from the Twilight Society. I wasn’t sure when was a good time to give it to you, but it seems like now is better than never.”

“Okay. What is it?” I asked with a concerned frown.

“They’re watching events out east closely, and if they have to, they will act,” he said gravely.

“...Okay.” I blinked in bafflement. “Well, by all means. Let them. I’ll take all the acting I can get right now.”

“You don’t understand,” he shook his head. “When I say act, I don’t mean against your enemy. I mean against the Hoof. They’ll fire up Celestia One and burn anything that looks hostile to slag. The Core. The Brood. Your forces. With how complicated things are here, telling friends from enemies is too much trouble and too much of a risk compared to shooting everything that moves. We won against Red Eye and the Enclave, and now they’re... concerned... about the events out here and losing them everything they’ve gained.”

“Can Celestia One obliterate an enormous moonstone boulder falling from space?” I asked back. When he balked, I gave a shaky smile. “No, really, can it? Because if it can, then they are more than welcome to fire away, and best of luck to them. I’ll take all the firepower I can get right now.” He chewed on that, and I added, “Oh, and you might want to let them know that if they do attack the Hoof, they’ll incinerate not just the city but Twilight’s descendant as well. If that still matters to them, that is.”

“It does, and I’m just passing on the message. There are a lot of eyes on the Hoof right now. Just be aware of that,” Life Bloom told me. Then he gave a half smile. “So, what next?”

There was something positively surreal about a bony-winged ghoulish pegasus being able to fly at all. That thought was one tiny voice amidst the rest of my mind screaming about splatting against the ground below as Ditzzy carried us through the sky in her wagon, *Absolutely Everything Too*. Proving herself yet again to be an honorary Finder, Ditzzy had produced both a PipBuck and a broadcaster at my first sarcastic

quip. The grin on her face put a smile on everypony else's.

With Unity broken, being in the Hoof was merely unpleasant rather than intolerable for the alicorns. I'd originally thought of using them to teleport everywhere I needed to go. However, the fact that I had no clue where I *specifically* needed to go killed that plan pretty quickly. Apparently pointing at a map and saying 'about here' wasn't exact enough for magically winking across the land when none of the teleporters had even so much as glimpsed 'about here' before. Fortunately, Ditzzy had been generous enough to give us all a ride instead. One purple alicorn had insisted on accompanying us, too, to 'keep us safe', though I'd gotten the impression that she was really only there for Velvet.

The radio was chaos. Pon3's channel might have been down, but there were other operators springing up. The strongest signal was 'Unity radio', which involved the Harbingers urging everypony to join 'the real Security' to pull the Hoof together, or else. The counterpoint to this was Homage's 'Freedom Radio', which consisted of a PipBuck, a broadcaster, and a rather startling selection of music she'd squirreled away on the thing before leaving Tenpony to escape the Enclave. As we flew over the Hoof, a dozen more different stations popped up, each with a range of only about a mile.

One was saying I was a fake. One saying everything was a fake and kill everyone. One sounding like a colt spouting as many obscenities as possible. Quite a few were ripped right out of LittlePip's memoir... really, she couldn't have edited that out? I wasn't sure this kid knew what a clit was... The rest, though, were urging ponies to follow their leaders and get ready for the Battle of the Hoof. "Is that a good sign?" I asked Homage.

"I think so. After Fillydelphia, the Everfree, and the battle in the skies, people have started seeing the value of coming together. The old way of tiny settlements and raider bands scattered everywhere just doesn't work anymore," she said with a smile. She stared off to the west. "I wish she could be here. I wish I could have done this with her at least once."

I sighed, putting a hoof on her shoulder. "I wish she could have been too. It was fun working with her."

"I'm just afraid for her. She's going to live a lot longer than the rest of us. In the S.P.P. hub, with Celestia's soul powering the shield, she might even survive Horizons. I don't like thinking of her all alone," Homage said with a shiver. "I worry about her happiness... her health... even her sanity. How long can somepony stay alone

watching without losing their mind?”

Well, Goldenblood, Celestia, and Spike seemed to have managed it well enough. “And I can’t imagine Celestia wants to be trapped in there forever either,” I said as I looked towards the Core. “That’s not life.” I shook my head. “Well, cyberponies and blanks live a long time too. So if I live through this and I’m still kicking around, I’ll make sure to pop in from time to time and bug her. Have some therapeutic sex. In the name of mental health, of course.”

She laughed at that, so I counted it as another small win. “Do you really expect to survive this?” she asked, her mirth melting away to leave that horrible sad smile I knew so well. “I mean, I know you’ve died. . . twice? Or has it been more?”

“I’ve lost track,” I said with a grin. Gazing out towards the Skyport, I could see the remains of Thunderhead on the ground. It was half a torus now and looked as if what remained had been gutted and burned by battle. The city in the clouds was acting as a wall, shielding the city from the Brood. . . but not the Core. “I’m just no good at dying, Homage. So I figure, why not? I’ll live through this, stop Cogs and the Legate, prevent Horizons from destroying the world, raise my baby with P-21, and try to have a few more—” *Ugh, sterile body, remember, numbskull?* “Or adoption... adoption’s good. I really want lots of babies,” I said with a grin. “Help out Chapel and the Hoof in general. Patch things up with Glory and Rampage. Make life better. See tomorrow.”

“I hope you get all that,” Homage said as she looked out at the clouds as we flew east.

I could see the black castle that had been Black Pony Mountain blocking my view of the Core itself. Down below us was the zebra army. They marched out of the bunker, Brood zebras, Brood zebras with cyberwings. . . And then there were the cyber unicorn zonies. Even after death, Silver Stripe had achieved a kind of immortality. There was no way to approach that during the day, especially for me. I was a shooty shooty kind of pony.

Besides, my business wasn’t with them. My business was far to the east, farther than I’d ever gone before.

I trotted up the valley, away from the Core, the others following behind me. The loose scree and ancient coal sands made for treacherous footing, more so in the fading light. It was starting to get late. Tomorrow, I’d have to catch Cognitum at the

Space Center before she left for the moon. I could feel time slipping away from me. Time. Time.

This was a place that looked as if it'd been skipped by time. Long ago, Equestria had had a technological boom founded on coal. They'd stripped all of their own deposits, then traded with the zebras when the supply ran out. A good arrangement, so long as the trade wasn't interrupted; the rest of the Wasteland, of course, was the legacy of what had happened when it was. All around me here... this was the legacy of what had happened before the trade began. This was a sacrificed land. Draglines perched on the edges of mountaintops ripped flat. Valleys were filled and beaten level with toxic tailings. Rusty rail lines drew over the landscape like the track lines of an addict unable to sate their hunger. Everywhere I turned my eyes were the shells of mills, their smokestacks jutting towards the gray skies. Power lines snaked this way and that eastwards towards the rest of Equestria. It only made sense. If you were going to pollute one area anyway, why not concentrate it to spare others? The ponies who didn't live here probably considered it a fine system.

I glanced over at Glory, trying to catch her eyes. She simply trotted on. I peeked at P-21, feeling conflicted... there had to be some way to fix things with us. Or should I even try?

The jingling tune of a banjo floated like a ghost through the valley, the twangy music carrying through the quiet, scarred landscape as if travelling through time. From off in another direction came another banjo with an answering tune. My mane crawled at the creepy yet definitely effective form of signaling. Red bars danced everywhere in my E.F.S., but I could hear the skittering of scavenging radroaches in the thorny underbrush.

"I just want to talk to Big Momma," I shouted out at the desolation. Mist collected on the edges of broken mountaintops. My voice echoed off the rusting mining lifts and slag heaps. I felt a tremble underhoof and imagined ponies digging deeper and deeper into the earth, no matter how dangerous it became. "I gave back your son's rifle!" I yelled.

The banjos played again, a faint variation of the tune. Then another exchange. It'd be pleasant were it not for the niggling feeling that there were a dozen gun sights trained on my skull as the plinking notes echoed through the valley. Finally, the music stopped, and a blue filly in a dirty and stained sundress stepped out from behind a rusting tractor. "Momma don't want you up here no more. This is our land."

I looked around at all the waste and devastation. I could only assume she could

hear me. "There's going to be a fight, Big Momma. A nasty fight for the Hoof. We need your help."

"Told you Momma don't want you up here no more," the blue earth filly said with a nod of her head towards the way we'd come. "Now git." Scotch Tape glowered at the other filly.

I took a step towards the filly, and there was a crack. The ground in front of me kicked up dust from a bullet, stopping me short. I hissed softly through my teeth. "I know you want to be left alone!" I shouted, my voice echoing across the valley. "I can respect that. But now is the time we need you! All of you. There's going to be a battle, and if you don't join, we're going to lose."

"Yer a stupid pony, you know that," the filly drawled.

"Yeah, well you're a jerk!" Scotch Tape snapped back.

"Scotch," P-21 said in admonishing tone that fell on deaf ears.

"Don't y'all call me names!" the blue filly shouted. "I'll sic my big sis on you!"

"Well, I don't need a big sister; I'll kick your flank all by myself!" Scotch Tape boasted.

"No pony kicks my flank!" the other filly shrieked, charging forward. Scotch Tape raced to meet her, and I was too shocked to levitate her away before the two were rolling in the dirt, biting and kicking.

"Baby Blue!" a mare snapped loudly, stepping out from between two boulders, Taurus's rifle at her side. Bluebelle narrowed her eyes at the two muddy fillies. "Y'all were supposed ta tell 'em ta scoot."

"She started it!" Baby Blue whined, pointing a mucky hoof at Scotch Tape. "She called me a jerk!"

"Well, you called Blackjack stupid!" Scotch Tape snapped as P-21 trotted over, grabbed her by the scruff of her stable barding, and pulled her away.

"But I didn't call you stupid, stupid!" Baby Blue yelled back.

"That's it!" Scotch Tape squealed, pulling herself free of P-21's bite and jumping back on the other filly. I stared at Bluebelle from across the scrabbling girls and stepped around them as Velvet and P-21 tried to separate the two without being beamed by a flying hoof. The alicorn watched with an expression of disdain on her face.

I sighed and shook my head. "I noticed there weren't many Highlanders at the meeting," I said to Blue Belle.

"Big Momma's stayin' out of this scrap. It's too big. Too dangerous. We're pullin' all our people back into the mines," Bluebelle informed me.

"You can't stay out of this, Bluebelle. The Hoof needs the Highlanders."

"Mebbe, but we don't need the Hoof," she replied stubbornly. The powerfully built blue earth pony crossed her legs. "We don't need magic or pegasi or robots or nothing. We take care of our own. Piss on the rest of you."

"You might not need the Hoof now, but you will," I said evenly. "There's a storm coming, and if we don't stand against it together, it's going to blow us away."

"Sez you," she countered with a scowl. "What has that pit done but taken our kin from us?"

"Nothing. But if Cognitum or the Legate win the battle tomorrow, how long do you think it'll be before you're next? They won't leave you alone. They can't," I said firmly.

"We got hundreds o' fighters. We'll manage," she said with a worried frown.

"They have thousands." I left out the detail that it was an infinite thousands on top of that. "You've been watching the bunker, I assume. That's one of several. And they don't have children or homes or families. They don't care about their wounded or dead. The only thing they care about is wiping their enemies out." I took a deep breath. "We need your help."

"We don't need your war. Them Brood wanna fight us? Fine. Ain't like we never been outnumbered 'fore. We got holes inside holes we can fall back to. Supplies that'll last us a good long while too."

"So that's how you want to write your epitaph? 'We ran away and hid in a hole while others who needed us fought and died'?" I asked, trying to keep my temper even. "Two hundred years ago, Equestria took this land from you and used it, and you. They did your ancestors wrong, and I'm sorry about that. But I'm not them. I'm not taking it from you. I'm not telling you that you have to come. I'm asking for help. Begging for it, in fact." I dropped to my haunches. "Please. We need the Highlanders. Every one you can spare. When the attack comes, we have to hit them from both sides to have a chance."

Bluebelle actually flushed and backed away a little. "I... look, it ain't up to me. Big Momma said she'd never help the Hoof ever again." The mare then paused and

blinked. "But... there might be one thing that could do it."

One thing? "What is it? Anything!" I said with a smile as I rose.

"She might do it if Big Daddy asked her for help," she said slowly, as if the big blue mare was unsure. "But he'd have ta ask her *real* nice."

"He will. I'm sure of it!" I said with a grin.

Bluebelle seemed pretty skeptical. "Well, we'll see. Big Momma's always listenin' on the radio. If he asks, she might come. Dunno. Maybe." She turned and trotted away. "Come on, Baby Blue. That's enough playin'."

The two fillies halted their battle to the death, and the blue one extracted herself and trotted away. She paused and whirled, narrowing her eyes. "Next time I won't be so nice, fat head."

"You better not be, cause I'm gonna kick yer hind end halfway ta Manehattan!" Scotch replied. Baby Blue stuck her tongue out at Scotch Tape, then trotted away with Bluebelle. Scotch Tape glared after the filly, then realized we were all staring at her. "What?"

"What?" Velvet Remedy asked in shock. "What do you mean 'what'? What was that all about?!"

Scotch Tape picked herself out of the mud and trotted in the opposite direction. "Ain't every day a filly meets her arch nemeswaterver-ya-call-it. I'll thump her good next time." Velvet stared after the filly, her mouth working silently in baffled shock.

"It's simple, Velvet," Scotch Tape said simply and with a prim nod. Velvet had finally regained the ability to ask about the fight after we got airborne again. "See, the second she insulted Blackjack, I knew we were going to be enemies forever."

"But you just met her! Why did you fight her? It doesn't make any sense!" Velvet Remedy lamented. "You could have told her not to say those things. Been the bigger pony!"

Scotch Tape looked at her flatly. "You never had a nem-er..." She glanced at P-21.

"Nemesis," he supplied.

"Right! Them nemesis things growing up, did you?" Scotch Tape asked.

Velvet blinked, taken aback for a moment. "Of course not! Everypony in Stable Two loved me!" We all just stared at her and sighed. "What?" she asked with a baffled frown.

Scotch sighed in return and shook her head. "Blackjack?"

"Daisy," I said with a smile. "Might not have realized it at the time, but yeah. Total nemesis."

"My sister, Dusk," Glory chipped in with a smile.

"Just your sister? I'll raise ya all o' my brothers plus my dad," Calamity said with a chuckle.

"Calamity! Not you too!" Velvet lamented.

"Wut? Just a good old colt grudge match."

Ditzy turned her head and showed on her chalkboard, 'Pinkie on a muffin binge.'

"Diamond Tiara. . ." the alicorn murmured softly. "That filly had serious flank issues."

"The Overmare," P-21 said with a sad smile. I put my hoof on his shoulder, glad he hadn't said 'all of Stable 99'.

"My father," Life Bloom said casually. "He didn't approve of my preference for stallions." Well now, didn't that make P-21's eyebrow raise speculatively.

Now, suddenly, all eyes were on Homage, and Velvet Remedy said a touch crossly, "Oh, I suppose you had a childhood nemesis too?"

"No," Homage said quietly. Velvet Remedy smiled in triumph before Homage continued, "I would have loved to have had one, though."

"Homage! Nemesis! Hate! Wastelands! Bad! Want? Why!?" Velvet Remedy sputtered.

"I reckon that's the first time anypony made Velvet skip," Calamity said, giving the fuming unicorn a little nudge.

"Because it would have meant I wasn't alone," Homage said quietly, looking out into the growing twilight. "I spent most of my fillyhood on my own picking through Manehattan, just trying to stay alive. A nemesis might not like me, but at least they would have cared about me, if only as a target. Feral ghouls and raiders. . . bloatsprites and bloodwings. . . I was just another meal to them, another victim, another. . . toy. Being the subject of somepony's disdain would have been a step up from being nopony at all."

She gave a smile to Life Bloom and went on, "Fortunately, I made some friends. And then met LittlePip, who I think was just as familiar with loneliness as I was."

"As I recall, you robbed Joke and me," Life Bloom said casually. "Took us for every cap we had and left us in just our hide for the bloodwings."

"Yeah. So you two followed me for three days begging for your stuff back. Finally I returned it just to keep your whining from giving us away," Homage replied with a small grin. "I guess I was your nemesis for a little while, then."

I grinned at Homage. "So you were a bad mare back then?"

She blinked, then gave a sly look to the west. "I'm even worse in other ways now, but I was a survivor and a scavenger. . . just two steps above an animal, really, and one above a raider. It was Jokeblue always trying to cheer me up and Life Bloom with his endless optimism and smart pony talk that made me better. Eventually, we had a dream of getting into Tenpony. An impossible dream for three Wastelanders, but it was a start." Trying to imagine a serious and brooding Homage was tough to do.

"Of course," Life Bloom added sourly, "it would have helped if we'd known it was impossible from the start. Tenpony says that if you gather a hundred thousand caps, you can join their community. That's horseapples. They're after 'civilized' ponies who are 'interesting' and 'valuable'. Not just thrifty wastelanders."

"Then DJ Pon3 took me in, and just like that I became civilized, interesting, and valuable. Imagine that." Homage shook her head. "I called them on their double standard so often they finally honored it. . . not that many could reach that amount of caps anyway, but still. . ." She sighed, pensively, "Too late for Jokeblue. . ."

"What happened to her?" Scotch Tape asked in a worried voice, then glanced around and lowered her eyes. "Nevermind. I don't wanna know."

Homage smiled wistfully as she stared off into the night. "That's the reason I want the Wasteland ended. So that nopony will have to go through what we did, and the biggest worry a pony would have is a grudge match with another young pony." That killed the mood for further silly arguments.

We were making our way south, giving the Luna Space Center a wide berth. Looking to the southeast, I could see the massive buildings and the four Raptors hanging over them. I'd guessed that Hoarfrost and Afterburner had gotten some more help on their side. Did they know Cognitum's full plan, or were they just signing up with the stronger pony? Below us, I could see a trail of activity stretching from the

mounds of refuse at Scrapyard to the long L-shaped building I guessed was Paradise Mall. Sitting directly between the Luna Space Center and the rest of the Core, it looked like Big Daddy was going to be turning it into a major fortification. At least some good would come from it.

I looked at all these ponies and swallowed. A battle was coming. It was inevitable. I wasn't scared for myself; I'd lasted this long and hadn't died yet... well, stayed dead... but I didn't like that so many others were in harm's way now. I was the kind of idiot who would take bullets, but I couldn't take them all. And while I was sure of myself in a fight, what about everypony else? I stared at my friends, new and old, and felt a growing anxiety inside me. Worse, I could tell everypony else was probably thinking similar thoughts. Calamity and Velvet sat a little closer together in the back of the crowded wagon. P-21 put a hoof around Scotch Tape. Glory sat on the opposite end of the seat from me, but I caught her glancing toward me.

I opened my mouth, wanting to say... well, I didn't know. Something. Anything! But that sad smile appeared in the corner of her mouth, she turned her purple eyes to the sunset, and my words shriveled in my mouth.

"Are you sure about this?" P-21 asked as he frowned down at me from the wagon.

"Yeah. I'm sure. If all of you are down here... yeah. I need them to know it's me," I said with a half-smile as I looked around the blasted plains.

"I... some of us should come with you, Blackjack," Velvet began. "I've advocated for—"

I shook my head. "It has to be me."

"And if they decide to kill you anyway?" P-21 asked with another frown.

"Well, keep the cart still and hope I can teleport back to it faster than they can grab me," I answered with a toss of my mane. There wasn't much to say beyond that. Slowly, Ditzzy hefted the cart back up into the sky, and I surveyed my surroundings. The blasted landscape appeared to be nothing more than an arid desert at first glance. Then little things started to stand out, like the fact that many of these rocks resembled melted glass. That others were arranged in the shapes of charred foundations. And who could ignore the steady *click-click-click* of radiation?

Oh. And the nearly solid band of red surrounding me in every direction.

I walked slowly through the irradiated blight, knowing that they were following me. I kept my horn illuminated, ready to wink out. To the north of me, on the edge of my vision, I could barely make out the lights of Grimhoof Army Base. I should have realized that the Remnant was there for more than just the missiles. The bunker housing their tree of life was practically right underneath it. It'd probably been built into the superstructure of the base as another line item by zebra sympathizers. And I'd helped them to secure it. . .

I found a hole in the irradiated landscape. All I could hope was that a combination of interest in the novelty and suspicion of a trick was keeping them from tearing my head off. But with a naked, unarmed unicorn dropped in the middle of their territory, it was only a matter of time before they acted. I crouched at the edge of the hole but didn't shine my light in. "I came here to talk."

No answer from the hole. None but the steady ticking of my PipBuck. "A few months ago, one of your kind came to ask my kind for help with the Enclave and their control helmets. Gnarr, I think his name was," I said as I felt the ground vibrate a moment. "Now I'm back to ask you for help."

Nothing. I could imagine ears twitching in the dark. "Tomorrow, the Brood that drove you out of Grimhoof is going to attack Hoofington. They outnumber us several times over. They'll probably kill all of us in a few hours. A day at the most." I closed my eyes. "I know your kind and mine don't have a good history of helping each other out. I know a lot of you want to kill me just for being here. But I want you to know that right now, we need you. We need your people. I know that most folks see you as monsters. I know you've suffered. I know what it means to suffer. I know you're more than they think you are."

"I can't offer you anything for helping us. I really can't think of anything we can give you that you don't already have. The only thing I can say is you'll have our respect. I don't know if that means anything to you, but you'll have it," I said as I rose. I had no idea if they were listening. No idea if they cared. For all I knew, they were laughing at our impending slaughter.

I took one long look back at the hole and then teleported up to the wagon. Time would tell if they would come or not.

The return to Star House was a solemn one. No debates or discussions about childhood rivals. Everypony knew that in a few hours, we'd hit the space center. I'd

get my body back. . . I had plans for teleporting in and dropping a spark grenade covered in Wonderglue on her back and hoping that'd do it. . . but there was no guarantee. And once Cognitum was down, or worse, gone, the Legate would stop pretending to fight and tear the Harbingers to pieces. And there was a very good. . . very *real* chance that one of my friends...

Losing Lacunae had hurt, but it was a death I could handle. She'd chosen it in order to save others. Painful as it was, I could rationalize and understand it. But I remembered reading about Steelhooves's abrupt demise. What if something like that happened to Glory? P-21? Scotch Tape? Boo? We'd been at risk before, but I'd always been able to throw myself to the front practically screaming 'shoot me first'. And they had. And I'd been tough enough or lucky enough to survive it.

Now?

"Cap for your thoughts?" P-21 asked as he held his dozing daughter in his forelegs.

"Just. . . nervous," I confessed. "I'm thinking about this too much. We should just go straight to the space center and go for it!"

"Sure. The eight of us versus a small army of Harbingers and Brood, plus your old body and the Legate. Why not?" he said, so straightforwardly that I immediately flushed.

"I'm serious," I said, running a hoof nervously through my mane. "The more I think about it. . ."

"So am I. I haven't stopped thinking about it. So let's go," he said with that casual smile. It actually turned teasing after a few seconds. "Let me guess. You realize why we shouldn't?"

I groaned, leaning over and burying my face in his shoulder. "Maturity sucks. When did I get to be so old and worried about consequences and plans and stuff?"

"I think it was when we lost Lacunae," he replied calmly. "I know for me it was when I almost got Scotch Tape killed. After that. . ." He shook his head. "None of us are who we were anymore, Blackjack. The stupid but kindhearted security mare. . . the bitter and resentful breeder. . . the lonely, orphaned filly. . . even the naive pegasus scientist," he added, regarding Glory grudgingly and getting a thankful smile in return. "Knowing you. . . being with you. . . has helped make us better, Blackjack. Better ponies. Better people."

"I didn't do anything," I muttered, embarrassed.

He shook his head. "More than you realize," he said with a kind smile.

Ditzy kicked the cart, rousing us, and then pointed ahead with a scarred-up undead hoof. We peered forward into the open land around Chapel and. . .

That was a lot of people.

I mean, at the amphitheatre there'd been a lot of people, more than I'd ever seen together in the Wasteland before. But now there were dozens of fires all around the small community. The people around them milled about like a kicked-up radroach nest. I hadn't thought that there were that many ponies in all the Wasteland, let alone the Hoof. As Ditzy set us down on the roof of the post office, I gaped at the sight of them all. Most of them appeared to be scavengers, but I also saw clumps of families. I'd always kind of imagined the Wasteland as just raiders, bandits, scavengers, punctuated with a few normal people just trying to survive. The reverse was true. And war had finally brought them together.

"Crap. I didn't expect so many to come so fast," Scotch Tape muttered. "I got to get out there and make sure we've got water, food, and some decent latrines going. With the rain stopped, water's going to quickly become an issue, and we don't want it getting contaminated because someone's pissing upstream," she said as she scrambled down the stairs into the building. We quickly followed her down.

"How are things?" I asked as I spotted Charity, Bottlecap, and Keeper amidst so many boxes it was hard to move through the post office.

"Could be better," Charity muttered as she scowled at a clipboard. "We need to charge these Talons an extra ten percent for bullets. They got the caps to cover it, and I think some of those featherbrains are 'overstocking'," Charity said to a small purple unicorn filly, who saluted and ran off quickly through the stacks. Charity shuffled another clipboard to the front. "Make sure those Society assholes don't try and stiff us more than five caps per pound of produce. They got it in spades and if things pan out, we're not feeding people past two days," she said to a red earth pony colt who followed the unicorn out.

"You're charging people for ammunition and food?" Velvet Remedy said, aghast. "At a time like this?"

Charity didn't look up from her boards. "Yep," she said in a level tone that made me stand back and smile.

"So you're making a profit off this crisis," Velvet Remedy said in angry, accusatory tones. Charity didn't answer, but I spotted the vein pulsing in the filly's temple. "How

could you? Those ponies are scared and helpless, and you're charging them for what they need."

Charity slapped the board down flat on the table. "Look! There're fifteen hundred refugees out that way. I didn't ask them to come here, but here they are. So we're taking care of them. Do you know what happens when you say the word 'free' to somepony scared and helpless? They get stupid. They get greedy. They load up on as much as they can carry, nevermind most of it will spoil before they can eat it, and then they get killed by the equally stupid, greedy pony who figures out that there's not going to be enough for them, so better kill them and take what they can. And since everypony who happens to be a merchant knows this, the ones that really are out for the profit will be sure to cash in on the one giving away shit.

"Oh, and in addition, most scavengers don't work for free, and we need every bullet, gun, suit of barding, and chem we can get, so I need to bring in some caps to buy it. Otherwise my stock is gone, my caps are gone, and we're all up shit creek. If well-off groups like Talons and heroes like yourself pay more, then I can subsidize the ones who can't. Which I do," Charity snapped, pointing a hoof at Velvet. "One hundred caps for wasting thirty seconds of my time." She thrust a hoof at a large, half-filled jar of caps on the counter; the label read 'Blackjack's Stupid People's Comments Fee'.

"What?!" Velvet stammered, waving her forehooves wildly at the jar. "That's outrageous! You can't. . ."

"Pay the filly, Velvet," I advised.

"Why?" she asked, glaring at the little yellow earth pony.

"Because if you don't, I'm pretty sure you're not buying anything in the Hoof," I answered. I didn't know if Charity could actually swing that, and I really didn't want Velvet to find out the hard way.

Velvet narrowed her gaze, but then opened her saddlebags after a few seconds. "You are a horrible, detestable pony," she almost growled.

"Then you have no problem with me leveling a ten percent surcharge," Charity countered. "Since I'm so horrible keeping everypony fed, armored, and armed to save their lives." She pointed towards the door. "Now, if you're not going to buy anything, there's the door. I got way too much going on to deal with ponies who don't have a clue about basic business."

"Fine! We'd never, ever shop with you in the first—" Velvet began to say when

Homage popped in.

"I really need something decent if we're going to be in a fight. How are you lined up for energy weapons?" Homage asked.

"I'm also gonna need ammo fer Spitfire," Calamity said.

Ditzzy held out a grimy purchase order that had every line filled in.

I trotted up next to the speechless Velvet. "Come on. Let the evil necessity of capitalism commence." I guided her outside.

"That... she... how could... I can't... ugh!" Velvet Remedy stammered, glaring at me and then back to the post office stacked high with stuff. I gave a sympathetic nod as she turned and gestured at the hundreds of ponies camped around Chapel. "That filly is deplorable. I'm going to see if I can't heal some injuries and raise some spirits with a few songs... for free!" she shouted back into the post office.

"Don't care!" Charity called back, the filly sounding almost happy. "Have fun!"

Snorting, Velvet Remedy stalked off into the crowd. I watched her go, marveling. Sometimes you met your fillyhood nemesis a little late.

Left alone, I walked through the crowd. Most didn't notice me in the black operative's armor. Just another Wastelander who'd come to fight for my survival. A few caught on to the Security written upon it. Those that did mostly stared as I passed. Some scowled. Others smiled. I guess it depended on how much pain I'd caused or spared. I'd have liked to think that I saw more frowns than scowls, but I couldn't be sure.

Nothing was certain anymore. Everything was tense and energized. Part of me wanted to hide, become anonymous behind the helmet of the operative barding, but I knew the last thing ponies needed to see was a faceless enemy. So many eyes staring at me. So many lives depending on me. I swallowed again and again, the fear chewing up the back of my throat.

"Walking among the troops, eh Blackjack?" a familiar mare said, and I whirled around and saw the Steel Ranger Crumpets. The buttery yellow brown mare with the freckles wore her armor casually. "Very regal of you. Just need to give you a cloak for proper brooding and I think we can write a play."

"I don't want to be in a play. I just want everyone to live past tomorrow," I said with a sigh.

"I imagine so, girl. Hope I'm there too. Be a bloody nuisance to clean out Sta-

ble 99 only to have the whole world go kablewy,” she said with a mirthless smile. “Stronghoof told me all about Horizons. And the bugger who designed the damned thing is calling the shots? Bloody brilliant.”

“It was the only way to keep everypony together. Or do you think you’d be happy taking orders from Big Daddy?” I asked her. She shrugged, conceding the point.

“Goldenblood will succeed,” a familiar mare said as the throng around us gave way. The purple alicorn glanced at me, then away, rubbing her legs together awkwardly. “Failure would kill him.”

Several snappy retorts died as I stepped towards her and gave her a hug around her neck. “Psalm,” I murmured as she stiffened beneath me. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Okay... is relative. You know that better than anypony,” she said hesitantly, constantly looking around. “How’s the barding fit?”

“Like I was dipped in a vat of badass and wired to a neon sign saying ‘kill this one first’,” I replied. I stared into her mournful purple eyes. The spark of Unity between us was long dead, but I felt as if we were both trying to awkwardly probe each other’s minds so we knew what not to say.

“No,” Psalm murmured, barely audible over the crowd.

“Beg pardon?” I blinked.

“No. I don’t have anything of Lacunae in me.” She dropped her eyes. “I have her memories, but they’re not the same thing. I could never be so strong. So compassionate. I’m sorry.”

I sighed, slumping a little. “That’s okay,” I said, digging into my saddlebags.

“No. I don’t want it back,” she said a moment later, and I froze and withdrew my hooves. “Penance... no. I don’t deserve it.”

“I’m not a sniper,” I told her. “I can never use it like you could. And Calamity already has a supergun.”

But Psalm shook her head again. “I don’t want to be a murderer again,” she whispered. Crumpets sighed, rolling her eyes and looking clearly annoyed. Psalm caught her expression and seemed to shrink into herself. “I know... I was a soldier... but, I shouldn’t have been. That was a mistake... killing for Luna.”

I smiled at her. As much as I knew she could be important in the battle, I couldn’t make her take up a life that had done her so much harm. “I’m sure you’ll find some

way to help.” I stretched up and brushed her mane out of her eyes. “You have a second chance.”

“Thanks to you and LittlePip,” she murmured as she nuzzled me.

I sniffed, rubbing my eyes with a hoof. “Did I make a mistake with Goldenblood?”

Psalm shook her head slowly. “Goldenblood strives for success, and he manipulates people like an artist manipulates pigment on canvas. He will achieve what you want, but you may not like how he does it. Maybe you convinced him to try a better approach. . . I hope so. But he won’t betray you, unless he feels you’ve betrayed yourself and everypony else.”

“We need to get going,” Crumpets broke in. “Some nut with the Harbingers keeps insisting we give him 99 due to eminent domain, and we need to make sure we get the ammo we need. Trading chems and healing potions for it.” At my shocked and baffled expression, she quirked a grin. “What, did you think your stable just recycled organic waste into food? It recycles nearly anything you put into it.”

“I’ll be around,” Psalm murmured. “I can’t. . . be. . . Lacunae. . . but if you need help, I’d like to.”

I stretched up and gave her another hug. “I’d appreciate it. Thank you.” I watched the pair trot towards the post office.

Behind me, a musical note struck me like a shot. A voice rose above the babble of the crowd like a breaking sunrise and silenced the camp. The ponies moved back to give room to Velvet Remedy. No stage. No lights. Not even music, and yet with her voice alone she released a melody that rippled through the massed people like a wave. The song sounded like something Sweetie Belle, but I didn’t recognize it. Within a minute, a red middle aged earth pony mare missing a hind leg bravely joined her, backing her up. I’d read Velvet could have done that herself with her magic, but her singing alone seemed to pull at the crowd. A purple unicorn filly, Sonata, clambered up next to Velvet. Her trilling soprano rang out; she didn’t even seem to know the words, but the three legged mare and the beautiful unicorn mare adjusted to her inexperience.

A glowing smile rested upon her lips as the audience put aside their worries for a moment and stared raptly at her. I spotted a purple earth pony stallion with dirty bandages wrapped around his limbs watching with his mouth hanging down. Here, she gave a little bit of kindness and beauty. It was such that I spotted Charity watching from the door of the post office. The filly twisted her lips sourly but gave a

little nod of acknowledgement.

As much as I'd love to sit and just listen to Velvet's beautiful, impromptu little concert, I tore myself away and made my way towards the bridge to the Core.

Down by the river, I was astonished to find the *Seahorse* tied up to the underside of the bridge. The pilothouse was gone and the deck and cabin roof slightly scorched, but the boat was still seaworthy. The crew were in the midst of hammering planks to the roof. Thrush lay draped across the bow next to the battered gun turret, hat covering her head, a trio of rum bottles collected around her.

"You survived?!" I shouted at the ship.

She jerked upright, scattering bottles every which way as her head turned wildly with her captain's hat still covering her face as it dangled from her horn. "I fully reject the false equivocation of that statement!" she bawled out. "That's unfair profiling of the nautically challenged, and I am offended, sir! Offended!"

"It's me, Thrush," I said as teleported over in front of the inebriated green mare. "Blackjack. Security." I pulled off the helmet and grinned at her.

She pulled the hat off and arched a brow as she eyed me suspiciously. "I've heard that often of late. Some say they are. Some say they aren't. How am I to know this isn't a highly elaborate scheme to confound and disabuse me of my dignity and high character?"

"I... uh..." She'd missed the meeting, it seemed. Then I picked up one of the empty bottles, stuck it on my horn, and grinned at her.

"Well," she said formally. "That changes things." And she pulled the bottle off my horn, looked at the others arranged around her, and lifted up one with a few dregs, downing it.

"How are you still afloat?" I asked. "I saw the *Seahorse* get hit."

She scowled at her crew. "Did not. You saw the *Seahorse almost* get hit." She spat at the city.

"Captain, we nearly got blown out of the water!" a teal mare objected.

"Not even close!"

"It nearly burned the roof off the ship! We were almost cooked in the steam," a red pegasus objected.

"Just a graze," Thrust said, adopting a stoic pose.

"Didn't it vaporize those bottles of Luna's Moonrise Rum, Captain?" a third crewmember asked.

Thrush's bottom lip quivered, and then she grabbed me and sobbed into my shoulder. "It was a disaster! A catastrophe! If we hadn't of turned towards the city at the last moment, I would have lost the last bottle too!"

"You nearly lost your boat, Captain Dodo!" the teal mare yelled back.

The water beside the boat splashed as a pink mare poked her head out. "The bottom is patched. Any more leaks, Seabiscuit?" The teal mare poked her head into a hatch at the front of the boat, then shook her head. "Good," the swimming one said before her eyes turned to me and she broke into a wide grin, waving a fin. "Hey, Blackjack. Wait, you are the real Blackjack, right?"

Thrush levitated a bottle over and stuck it on the end of my horn. She then gestured to me with both her hooves and an arched brow.

"I'm the real Blackjack," I assured her. "It's good to see you, Pisces. Is Capricorn around?"

She shook her head. "Capri's over on the northwest side. There was a barge loaded with munitions that sank there, and she's helping the Finders and Reapers pull out the crates." The pink mare cocked her head. "Finders, Reapers, and Zodiacs working together. That's just. . ."

"Weird. I know," I assured her with a smile.

"No. It's good," she said with a smile. "Brutus is really cute," she flushed a little.

"He's. . . well. . ." I flushed as I remembered my close brush with him. "Shiny. Very shiny."

"Do you even have a port for his ship?" Thrush taunted with a smile.

Pisces went from pink to scarlet. "Yes! I do. Not that it's any of your business!"

I shook my head to refocus off shiny, buff stallions and seapony reproduction. "What are you doing with the *Seahorse*?" I asked Thrush.

"Well, that's quite a question. What to do with the fastest boat on the river, a bit of scorching aside?" Thrush rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"We're running cargo and getting refugees to the Ironmare naval station," the teal mare answered for her. "The Steel Rangers have a ship they're going to bring to try and get ponies clear of the battle. No idea how many trips their ship can make

before the shit hits the props. If we all live through this, we'll have enough caps to rebuild the Seahorse completely."

Well, that was promising. I didn't know how many the Seahorse could move either, but even one was better than nothing. "I'm glad you're not running."

"Thought about it." Thrush frowned. "Honestly, egress would be the smart thing to do. Digression and valor and all that. But this city's kept me here this long. Leaving it just feels. . . eh." She gave a little shrug. "Currents keep bringing me back here."

I thought about the Tokomare and how its Enervation field drew souls to it. These ponies might not be losing their souls, but I thought of the attraction. Maybe it was affecting all of us on a level that we couldn't quite perceive. A kind of soul gravity, pulling us in. I'd returned. So had others. Until this was finished, one way or another, I didn't think I'd ever be able to leave this valley.

"Blackjack?" Pisces asked in worry.

I shook my head. "I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm glad you're okay, Pisces."

"I am too. And I'm glad you're the real one. The other you. . . the armored one. . . really scared me," she admitted, dropping her eyes to the brown water as she tapped her fins together. "I thought she was going to shoot us even after we got that gun for her."

"Gun for her? What gun?" I asked with a worried frown.

"Well, it was something that Steel Rain guy had us look for months ago after the *Celestia* blew up. A really weird gun. We found it a few days ago and delivered it to her. I've never seen a gun like it before, but she had ammo for it and everything."

My body felt cyberponyish once again. "This ammo... was it great big silver bullets?"

"Yeah. You know what it is?" Pisces asked.

"A gun. Folly. I killed a battleship with it," I said absently. "I need to find the jackass that asked for the damned thing to be built in the first place." I had other reasons, too, but if Cognitum had Folly. . . I had a sudden image of a beam obliterating me from a mile or two away. "I'm glad you're both still okay. Stay—"

My words were drowned out by an enormous booming thump coming from the Core. The babble of thousands of ponies died down to a crackle as a great metallic groan rippled over the valley. Slowly, I climbed up the slope to the bridge above us as the thumps were replaced by more softer, quicker thuds and more moans. Deep thuds

sounded somewhere far below. I saw ripples dance in puddles left on the road. More ponies were following me up and on to the bridge.

I stared at the Core and saw that the beam turrets atop the wall were dark. How long had they been off? Slowly, I walked along the bridge towards the open gate. I reached the word 'Mercy' painted across the bridge, balked, and then took a tentative step forward. Another. Another. No beams lanced out at me to render me to ash. Slowly, I continued forward as the groans and moans of metal continued, punctuated by thuds and shivers under my hooves.

I glanced back and saw not a single other pony advancing past the Mercy line. Smart. Any second I expected the beams atop the wall to light up and dust me... but why would they? Cognitum wasn't connected to the Core anymore. The stallion she left behind was dead. Goldenblood wasn't wired in through his pod, so... who was left to turn the guns on? I swallowed as I reached the massive gate.

Ahead, the Core lay still. The green glow radiating from the cracks in the streets had dimmed. Hundreds of tiny robots lay scattered about in motionless heaps like so many unwanted toys. I stepped forward, unable to hear even the faint whisper of Enervation. Only the metallic groans sounded. The thumps. The deep thuds.

Wait. I froze, staring ahead. Did that skyscraper just... move? I stared up at one of the shorter, sixty-story-tall black towers laced with wires and cables. I saw several of the cables go taut, accompanied by a moan of metal and a great thump. The tower swayed, and slowly moved upright. Then it went still. A second thump and other cables off to the side went taut, and the tower shifted ever so slightly in that direction. My eyes followed the hoof-thick cables to immense wheels exposed by torn away siding. I had no idea what those immense motors had been for. Elevators? Power cables feeding directly into the machines gave the city a sharp reek of ozone as the wheels turned to take in the slack, thumped to a halt, strained, and then went slack again.

"Do you—" a stallion rasped from beside me, making me almost jump out of my hooves. Goldenblood looked at me flatly, then at the Core. "Do you get the feeling that something bad is about to happen?"

"You mean something bad isn't *already* happening?" I answered with a grim grin. I looked out at the moaning city. "I've been having that feeling since I first saw this place." Then I blinked and stared at him. "Wait! You're not melting!"

"No. I'm not. The Enervation is gone," he said quietly. "Why do I feel that that's a bad sign too?"

Because if there was no Enervation, no killer robots, and no beams of death, then there was nothing to keep everypony in the Hoof from flooding into the city for protection or loot. “It’s Silverstar Sporting Supplies all over again. Lure everypony in. . . turn the Enervation back on. . . kill us all at once and harvest our souls.” But why? What did the Eater get from pony souls? What did it want?

“I’ll pass on word to seal off the three bridges into the city. Hopefully that will keep everypony out,” he said grimly, tapping buttons on the broadcaster-equipped Pip-Buck he was wearing. He reached over and did something to mine too. “There. Tags of every PipBuck we have. You can listen in with that Perceptitron device.”

I nodded, not taking my eyes off the tower that slowly crept back into a vertical position. “Cognitum has Folly. Any advice on how not to get annihilated?”

“Don’t sit there while she fires it. It does have a ridiculously long fire delay, and only a ten or twelve square foot area of effect. Rather idiotic to use it against anything smaller than a building,” he murmured, also staring at the tormented city.

“What were you going to fire it at?” I asked with a wry smile.

“Tom,” he answered quietly. “I realized something was manipulating me into creating Horizons a short time before the bombs fell. I wasn’t precisely sure what. Pinkie’s warning had. . . shaken me. Deeply. But was it Luna manipulating me? Horse? Twilight Sparkle? I couldn’t be sure of anything anymore. I realized Horizons was a mistake, and so I had Trottenheimer make a weapon that could destroy the moon rock.” He chuckled and shook his head. “I have no idea how he pulled it off. Maybe he’d already been working on something similar...”

Wait. Barring instant vaporization. . . “Could I use Folly to stop Horizons?”

“I don’t see why not. Granted, destroying Tom as it falls would probably cost you the valley. Instead of one immense stone, you’d be showered with thousands of smaller ones. . . but none of them would be caught by the system that would turn them into starmetal or penetrate the mile of stone and interact with the Tokomare directly.”

“Still, it’s a plan B. But what about my body? If she fires it, the Flux...”

“Will start mutating her badly. Multiple shots will accelerate the change, of course.” He closed his eyes. “Folly was my other suicide. Dying destroying my greatest and most terrible creation seemed. . . fitting.”

I stared at him flatly. “No offense, Goldie, but I think a good therapist would have probably helped you out a whole lot more.” I sighed and looked out at the city once more. “If she does fire, and she’s pregnant, how long could she last before the

baby..." I choked. If it was immediate... there wasn't much point to taking my body back alive once she shot Folly.

He stared at me in shock, and then his eyes softened in understanding and he gazed out once more. "I'm not a doctor. I believe the placenta would offer a tiny amount of protection, but no more than a day. Flux is... fickle."

"Right. Right," I muttered. "Just more incentive to get moving and finish this. When do we move on the space port?"

"Tomorrow morning at dawn. Big Daddy and the teams are getting what they need. Mare Do Well has a squad to tap into their control network. Everything is getting staged at Paradise Mall. We'll storm in and hit Cognitum hard before they launch." He sighed. "At least, that's the plan. You do have an idea how to stop her?"

"Spark grenades and Wonderglue. Glory and Homage distract her with distance fire, protected by Velvet and her alicorns. Calamity snipes her floating weapon pods. I try and teleport onto her back. She expects the move and gets really pissed and focuses on me. P-21 sticks a spark grenade on her butt with Wonderglue so she can't teleport out of range or levitate it off." He gave me a funny look, and I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I've been plotting how to take myself out. Sad, huh?" I sighed and went on, "Zap knocks her out. Scotch Tape takes off her legs and wings. Brings her back here. Triage and smart ponies take Cognitum out and put me back in. Take rocket to stop Horizons and deal with Brood or, if too late, you get to use Folly and blow it out of the sky while we run for the Highlanders' mines."

"You'd let me do that?" he said, sounding oddly touched. His broadcaster let out a squawk, somepony requesting confirmation of moving refugees through Burner territory, and he said, "Yes. Survivors from Flotsam. Let them through and don't waste time shaking them down. They're refugees." He took a deep breath. "I'm honored you'd grant me such a death."

"You have issues," I said flatly. "Anyway, once Brood are done, find surrogate for my baby, transfer back into this body for good. Stick the original in your stasis pod to keep it safe. Get Snails to put my soul back together. Then spend many long years being a mommy with P-21 and either patch things up with Glory or make sure she has a mare worthy of a girl like her. Spend the rest of my existence making things better 'till a raider is luckier than me and call it a good life."

"I see a gap in your plan," he said softly.

"I know, but unless I know for sure how Boo thinks of me, I can't really work her into

the equation, now can I?" I asked with a feeble stab at humor.

"Not that," he countered, the voice of reasonable concern.

I shook my head. "Yeah. Getting to Cognitum through the Harbingers, Brood, and Legate. Amadi isn't going to make this easy. He wants her to go." I sighed and rubbed my face. "Maybe Charity has a crate of StealthBucks lying around and we can all just cheat our way through."

"The ones she has are going to the infiltration teams," Goldenblood said with a half-smile.

"Figures. What I need is firepower. Vigilance is great for close-in work, but I need something more on the kinetic killing machine scale." I rolled my eyes with a sheepish smile. "What I really need is a . . . ah, forget it."

"What?" he asked in bafflement.

"It's stupid."

"What is?"

I rolled my eyes again and said with a touch of sarcasm, "You wouldn't happen to know where I can get my hooves on an IF-88 Ironpony, would you?"

He smiled. Of course he smiled. . .

"This is a bad idea, Blackjack," P-21 said as we teleported to the east side of the Miramare Air Station. The alicorns had deposited us outside the base; apparently alicorn fast travel wasn't precise enough to get me into the room I needed. I was glad they'd agreed to transport us, given Velvet was helping out the refugees. Homage and Scotch Tape had stayed behind as well, the former to work with Mare Do Well on how to return control of the MASEBS and the latter to prevent the refugees from spreading disease.

"What's new about that?" Glory asked with a smile.

"Nothing. Just like to be on the record, that's all," he admitted. In every direction were countless red bars. The base was awash in crackling gunfire as dozens of Harbinger defenders attacked the swarm of Brood to the west of the base. I lifted Penance and sighted through the scope, assessing things. Calamity did the same through Spitfire's Thunder. I lingered the crosshairs on the back of a stallion's head

and shivered. No matter what, I'd never be a sniper. Even if these were technically the enemy.

I sighted on several of the combat-armor-clad Harbingers blasting away with mark-spony carbines, assault carbines, and anti-machine rifles. I watched as cybernetic Brood made lazy attacks on the base, standing out in the open and letting themselves get shot to pieces before falling back. Out of sight, I knew their repair and healing talismans were restoring them to full. Repeat ad nauseam. "That is one hell of a turkey shoot," Calamity said flatly. "Barely any fire control at all. Did these idiots just raid an arms storeroom, put on the same outfit, and call themselves an army?"

"Some of them have training, but for the most part, yeah. That's the Harbingers," I replied.

"That's a joke. Sick, sad, deadly joke," Calamity replied.

"Is there a plan?" P-21 asked me with a smile.

I thought about teleporting in, getting the stuff, and getting out again. What if there were guards? They'd probably blast anypony who just teleported in next to them. "Get into the crater, up the pipes, in through the command center, and up into the building. Extraction the same way. Calamity and the alicorns will stay here and provide cover fire if we need to bolt," I said, getting a surprised smile from P-21. "What?"

"Nothing. That's just much more of an actual plan than you normally have," he replied. "I remember when the plan was 'run for our lives'."

"The good old days." I chuckled and then looked at Glory with her wistful smile. "Just the three of us again. Been a while, huh?"

"Yes," she said with a happy sigh.

Together, the three of us waited for a rise in firing, then rushed to the tank lying near the crater. I gave a few seconds' consideration for the bones of the mare I'd seen so long ago. Now they'd been scattered by some reckless looter. The pictures were gone. She only existed as a person in my memory.

No time for that now. We each took some Rad-X, dropped into the crater, and made our way through drainage culverts and up into the base. I didn't think the Harbingers would be using this area. Without power, I recalled how dark, hot, and stuffy it was down here. This time, I was surprised. The utility room the culverts connected to was well-lit, and there were red bars moving around. It looked like the Harbingers had some decent technicians with them.

And guards. One unicorn spotted us coming around a corner, levitated up an assault carbine, and opened her mouth wide. Glory's beam pistol sent a line of oscillating rainbow light into her head. The light spread along her body, turning her into a glowing mass that disappeared in a flash when it reached her hooves. The armor and gun clanged to the floor of the hall. She spat out the pistol, turning it over in her hooves. "What setting was that?"

"Awesome, I think. Or is that Cool?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at a little dial on the side, looking at the various settings.

P-21 sighed and retrieved the combat barding and guns. "You should put this on, Blackjack. That operative barding stands out way too much." I had to agree. Better to fit in.

On mostly silent hooves. . . why couldn't I be all sneaky sneaky like LittlePip?... the three of us prowled through the halls of the command center. We had to hide in the interrogation room to avoid a patrol. I stared at its smashed-out window and the dark stains still covering the walls. I glanced at Glory, shifting over and hugging her as she trembled. So much pain had started here, some of which I contributed to. She gave me a smile and stilled.

As we passed by the command center, I heard a familiar stallion say, "Tell them to stop firing! Stop! Until we get a resupply, I want them to hunker down and only attack if the Brood cross the fence into the base proper. We're going to be fighting them with hooves soon, and I've seen cyberponies in action."

I wanted to stay and listen more, but every second we did increased the chance of detection. Upstairs, the plan was seriously straining. I hadn't expected there to be this many Harbingers inside. The cafeteria was filled with injured Harbingers. Dozens lay on bloody mattresses set out on the floor. Clearly, the Brood were whittling away at the ponies without internal healing talismans.

"You!" a mare snapped at us. "What do you think you're doing?" I whirled to stare at a gaunt gray unicorn with a bloody scalpel on her flank. She seemed familiar. Her eyes stared hard at Glory and P-21. "If you two aren't injured you need to get your gear and get on the roof," she snapped.

"Right. Gear. They just got here," I murmured.

"Hurry up," she snapped, pointing towards the back towards our destination. "Get some barding that's not too bloody and get shooting." And then she returned to casting healing spells. Either she hadn't recognized us, or she had and assumed I

was just another impostor.

Either way, I wasn't going to question my luck. In the barracks were more Harbingers trying to sleep. One rocked back and forth muttering to himself, "Security will save us. Security will save us. Any second." I wanted to reassure him. To let him know I was trying my best. . . but the Security he prayed to couldn't care less if he lived or died.

In the locker room filled with boxes of combat barding, a haggard stallion stared desperately at the three of us. "Reinforcements? Say you're reinforcements!" he begged.

I shared a look with the other two. "We're here to help," I finally said.

"It's been a nightmare. Just a nightmare," he muttered as the earth pony pawed through the barding looking for a complete set. "At first it was a joke. Like that fake Security saying she was the real thing. But the attacks never stopped. They just let us shoot them and fall back. Shoot them some more and fall back. And for every twenty we shoot, they shoot one of ours. Like clockwork."

As he worked, I moved over to the back row of lockers, gesturing for them to keep him occupied. I got to the ones used for the Marauders and tapped the control panel. It flickered to life. Somepony had apparently tried to rip them open, or maybe, from the scorch marks, blast them open. I brought up the locker of Big Macintosh.

Password Clue: Where the heart is.

Carefully I entered in the obvious ones while the old stallion with the armor blathered on about the constant casualties, the gangers refusing to help like they should, and low ammunition. Family. Home. Sweet Apple Acres. Applejack. Applebloom. All failed. Twilight Sparkle. I sighed... if this didn't work... I tried my last one. Maripony.

The locker clicked open. Inside was a large black case with a note on the top. I leaned over and read it. Thought you should have the prototype, Cupcake, since it was made for him. Sadly, anti-machine rifles are more effective against zebra robots and infantry. Might roll out a model for power armor. Hope you can use it to inspire others to follow in his hoof steps. Braeburn.

I cracked open the case and was immediately struck by the smell of gun oil. The twelve gauge barrel was thicker than a riot gun, and about four inches shorter than usual. The full automatic action had a select fire for single, burst, or fully automatic fire. On the lid of the case rested the magazines, two double drums, each capable of

holding fifty twelve gauge rounds and fitted with selector switches allowing different types of ammo to be used. There was also a feeder chain connected to a two-hundred-round ammo drum. The latter could only have been intended for use with a battle saddle.

Inscribed on the barrel was a simple word: 'Ayup'.

"I think you're gonna need more shotgun shells for that thing," Glory said over my shoulder.

The grizzled stallion realized we weren't listening to him ramble on as he held the combat armor out to P-21. "Wait, did you get those lockers in the back open?"

"Um. Nope," I said with a bald-faced lie, trying to hide the gun case behind my back, closing the locker with a hind hoof as carefully as I could.

"Anything there is the property of—" he started to say with a frown. P-21 charged him, pinning him against the racks of armor and glaring into his eyes. "Y'all!" the stallion yelped. "Nine tenths and all that."

"Good," P-21 said, then met my gaze. "What?"

"Nothing," I said as we turned to go, shaking my head. I couldn't fault him. I wanted to trot the heck out of here, but as I looked out, a gray stallion with bars on his helmet was trying to rally more soldiers to get up on the roof and fight back the enemy. There were at least a dozen armed Harbingers in there. Oh, to just teleport out. "Stay close," I told them, and concentrated. I could do this. I could teleport my friends with—

Flash, and I appeared next to Calamity. "Yes, I knew—"

Next thing I knew I was flipping sideways through the air in a whole heap of pain, landing in a heap with my whole body alternating between pain and numb. "Aw horseapples," Calamity said as he rushed up, setting down Spitfire's Thunder and immediately pulling out freshly brewed healing potions. "Why can't folks send me a memo when they're gonna dress up like the bad guys? That too much ta ask?"

I chugged down half a dozen healing potions, thankful for their potency. That rifle hurt! "Don't worry. You're just the latest in a fine tradition." I looked at the hole punched through the ceramic composite plate in my barding, then at my side, then out the opposite side. I gulped down another healing potion for good measure. If Calamity had taken a second to aim rather than shooting in reaction, I'd be dead. "I need some whiskey. Then let's get out of here."

He demonstrated he was the best of ponies by pulling out a half full bottle of amber intoxicant and passing it to me. I wasted no time taking a hearty pull. "I'm sorry about your friends," he murmured, taking off his hat. Then I blinked and realized there were only the two of us and the alicorn here.

I upended the bottle.

My bloodstream charged with healing potions and happy juice, I focused and teleported back where I'd come. The grizzled stallion fell back again. "Gah! What's with the flashing and the popping in and out and..."

"Where are my friends?" I demanded. He blinked at me several times, as if trying to figure out what I was asking. In the cafeteria, the gray doctor was peering at me with a sharp scowl.

"On the roof? Where else? The Brood are picking up the attack! I'd get out of here myself if they wouldn't shoot me for trying!" he said.

"Right. The roof." I trotted out and made my way to the stairs, past the second floor offices into the third floor quarters. Most of them had been broken into and looted long ago. I was depressed to see that Colonel Cupcake's was one of them. There was an injured soldier holding her guts in lying in the hallway. "Roof?" I asked, immediately passing her my last healing potion. She drank it at once and pointed to the end of the hall.

As I walked down, a pink pony in my head immediately began waving a red flag, and I paused, considering one of the closed doors. Then my eyes were drawn to the nameplate, the letters on it obscured by accumulated grime. I reached up and wiped the film off the metal. Sgt. Twist. The door was locked, and I mentally kicked myself... If only I had the time and skill. Friends first, though.

At the end of the hall, a stair continued up and the chatter of bullets became louder. The roof was awash with brass and confused heaps of discarded ammo boxes. Sandbags along the roof's edge afforded some protection from the ground as the Brood continued to press in from the west. The momentum had changed, too. The peek and retreat tactic I'd noticed earlier had transformed into a more steady push. Dozens of augmented zebras were now out in the open, laying down a steady cover fire as they advanced. Fifty ponies in battered combat armor milled about returning fire, some just hopelessly spraying their weapons into the advancing throng.

Now was a time I really would have loved to have Calamity or Psalm with me. I drew out Penance and searched my inventory for armor piercing rounds. Two dozen,

better than nothing. "I need AP ammo," I shouted to the pony next to me, who was firing bullets wildly with a levitated sniper rifle.

"What?" she screamed, staring at me.

"AP! Armor piercing!" I yelled.

"What's that?" she asked, blinking at me in bafflement.

I levitated out three bullets. "Hollow point. Standard jacket. Armor piercing! These! Use these on their heads!" I waved the third at her before loading and shoving out two sandbags, giving myself a firing hole. These weren't real zebras. They were organic killing machines... not ponies. No souls... still, I felt a squirm of unease as I aimed the crosshairs at the nearest zebra.

It took two headshots for me to drop it. Then over to the next. Two shots. The next. Two shots and a reload. I glanced over at the other Harbingers. "Aim!" I screamed at the top of my lungs. "You won't kill these without a headshot. Use spark grenades if you have them!" Still, there was chaos. One stallion seemed to be dumping brass in ammo crates, duct taping them shut, and tossing them at the enemy!

A trio of cyberwinged zebras dove in a wedge straight at me in a strafing run. I levitated as much brass as I could and flung it up at them, ruining their shots and breaking their dive in a moment of confusion. Their programming probably didn't account for this. Nor did it account for me drawing Vigilance and teleporting in a flash onto one's back. I unloaded the magazine into the nearest one, the heavy bullets ripping through wings and hide and sending it crashing to earth. The last in the wing turned and opened fire on the one I rode, and I flashed off my current mount and on to the diving one, switching to Duty and Sacrifice. The old dueling pistols boomed in unison as I blasted it, and then I put the last two bullets in the head of the already-injured last one just in case. I teleported back to the roof, popped open the revolvers, and started reloading; the click of the cylinders closing was accompanied by the thump of a dead cyberzebra hitting the roof behind me.

A dozen Harbingers had stopped fighting to gape at me, the corpse, and the air where I'd been. "What?" I asked in annoyance. "Fire! They won't stop just for that." Galvanized, the fight began to shift. Less panic and more discipline. I moved up and down the line to make it harder for their zebras to hit me as I looked for my friends. I spotted a pegasus firing an anti-machine rifle with no heed for the recoil, the muzzle waving all over the place as she struggled. "You've got to compensate for the recoil! Slow down!" I bellowed at her.

"I'm trying! Energy weapons are easier!" she yelled back at me in annoyance. Then Glory looked up at me, her purple eyes widening in surprise. "About time you got back!"

"Sorry. Teleporting is funny like—"

At that instant, six cyber unicorns flashed in around us, each with a pistol and, of all things, a sword. The six moved at me with terrifying swiftness and sureness; so this was what it was like being on the receiving end of augmentation. I lifted Duty, Sacrifice, and Vigilance and got ready to kiss my ass goodbye.

But Glory was faster. Abandoning the huge rifle, she drew the rainbow blaster and, with the smoothness of S.A.T.S., transformed one into a glowing bright nimbus of light. I gritted my teeth, preparing for pain as I fired the dueling pistols and my magic bullets at a pair. The barrage slammed into them, not fatally, perhaps, but enough to ruin their shots.

But the other three... they rushed in as one, pistol shots sending Harbingers diving for cover as they stabbed at me in unison, their blades precisely aimed to pierce my heart, throat, and eye. I did the only thing I could and jumped away as hard and fast as I could. Unfortunately, the only direction of 'away' was over the sandbags, and I found myself flipping into empty air.

Did I mention I was on the roof of a three story building? With a whole bunch of Brood advancing? Maybe that Wild Pegasus wasn't the best idea...

I tumbled through the air for a few seconds, then teleported back to the roof. I had enough velocity that I slammed down on one of the cyber unicorns with a crunch that was only partially from me. The ones I'd missed wheeled about without the good manners to be marginally impressed, but now the soldiers had gotten over their shock and came to my rescue, mobbing them and joining Glory. I staggered to my hooves as the remaining unicorns were dispatched. "Get back to firing! That was a distraction. Go!" I croaked, waving a hoof to the west. The soldiers rallied, fighting back with more vigor and determination.

Glory knelt beside me. "Have any healing potions?" she asked as she poked my side, making me hiss in pain.

"Used my last on a mare downstairs," I confessed.

"Me too," she answered. "Just take it easy."

I scanned the battlefield and then gave her a sardonic grin. "Sure. I was thinking of taking a little nap. Sounds good. Wake me when it's over." She sighed and shook

her head. "Thanks. I appreciate it." Then I looked over at that crazy pony throwing ammo crates over the edge and shouted at him. "What are you doing?!" My side gave a twinge of pain. Okay, shouting bad.

Then P-21 regarded me flatly, a detonator in his mouth. He bit down hard and from the west came multiple sharp explosions as the ammo crates exploded, peppering the enemy with countless spent shell casings. Even cyberponies were staggered by that. The stunned Harbingers recovered and finished picking them off before they could retreat and regenerate. "Sorry, I didn't realize you were enjoying yourself," P-21 said as he trotted to us and pulled out a healing potion for me.

The Harbingers began to give little cheers and shouts of joy. I wondered how happy they'd be if they knew that there were more coming. Still, a little hope was better than no hope. "Let's get out of here," I said as I started for the stairs. If I was lucky, I'd be able to make it out of here without any more trouble—

Down in the third floor hall, a solid wall of soldiers faced me. As scared and shaken as they were, they had more than enough force to liquefy us. I blinked at so many red bars, and one yellow. "Hi," I said, giving the yellow bar a wave. Fortunately, it belonged to the pony with what I suspected was Colonel Cupcake's combat helmet on his head. Hopefully that meant he was the pony in charge of this firing squad. "Let's not anypony do anything they're going to regret."

"I told you. P-21 and Morning Glory and the impostor we were warned about," the gaunt gray doctor said. "I remember them from Flank. Not many stallions with dots all over their flanks."

"Yes, I recognize both of them. You're the mare calling herself Blackjack, then?" the officer asked in that tantalizingly familiar voice. I tugged off the helmet, tossing my mane before staring evenly into his eyes. P-21 scowled at him and gave a low growl.

"You!" he spat. "You raping bastard!"

"P-21," I said evenly, my hind end clenching at that word. I kept my eyes on his, stepping closer. "So. . . you were one of the four on the *Seahorse*." He didn't answer immediately, just gave a little nod.

"Captain Nails," he replied evenly after a moment. "Thanks for helping out with the attack."

"I was in the neighborhood. It's sort of a thing I do." I swallowed hard. "I spared your life," I said, hoping it was still possible for all three of us to get out of here. Why didn't I have alicorn teleportation that could yank a half dozen ponies where I wanted?

“And I yours. Happyhorn, remember?” he said as he kept my gaze.

“I’m so glad you two are acquainted! She’s wanted by Security!” the doctor said with a roll of her eyes. “Dead, as I recall. Her friends too.”

Nails didn’t answer. Now that I could get a better look at him, I took in his brown and black mane. Earth pony, bigger than P-21, with a steady and thoughtful gaze. “You spared my life,” he said finally. “The mare... that cyber thing... never would have. She’d have been creative with killing us.” He closed his eyes. “You’re the real Blackjack.”

“Who cares!” the doctor scoffed. “The mare calling the shots wants her dead.”

“I care!” Nails snapped at her, making her back away. He frowned at me. “If you’re really Blackjack, then it’s as he said. So I have two questions to ask: is Steel Rain dead?”

I could have denied it. Remained vague, but really, I was just tired of lies. Tired of so damn much. “Yes.”

“Did you kill him?” He asked me.

“Actually, it was his own damn treacherousness that killed him, but yeah. I guess you could say I did,” I replied. I glanced back at P-21 and he gave the tiniest of nods. I glance out the corner of my other eye and Glory gave a sad, resigned smile.

“I see,” he said and then looked at the soldiers and then back at me.

“What are you waiting for?” the lavender nag demanded.

“Making a decision,” I murmured.

“Ha... bu...gah... wa?” the mare – Scalpel! That was the name! From Flank! – blustered. “Are you insane? She just said she killed him! Shoot now!” Her magic glowed around the gun of the pony next to her.

Nails fixed her with a cold, hard glare. “Shut up. That cyberpony nag would shoot you without a second thought.” His hoof smacked her horn, and she sat hard on her ass, holding her horn as her focus was shattered. More and more guns lowered, red bars changing to yellow as he advanced on me. “Steel Rain gave us a recording for if he died and you killed him. We haven’t heard from him in over twenty-four hours. That’s unheard of for him.” He lifted his leg and accessed a scratched-up PipBuck. I guessed that after LittlePip and me, they were all the rage.

From his hoof came a familiar, warm voice that made me shiver. “Hello. I don’t have

much time. I'm taking a squad of soldiers into the Core and there's a good chance I won't make it out. I hoped that I could work the angles and take the Core for all of us, but if you're playing this then that's just not going to happen. So if a pony comes out of the Core that's not with us, I'm probably dead. You need to know that the Harbingers are a trap. All of it. That Dawn and her Goddess, Cognitum, are using all of you as chumps. Just like they used me.

"Nails, you know Security. You'll know the real deal. I put you in charge of the Harbingers. If you meet her and she's killed me, I want you... well... fuck... to be honest, I want you to nail her to the floor and fuck her ass a dozen times. Set up a conga line. I want you to chop her head off. And if her friends are there, kill them first." The recording laughed. "Then kill that cybermare. The Legate. The whole damn Hoof. Kill 'em all!

"And Blackjack, if you're listening to this, I'll be waiting for you!" the stallion on the recording said cheerfully. Then it clicked off.

A loud sneeze might set things off. I didn't want to blast these guys, but I didn't see much choice. Everything hinged on a stallion who'd nailed my hooves to the floor and raped me. Scalpel looked from Nails to me as we stared into each other's eyes, her head jerking back and forth so quickly, I thought the snapping of her neck might set everyone off. "Well?" she shrieked.

Nails kept his eyes on mine. I knew that P-21 somehow had a grenade ready to fly and Glory was set to start blasting, but so were they. It felt like I was back in Happyhorn, and I mentally begged him to be the better pony. "Keep your guns down," he said in a low but sure voice.

"What!?" Scalpel said, her voice sharp as griffin claws on a chalkboard. "Cognitum—!"

"Is not here! This mare is!" he snapped back. "Cognitum gave her orders for us to fight to the last. Well, I will fight to the last, but only for a mare who deserves it." He faced me again. "Can you help us any more? We'll be out of ammo in an hour or two and overrun if we can't get some reinforcements and resupply. I know a dozen other squads that are just as bad off or worse."

I activated my broadcaster and found the tag. "Goldenblood?"

A minute later, he rasped, "Blackjack?"

"I'm talking with an officer in the Harbingers at Miramare. They need our help. I want you to tell Big Daddy to reinforce them and Keeper to try and get them more ammo.

Lots of them are shot to hell, too,” I informed him. A tiny smile formed in the corner of Nails’s mouth. I regarded him a moment. “Will you follow Big Daddy’s orders?” The smile disappeared. “He’s calling the shots in the fight for me. Can you?”

“He obliterated my gang a year ago, the Nightmares,” Nails said darkly, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “You forgave me. I can work with him, at least.”

“You... you... you...” Scalpel’s eyes bulged. “She’s going to kill you. All of us.” Was she talking about me or Cognitum? In the eyes of my enemies, was there really any difference?

“No she’s not. Because I’m trying to help,” I told the old mare.

“Help?” she screeched. “I remember the help you gave Flank! It was my home. Then you showed up, and it all went to shit. All because of you! Everything you do gets everypony killed. You’re a fucking menace! You’re a plague! A fucking monster!”

I stood there, hollow. “I’m trying to do better,” was all I could say.

“Ever think the whole Hoof would be better off if you didn’t?” She hissed the question like acid.

“No,” Glory said immediately, stepping forward. “I know it wouldn’t be.” Scalpel balked as she went on. “This valley is like an infected wound. It’s full of poison and disease, so twisted up that you can get killed just by stepping hoof in it. But Blackjack didn’t cause that. She’s lancing this boil, draining the pus, debriding the wound, and giving us all a chance at survival. It’s not easy, and even she can’t force the healing that its going to take. But it’s better than slowly dying.”

“Cognitum’s going to kill us all for this,” Scalpel said quietly. Then, without another word, she turned and walked down the stairs.

P-21 looked at the rest of the Harbingers. “I know you’re scared. I know you’re angry. I’m an expert on fear and hatred. And I know how difficult and hard it is to change. Steel Rain, Cognitum, and Dawn don’t change. They just want to go back to Old Equestria, with the power and the war machines and the facade of normal life. Well, we don’t. We’re trying for a New Equestria. And we, all of us, need each other to do it. I know you’re scared. I know you want to fight and kill and hurt those that hurt you. You can’t. These Brood aren’t zebras. They’re killing machines, and they’re infinite. We have a plan to stop them.”

“Do you really think you can?” Nails asked.

"We stopped them now. We wouldn't be here if we didn't think it was possible," I told him.

He shook his head. "After what we did... I just wanted to die. Planned to. Then I heard that Dawn pony talking about becoming a part of something bigger. But we weren't. We were just a collection of smaller pieces. Steel Rain talked about being a part of something stronger. But we weren't. He just worked for a pony that knew where the arms caches were. You're the first pony I've ever met who wants to make things better and get nothing for it."

"Cause I'm stupid," I laughed, a little forced, as I blushed in embarrassment.

"No," Nails said with a shake of his head.

"Here," P-21 said as he pulled the broadcaster off his PipBuck and gave it to Nails. "If she's set on giving you another chance, I will too." He paused as Nails took the broadcaster, then fixed him with a look that portended a certain, cruel death. "One. Chance. Don't waste it."

There wasn't much to say after that. We stepped past. I hoped Big Daddy and the other Harbingers listened. I also realized something else: If Nails was no longer following the script, it wouldn't be long before Cognitum knew I was undermining her control. Would she tell Amadi? Maybe. The Legate wouldn't want to act till she was off the ground. He needed her to change Tom's entry angle if the Eater was going to get its feast. He'd probably tell her about using the Core to squash me like a bug when she returned. Would she move up the timetable? Maybe. Apparently it took a lot of time to safely fill up a rocket full of highly explosive chemical and magical propellant. Rushing it tended to result in explosions, as I'd heard from Stronghoof in the meeting.

As we started for the exit, I paused. "Wait," I said to P-21 as I looked at Twist's door. "Can you open this?"

"I got it." He got out his tools and started to work on the lock.

Glory frowned at the door. "What is it?"

"I'm hoping to find something in here for Rampage," I said as he worked the lock with a bobby pin and screwdriver. A second later, it popped open.

Twist's room was spartan, as I expected. The windows were obscured by a thin veil of grime, and dust covered everything. There were two bunk beds in the corner, and on the top one rested a teddy bear. On the computer desk were a burned-out terminal... and pictures. Twist and the Marauders. Twist celebrating atop Big

Macintosh with a grin from ear to ear. Twist and Stonewing laughing at a soaking wet Applesnack sitting in a doorway with a bucket atop his head. Twist cuddled up with a red-striped zebra.

And Twist with her filly.

I'd seen her several times; it was the same filly Rampage reverted to every time she was disintegrated. In the pictures, she went from a tiny foal to a tiny filly. In another, she suddenly had red stripes too, and a little note on the picture read 'Shu needs to hide her magic zebra dyes better.' The last picture was Twist embracing her striped daughter.

This was it. Proof that Rampage wasn't just some mix of souls. She'd been a real filly once. The talisman might have prolonged her life, but the grin on that painted filly almost matched the one on my friend for eagerness and energy. I levitated the picture...

And spotted the memory orb behind it.

"Blackjack, you're not thinking of going into that thing, are you?" Glory asked.

"I need to. If I can give Rampage a reason to live, she won't have a reason to help Cognitum anymore," I said. "If I'm out for too long, carry me back, please." I touched the orb to my horn before there could be any further argument.

oooOOOooo

I was thrust into the body of an earth pony mare. Twist, I guessed. Her hornless body felt tough and strong; how much of that was due to her earth ponyness and how much was from the talisman inside her, I couldn't say. As she raced down the hall of the base, sirens wailed outside. Muted explosions sounded in the distance. She ran into the command center, starting to speak before she was all the way through the door. "Lieutenant Flash and Captain Grapevine are down. Zebra snipers. I got the snipers, but..." she started to say, and then she spotted the rotund Colonel Cupcake slouched in a chair. "Sir?"

"They've gotten Canterlot," the overweight brown stallion said in a hollow voice, a pained smile on his lips. "Some kind of chemical weapon like the one deployed at Littlehorn." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "And the bastards claimed they weren't behind it."

"The Princesses?" Twist asked.

"Presumed dead. It's not clear. Cloudsdale Command and Control is gone. Earth

Pony Command is gone. General Steelspire gave orders for megaspells to be deployed as fast as possible, but her command went silent ten minutes ago. The MASEBS is up, but patchy, and there's no word from any of the Ministries." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Pegasus Air Command is ordering all pegasi to pull back to the clouds and seal the skies."

"They can't do that!" Twist shouted. "We need them!"

"They're doing it. Rainbow Dash gave orders to help us, but they were countermanded. Since the military doesn't answer to the M.o.A.... we're on our own." He sighed and closed his eyes. "Twist, you need to evacuate."

"Evacuate?" she stammered. "Evacuate where? With the skies closed, there's nowhere left to go! The stables are sealed. Hoofington is silent. I can't reach anyone there. The lines are open, but everypony is gone!"

"Go to the Highlands. I doubt the zebras will waste a missile on played-out mines. You might have a chance if you go now and hurry." He gave a sad smile and saluted her. "It has been an honor, Sergeant Twist, but I must relieve you of your duty. Your final orders are to get your daughter out of here and keep her alive at all costs."

"Sir..." she began in a broken voice.

He looked over at the consoles and terminals, the speakers crackling with static. "I'll remain here. Maybe we can get some organization out of this chaos. Go."

Twist stiffened and snapped a stiff salute with a tear running down her cheek. He stood and returned it with a kind smile. "Permission to... to..." He gave a little nod. She rushed forward and gave him a quick, fierce hug. "It all turned out wrong, sir..."

"It may work out in the end," he replied and released her, regarding a radar display peppered with little flashing dots. "Now hurry. There's another wave of balefire missiles inbound. They might be hitting Grimhoof again, but they might be heading here."

"Goodbye, Colonel. I hope..." but she didn't finish the statement. Instead, she turned and rushed away from him, back the way she came.

In the front entrance, behind sandbag barricades, were a few soldiers making a feeble, futile defense. They had to know it was doomed, but what else did they have? Twist scampered up to the third floor. "Peppermint? Peppermint!" she shouted, looking around the room.

"Mommy!" the filly shouted as she scampered out from under the bed and hugged

her fiercely. "I'm scared! What's going on?"

Twist's body shuddered as her lips curled in a smile. Her limbs tightened on the red striped filly's form. "It's okay... I'm going to take care of you... take care of you..." she murmured.

"Mommy! You're squishing me!" Peppermint squealed.

That seemed to shake Twist out of it as she released her. "I'm sorry, Mint. Get your gear, baby. We need to go. We're going on a camping trip in the Highlands. It'll be safe there." Mint nodded once and ran to the closet, pulling out a filly's saddlebags and immediately wiggling into them. Twist rushed to the desk and pulled out a pack of photographs. Her eyes lingered on the larger pictures in the frames, but she just stuffed the pack into her pocket. "Come on. We have to hurry, honey. It's not safe here."

"I thought you said you'd keep the bad zebras away, Mommy," Peppermint said as Twist scooped her onto her back and started from the room. "Wait! You forgot Mr. Ripper Killer Death Machine!"

Twist didn't stop. "We'll come back for him, Minty. Hold tight," she said as she raced down the stairs. "Now, what do we do if we're attacked?"

"Get off your back and hide," she replied at once.

"And if I'm attacked and you see an opening?" Twist asked briskly.

"Knees. Eyes. Private bits. Hit 'em as hard as I can!" Peppermint replied fiercely.

"Good girl," she said, reaching into her pocket for a tin of Mint-als. She popped two into her mouth and chewed furiously. The world became sharper and clearer she trotted down to the entrance of the command center and froze. The ponies that had been at the barricade were now dead. "Trouble, sweetie," she murmured. Without a work of argument, Peppermint slipped off her back and backed up as Twist stepped forward, all her senses on high alert.

Twist immediately froze, her ears twitching a moment. Then she lunged to the side, her hooves wrapping around thin air that immediately shimmered and manifested into a zebra. He shouted something at her in zebra, and her hooves twisted with incredible force, snapping his neck. Something screamed behind her, and kicks designed to shatter bones slammed into her back, driving her to the ground. Twist turned to look at a second zebra draped in a mistcloak.

Then Peppermint dove at the zebra, wrapping her limbs around one hind leg and

biting down hard on the ligament attached to his hock. He cried out, turning away from Twist for a critical second to deal with the nuisance. Twist turned, hooked a hoof around his neck, and pulled his head back sharply, nearly making his ears touch his rump. A vicious blow to his throat crushed his trachea and sent him down in a gagging, gurgling heap. Peppermint extracted herself from the leg, grinning up at her with bloody lips.

“Aunty Shu shu taught me that one!” she said brightly.

“Come on, Minty. On my back again,” she said as she scooped her up and went running out into a world of chaos. Several long buildings were ablaze. Wagons lay scattered over the field, and several hangars had collapsed. Missiles streaked overhead from the east and south, trailing smoke as they slammed into more buildings beyond the tree line. Far to the south, there was an immense red glow, like a piece of the sun resting on the earth. A megaspell?

“We got to hurry, Minty. We’re going... somewhere. Somewhere safe,” she said as she rushed across the field towards a smoldering tank. Ponies lay scattered about as bullets zipped back and forth, buzzing like deadly lead bees.

“It’s okay, Momma. I’m not scared,” Peppermint said in her ear as they fled. “Aunty Shu said not to be.”

As they were passing an abandoned tank, a zebra with bat wings strafed the ground, machine guns chattering as lines of bullets tore through the field. One pierced right through Twist’s leg, but as she put her weight down, I could feel the muscle and bone shifting to heal the injury. The bat zebra wheeled back around, and Twist ducked inside the tank.

“It’s okay... not scared...” Peppermint whimpered on her back.

“That’s right...” Twist began, and then she felt a hot, wet wash on her back. “Peppermint?” No answer. Carefully she slipped the filly from her back and saw the hole punched from spine to chest, right next to her heart.

“Peppermint!” she screamed. “No... no! Not you too! Peppermint!” She shook as she saw the blood leaking out of Peppermint’s mouth. “No. Please no...” she wept. Then her eyes focused on the hole in her hind leg closing before her eyes. “Peppermint...”

She reached down and seized a combat knife that had fallen on the floor and turned it towards herself. “Peppermint...” she whispered, and then she rammed the knife into her chest with a scream. As the blade passed through her flesh, it began to heal

immediately. Tears running down her cheek, she cut again and again, struggling to excise the device implanted within her chest. The tip of the knife scraped against something, and she pressed deeper. "Hold on, Peppermint... hold on..." she whimpered. She pried hard, levering against her ribs. Something tore, and a glowing glob connected to tendrils of flesh came free. Gasping and whimpering, she cut the very last connection to the heart.

Abruptly, I was plunged into darkness. Then, slowly, I came to... only now I was in an aching filly's body. Peppermint groggily got to her hooves and saw her mother as she lay there on her back, looking at pictures. The sounds of shooting had softened a little, and a terrible calm was filling the air. "Mommy?" Peppermint asked, her eyes wide and fearful at the weak way she slumped back against the wall of the tank.

"You're okay," Twist whispered, stroking her mane with a bloody hoof. "You're going to be okay..."

Peppermint stood up and saw the horrible hole in her mom's chest. Her eyes rose to Twist's as tears ran down her cheeks. "You're not. You need medicine, Mommy. You're hurt."

"Shhh... I'm fine," she whispered. "Such a brave and strong girl. I want you to promise me. Promise me you'll live. That you'll have a house and a family and a life. Please..."

"I promise Mommy. I promise. But you need a doctor, mommy!" she begged, sniffling.

"Shh... shh... it's okay..." she whispered as she kept petting her mane.

"It's not okay. You're hurt!" She sniffed. "I don't want you to die!"

"Shh..." Twist said quietly. "It's okay. Sometimes mommies get hurt to save the lives of their babies."

Peppermint hugged her as she wept, and then the hoof stroking her mane stilled. "Mommy?" She pulled away, looking at her still form. At the other hoof holding photographs to her chest. "Mommy!" A smile lingered on the corner of her mouth. Then there was a colossal roar and a terrible pain in her head, and everything returned to black.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory weeping. It hadn't been a long one, a few minutes at the most. "I'm getting too old for this," I muttered, remembering the feel of that probing

knife. But now it was clear why she couldn't remember who she was: that memory had been removed. I could only imagine the anguish Twist must have felt at Shujaa's death, only to carry her inside her. But what guilt had Peppermint felt, promising to live to a dying mother, and then wanting to end it after she killed her own baby? But it was as Rampage herself had said: not knowing sucks.

"Rampage... needs our help," I muttered as I looked around the tight quarters. Of course Twist would want her daughter close at hoof and in a safer home than that little outbuilding towards the end. And Cupcake would let her keep her here, as the last Marauder. I didn't even know if it was possible to help Rampage at this point...

But I had to try.

We returned to Star House. Charity had delivered several cardboard boxes of supplies. Healing potions, 12.7mm and 12 gauge ammunition in a variety of flavors, food and bottles of water, spark grenades and Wonderglue. And, of course, a bill. 'To be paid if you live' was scribbled at the bottom. Charity might have only been a filly, but she'd helped with this fight more than I suspected she could imagine.

Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape all had similar packages waiting for them. Glory was using some spark batteries to 'optimally charge' her gem cartridges. P-21 was inspecting each 40mm shell for Persuasion. Scotch Tape examined her array of tools, spanners, hammers, duct tape, Wonderglue, turpentine, and other equipment. Nopony talked.

P-21 cleared his throat.

"I'm coming with you, Daddy," Scotch Tape declared flatly. "Don't tell me to stay where it's safe, 'cause nowhere is. I'm coming and I'm helping and that's that."

P-21 froze, mouth open, then closed it again. He glanced at me, but all I could do was smile and shrug. Send her away or take her with us, either way was risky. "Stick close to me," he told her. "I don't want anything to happen to you." The words hung over us like a shroud. I could only focus on loading twelve gauge slugs into the ammo drums.

Then the door opened, and Boo sauntered in. I immediately smiled. "Hey! There you are. I wondered where you'd got off to."

Boo beamed a smile and then turned and said outside, "Come'n!"

“What...?” I began to say when Homage, Calamity, Velvet, and Ditzzy sauntered in. “Oh, um, hi,” I said weakly. “Is something the—”

But they weren’t the end. After them came Big Daddy, Brutus, Candlewick, Dazzle, and Storm Front. “Where do you want us to put this grub?” Big Daddy asked as he gestured to boxes of food carried casually on Brutus’s back.

“Um... over there,” I murmured, gesturing at the long dining table. “But we have more than...”

Again my words died out as Triage, Sagittarius, Virgo, a red earth pony mare with a flame cutie mark I guessed was Aries, and a limping green pony I hadn’t seen in months, Leo, trotted in. Triage and Sagittarius levitated a wooden tub with Capricorn and Pisces waving at me. “Tell me where I can set them down. They’re heavy,” Triage grumbled. Thrush staggered in after them with her crew carrying boxes of sloshing bottles.

“I... ah... what are you?” I stammered. But there were still more ponies. Grace and Splendid followed with a protective Pain Train and a worried looking Charm, her head still bandaged. Stronghoof, Crumpets, Psalm, Chicanery, and Farsight funneled in after them. Storm Chaser, Mare Do Well, Twister, Boomer, Doctor Morningstar, and Lightning Dancer entered along with Dusk, Moonshadow, Lambent, and Lucent; the latter four immediately went to Morning Glory. Charity, Bottlecap, and Keeper arrived with even more food on their back, and behind them was a horde of colts and fillies, Sonata and Adagio bearing Octavia on their backs.

The house overflowed, and so the crowd spilled outside. I saw Whisper and Stygius, Tenebra and Persephone, and the still blind Hades clustered together with the yellow pegasus trying to get the four close to the others. The ghouls Windclop the mayor, Willow the security mare, Velvet the... what did you call a pony who made naughty underwear anyway?... and Boing. Harpica and the ghouls fillies and colts immediately joined them in polite and civilized conversation. Rover, Gnarr, and Fifi kept a little pocket of clear space around themselves as still others arrived. Silver Spoon, Xanthe, Carrion, Cerberus, and Snails trotted and floated up to the house as well. I spotted a restored Sweetie Bot alongside a holographic Applebloom whose appearance flickered in and out to reveal the mechanical filly beneath. Applebot? But they...

Horrible images of Cognitum packing them with balefire eggs and detonating them in the crowd or spying through their mechanical eyes to find the perfect time and place to fire a Raptor’s guns swept through my head. “It’s okay, Blackjack,” Triage

said from beside me with a nod to Rover off in the crowd. My fears must have been apparent on my face as I gaped at the pair of machines. "We checked them as soon as they showed up. They're not broadcasting to anyone. No nasty surprises, either. Some funny tech in the white one, but if they get out of hand..." She casually checked the pack on her beam pistol, and Rover scraped his formidable metal claws together. "They won't be any trouble."

That was a little bit of a relief, even if it didn't explain where they came from. Definitely something I should ask about, but if they were safe, it could wait. More urgent was the question of where... *everyone here* came from. Almost everyone I knew was gathered around us. "What's..." I looked down at Boo. "What's going on?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Big Daddy said, "Tomorrow morning we're going to battle."

"So we have two choices," Storm Chaser said deeply. "To ponder the imminent battle ahead with sobriety and grim contemplation."

"Or get shitfaced drunk and spit in the face of Death and enjoy ourselves 'cause tomorrow we're fucked!" Thrush exclaimed.

"And while we know you might prefer the former," Homage said with a sad smile.

"The latter will probably do you a whole lot more good," Triage commented around her cigarette. "Us, too."

"So..." The white blank grinned eagerly, then leapt up in the air and yelled, "Leeeeet's... party!"

Once again, Star House was home to a celebration grossly inappropriate to the Wasteland. It was a rude gesture at despair and sober reality. Any second, the nightmare might begin. Heck, if I were Cognitum and still in the Core, I'd incinerate the whole house and all of us in one blast. But none of that seemed to matter here. People needed celebration and joy in the Wasteland. And so while I tried to smile and enjoy myself, I kept turning a wary eye out for a flash of silver or an ominous red alicorn shape.

But that didn't mean others couldn't have fun.

The two strange ponies from Flank had set up a table and plugged cables into Applebot, who'd deployed two large speakers from her sides, and begun to play thumping, lively music with Sweetie Bot providing 'live' vocals. I just hoped they were waterproof in case the Hoofington weather decided to join this party too. Whisper tried to drag Tenebra into the middle of everyone to dance, but the batpony pulled free and made off into the crowd; instead, Whisper returned to Stygius who, to his credit,

gave as good as he got on the impromptu dance floor. Was it just me, though, or was Whisper a little... well... *radiant*? It was probably just me. Storm Front and P-21 sat off to the side, each drinking and beer and nodding to each other. Brutus, Stronghoof, and Pain Train engaged in a flex off. Charity and Bottlecap abstained from the festivities but seemed to enjoy keeping the food and drink flowing. Repeatedly, Charity tried to tally up the drinks and meals served, and repeatedly Bottlecap stopped her, reminding her sibling that this was on the house. It seemed to cause Charity pain.

Calamity, Chicanery, Mare Do Well, and Storm Chaser talked about the future of the Enclave and Thunderhead. Homage and Velvet chatted with Grace and Splendid; what did you call a collective of unicorns? Boing and Grace sat off to the side, looking dour, before Harpica brought over some of her ghoulish children to talk. Hades almost appeared to be having a taste test wearing his bandages as he sampled dishes provided by his wife. Being beaten in his own throne room seemed to have done wonders for his disposition.

As I wandered around, I kept hearing bits of conversation. Things were so crowded and wonderfully chaotic that I could eavesdrop on them without even trying. What did they call it? Mingling? Something like that.

When they were between songs, I trotted over to Applebot and Sweetie Bot. “You... the two of you... I thought you were scrap, and you... well... were scrapped too!” I couldn’t believe it. Sweetie Bot was in bits! But now there wasn’t a mark on her. Did Horse have a spare or something? And Applebot... Even ignoring what happened to her body, wasn’t she just Cognitum in disguise?

“We are happy to see you again, too,” Sweetie Bot said with a smile. The imitation was uncanny. Now that I wasn’t fighting for my life, I could appreciate the job Horse had done. Bar the synthetic warble in her voice, she was almost indistinguishable from the real thing. “Though I was deactivated for several hours, my repair talisman was intact, and, barring problems with some improperly installed hardware, I was able to recover enough system integrity to leave the Core. Without the sexy, splendid Mr. Horse, I found myself with a complete lack of purpose. I had no driving goal, only fragmented data of Sweetie v1.0.” She nodded to Applebot. “Fortunately, I recovered engrams of the previous imprint accessing her system.” If only I spoke smart pony...

“Sweetie Belle got me fixed up right proper. ‘Course, there was a little problem with my operatin’ system. Thing was buggier than an anthill. But I got a new system installed and backed up.” She frowned, looked around the party, and leaned in with

a conspiratorial whisper, "Has Goldenblood told you anything new yet? Have you changed your mind on this whole 'execution by mercy' hogwash?"

"Ah... no?" I said as I gaped at her.

"Hokey Dokie!" Applebot said, beamed at me. "Just let me know if you need me to take him out. I can't do it as creatively as I could in the pod, but I'll try my best!"

"You... installed the megastable interrogation program into her?" I asked Sweetie Bot.

"Yes. It was a challenge, but the program was remarkably stable," Sweetie Bot said brightly, as if I'd just paid her a compliment. "And it had all of Applebot's old files. I think the two integrated well."

Applebot hung her head a little. "Darn sorry for the fibs I told, but I didn't have no choice. I had ta do what she wanted."

I sighed and shook my head. Robots. "Well... I'm glad you two are free now. Are you going to help with the fight?" I didn't see a lot of weapons on either of them.

"Well," Applebot began, "if she tries to use that PipBuck to access the MASEBS, we can try and mess with her. But otherwise, I don't think we'll be able to do much. Sorry." She sounded a touch down, but then she brightened. "Instead, I'm going to do my best to find out every dirty and underhanded secret in the Wasteland. And we're going to need a Scootabot... maybe one of those sentry robots!"

I had images of a bright orange sentry rolling along praising Rainbow Dash. "And I have a sample of super sexy Horse's DNA," Sweetie Bot gushed. "If I can get one of those cloning trees, we'll be reunited!"

"Sweetie... he'll be a mindless, soulless blank," I pointed out.

"I know. He'll be perfect!"

"Okay... well... good luck with that!" I said as I stepped away from the pair. Robots...

I spotted Crumpets and Lacu— Psalm. She was Psalm... I spotted them off to the side and tried to approach. "...still loves you, you know," I picked out Crumpets saying as I drew closer, feigning interest in the music. "I know it's a ballache listening to him going on about *love everlasting* and all that, at least for me, but he means it."

"He loves a mare who's gone. A mare who was better than me," Psalm said, and I had to drift closer to pick up her soft words. "I don't deserve his love."

Crumpets shook her head. "How'd you get so bloody fucking lucky and so sodding

leatherheaded at the same time?” The yellow mare thumped Psalm’s chest. “He. Fackin’. Loves ya. You have any idea how bleedin’ rare that is? Not ‘likes ya’. Not ‘wants to mount you and shag you proper’. Love. Real fackin’ deal. But you’re standing here saying you don’t deserve it. What’s wrong with you?”

“I don’t deserve it! Don’t you understand?” Psalm said, flushing. “He’s... he’s so much better than me...”

“He’s not a saint, you right big purple pillock. He’s done things he ain’t proud of. So have I. So have you. So what? It’s not about what you *deserve*. Name me one geezer in this world who deserves love after all we do to survive!” Crumpets demanded jabbing the alicorn in the breast again. “Deservin’ it don’t come into it. What matters is whether you get it.”

“It’s not...” Psalm stammered.

“Do you love him too?” Crumpets asked. “Are you only into mares? Just not interested right now?”

“No! He’s wonderful. He’s caring. He’s... noble...” Psalm replied.

“Then take what he’s giving you and enjoy it as long as you can! Sure, you did some grim shit, but so what? You ain’t special there, darlin’. If he forgives you and accepts you, then that’s all that bloody matters, you dozy git.” Crumpets sighed. “Some of us would sodding kill for what you’ve been given.” She turned and trotted away.

Psalm started away in the other direction, but I trotted up to her. “She’s right, you know.”

“Eavesdropping is a bad habit,” Psalm said with a grumpy little pout.

“Yeah. I’m full of those. Setting off balefire bombs. Wanton megaspell-assisted vandalism. Eavesdropping. If we get carts running on the road again, I can add jaywalking to the list, and then I’ll have the full set!” I said as I walked in front of her. “She’s still right. Stronghoof is a good pony. You’re a good pony. You’ll be better together.”

“How can you say that? Blackjack... you know what I did,” Psalm said with a touch of anguish.

“You killed Big Macintosh,” I answered, making her flinch. “We all make mistakes, Psalm. Some of them huge. Some we can never forgive ourselves for. But...” I turned and looked at the huge, strong, tiny-horned unicorn and paused. “He reminds you of Big Macintosh. That’s what’s wrong.” Psalm closed her eyes and gave

a little nod. "Did you love Big Macintosh?"

"It was... more a crush. I never spoke of it. Never acted. We all thought he had a mare somewhere, secret. But still... I dreamed of being with him. And then I killed him. As good as he was. As much as I... loved... I killed him. How could I dare to love again after doing that?" Psalm said, striding from the party to hide her anguish.

"You dare because you can. Because love is so rare that when you have it, you hold it as best you can. Because losing it..." I sighed and shook my head. "I wish it was about deserving. It would be so much easier if it was that simple. Love is... precious. Fleeting. Frustrating. Wonderful. Terrifying. And above all... worth it. Besides, after tonight, there may not be a tomorrow."

Psalm wiped her eyes and stared across the party at where Stronghoof laughed jovially with the others. "Perhaps..."

I opened my saddlebags and pulled out Penance's case. "I want you to have this back, Psalm. I can't use it like you can, and in the upcoming fight, I think you'll need it."

She froze, staring at it. "How... how could you... how can I..." she muttered, half in horror.

I stood and held her shoulders, gazing into her eyes. "I can because I know you're strong enough to carry it. And I know you're strong enough to use it, because you don't want to repeat your mistakes. Forgive yourself, Psalm. I know that Big Macintosh would forgive you if he were here." I pushed the case into her hooves. "If you can't, or won't, give it to somepony who can. But it should be a better pony than me."

"I... will think about what you have said," Psalm murmured, barely audible above the noise. Then she turned and walked away, floating the case beside her. I hoped she came to terms with it. Hating and denying yourself happiness because of past mistakes didn't do anything to help overcome pain like that.

I kept mingling. I overheard Velvet, Homage, and Grace talking about babies, with Splendid looking like he was contemplating chewing his leg off to escape the conversation. Off to the side, Xanthe pranced quite happily to the music. Then she spotted me watching her and immediately flushed. "Hiding now," the suit piped, and when I blinked, she was gone.

"The griffins are sitting this one out," Carrion told General Storm Chaser over by the door to Star House. "The Talons came because of money, but most of my people

remember the great war. They won't get involved this time."

"That's too bad. We're going to need all the help we can get," Storm Chaser said with a frown. "You'd think that with the end of the Enclave, they'd be glad to get involved again."

"You would think that," Carrion countered. "You're a pony. But two hundred years of battle has left a bitter taste in our mouths. Our people lived in Equestria, were even a part of it, but we aren't ponies. There's some that just want to watch the battle play out and then finish off whoever wins."

"They think they can?" Storm Chaser scowled.

"Their leaders do. Time will tell if they can pull together the support to actually make it happen," Carrion said with a shrug. Then they spotted me and looked at me coolly. I gave a sheepish smile and pretended to be interested in... a whiskey mixer... actually, nevermind the pretending. The whiskey helped me think about what I'd just heard.

That was a depressing thought. Winning the battle tomorrow just to have another battle. And another. And another. But why should our fight tomorrow be the end of all fights? That was hardly realistic. There would always be conflict and strife of some sort or another. Twilight had Nightmare Moon. The Princesses had struggled with Discord. The Ministries with the zebras. Who knew what battles would come, who would face them, or how they would win?

Face the battle in front of you, Blackjack, I thought, and make sure the world gets a chance for those battles tomorrow.

I continued through the celebration. Velvet Remedy was now having an argument with P-21 about whether it was appropriate for Scotch Tape to fraternize with Adagio and Allegro. P-21 asked if there was an age at which a filly could give fellatio to multiple partners without parental approval that he wasn't aware of and if Velvet would instruct her own child of such. I stayed clear of that one. If Scotch Tape wanted to fool around and had her implant, good on her. Ambitious to tackle two at once, though; I'd never have had such an opportunity at her age.

Then I spotted Candlewick and Dazzle talking, the scarred stallion in the red fire coat giving awkward smiles as the mare remained polite... maybe even a little interested. Good for— then Toaster approached the pair and Dazzle immediately backed off and moved away. I headed closer, pretending to be interested in the music again as I listened.

"What is the matter with you, Candle? Getting sweet on a Flasher? Bad move, Bro. Bad move," Toaster said as he leaned towards him.

"We're going on a mission tomorrow," Candlewick countered with a scowl.

"Yeah, yeah. No doubt. But you got to be thinking about things after the mission, Bro. 'Cause if you're smart, you'll make sure that you're the only pony that walks out of that bunker. Things are gonna change around here, Bro, and you can't be thinking with your dick over some mare that doesn't give a fuck about you," Toaster said with a dark chuckle.

"It's not like that!" Candlewick protested.

"Oh, but you wish it was!" Toaster leered at him, leaning in. "Look at you. You're a fucking steak, well done. You'd like her to do you a little more though. It's fucking branded on your face. Get a clue. Flashers fuck who they want to fuck and that ain't a pony who looks like a ghoul. Little bitches give a 'I was raped' sob story and then shoot you in the back for your caps. Well, the Flashers are done. They just don't know it yet. They still don't have a new leader since Diamond got squashed flat. Psychoshy's more interested in fucking that batpony. Blackjack's way out of their league. They're gonna be toasted. So don't get too attached, Bro."

He trotted away, leaving an anguished Candlewick as he stared across the party at where Dazzle was talking with Whisper. "Asshole," a stallion muttered beside me, and I jumped, the navy blue Storm Front having snuck up beside me. The pegasus glanced at me and then in the direction Toaster went. "Toaster has more ambition than's healthy for him. Dreams of seeing himself in Big Daddy's position. He keeps the Burners together, but that's about all the good you can say about him."

"Is he right?" I asked the Halfheart, who gave a noncommittal shrug.

"Big Daddy's old. No question about that. Question is if he's old enough to be taken down. If Brutus dies in the bunker, I think Toaster might just try it. Or were you asking about the Flashers?"

"Both," I said with a small half smile.

"Flashers always have it rough. East side of the river has always been tough. Flashers are used to fighting for their lives. Toaster thinks raped mares are funny. Half-hearts know better. Pride keeps the Flashers going after they've been hurt. They're like us. Desolate, but still trudging forward, even when you know the most sensible thing to do is eat a bullet," he rumbled. Wow, melodramatic much? Wait, was that what I used to sound like? No wonder ponies liked to shoot me. "Losing Diamond

Flash was a blow, but they'll continue on. Maybe Dazzle will take over. Maybe somepony else. Maybe Toaster's right. Time will tell."

I regarded him. "Do the Halfhearts have a leader?"

"Heartmender. You won't meet her. She's scared to death of you. M.o.P. ghoul. Used to be a caseworker. She keeps us all from doing something permanent to ourselves. We keep her sane. Good arrangement," he said in his short, clipped sentences. A casewoker? Well, at least somepony in the Wasteland was getting therapy. "Toaster thinks Halfhearts are weak, but then, Toaster thinks everypony is. Probably even you."

"Is he going to be a problem?" I asked with a frown.

"Of course. But if you try and do something to him or get rid of him, you'll lose all the Burners' fighters and turn their territory into a great big hole for the Brood to pour through," he answered.

I groaned and rubbed my face. "Why is all of this so damned difficult?"

"Because it's life. Life is a struggle. Killing is easy. It's why Toaster is doomed to fail; he only wants to do what's easy. He doesn't have the strength for a real struggle," Storm Front said, then patted my shoulder. "Don't worry about Toaster. We've been dealing with him for years. You worry about your battle. We'll deal with ours."

That... cheered me up a little bit. It wasn't all my fight. Maybe I'd have to deal with Toaster later... but that was something way down on my list.

I spotted Glory disappearing around the back of Star House and blinked, then trotted after her. Behind the building, I spotted the gray mare sitting next to Tenebra. The charcoal batpony wept as she sat on a rock. "It's hard. I try so hard to be like... like Stygius. Father. Even Whisper. But I can't. Every time I get into a fight... everything goes wrong. I just... I'm a liability. A joke. Whisper thinks it's funny."

"Whisper has her own issues. She can be cruel," Glory said as she put a wing around Tenebra's shoulders. "Epilepsy isn't a joke. For fliers, it can be fatal if they have an attack at high altitudes and can't recover in time."

"I'm just... I want to be like her. I want to be... strong. Dangerous. Confident. All my people were supposed to be fighters, so a pony who can't fight... is nothing," Tenebra said with another sniff, wiping her eyes. "Ignored. I know Father is ashamed of me."

"I know how you feel. It's rough when the expectations of others aren't in accord

with our own,” Glory said.

“I don’t want to be useless. I’d rather die than be useless,” Tenebra said as she pressed her face to Glory’s mane.

“You don’t have to feel that way. Blackjack blinded Hades, and he seems... okay,” Glory said awkwardly.

Tenebra sighed. “If we survive the battle, Triage will give him robot eyes to restore his sight. It’s only a temporary uselessness... unlike mine.”

“You’re not useless. You just have to take your weakness and work around it. Just a guess, but I suspect your attacks are the result of adrenaline. Whisper and Stygius focus on close in attacks, right? Have you considered focusing on more long-ranged weapons? Rifles? Something that will keep you out of imminent harm and still let you fight.”

“Rifles? I don’t... traditionally, we use hooves and blades, not guns,” Tenebra said as she wiped her eye. “Do you really think so?”

“I think it’d be better than hating yourself because you can’t be like someone else. Believe me, I’ve been guilty of that lately too,” Glory said as she held her.

“I... heard you and Blackjack...” Tenebra began.

“Mhmmm...” Glory answered.

“I’m sorry,” Tenebra said.

“I am too. Blackjack is... Blackjack. I can’t hate her. It’d be so much easier if I could, for both of us. I’ve tried hating her, and it’s just so hard. Soon as I ended it, she went and had marathon sex with another pony. I thought I’d be hurt by it... but I was glad she did. Loving Blackjack is... hard. I know she wants to accommodate my feelings, but in the end, she is who she is. A wonderful, self-destructive, self-sacrificing, determined, lecherous, loving mess of a mare.” Glory and Tenebra were silent for a moment, and I considered sneaking away before I was caught. Then, “I also wonder if she was right.”

“About what?” Tenebra asked, and I did as well.

“About the marathon sex being good for getting over a breakup,” Glory said with a smile. Tenebra immediately flushed and squirmed a little.

“Do you think it would be okay?” Tenebra asked.

Glory then turned and regarded me with a cool smile and arched brow. I immediately

stammered, “Um... Hi. I just... saw... and... um...” There wasn’t any animosity in her eyes though. Friendliness. We were friends... just friends now.

“Hey, Blackjack,” she said, and then she returned her attention to Tenebra, “I think, if we take it slow, it’ll be just fine,” she said as she rose to her hooves with the batpony beside her. “Let’s go to my room.” Together, the pair walked past me, Glory giving a warm smile to me and the mare beside her.

I watched them disappear around the corner, my last sight of them being Glory nibbling Tenebra’s ear.

What a night.

Though... there was one pony I hadn’t seen yet. I checked my PipBuck and found his tag. There he was. I trotted to the edge of the party and up the hillside into the still woods. Goldenblood sat alone, looking down at the festivities with a longing, pained look. “Hey. This is *my* brooding spot,” I said as I sat down beside him.

“I’ve never been good with social functions,” he answered. “Besides, I was here first.”

I watched the party as well. For several long minutes, we just spectated. Neither of us were particularly happy. We’d been through too much to ever join in like everyone else was. But we could find comfort in the happiness of others.

“What are our chances?” I asked him. “Seriously?”

“Seriously... I don’t know. We’re outnumbered, outgunned, and there’re too many ways this can end disastrously. Horizons will fire tomorrow afternoon and impact at midnight. If the trajectory isn’t altered, sooner. We may all die. But I do know that there is no way to calculate success at this point. We will win, or we will lose.”

Twenty-four hours. I should have been shocked... but really, considering how my life had gone... “When will Cognitum leave?” I asked.

“It takes a lot of time to fuel a rocket safely. Dawn, at the soonest. We’re trying to keep tabs on her, but between Harbingers still loyal to her at the base, the Brood, the Remnant, and any Enclave that are throwing in with her... well, it’s been difficult.”

“It seems wrong to have a party now,” I said.

He checked his PipBuck. “It doesn’t matter. We won’t be ready to attack until morning either. So folks may as well be happy.” He nodded towards the celebration. “You should go. It’s not good for the leader to hide during events like this. Luna always made that mistake.”

I rose, extending a hoof to him. "Only if you come with me."

He stared at it for a long moment, then reached out and took it. Life was messy. A tangled perplexity that kept you constantly wondering what came next. Even in a moment where people weren't shooting at each other, you couldn't escape the rushing, twisting, churning, chaos of it all. Boo'd been right. A party was exactly what we needed right now. Life was a party, and while you may not always have fun, it was still preferable to the alternative. So together, Goldenblood and I rejoined the mess, as the celebration pressed on towards oblivion.

(Author's notes: The universe hated this chapter. It did everything it could to conspire against me getting it out. I had writers block and frustration. There were huge banal scenes. People got sick. There was lightning storms knocking out power and fire drills going off and just everything went wrong. This chapter was really a continuation of the last chapter, getting things set up for next chapter, and just kept growing and growing... it's like in FONV where you're about to go to the Hoover Dam and the game asks 'Are you sure you want to go, because you can't resolve any more quests from here on out if you do!'

Anyway, finally got the thing written and edited. It's horrible... so sorry. I'm sorry it took so much longer than I intended. I wanted to thank Kkat for creating FoE in the first place, and Bro, Hinds, swicked, and Heartshine for their hard word in making this a better story. Even if we had to add in seven or eight pages... seriously. It was crazy.

Anyway, I hope folks leave feedback. I really do like reading if I do things right or not, even if I'm quiet about it. You can put it on Reddit, cloudsville, or on FimFic's blog. Also, if anyone wants to donate, it would be *incredibly* welcome this month. I haven't gotten much subbing work, so bits at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal would be hugely appreciated. I wish I knew how to set up a Patreon thing. Anyway thank you for reading. Next chapter is going to catch Cognitum and... stuff...

EDIT: Oh! About Homage! I spoke with Kkat about her origins. It was actually different than what I had in my head, so I'm very glad to have gotten her input. This wasn't something I just made up.)

(Bronode: I was responsible for 1 and a half-ish pages of the new growth. Blame swicked for the other stuff. And friendly synthetics that show up and don't immediately get ganked! Finally my wish came true!! ...Well, I kind of *made* it come true, but it still counts!)

(swicked: Huzzah, the chapter is complete! And gosh, wasn't it grand? That Twist saving Peppermint scene had me in stitches!

And also I'd like to extend a personal thanks to Bronode for helping edit in an accent he absolutely hates.)

71. Ignition

“Darn it! Now you got me acting all sappy!”

There were ghosts in Star House. They breathed softly, silently, in the night. One moved through the rooms, restless, watching the slumbering occupants in the afterglow of desperate celebration. The house was in shambles; it'd take days to clean everything up and put things as nice and neat as when they'd first entered. The ghost walked quietly amidst the cast off Sparkle-Cola bottles and slumbering ponies. Many virtually sprawled out on the floor, snatching a few precious hours of sleep before the coming day. But not all.

Whisper and Stygius curled up together on the couch, oblivious to the outside world. That was how they survived and maintained themselves; they focused on that which was dear to them and shut out the rest of the horribleness. Like this, Whisper didn't need to inflict pain upon a world before it hurt her. There were the whispers, squeaks, giggles, and soft sighs of intimate cuddles. The ghost moved on. Time waited for nopony. Not even ghosts.

She walked past a sleeping filly murmuring softly in her sleep from underneath the kitchen table. “Eight caps per Sparkle-Cola times forty-eight bottles... sixteen boxes of Sugar Apple Bombs... carry the two...” Carefully, her head was raised, and an old pillow abandoned on the floor was slid under her head. The yellow filly gave a tiny smile. “Five percent discount...” That was how she lived, by what the world owed her and what she owed the world.

The door to the room occupied by P-21 and Scotch Tape was open. The pair slept side by side with P-21 holding her safely in his hooves. They slept the sleep of the secure, the happy, the loved. The ghost couldn't help but smile as she looked down at the pair. They endured simply through being. Though hardship had battered both, they'd weathered it, father and daughter alike, with caring and concern. He'd given her security and affirmation. She'd given him hope.

Next door, in Rampage's old room, LittlePip's friends rested. Calamity snored blissfully next to a Velvet who seemed to have adapted to it. Ditzzy's family had refused to stay away where it was safe, arriving at the end of the party. Lionheart, Silver Belle, and the curious pink-eyed mouse lodged in the wagon, barely visible outside the window. What did ghouls do when the living slept? Did they walk among the sleeping like ghosts: enviously, hungrily, wistfully? Homage lay curled up, her back

to Calamity, a pair of headphones covering her ears and plugged into the PipBuck she wore. Tears still lingered in the corners of her eyes as she slept, music a poor substitute for the warmth of the mare she loved.

The ghost ascended. There were others outside who kept watch and would give warning when trouble came. Outside the upstairs door, barely muted giggles could be heard. "... want to continue your research?" Tenebra said from within.

"I think that, with all I've learned from Triage, Rover, and the Project Steelpony notes, I could help ponies all across the Hoof. Maybe the Wasteland. Cybernetics are a double-edged sword, but if we're careful, the potential for good is phenomenal," Glory said.

"If it grants Father vision again," Tenebra murmured, "I suppose it is okay." Silence for a few seconds and a soft sigh. "Do you think you could help my... attacks... with some device?"

"Maybe. I think so. I'd be glad to find out. You didn't have an attack our last time," Glory giggled again. "I guess I didn't do a good job..."

"You were wonderful," Tenebra countered at once. "Though I'm glad you stopped trying to tie me up. And it was nice to do it without... well... everything. Whisper often tried to trigger an attack at her 'parties'. It was... aggravating... unlike this," she continued, followed by the sounds of kissing. The ghost rose, to leave them to their privacy. Then, "And you can help Blackjack, too." The ghost froze, silence pouring out from under the door. "I know you still care for her. I see how you look at her," Tenebra pressed.

"Blackjack... needs to get through this. I can't be both her special somepony and come along and help her. She gets distracted, and I don't want to compromise her. When everything is all done... when it's all done, then we'll see," Glory said. "We have to finish this. I'll do whatever I can so that she can be done and finally take the rest she deserves."

"And me?" Tenebra asked in a tiny, barely perceptible voice.

"You..." Glory was silent for a moment, "You're more than just a rebound, Tenebra. I like you. I'd like this thing we have to be more." A soft sigh. "Blackjack's got the biggest heart in the Wasteland. I'm sure she'll understand."

"Maybe the three of us?" Tenebra asked.

"Not you too," Glory groaned, then relented. "Maybe. Maybe something might work out. But it'll be tomorrow. Everything will be settled, one way or another, tomorrow."

A soft sigh. A gentle kiss. A rustling of sheets. Silence broken only by the longing in the air.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow... the ghost walked to the last room, gaze sweeping over the cardboard boxes, the desk in the corner which held the IF-88, and the tousled bed. Tomorrow... time marched endlessly onward in plodding steps from now to the ending of the universe. What folly had it witnessed? What cruelties? What joys? What sorrows? And if the grand totality of the events of the universe were tallied, which would ultimately predominate?

In the window, the ghost beheld herself. White. Red. Black. A blurred panoply. So different from the mare who'd been birthed in the depths of a damned stable, blissfully ignorant of its wretchedness. She'd come full circle, but oh so much more worn for the passage. Pressing her brow to the cool glass, she stared through the warped and indistinct pane and into unknown darkness. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. What was the price to see tomorrow?

And could a ghost pay for the privilege?

"Bwackjack?" Boo asked behind me. I turned and saw her standing in the door, watching me with wide scared eyes. Not scared in general; I knew *that* expression too well. Boo's face showed an odd fear... for me? "You scared?"

"Me? Scared?" I said with a lazy grin I'd practiced so well. "No way, Boo. No," I lied as smoothly as I ever had before, but Boo trotted right up to me, put her hooves around me, and gave me a hug. "It'll be fine, Boo," I assured her.

"Mhmmm..." she replied, holding me tightly.

"Nothing to worry about," I said, now feeling awkward. "Easy peasy."

"Mhmmm..." she answered again. And once more I felt myself start to shake, and she murmured, "Don't die, Bwackjack."

"I'll try my best not to..." I started to say when my voice cracked and I swallowed hard. "I'm not going to..." Again, that lump in my throat silenced me. "Boo..."

"Don't die first, Bwackjack," she said as she pressed her face into my shoulder. The tremors increased as her words pierced me. Dying first. It was like LittlePip's Mint-al addiction; if tomorrow didn't go as perfectly as it possibly could, some of us were going to die. Who would be first? P-21? Glory? Scotch Tape? Boo? Any answer other than me tore me to my core. And that insidious part of myself that had always held me back, which had been fed by Psalm's own torments, now whispered about

how noble it would be for me to sacrifice myself for my friends. Give myself first. Make sure I died first. Then. . . then I wouldn't have to see. . . who died next.

Lacunae's sad smile filled my memory, and I hated her, envied her. Nobly sacrificing herself for others so that her race would have a chance, giving back all the memories that made up her being. How dare she go first? Why couldn't it have been me?

Dying last. . . sucked. Was it any wonder Twist ripped the talisman from her chest to save Peppermint?

"No pony is going to die, Boo," I told her, sniffing, the words halfway between a promise and a prayer. "It's going to be like LittlePip's fight. We're going to go out there and kick flank, get my body back, and save the world. Just like LittlePip."

Boo said nothing. She didn't have to. She just held me tight, because right then I needed to be held.

Just two ghosts, comforting each other.

Then the door swung wide as if more specters were coming to the party, and for a moment I stared at the darkness on the other side. Then it spoke, low and soft. "Don't shoot." The darkness shimmered and dropped, and from it stepped Lancer. He looked horrible. Gaunt and exhausted, with fresh scars crossing his striped hide. But he still carried himself with determination. "It's been a while, Maiden."

"A bit. Still cursed?" I asked lightly.

"We are all cursed," he answered with a small smile. "Some more than others," he added as he stepped in, and there was a second shimmer revealing Sekashi. A second later, a lump on her back slipped out from under the cloak and onto the floor, revealing Majina.

She rushed to me, looking a little better than her son, and embraced me. "I know a funny story about a silly mare who fights great evil, but I fear how the story ends."

Majina tapped her mother's shoulder, waited for her to turn so she could watch the filly's lips, then took a deep breath and explained, "Well duh, Mama. It ends with pzow pzow, vroom, boom, and then yay! Any other ending would be stupid."

"I sure hope so," I said as I addressed the trio. "Come to join the fight?"

My question wiped the smiles from their faces. "No, Blackjack. We have come to take you to the fight," he said gravely.

"What do you mean?" I asked, a chill running along my mane. "She's leaving in a

few hours.”

The three of them regarded each other gravely. “No Blackjack. She is early. Your copy is leaving within the hour.”

Star House filled with yells and shouts as I went from door to door, rousing everyone and shouting for them to get ready. Lancer followed in my wake as everypony scrambled in the panic. Goldenblood entered from outside, took stock of the madness, and immediately relayed to Big Daddy and General Stormchaser that it was happening now, whether the soldiers at Paradise Mall were ready or not.

“We were told it’d take hours to fuel the rockets. That it was too dangerous to fill them too soon,” I shouted as I checked the drum magazines to the shotgun.

“It is not a danger if you force the ghouls to fuel them at gunpoint and you are not concerned with a few rockets exploding, especially if you know you can move before your enemies,” Lancer called after us. “They lost two of the older rockets, but the rest are still functional. Father has been generous providing your copy with parts to restore them, and forcing the Propoli to repair them.”

“Is the Remnant still following him?” I asked, turning to Scotch Tape as I saw the filly scrambling for some healing potions. “Make sure they’re all good. We don’t want any that have been sucked dry by Enervation.”

“Right!” Scotch Tape shouted back as she flicked through them one by one, discarding a few that were too pale to be any good.

“The Remnant has been completely sidelined by the Brood. Father has taken them out of the fight, moved our people back to the staging depot for our safety. The few at the launch center were forced to come. I doubt the majority know he is working with your copy,” Lancer said as he followed in my wake.

The staging depot that was being targeted by Storm Chaser. “Why didn’t we have any warning?” I snapped.

“Your pegasi are good scouts, but the Brood has cyberpony unicorns with wings. It’s impossible for them to get close enough to see,” Lancer said tersely.

“Got everything?” Velvet Remedy asked Calamity.

“Let’s see. Got my bardin’. Got my guns. Got my ammo.” He blinked and then looked around. “Muh hat! Where’s my hat?”

“On your head, Calamity,” Homage replied as she checked a disintegration defender pistol.

“Oh, right,” he replied, relaxing. “I’m good.”

“Do the Legate and Cognitum know this is Blackjack?” P-21 asked as he fell in beside Lancer.

“Thankfully no,” Sekashi said. “I read their lips though my son’s scope. They think this is a ploy by Big Daddy and his allies to seize power. That you are just a particularly skilled imposter and a patsy to them. They think you are attacking to kill them, and will attack soon.”

“Does the Remnant know that the Legate is Starkatter?” I asked as we stepped outside. My statement didn’t prompt shock from the three. “You knew, didn’t you?” I asked Sekashi.

The mare balked. “There is a story of a mare whose husband was burned. When he healed, the black marks were as red as blood. She watched him warily but told her fears to none. Then, one day, in the night as she did her duty as his mare, she asked he remove the skull he wore, for love cannot thrive amidst the bones of the dead. He did so, for of his wives, she had the sweetest of silver tongues. What he did not know was that she wore a charm to help see in the dark, and saw his cursed marks. She told his other wives, and they repeated the trick. When they learned what he was, they tried to flee. He could not go after them himself, so he sent his most devoted son after them.

Lancer had the decency to appear ashamed as he turned away. “I was so proud he picked me,” he murmured, then looked at his mother a moment. They shared a smile, and he continued, facing me, “I have tried to spread the word, but they are ever skeptical. The Legate serving the stars above? It is more than they will accept.”

“I hope they change their minds soon,” I said as we trotted out. If we were fighting for the future of the world, I hoped the zebras didn’t miss out on it because they blindly followed their leaders. Xenith, according to Calamity, was going to try to get zebras from Glyphmark to come to the fight, but none had arrived yet.

Outside, the chaos was rippling like a wave down towards Chapel. No, not chaos. Action. Most ponies knew where they had to go. Those that didn’t were those who had come to Chapel for sanctuary: the weak, sick, and helpless.

“You have to get the Remnant to leave their places at the depot and come to the space center. If they see what he’s doing with their own eyes, they have to accept it. Even if I have to blast that skull off his face and show everyone his marks myself,” I said with a frown. So much planning had been done for Cognitum that I had

forgotten there was an immortal fighter with scary star powers pitted against me. One that would be righteously pissed when he found out I was still alive. “You’ve got to get them out of there, though. There’s a good chance that, one way or another, that depot is getting taken out, either by Raptor or megaspell.”

“Irony,” Lancer said with a touch of bitterness, “that the Maiden of the Stars would care more for my own people than our leader.”

I sighed and gave him a half smile. “You know he made that up, don’t you?” All three blinked at me in surprise. “The whole Maiden prophesy thing. He used it to... um... manipulate people,” I said delicately.

“My husband may make light of many things, but no zebra, not even the Starkatteri, would make up such a thing,” Sekashi said gravely. “The Maiden of the Stars will exist, and she will strike down the city of evil. We thought it your Princess Luna. Perhaps she may still be. Prophecies may be manipulated. Exploited. But they always, always matter.”

“Even if they are made by a monster like my father,” Lancer added.

He started to turn away, but I touched his shoulder with a hoof and stopped him. “You are a better person than your father, Lancer. You know that, right?”

Lancer blinked, then gave a weary smile. “I know so, but it remains for me to prove it.”

I quickly trotted them to where Ditzzy and Lionheart seemed to be having a heated debate over whether or not Ditzzy should remain at Star House. After a brief discussion, I told them where I needed them to take Lancer and his family. Lionheart swore upon the soul of Princess Luna at thunderous volume that he could get them there safely. I didn’t inform him of where that soul currently resided, but then, my ears were ringing.

As they left, Goldenblood approached me. Of all the ponies in a rush, he appeared the most cool and collected. “I’d feared she might try this. Luna was always full of surprises, and she was *sane*.” He lifted his PipBuck, checked it, then looked around. “We were going to start operations in two hours. There’s no way to get you to our forces at the mall and get them moving in time to prevent the launch. It takes time getting three hundred mixed murderers, soldiers, volunteers, and draftees to act in concert, even if they’re only moving five miles. We’re going to have to improvise.” He paused, and for one moment I saw a crack form in his cool façade. “Blackjack... are you—”

I silenced him with a hoof. "I'm not sure about anything, Goldenblood, but I think you're going to be fine. Keep everypony alive, and try to save as many lives as you can. You want to make up for your crimes, this is your chance."

He swallowed, and then his features smoothed over as if he hadn't been upset in the slightest. "Of course." He looked over to where the alicorn trios were teleporting ponies. "Fortunately, Glory, Storm Chaser, and Velvet have worked out a plan B. It may save all our lives."

"Plan B's are good," I answered. "Listen, if everything goes bad, there's a secret weapon I want you to know about." I leaned in, whispered it into his ear, and was rewarded with something utterly beautiful: an expression of profound bafflement. Whisper leaned in eagerly, almost bouncing on her hooves, and I gave her a flat glare. "No. It's not another megaspell. This time."

The yellow pegasus sighed and rolled her eyes. "Damn it. I miss out on everything," she said, pouting as Stygius gave her a consoling pat.

Goldenblood's face still showed doubts. "Blackjack, are you—" he started to say, but I cut him off with a wave of my hoof.

"Enh! It'll work," I said solemnly.

"But—"

"Enh!" I repeated even louder and with another hoof wave. "It'll work just fine."

"How can—"

"ENNNNNNNHHHHH!" I said, waving both hooves in his face. "Trust me! It'll work."

I stared at him with such an earnest grin that he finally relented.

"Blackjack!" Glory called from where a trio of alicorns waited. P-21, Scotch Tape, and Boo all stood there with varying expressions of impatience, worry, and eagerness. "Let's hurry. The alicorns are going to teleport us over the roof of the Luna Space Center." That didn't seem like such a good idea given that there were airships, pegasi, and flying Brood that would see the flash of our arrival in the middle of the night, but I trusted the ponies who'd planned this.

"What about Calamity, Homage, and Velvet?" I asked, gesturing back at the house.

"They'll catch up," Glory said as I reached her. Then she held up a harness attached to a backpack. "Put this on."

"What is it?" I asked as I magically shrugged into it. All my friends, save Glory, were

already wearing ones like them. We'd also made sure that all of us had PipBucks and broadcasters like the rest of the battle leaders. Sure, Boo didn't know how to use it, but we could talk to her and find her a little easier if she disappeared. Given all the spare PipBucks in 99... well, I was glad they didn't smell of chlorine.

"Something that will help us get onto the roof if Plan B doesn't work," Glory said.

"What exactly is Plan B?" I asked with a frown.

"The alicorns can't teleport you to the general area of the Luna Space Center, since in all our hapless wandering, we never actually got down there. So Plan B. It's dark, so the alicorns will teleport us to a... position close enough to use a night vision scope to see where they need to teleport to directly." She reached down and tugged on my straps, tightening them. "If we can't do that either... eh... Hopefully, these earth pony contraptions will work right. The one we tested did, but... don't worry about it, Blackjack."

Don't worry about it? Last time she'd told me that I'd woken up half machine! "Wait? What earth pony contrap—" I started to say when the world disappeared in a purple flash.

We were over the Luna Space Center.

Way over.

The entire Hoof stretched out around me, a great concave bowl with the inky black of the reservoir and the Hoofington River behind us. I could see it all lit by the full moon. I'd seen it before when I was rushing around outside of Star House, but I hadn't *noticed* it; I was too busy. Not now. There was not a single cloud anywhere in the sky over Hoofington. The trio of alicorns suspended us easily in a telekinetic bubble as we hovered over a gigantic monolith of a building that had to be the Luna Space Center. It was shaped like a crescent, the points facing west, with sloped concrete walls. The area surrounded by the crescent was paved and filled with a complicated tangle of rail lines and turntables, pipes in shadowed trenches, pits, and scorch marks. Most prominent were the six sturdy concrete pads, a central one circled by five others, occupied by towers of metal, four floodlit and two dark. Every inch of the surrounding terrain was lit up by bonfires, flares, and spotlights, and in three places I saw the bulky outlines of double-barreled tanks. Two Raptors, the *Blizzard* and *Sirocco*, circled in the sky out away from the building. Suddenly I had a deep appreciation of the cesspit that we were all going to be dunked in.

Above, the skies were clear and dark, the stars shining down at me. The stars... I stared up at them with a sense of wonder. I'd seen the sun and the moon, but peering out into that sea of blackness, I could only marvel at their beauty. They seemed to be greeting me; zebras might think that stars were bad, and the Eater of Souls proved that some truly were, but I couldn't believe they *all* were. Not all of them. So many stars amidst so much blackness... I felt tears on my cheeks.

P-21 pressed a forehoof against one of mine, and I looked over at him, seeing a confident smile that made me forget that I was far above the world and snuffed out any fears of splatting before they could form. Then Boo took my other forehoof, and Scotch Tape pulled herself along my body to a position across from me, joining her hooves with Boo and P-21. Glory hovered beside me, and I broke my hold on Boo's hoof to make room for her. If only Rampage had been here...

Okay. This wasn't so bad. Once the alicorns had a decent view of the roof, they'd teleport down. That was Plan B, right? Hard to tell given what defenses there might be, given how high we were. Well... we'd just have to move fast. Hopefully it wouldn't be too rough. Too bad there weren't any blue alicorns with... wait? Where *were* the blues? There had to be some travelling with Velvet.

Suddenly there were flashes far below, clouds of dust and smoke rising from them. Flares burst to light like harsh, artificial stars, and I saw the horde spilling from the edge of the light towards the space center. A veritable flood of tiny shapes I imagined as gangers, Steel Rangers, and anypony else with guns, barding, and a willingness to fight poured from the darkness. First hundreds and then thousands of attackers. I gaped in shock. Where had they all come from? If you armed every stallion, mare, and foal in the Hoof, you still wouldn't have that many attackers streaking out in thick streams, firing wildly as they ran. From the silent night came the rumble of far-distant gunfire, then the faint crumps of explosions I realized I'd seen over ten seconds ago as the first sign of the battle.

My blood ran cold. It was suicide. An undisciplined slaughter. As one, the airships and tanks opened up, followed by a deluge of bullets from the defending infantry that would rip the attackers to pieces. How could Big Daddy be so reckless and callous to the casualties of such a charge? Whole platoons of ponies were torn to pieces in their mad charge. Dust cast weird shadows across the open space, and the light danced wildly about as they raced along. And still they were coming, more and more charging and charging and charging and...

Wait a minute? I scowled as I watched the endless charge. There was something wrong here. Nopony would ever charge so recklessly forward seeing the

people ahead of them being blown to bits. And looking from above, there was a decided pattern to the rushing soldiers. I focused and saw a distinct bright blue raider charge through a hail of gunfire, disappear in an explosion, and collapse into a crater. Twenty seconds later, the same blue raider appeared at the edge of the light, charged, and collapsed into the same crater.

I gaped at the nearest alicorn. The green winked at me and smiled. "One of the blues was an Applewood special effects manager for the Ministry of Image. We actually planned on using this trick against Red Eye when he turned against us." Her smile faded a little. "Never expected one pony would break us."

"But you're not mad at Litt... the Lightbringer?" I asked. Her expression turned wistful.

"Some are. It's complicated. Mother helped many of us with the confusion. Some are angry, while others wish to replace the Goddess. But I see it as a second chance. And I have my sister to help me." The other green alicorn smiled as well, rolling her eyes with a snort. "Even if she's not as fond of the unchanged as I."

"I'm not your sister. I was a seventy-nine-year-old granny looking to retire in a week," she grumbled. "You're an intern who shouldn't have even been at Maripony that day."

"I was trying to score points with Gestalt for my M.A.S. application. I didn't know it was going to turn me into this, big sis," she said with a teasing grin, earning a sour snort from the other green alicorn.

"Greens," the purple alicorn said with a little roll of her eyes. She received a simultaneous sticking out of tongues in return, followed by the 'older' green glaring in annoyance at the 'younger', sheepishly grinning green.

Fascinating as alicornosity was post-Goddess, I tried to focus on the fight way way way below while trying to ignore the fact the ground was way way way below. While the air was thin and chilly, I didn't feel as if I was going to pass out. Definitely didn't want to stay up here for hours, though. "So if those are all illusions, where are the real fighters?" I asked.

Suddenly the ground at the edge of the concrete exploded in a half dozen places, and sand dogs and earth pony Reapers raced out. Two actually emerged behind the Brood lines, and they tore into their flanks with glee. In the gaps between illusions, invisibility spells were dropped, and the attackers fanned out in a swarm to hit the Brood as they whirled to deal with the threat on both sides. The tanks disappeared behind cloaks of continuously exploding fireworks. If they were dazzling up here, I

wondered how the tank crews fared. From higher up but further away, two Raptors appeared as if by magic, the massed invisibility spells on them torn away by the power of outgoing disintegration cannon fire.

If we got through this, I intended to send a bottle of Wild Pegasus to every alicorn I could. Without their magic, we simply couldn't have done this.

"Okay! Take us in!" I said. Cognitum wouldn't wait long before launching with a full-on attack going on.

There was flash and a sense just short of smashing every atom in my body against a stone wall. "Ow..." The purple shuddered. "I'm afraid we cannot."

"Can't? What do you mean can't? Is there a Fade shield in the way?" I asked.

"No. Something magical is disrupting the spell," the purple said, pained. Probably some zebra trick, I guessed, or nasty Starkatter magic. She looked to Glory. "Plan C?" Wait? What's this? Glory gave a solemn nod.

"Wait? What's plan Ceeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!" I screamed as the telekinetic field holding us disappeared.

"Good luck!" the younger green yelled down after us. Then the three disappeared in a flash. Not that I was particularly paying attention to them at that point; I was a bit preoccupied by how very, very quickly the dark rooftop of the Luna Space Center was getting bigger. The rockets looked like spikes. I could see the hard ground and I could imagine myself falling faster and faster till I transformed into thin paste and...

I heard laughter and glanced over at Scotch Tape waving her hooves out at her sides. "I'm a pegasus!" she shrieked, barely audible over the rushing wind in my hair. I saw P-21 smiling too, and Boo seeming also at ease. There was only one explanation: my friends were all insane!

Then Glory reached behind me and pulled a cord. The backpack flipped open, a little cloth coming out, catching the air, and then dragging out a giant pink chute. It unfolded and expanded into a round parachute with Pinkie Pie's grinning face emblazoned across it. P-21's chute popped open, then Scotch Tape's and finally Boo's. Together, we slowed, drifting towards the great building. Glory gave me a sympathetic smile as my eyes bulged, my pulse raced, and my mane and tail stood out in every direction.

"Nice! They all worked," Glory said as she drifted down next to me. "I was afraid I was going to have to catch you."

“Why didn’t you tell me this was plan C?” I asked.

“Because you would have insisted on plan D, which would have probably have involved either some horrible attempt to parlay our way in, intruding through some horrible muck-filled pipes, or attempting to charge the lines.”

“Because those are all sane plans!” I countered as we drifted down. Finally, though, my panic abated to the point of rational thought. “...Okay. Seriously, this was genius, but I really would have loved trying to talk my way in at gunpoint.”

“I know,” she said.

We continued our slow descent in silence; fortunately, everyone seemed to be too busy to notice and shoot us. “Keep your knees unlocked and roll as you land,” Glory warned as we approached the rooftop. It wasn’t completely abandoned; there were Brood squads firing down from the elevated edge. She darted down to the closest one and, just as one of the cyberzebras noticed something and started to turn, opened up with Pew-Pew. Beams of energy transformed the first three zebras into glittering heaps of blue, green, and red dust. She’d come a long way from the mare I’d found hiding under a floor.

Up close, it was clear that Luna Space Center had been hit by some heavy firepower in the past. The top was cratered, and in some places the blast had overwhelmed the fortification and torn great holes through to lower levels. This building was just as tough as Maripony, designed to take a beating from within and without, but parts of it were every bit as ruined as the rest of the Wasteland. Glory had wafted us towards a large intact section of roof rather than a hole filled with rubble and jagged rebar, for which I was grateful. This was going to be hard enough already, especially if I couldn’t teleport.

I landed more or less in a heap, which wasn’t surprising given that I had no practice with the ‘unlock your knees and roll’ thing. With the battle raging around the building, I hoped our own melee here would go unnoticed a little longer. I tried to get to my hooves, levitate up the Ironpony — I needed a damned name for the thing! All badass guns had special names! — and give Glory some support, but the gun was tangled in the parachute canopy, my legs got hung up on the strings, and I fell on my face with a yelp on the rough concrete.

“This is not how I wanted to start this morning,” I muttered.

Boo charged forward as well, and a frisson shot up my spine. What was she doing? She didn’t have a gun or barding! One of the Brood turned his guns towards her,

and I shouted a warning, about to fire a magic bullet. Then the Brood's magazine inexplicably ejected as the automatic rifle jammed. Boo dropped and rolled like a log, tripping the Brood and sending it sprawling on its face. How... Then Scotch Tape leapt out from behind some vent ducts and bashed it in the head with her wrench once, then again.

"I got one!" she said proudly, not noticing the two other Brood turning their weapons on her. The ground beneath them suddenly exploded, the grenade raising the cyberzebras off the ground with the force of the blast. She whirled as P-21 stepped out from... well, wherever he usually came from... and grinned sheepishly. "Oopsie."

"Tally up when the fighting's done. That one's getting up again," he told her with a slightly tense smile. The cyberzebra she'd clubbed began to stir, and she pulled out a small baton and jammed it into the base of the Brood's skull. There was a pop and sizzle and a flash of sparks, and it went still. "Now you can count it." Soon the remaining Brood in this area of the roof were eliminated by Glory's beam gun, Scotch's little shock prod, Boo's utterly baffling little kicks and trips, and two more judicious grenades.

"Nice job, Boo," Scotch Tape told her. "Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

"Not fightin'. Playin'. Discord showed me how." Little statements like that got the oddest looks, but now wasn't the time for elaboration.

Glory trotted up to where I was still tangled up in the lines. She looked down at me with a patient, almost maternal smile. "Blackjack. I broke up with you, remember? Stop trying to tempt me."

I grinned up at her. "Hey. I'm nothing if not persistent."

She sighed, glancing over at P-21. He wore a composed mask that barely hid his annoyance. She shook her head. "Talk to me about that tomorrow, Blackjack. Let's just get through today."

"You bet," I said, certain that with enough time I'd work something out. Maybe... visitation? P-21 during the weekdays and Glory on the weekends? I could teleport from Star House to the Citadel or Skyport. If that wasn't reason to live, I couldn't think of one better. And if we couldn't work it out, it wouldn't be for lack of trying. Tomorrow. "Now... um... untangle me?"

Soon as I was free, we all moved to the inner edge of the roof, looking down at the launch area embraced by the building. I didn't know much about rocket stuff, but it seemed like a clever place to launch from; the high, thick building was a formidable

defense against anything smaller than a balefire bomb or megaspell. Even a Raptor would have to get almost directly above the space center to make an effective attack on the launchpads. The gap was the only breach in the defense, and it was most heavily protected with a tank in front of it and Brood guarding the tips of the opening.

In the middle was the pentagonal arrangement of launchpads with their rockets. The largest and grandest stood on the sixth pad in the center of the pentagon, a wonder of arcane science and technomagical art. The white metal of its skin bore the tarnish of two centuries of neglect, but, seeing it here so close and in person, bathed in the glow of floodlights and standing next to a tower of girders, pipes, and catwalks, it was still an awesome sight. Unlike the rockets I'd seen in memories and pictures, it had no separate boosters; the hull flowed smoothly down from the pointed nose to the broad base. The other rockets were smaller, the less advanced but still elegant models with their four aerodynamic boosters and launch towers that surrounded and embraced them instead of just standing alongside, wreathed in frigid mist and bearing more signs of slapdash repair. I also had a clearer view of the two destroyed pads; one looked as if the rocket and its support tower had exploded and partially melted into single shards of tortured metal. The other was covered in frost, shattered corpses scattered around its base. Clearly, Goldenblood hadn't been mistaken about the risk of hasty fueling.

"But where is Cognitum?" I asked, trying to pick her out from all the activity. Then I glanced over at Scotch Tape peering through a pair of binoculars. I pursed my lips at her remembering to bring something I'd forgotten, then snagged them from her, ignoring her protest of annoyance. I swept the field with the glasses. If she was down there at all, she had to be near the biggest rocket.

"Oh," I murmured as I spotted her.

"Oh what?" Glory asked. I passed her the binoculars and pointed my hoof. She peered through, and a second later: "Oh. My." She passed them to the side, flushing. P-21 took them next, and both his eyebrows arched in surprise, then furrowed. He passed them limply back to Scotch Tape, but Boo intercepted them and looked as well. . . at the wrong place, but still, she was trying.

"Let me see!" Scotch Tape demanded. "I'm the one who remembered to bring them!" Boo returned them to her, and she stared around the field. Then her jaw dropped. "Whoa. Wicked," she whispered as she passed them back to me.

"Yeah, wicked," I said as I looked again. What had she done to my body? The black armor, based on Shadowbolt power armor, now had a more sleek and smooth

appearance to it, as if the metal limbs were actual flesh, sinews of cable visible where the metallic... *skin* parted. What actual armor plates remained appeared intricately wrought and ornate, tipped with spikes. The black metal now had a faint purplish coloration to it, and there was no attempt to maintain my old cutie mark engraving or that of the Crusaders' filly or 'Security'. In place of mane and tail, red and black striped magic blew, snapping like flame behind her. A crown of burnished silver and rubies rest atop her head. She appeared the perfect amalgamation of magic, machine, and mare. And also very, very evil.

A small escort of diminutive black and red gun robots flitted about her on levitation talismans, on constant vigil for something to shoot. Suddenly, I had to wonder if just a spark grenade would be enough to take her out. My earlier plan seemed to be quite shaky at this point.

Next to her, the Legate seemed positively ordinary. He still had his hooves wrapped in the glyph-marked cloths and wore the skull, but those now seemed almost amusing in comparison to Cognitum. I could see Cognitum's lips moving. . . what were they saying?

"Give me a minute," I said as I pulled out the Perceptitron and jammed it on my head. I entered my old PipBuck tag and let the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Not only did she appear different, but she felt. . . odd. This was my old body, and yet not. I could feel the strange, smooth metal limbs far more intimately than I had the old ones, which had been more like phantom limbs. There was a pulse, but it was a pulse of energy. Everything felt tight and oversensitive. I could now feel the pressure of my baby as a constant sensation punctuated by slight movements and tiny discomforts.

". . . foals have shown their faces at last," the Legate was saying. "They don't realize how their factions are already falling apart. The Steel Rangers in Stable 99 are now reinforcing your Harbingers, as are certain Reapers and gangs. Their attack is a desperate gamble." She stared down at the smaller zebra stallion. "When you return, the Hoof, then all the Wasteland, will kneel to you."

"Be that as it may, we should have gotten word from Steel Rain by now. I dislike that I have so little direct control at this point. Before, when I wanted to act, I simply *did*. Now, I must give orders. It is frightfully limiting," Cognitum said in a voice that sounded odd. She sat and stroked a metal hoof idly over her belly. "I do not like it, but if this is how I must rule again, so be it."

“Are you still determined to keep those lumps of tissue inside you?” the Legate asked, lip curling.

“Do not bring that up again! You serve me, remember?” she snapped. “These babies... my babies... I did not get to have one before. My children will love me. I will raise them, and in time, all of Equestria will be theirs! All the world!”

I wished I could see his face behind that skull. “Well, good luck with that,” he said dryly. “You should depart soon. Before the Raptors get close enough to target the rockets.”

“I will leave when I am good and ready. Do not presume to tell me otherwise,” Cognitum snapped, turning to regard the rockets. “I will go to the moon once more, alter the trajectory, and the Core shall be reborn. Greater than any ever imagined!” she proclaimed. “My Harbingers will put down these rebellious subjects and your puppets.” She purred softly. “I look forward to seeing their faces when I catch this fraud they’re calling Blackjack and tear her to pieces before their eyes.”

“Of course, o Goddess of Equestria,” he said with a bow of his head. “And then I shall be rewarded,” he said with a chuckle. “We shall all get precisely what we deserve.”

“Oh yes,” she replied, smiling beatifically at him. She turned and flew easily up to the open hatch at the top of the rocket, her drones following, where a Harbinger awaited in combat armor. “As soon as we go, kill him. Then direct my people to stamp out the Brood and Remnant for good. Hoarfrost and Afterburner have their instructions to assist in the elimination. I’ll not have him in place with his minions.” The Harbinger saluted and trotted back down the steps. She hissed in annoyance. “What is Steel Rain up to? He should have checked in on these disturbances in the Core hours ago.”

She stepped into a small chamber with a dozen reclining seats spaced around the edges, two rings of six each. In the center of the room, two seats surrounded by controls and screens stood by a narrow spiral staircase leading down. Instead of pilots, a cobbled-together assembly of computer hardware was strapped and taped into them with wires running into gaping access panels on the consoles. A battered ghoulish unicorn in a torn and faded flight suit worked frantically on the jury-rigged system, unscrewing another access panel as I watched. “Are the flight controls ready?”

“Soon. Soon! Fifteen, twenty minutes tops. But is very risky. These computers ran flight simulations, not actual rockets,” he rasped. No surprise that Cognitum would

trust a machine pilot over a pony.

“Well, they’d better work. If they don’t, I’ll teleport to safety, and then I’ll come down here and squish the rest of you into undead jam, do you understand?” Cognitum asked him sharply, the hovering gun pods all orienting on him.

“Yes. Yes. They’ll work! They’ll work!” the ghoul squawked, going back to furiously wiring the machines. “Once they’re active, we can signal control room to start launch.”

“Good. If I have to launch these things manually, I’ll start them with you,” she replied dismissively as the ghoul worked his mouth silently, clearly trying to work out the threat. She took a seat, sitting back and rubbing her shiny black tummy. “I’ll save the world for you, my babies. For all my subjects. For everyone.” Then she caught the ghoul staring at her. “Work!” she snapped furiously.

oooOOOooo

I severed the connection. “We have fifteen or twenty minutes,” I said, trying to stem my rage from her talking about ‘her’ babies. Cognitum was a crazy program with a dead princess’s soul jammed inside her. It was my body and my baby. Babies! More than one! Was my happiness doubled, or my fear? Both. “The... baby is okay,” I said to P-21 as I packed the Perceptitron away.

A relieved smile spread across his face. “What’s the plan?”

“Get to the middle rocket. Get her stunned. Swap me in for her. Go to the moon and stop Horizons. Easy.” I then looked at the dozens, if not hundreds, of Brood and Harbinger soldiers all over the launch field. “Okay... Maybe not quite easy.” I took a risk and tried to tele—

“Blackjack? Are you okay?” Scotch Tape asked as I blinked up at my friends. Small wonder the purple alicorn hadn’t been able to teleport down here.

“No. Just... teleporting is out.” I glanced at Glory and P-21. “Any ideas?”

Both of them shook their heads, but Scotch Tape said, “Emergency releases.” Suddenly all eyes were on her, and she balked. “Well, they had to make safeties for the fueling. If they had to dump the fuel for a fire or an attack or something, they’d need a way to do so remotely and quickly. If it doesn’t have any fuel, it can’t launch.” She gestured out towards the large gap in the crescent. “Probably vents way out there.”

“Scotch, you’re a genius!” I said as I grinned at the rocket. “If we can vent some of the fuel, they’ll have to stop and refill it. Cognitum’s not going to risk getting stuck on

the moon. And if it does vent way out there, I think it'll provide a heck of a distraction when it all goes up." I was imagining a great geyser of flamer fuel raining down on the Brood forces. "We vent the fuel, get inside the rocket amidst all the confusion, take her out with a well-placed spark grenade or that prod of yours, and then let them refill the rocket and go!"

"Anypony else seeing the great big gaping holes in that plan?" Glory asked with a smile.

"Sure," P-21 replied, "but when has that ever stopped us before?"

"Nothin' stops Bwackjack!" Boo agreed.

"Where would these emergency releases be?" I asked Scotch Tape.

"I dunno, but if it were me, I'd want at least one in their main control room and another right by the launch pad," the olive filly replied. "I mean, I don't know exactly where, but normally safeties are marked with great big orange and yellow signs, you know?"

"Plus, if we control the control room, that should buy us more time," Glory pointed out.

We moved out as one, running along the roof to the nearest intact stairwell. P-21 made short work of the lock, and we scampered down. "Keep an eye out for generators and guards," I said quietly. "They're going to need power to run these systems. The more noise, the better the odds are that's where we need to be."

Unfortunately, this was an absolutely gargantuan building. It would probably take an hour at *least* to walk all the way around it. Most of it was simply uninhabited, and I could feel the tick tick ticking of time. Any minute... any second... we'd hear the roar of the rockets launching, and then that would be it. Maybe we could somehow, some way, get the Elements of Harmony to banish me to the moon... but I doubted it.

I kept feeling the temptation to sing 'I am your enemy, come and kill me' so that we'd at least have some idea as to a direction. In one large boardroom, we encountered heaps of rotting ghouls, some of them still twitching; presumably these were the other inhabitants of what I assumed had been 'Rocket Town' before Cognitum arrived. There were disabled turret defenses and melted robots here and there, showing signs of the violent takeover.

Then we walked right into the Brood.

There were six of them, and soon as I stepped around the corner, they opened up at us. Glory cried out as several rounds struck her dragonhide flight jacket, and I felt the familiar thud of impacts absorbed by my operative barding. I didn't have time to wait for an explosive from P-21; I simply levitated up the Ironpony, flicked a switch, and pulled the trigger.

The half-dozen Brood were separated into metal and blood, the former falling in sparking, smoking heaps and the latter splattering the wall behind them as it was utterly resurfaced by lead. My shooting was shit; I just didn't have the LittlePip levels of telekinesis needed to control the damned thing, and the most I could do was try to keep it aimed 'that way'. And I hit 'that way'. In the space of a second, everything in that hall had been obliterated. Six meaty mounds of scrap where they'd stood, and two dozen shell casings littered the floor around me.

My barding's helmet protected my hearing well enough, but my friends wiggled their hooves in their ears, trying to get theirs back. I stared at the casings and the bloody lumps, smoke rising from the barrel. I felt the heat radiating against my face. I lifted the gun before me. "Okay. . ." I said breathlessly. "I hereby dub thee... Sexy!"

"Sexy," P-21 said flatly. "Really."

"What? Did you expect something more profound?" Glory asked with a smile.

"Hey. I can do profound," I said as I pouted at her. "And 'Sexy' is profound. It fucks the target over any leaves them a complete wreck afterwards."

"In that case, shouldn't you name it 'Blackjack'?" Scotch Tape asked. Suddenly I, P-21, and Glory were all varying degrees of embarrassed, and she snickered. "I win." Somefilly should have been left at Chapel...

I coughed, trying desperately to regain some dignity. "Okay. Full auto is excessive. Good to know." I swapped out the drum magazine and reloaded the first; Sexy was one hell of an ammo hog. The Brood had been so torn up by the barrage that P-21 didn't even try and search them for valuables. He'd need a sieve.

Much of the space center building seemed to be devoted to the public. We trotted through a large museum hall that put the building's foundation at the start of the war. No wonder it was located in one of the worst spots in Equestria. Then again, if you were going to repurpose rockets into ballistic missiles, maybe it wasn't so poorly placed. I ran past pictures of ponies testing model rockets on a field, then larger 'liquid fuel' rockets using alcohol and oxygen. Then rockets twice or three times the height of a pony.

Another hall seemed to be dedicated to rockets themselves rather than just the history of them, but it was mostly empty. Only models had been left behind, and a huge hole in the ceiling suggested that some of the rockets on the field had once occupied this hall. I felt a rising surge of panic in my throat. There should have been some kind of massive sign that read 'control room'! Or maybe a map with a convenient 'you are here' label. I was going to fail simply because I was lost.

"Boo!" I whirled on the white mare. "Which way do you think we should go?" She blinked her pale eyes in bafflement.

"Blackjack?" P-21 asked, just as perplexed.

"Just trust me on this!" I told him as I stared into her eyes. "Just pick which way."

She rubbed her chin and started counting. "Eenie, menie, miney, moe, catch a pony by its... that way," she said abruptly, pointing down a side hall that read 'Planetarium'.

"Blackjack? Are you sure?" Glory asked.

"Shh! Don't doubt the Boo!" I warned as I turned and raced in the direction she'd pointed. I burst through the double doors into a familiarly round room dominated by a complex projector in the middle. It was almost identical to the one at the Collegiate, though perhaps a little bit bigger. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I spotted an even smaller and more unassuming door with a large sign saying 'Warning: No unauthorized civilians allowed in Operations areas.'

"Excellent," I said, patting her on the head as we passed her, the mare suddenly halted, seeming uncertain. I looked back at her. "Everything okay?"

"It's the right way," she said as she stared up at the shadows of the great vault. "Just feels... spooky."

"Just keep an eye out for trouble, okay?" I said, keeping my eyes open as we moved through. I understood what she said, my eyes squinting into the dark pools between emergency lights. Damn, for the first time, I really missed not having glowy night vision eyes. "P-21, work your magic."

We crossed the round room to the far side, and P-21 knelt, starting to work on the lock when the double doors we'd entered suddenly slammed shut with a resounding boom, sealing Boo outside the planetarium. One by one the emergency lights went dark. Almost as one, we clicked on our PipBuck lamps, producing four little pools of wan amber light. Then there was a crackle from the center of the room, and one by one the projector lights popped on, the lights reflecting off the overhead dome in a sickly array of light.

“Ashur,” a mare whispered in the dark.

“Dagon,” hissed a second mare.

“Namtar,” moaned a third.

“Nibiru,” said a final, lighter voice.

In the pale light, four cloaked figures stood on the periphery of the room. Three adults and a foal, going by size. Given that they wore cloaks and spoke the names of freaky stars that made my mane crawl, I lifted Sexy to the closest of the four. It swung its hoof, and a pale blue streak of dust crossed the distance, coating the weapon. An instant later, an inch of ice flashed into being around it, transforming it from a firearm into an icy doorstep.

“The black star Ashur’s cold embrace overcomes your weak technology,” the mare said as she drew back her hood. The old zebra’s mane, stripes, and eyes were almost faded to nothing. Elsewhere in the line, the smallest of the four took out a piece of paper and dangled a crystal over it.

Glory snapped her gun down at the old zebra, but one of the others tossed a hoofful of crimson dust into the air. The cloud twisted and formed flaming serpents that streaked towards Glory and chased her around the projector. “Did you think we’d overlook your plans, little pretender? The stars warned us of your attempt,” she said as she pulled back her hood, showing a mare whose face was a mask of smooth burn keloid on which circular tattoos stood out as clear as day. “Dagon shall consume you!”

“I don’t have time for this!” I shouted as I pointed my horn at the cold zebra and fired a volley of S.A.T.S.-guided magic bullets at her head.

The filly let out a yell of alarm. “Block!”

Another hoofful of blue dust slashed through the air a moment before the volley hit, as if she’d been expecting it, and a thick wall of ice deflected each of my shots away. I stared at it, then at the filly, who gave a little smirk that said ‘what are you going to do about it?’

“We have eternity and more,” intoned a third, then looked at the filly. “Where is he?” she said in a voice like tar. The filly, not taking her face off the paper before her, pointed her free hoof over to the left. The elder mare snapped her hoof, and green dust whipped out like a comet, coalesced into an orb of energy, and exploded with a bright rainbow-green flash, revealing P-21 with a grenade in his hoof. All our PipBucks began to crackle madly at the radiation. The ghastly illumination showed

a mare's features which appeared distorted like soft wax. "The stars rot for eons, and you shall join them. Namtar demands it."

As my horn recharged, I tried to close the gap with the old zebra, but her funky blue dust kept stymying me. She turned the floor under me to slippery ice, sending me sprawling on my face, and dropped jagged frozen spurs the size of my hooves down at me. Fortunately, my telekinesis deflected them; LittlePip would have just rammed them right up the zebra's ass. Glory was still busy dodging the seeking snakes while the green one calmly kept trying to blow up P-21.

Scotch Tape blinked at the three adult zebras, then charged the only one her size. Without looking up from the paper, she jerked it aside at the last minute and left Scotch Tape sliding through empty air. "Hey, you! Fight me!" Scotch demanded. "Ain't ya got spooky star stuff to spout at me?"

"Yeah yeah. Nibiru curse you. Whatever," the zebra said, pulling back her hood enough to reveal a filly the same age. I was taken by how pretty she was for her age, despite the arcane markings on her delicate face. Even Scotch Tape gaped for a second. "Busy now."

"D-Don't you ignore me!" Scotch Tape yelled, her cheeks flaming, diving at her. Once again without looking up, the filly kicked back, planting her hoof upside Scotch's head. Scotch fell back, holding her head in her hooves, bit down on her wrench, and dove once more, swinging wildly. The little zebra thrust out her rear legs and braced herself against Scotch's head, holding the olive filly at bay as her mouth swung and her forehooves thrashed the air. "Gonna... beat you..."

"Told you. Busy now," she said as she looked at the old zebra. "Atropos, the signs don't make any sense. This may not be the Maiden, but Nibiru is going nuts here! I don't know who she is, but she's not a nopony." She shoved Scotch Tape away, her cloak flipping up around her shoulders. "And this one isn't helping!" she snapped as she kept scrying the paper. "...and stop staring at my butt!"

"Focus on the later, not the now, Pythia," the old zebra rasped.

"Finally! We will be ascendant after ten thousand years!" the scarred mare laughed as she tossed more incendiary powder up after Glory. With the flames seeking Glory under their own enchantments, the burned zebra was free to dance away from any of Pew-Pew's beams that happened to get near her. "We shall rule this world as is our right!"

The exploding green dust kept P-21 moving around the perimeter of the room. If

he got much closer to us, he could have risked us being caught in the baleful green explosions. Worse, the one time he moved closer to the old zebra with the ice, the filly snapped out a warning, and the old zebra whirled and covered him with a layer of hoarfrost while the mutated zebra nearly blasted me off my hooves.

“Kill them,” she said as she flung another hoofful of green dust. “I’ll feel better when the Maiden of the Stars is gone forever.” P-21 launched a grenade at her, but she detonated it in midair with more of that damned magic dust! I focused on the icy old zebra.

“Forever? That rocket is coming back, you know!” I yelled at them.

“And a balefire missile stands ready to greet her the instant she lands,” the one flinging red dust cackled. “One specially treated with our magics to disrupt any pitiful pony shield talismans she might try to defend herself with! She’ll be vaporized before she even realizes she was used! We shall rule forever!” the scarred zebra crowed.

“Shut up, Eurydale!” snapped the mutated balefire dust zebra. “Stop playing around. You’re making basic mistakes.”

But what the burned mare had said nearly halted me in my hooves. The Legate had a balefire missile? But of course he did; Xanthe had told me about the warhead, and he had the remaining missiles from Grimhoof. It made sense, too. Once Cognitum had fixed Tom’s trajectory, why risk combat with her? Let her come back triumphant and be vaporized as soon as she landed. Not even a cyberpony could survive that!

“And so who’s going to rule? Which of you gets to call the shots?” Glory called out.

“Why, all of us, together,” the old zebra chuckled. “Of course, the Legate will sit on the throne, and we will be the ones that actually get things done... and reap the benefits. Isn’t that the way it’s always been with powerful males?”

The littlest one kept struggling to focus on the paper and keep Scotch Tape at bay. It’d be impressive if we weren’t so pressed for time. She never took her eyes off the sheet before her nor dropped the dangling pendant, even as she dodged, sidestepped, backflipped, and pirouetted around Scotch’s wild charges. “This isn’t right, Scylla! I’m seeing shadows all over the future! Something is wrong.” Scotch Tape tried to get her hooves around one of the filly’s hindlegs, and the filly barely yanked it away in time. “And would someone get her off me? It’s hard enough to scry in the middle of a battle without this one distracting me!” She kicked back and nailed Scotch Tape in the face again, sending her staggering back across the floor

to trip and smack her head against the base of the projector.

“Fine,” the mutated Scylla said, then turned towards Scotch and lifted a hoofful of powder. “I’ll remove the distraction then.”

P-21, who already had a glowing ball of star magic sailing towards him, suddenly turned and launched himself at it. He rolled tight in a ball and hit the glowing dust as it started to flare, scattering it and forcing it to reform a second later behind him. The blast launched him straight into Scylla like a cannonball, smashing them both to the ground.

“Hah! Now who’s making rookie mistakes?” Eurydale crowed, and then she threw an enormous wad of the red powder into the air. The heat had set her mane on fire, but she didn’t seem to notice as she laughed, the airborne dust igniting in the shape of a dragon, growing larger and larger and filling the ceiling. “Fly! Fly! Fast as you can! There’s nowhere to run when all is aflame!” She laughed madly. The billowing fire caught Glory, and she covered her head as she tumbled towards the ground, feathers and tail aflame.

A moment later, there was pop and then a hiss as water poured down from ceiling sprinklers. The dragon roared in agony before melting away, and Eurydale shrieked as her glowing red powder suddenly became so much dull red mud. “No! No!” she cried as Glory rose to her hooves, beam gun clenched in her jaws. The zebra flung globs of the soaked powder at Glory as she approached. “Dagon! Dagon, burn her! Burn them all!” She teared up as she stared at the red goop running down her hooves. “Dagon, why have you forsaken me?”

Glory gave the burned mare a shooty look, and I wondered if this was going to be it: was she going to become an executioner? Eurydale pouted, scooping up balls of red muck and watching them dribble away. She sat in a red puddle. “Go away! Dagon will burn and consume you! He shall burn all the world to ash for daring his wra—”

Glory’s gray feathers were blackened and bent, her mane scorched, and her face distinctly ready to dust the zebra. Then she lunged and smashed her hooves against Eurydale’s head twice. “Shut! Up!” she snapped.

“Atropos!” the filly wailed. “I can’t see anything but shadows now! The stars won’t show me anything!”

The old mare said something in a voice that chilled me to my bones, and blue light struck the floor, a ring of frost flashing out from her. It ran up the walls and across

the ceiling, covering everything in ice. My friends and I were glued to the floor. "Enough," she growled. "This is over." Overhead, four long spears of ice started to form.

"I can tell you why you can't see the future," I said simply.

"Doubtful," she said grimly.

"The Legate is going to resurrect the Eater of Souls," I informed her.

There's nothing quite so funny as seeing an old person surprised. "Let me guess. The Starkatteri were going to rule the world, right? Brood. Core. Making pony and zebra alike bend their hooves to you?" Goddesses, it was Cognitum's routine, just to a different audience. "He's not. He's going to resurrect the Eater of Souls, and everything is going to be die. You. Me. But not him. He can't die, right?"

Atropos scowled thoughtfully, those lances of ice growing longer and longer. "You know nothing of what you speak. The ritual to do so would require hundreds of my tribe. We are all that remain, we five. We could never call down a star, nor would we be foolish enough to try a second time."

"You don't have to," I countered. "The Eater of Souls got a pony to bind a star to the stone that Cognitum is sending straight to the Core."

Again, that satisfying expression of shock... though it wasn't as funny the second time around. "Atropos", the small one said, "I'm seeing a gap in the shadows... but I don't know why." She stared at me. "Who are you?"

"Hush, Pythia," she growled, regarding me. At least the icy spears had stopped growing. "My people have never loved the Eater of Souls. We sought to use him for our own empowerment, for he is a *vast* source of power. We summoned a star once at his direction, and the reaction nearly broke the world in two. At the last moment, my ancestors broke the ritual, letting the star escape. But the devastation was complete enough to eradicate our empire from the earth. We are born with this brand as a reminder of that folly." She gestured at the orbital markings on her face.

"The Legate is lying to you. Maybe there is some way to restore the Core without setting the Eater free. I can't say it's impossible. But I can tell you that he's not interested in anyone ruling anything." I pointed at the filly. "She can see the future, right? Well, can she see a future, any future, where all of you get exactly what he promised?"

Now that all eyes were on her, the filly stammered, "There are shadows. Always shadows. Just because I haven't seen it doesn't mean it's not there... maybe..." She

faltered. She looked down at the paper, which, now that I was frozen in place, I saw was a map of the night sky. She dangled the crystal, the gem making tiny pinpricks of light on the map. "It has to be here somewhere, right, Atropos?"

Atropos narrowed her eyes at me. "You. You're not a copy, are you? You're her. Actually her. The Gambler." She smiled a little. "You're supposed to be dead."

"Yeah. I'm really bad at that," I replied. "Has Amadi said anything about what you're actually going to be doing in this glorious future? Made any real plans past 'restoring the Core'? Anything besides promises?"

Atropos was quiet for so long, staring at me contemplatively, that I could have screamed. I had a deadline here! "No. I suppose not."

She stomped a hoof once, the old mare suddenly seeming a lot more tired and haggard. The ice shattered into snow. Scotch Tape gave the filly a dirty look as she walked a trifle unsteadily to where P-21 had landed. "It would have been nice to not see my tribe go extinct," the old mare said quietly, turning away from us. "Eurydale. Scyllia. Pythia. Let's go."

"Wait!" I said as I shook the frost off my barding. "You need to tell the other zebras."

"Tell them? I'm not sure if you noticed, but our tribe is cursed, stupid po—" Eurydale said with a sneer, then saw Glory's angry glare and shrank back. Her mane, tail, and feathers were badly scorched, but the jacket had seemed to protect the rest of her.

"Lancer, Sekashi, and Majina are trying to convince the tribe that the Legate is a Starkatteri. You have to help them," I begged. Okay, I wasn't exactly sure *how* that was supposed to work, but still! Help was good! They wanted to show everyone they were good, right?

Atropos regarded me coolly. "We will... think about it. And if Pythia sees our glorious future, we will come back for you. But for now, we shall withdraw and consult the stars."

"One thing," P-21 asked as he pulled himself to his hooves, with a pained expression. "Why does the Eater of Souls draw in pony souls but not eat them? That's never made sense to me."

Atropos regarded him with surprise, and I had to admit that I did too. After all, as long as we weren't dealing with slavers or the like, P-21 never really seemed interested in who we were fighting or why. "The Eater eats the souls of Stars. It collects the souls of lesser beings to sing its praises for all of eternity. And when the Eater

has consumed all the light that remains, the souls of all life will exist for nothing but aggrandizement of its own ego. Naturally, any sane,” and here she eyed the scarred and charred Eurydale, who was intently poking a ball of mud and whispering loudly ‘Dagon will burn you!’ with every jab, and heaved a sigh, “and many not-so-sane zebras, Starkatteri or not, know such a fate is punishment without end.”

“Right,” I said. “Well, if you want to avoid that, try and help us. We need everyone. Even you.”

The comment seemed to give the old zebra pause. “Interesting. You are... unsettling. I see why he fears you so. As I said. We shall consider it.” She turned and led the other three towards the exit.

“Wait!” the filly ran up to us holding scraps of paper with some numbers scribbled on them. “Here. The Brood guard patrols. Just take cover at these times and they should miss you.” She gave a little smile and ran after the others. “Wait for me!”

“I’ve never been so humiliated,” Scotch Tape groaned, rubbing one of the many black and blue hoof marks that now covered her face. “She spent the entire time staring at that map, and I didn’t lay a hoof on her!” She stared in the direction that the filly had gone.

“Especially not her rear,” I added with a smirk.

Scotch Tape glowered at me as she replied in icy tones, “Yes. Especially not that.” She stared at the door. “Enemies aren’t allowed to be cute like that!”

“Zebras are just like that sometimes,” I said, trying not to think of Lancer atop me, as I tried my broadcaster but got only static. Apparently, magical jamming wasn’t the only source of interference here, though. I trotted to the entrance and kicked the doors open, looking for Boo. Nothing. I spotted her PipBuck tag on the other side of the room and frowned, trotting to the small access door.

Boo appeared in the doorway as soon as I’d gotten it open. She rushed forward, hugging me tightly. “I’m sorry! I shoulda known something bad was there.”

“It’s okay,” I said as I patted her mane. “How’d you get over on this side though?” I asked with a frown.

“Oh! Well, doors was locked, so I found the right way!” She beamed up at me. “Ready ta go?”

We only paused long enough for everypony to share a round of healing potions, and I was glad to see the plumage on Glory’s wings grow back. P-21 also drank heavy

doses of RadAway; Scylla's powder's explosions had been like mini balefire eggs. For all I knew, that green powder was what Balefire eggs were made from!

We'd fallen behind in the fight, but with Boo leading the way and Pythia's little scraps of times, we were able to take cover seconds before Brood came trotting into view. Not that we couldn't take them. I'd thawed out my gun and checked it, and the rugged thing seemed to have come through okay. It was a little unsettling, though. Every time the moment came close, we'd take cover with no sign of the Brood. Then they'd come around a corner or out a door and just miss us.

Note to self: seeing the future is useful against your enemies!

The Operations section of the building was relatively small, but given the enormity of the building it was in, it still took us far longer than I was comfortable with to get past the many Brood patrols. A wave of relief swept through me when I spotted the door marked 'Launch Control' ahead. Sexy roared out two hammering storms of buckshot, staggering the Brood guards long enough for P-21 and Glory to finish them off. I looked at all the shells scattered on the floor around me. Even on burst instead of full auto... "Someone's a cartridge hog," I chided the weapon affectionately, then stormed through the door.

The control room was much, much smaller than I'd anticipated. I'd expected a cavernous space with tiers of hundreds of terminals and maybe a massive holographic display floating in the middle. The somewhat underwhelming reality: a dozen terminals on ordinary desks looking out at a window angled down and curved to give a slightly distorted view of the entire launch field. A number of little displays above it showed the various rockets. A half dozen zebra technicians sat at various terminals with two Brood unicorns standing guard. At the sight of me bursting in, the former scrambled under or behind their desks and the latter opened up with bolts of lightning from their dark metal horns. I jumped back into the cover behind the doorframe, electricity sizzling past me.

P-21 drew a shock grenade, but I shook my head. I had no idea what those controls did. I didn't want to launch the rockets by accident. "We require reinforcements," I heard one of the two Brood mares say in Silver Stripe's monotone.

"What?! You talk?!" I gasped. "Brood can't talk."

"Aural communication fallback protocols enabled," they replied dryly in unison. One of the zebra technicians began to creep towards an intercom panel on the wall, looking quite hesitant to do so. "Expedite," they urged, not taking their eyes off the door as their horns glowed.

I could almost feel our time slipping away. Then Glory launched herself out of cover and through the doorway, her beam pistol already spitting rainbow light. The Brood were turned into sparkling dust, but not before one of them hit her hard enough with a bolt of lightning to send her slamming against the hallway wall. I rushed to her as P-21 and Scotch Tape swept into the room, shouting at the technicians. The filly tackled the zebra at the intercom, throwing her forelegs around his neck and chomping on his ear.

I practically shoved a healing potion down her throat, then unzipped the jacket and pressed my ear to her chest. "Don't be dead. Don't be dead. Don't be dead," I whispered over and over again.

I heard the beat of her heart. "Don't you have a world to save?" she muttered. I lifted my head and saw her sad smile. "You know you're better off with him," she said quietly.

"Let me decide that. We're all getting through this. And then I'm going to work things out if it kills me," I promised, as I stroked her cheek. "I still haven't given up plans on making it all work between the three of us."

"You never give up," she murmured with a shake of her head, then zipped the jacket back up. "Tomorrow," she promised. Then we heard the rapid approach of more Brood, and I ran into the launch control room.

Boo peeked down the hall and suddenly threw herself against the wall as a burst of gunfire spat at her. She rolled across the floor back into the room. "There's a whole lot of them comin'! Zebras and ponies too!"

"P-21," I said quickly. "Persuade them to take their time. Scotch, see if you can lock that door or something." I looked at the haggard, terrified zebras. "Propoli?" I asked, startling them and getting wary nods. I clasped my hooves together. "Okay. Time is short, and I don't want anyone to die. First off, I need to delay the launch. Is there somezebra here who can help me with that? Maybe do an emergency venting of the fuel?"

"Are you trying to blow us all up?" one zebra in huge blue glasses asked. "That's a terrible idea!"

"Congradulations. You're the leader," I said as I trotted over to him, trying to ignore the explosions in the hall behind us. "Listen. I need to get out there. I need to get on that big, fancy rocket. Tell me how to do that," I said as I stared into his eyes with a casual smile. He kept gaping from the window to me. "What's your name?" I asked.

“Cerynitis,” he said unsteadily.

“Cerynitis? I’m Blackjack,” I said as I politely patted his shoulder. “I’ve told you what I need. You tell me how you can help me make it happen. Can you just delay the launch here? Wait till I’ve got everything taken care of and then send me off?” When he didn’t answer, I pointed my gun at the terminals. “If not, I’ll have to see if just breaking things works, or try that emergency fuel dump idea.”

He swallowed and adjusted his glasses. “Please don’t. This facility... it’s a miracle it’s held up as well as it has. If it wasn’t for the ghouls that used to live here, planning to escape to the moon or somesuch, I doubt it would have at all. Still, it’s in rough shape. Most of these rockets are barely-restored literal museum pieces; I doubt half of them will make it to the moon even if they launch successfully. If you start venting the fuel and oxidizer, there’s a good chance the systems to channel it safely away won’t work. The loading systems are probably leaking some as we speak, but so many of the sensors aren’t working that I can’t even be sure of that.” He ran his hooves through his bristly, erect mane, then waved over his head. “I tried to explain to them that this was reckless, but they wouldn’t listen to me! Rocketry is supposed to be a calm, focused, deliberate use of technology. Not slapping things together, filling them with explosives, and just hoping they’ll work!”

“Eh.” I gave a minimalist shrug. “Then help me out here. How can I slow things down?” I spotted Glory examining a nearby terminal.

“We can keep the other three rockets from launching,” he said, pointing at clocks which were frozen at 1 minute. “Even if they overrode our control and manually got the launch towers down, they don’t have the time or the training to fire the boosters locally without destroying the rocket. But there’s nothing we can do about the one in the center. That’s an ESS-A1, the only one ever built before Equestria’s space program lost funding for any new ships. It uses the finest MTRpg engines ever designed, with a TWR of—”

“I am a technological moron, Cerynitis,” I said as I smiled at him. “Just tell me how to stop it from launching.” His mouth worked silently a moment as if trying to figure out how much to dumb this information down. “Really.”

Finally, he said, “...Sorry. You can’t. The erector has already been locally disengaged, and the launch tower isn’t sturdy enough to be a problem for the rocket even if it stays in place. It’s mostly just to make cargo and passenger transfer easier; the ESS-A1 can launch and land pretty much anywhere with flat ground it won’t sink into.” That was not what I wanted to hear right now.

The doors shut, and there was a thump against them. P-21 stepped back, bobby pin in his mouth, from the door. "Okay," Scotch Tape said. "Daddy locked it, and I think I got it jammed. It still won't take them long to get in, though. For all I know, they can chew through it."

"Not unless they can get it in their mouths," I replied with a smile, then turned back to Cerynitis. "Well then, keep the other rockets here. If I can't stop her, I'll need a rocket to follow her."

"Be careful. There are magical fields that raise prior to launch. If you get stuck inside when the rocket goes up and don't reach a bunker, you'll be cooked," he warned. "You'll only have ten seconds between the fields going up and the engines firing, and that's if everything's working properly."

"Plenty of time." If I were able to teleport, damn it! Now, for the last challenge... "How do I get out there?" If he said I couldn't, that big window was going to have a date with Sexy on full auto with grenade chaperones!

Thankfully, he pointed a hoof at a hatch set in the room's exterior wall. I rushed over, twisted the handle, and yanked it open; behind was a six-foot-long hall ending in what looked like a sturdy exterior door.

"I should stay here," Glory said.

I rounded on her. "What have we learned about splitting up?" I told her. "No. I want all of you with me. No one gets left behind."

"Somepony should stay," P-21 said, examining the door. "That won't keep Brood out forever. I could do it."

Glory shook her head. "No. You couldn't get back in time," she said with a shake of her head. "I've got a strong enough weapon to stop them. Plus, if you do need to launch one of the other rockets, someone is going to have to push the button and fly to you before it goes up." She patted my mane. "Don't worry, Blackjack. I might not be Dash anymore, but I can reach you in a minute."

How did I not like this? Let me count the ways. "Blackjack," P-21 said gravely behind me.

"I'll be fine," she said as she stroked my mane. "Hurry. You don't want to miss your flight."

I closed my eyes, feeling her hoof as it brushed my cheek. "Tomorrow," I murmured.

“Tomorrow. Till then, do what you do best. Go,” she said, her hoof lingering a moment longer, and then she pulled away.

I didn’t trust myself to wait any longer. I turned stepped into the hallway and told Cerynitis over my shoulder to show her how to make the rockets launch, and then Glory closed the inner door behind us.

The outer door opened to a stairway that ran down along the inside wall of the crescent. “Sorry my plan didn’t work like I thought it would, Blackjack,” Scotch Tape apologized from her father’s back as we hurried down.

“Hey. No sweat. If you could guess the inner workings of rockets a few months after getting your cutie mark, I’d feel really gypped.” They touched the ground between the concrete pads with faded stenciled signs reading ‘5’ and ‘1’, closer to 5 than 1. Large grates covered dark pits that I guessed were for redirected rocket exhaust. A ring of talismans gleamed around the each of the pads. ‘Arcane Bulwark. Do not stand on line.’ was written repeatedly around them, and in several places in each ring of talismans were pits with stairs leading into them and signs reading ‘Emergency Shelter’. The pits seemed nearly full of water, but I couldn’t make out more than that.

At the bottom of the stairs, I looked around at the others and then put a hoof around Boo. “Boo, I have a super special mission for you.” She blinked at me. “Do you feel up to it?”

Boo’s face grew more serious. “You need to find Big Daddy or Lancer and tell them that there’s a balefire missile aimed at this place. They need to ready to pull back quickly as they can. We’re here. At this point, I’m not sure how much good they can do with their attack.”

“Yer sending me away again,” she pouted.

“Because you’re the only pony who can make it. I know you’re lucky, and smart, and quiet.” I gave her a kiss on her forehead. “Get to them quick.” I reached down and manipulated her PipBuck, typing out a brief message. ‘Balefire bomb targeting space center. Get out. Do better. Blackjack.’ If they didn’t think I’d sent her... well... there wasn’t much I could do about that.

Boo moved away, paused to gaze longingly back at us, and then sped out into the shadows around the side of the building. The rest of us quickly made our way past them the smaller pads towards the center. Cognitum’s rocket was a shining white tower curving gracefully up to a point high above us, reaching for the stars, a scaffold

tower rising next to it to allow access and looking quite utilitarian in comparison to its neighbor.

“Get your spark grenades ready,” I said as we approached the base of the scaffold, where a stairway and several cargo and passenger elevators stood empty alongside large wheels that must have been for moving the tower away from the rocket. “Cognitum!” I roared up at where I knew the control room hatch was. “I’m calling you out! Get down here and give me my body back!”

She’d do it. She was arrogant enough to do it. She’d want to squash me personally. But then a worried thought struck me. “You can hear me, right?” I hollered up at her. “Hey! Hey!” I started jumping up and down, waving my hooves in the air. “Get down here!” I really did not want to fight a flying me on a scaffold ten stories in the air.

And the Brood were coming. While most of them were occupied fighting our allies assaulting the facility from the outside, there were still plenty left to deal with us. I looked around and spotted a box marked ‘Intercom 6’ by the base of the launch tower stairway, rushed to it, and mashed my hoof against the button. “Cognitum!”

There was silence, and then her voice crackled over the intercom. “Who is this?”

“You know who. You took my body and my baby. I want them back!” I snapped.

“Your baby?” Cognitum murred. Then her voice took on a purr that nearly made me bite the box. “It is you, isn’t it? How... interesting,” she said with a note of delight.

“I want my body back and I want my baby back.”

“And how is it to want? I wanted a body and my kingdom back for two hundred years. I dare say I’m handling it much better than you are now. And, let’s be honest, I am going to be a much better mother to my babies than you ever will be.” There was a pause. “Did you just bite the intercom?”

I wasn’t going to answer that, no matter how much my teeth hurt. “I’m going to stop Horizons,” I said as I saw the Brood coming closer. “Face me!”

“Face you? Dear Blackjack, I have a world to save. I don’t have time to indulge you,” she said silkily. “However, I will make you this offer. If I return and the Legate is dead, I’ll pardon you and your friends. I’ll allow you a quiet life elsewhere in the world.”

“The Legate has fooled you!” I shouted. “There’s a star spirit bound to Tom. The Legate is planning on feeding it to the Eater and resurrecting it! You’re playing right into his hooves!”

"You are deranged," Cognitum said disdainfully. "The Tokomare will be restored and the Core rebuilt, and we shall proceed into a glorious future. Too bad you are so mired in the past."

Suddenly klaxons were blaring, red lights flashing on the scaffold tower as it started pulling away from the rocket with the grind of protesting machinery. "Clear Pad Six immediately. Launch sequence initiated," a recorded voice began announcing as the ring of bulwark talismans grew brighter and a hiss began to build in the darkness beneath the rocket. "Clear Pad Six immediately. . ."

"Rampage! Stop her, Rampage! I know who you are! She's never going to help you!" I screamed into the intercom over the noise, having to trot to keep up with the moving tower. "Dealer! I know you can hear me! You owe me, Dealer!" Still no response. In my rage, I lifted my gun and pointed it at the rocket's thick base.

P-21 tackled me, breaking my focus. "No, Blackjack! If you get through the hull at all, you could blow us all up! Come on!"

"No! Damn it!" I shouted as he shoved me towards the line of bright talismans. I'd been so sure she'd face me personally. That I'd do it and get it back. "No!" I yelled as we cross the bulwark. He held me back, and then a shimmery field rose up, flickered, and solidified, smaller ones rising around each of the trio of exhaust grates. I pushed past him, hammering on it with my hooves, the magic flashing as I beat something the consistency of thick rubber.

Then the ground leapt under my hooves, shaking so much that we nearly bounced across it. The flames under the rocket were tiny, pale things, with barely-visible columns of exhaust with an odd diamond pattern in them, but the *sound* that managed to escape the fields was deafening. From the exhaust grates blasted huge columns of steam, jetting out into clouds at the tops of the exhaust bulwarks. They didn't beat the rocket by much as it shot upward, its own bulwark taller but still low enough that, when it finally cleared the top of it, the building noise nearly ruptured my eardrums and the hurricane blast of suffocatingly hot gas that escaped around the sides of the field picked me up from the still-vibrating ground and sent me skidding past the other waiting rockets and towards the wall of the space center. When I came to rest, I was surrounded by a stinging-hot fog, the roar of the rocket's engines growing quieter and quieter and making my ears ring from the relative silence. I lay on my back and stared up at the now-hidden sky, my ears trying to track the rocket and my eyes desperately trying to see it. The noise faded and faded, and then was gone.

“No. . .” I whispered into the quiet as the vapor began to thin.

“Oh yes,” a stallion said confidently, and I looked up at the wall of Brood, Harbingers, and Remnant surrounding us, guns motionlessly pointed at me. Looking down at me sat the Legate, his eyes narrowed in mirth. “Time to die.”

Then his chest exploded. The Harbingers opened up on him, the Brood, and the Remnant with full automatic spray. Indeed, only the flesh wall of the Brood kept the three of us from being wiped out. The Legate jerked and danced in the air as if he was being electrocuted, but he did not fall. Bullets sparked off the skull helmet. The Remnant, the smallest in number of the three, fell back, and from around us came more sounds of gunfire as the Harbingers attacked the Legate’s forces all across the field. From above, the energy blasts from the *Blizzard*’s secondary weapons lanced down, careful not to hit the remaining three rockets, as the *Sirocco* exchanged fire with the *Rampage* and *Cyclone*.

Fierce as the Harbingers were, though, the Brood still turned to face them. They didn’t register pain. Couldn’t feel fear. Only a headshot or blasting them to pieces would really stop them. And now the ones on the field had a particularly nasty weapon: the rifles they employed fired glowing blue bullets that reminded me of Atropos’s freezing powder. The enchanted rounds coated the Harbingers’ barding with thick ice, froze their hooves to the ground, and, more than once, made huge chunks of flesh shatter off like meaty popsicles.

And the Legate didn’t stop either. The gory nightmare rushed right up to the first Harbinger to shoot him and hooked his forelegs around the stallion’s neck. The blood-streaked Legate twisted and pulled, the stallion’s body gave a crack, and then his entire head came off. Again the Legate lunged, at the next and the next, killing them all with crushing blows that shattered ribs and burst blood vessels. Bullets tumbled out of his body seconds after they entered. Bits shot off returned to rejoin his body.

The field erupted into incomprehensible chaos as the three of us collapsed into one of the shelter pits. Really, I didn’t see why it was full of shoulder deep cold water, whether that was intentional or not, but after the baking we’d just received, it was quite refreshing. Rusty breathing apparatuses hung on hooks. There was a button for an emergency hatch, but, despite mashing my hoof against it repeatedly, it wouldn’t close. The shooting went on for several seconds, and I poked my head up.

The Legate stood on a field of carnage. Most of the Brood and all of the Harbingers

that had been within his reach had died. The Remnant were beginning to emerge from gaps and cover, though most of them looked as if they wanted to be anywhere else but here. I couldn't blame them as the Legate stood in the middle of all that gore. He then turned back to us in the shelter pit. "Come on out, little fraud. Don't make me come in there after you."

Okay. Here's hoping he was in a talky mood. I whispered instructions to P-21 and Scotch Tape, then climbed from the pit, water streaming from me as I faced him. "Starkatteri," I said, and instantly his eyes narrowed.

"Oh? An educated fraud. Or perhaps proof that my treasonous mate is working with the damned city?" he said loudly, pointing a bloody hoof at me. "Well, no matter. Soon the city will be destroyed and the world purged of pony evil. I have sent the Maiden back to the moon, and there she will remain, forever. Should she return, I will annihilate her."

Why was he talking? He should just be killing me. But he'd been the same way earlier too. He had phenomenal power to kill with his own hooves, and it wasn't enough. "You missed your calling, Amadi. You should have been an actor." Slowly I walked to the left, all eyes on me, and none on the filly and stallion rushing away to the other side.

He froze, his eyes wide behind the skull. "You heard me, Amadi. You've been playing roles for centuries now. You used the war as cover for your schemes. Used the pony and zebra hate to play one against the other. You've been doing it for years now." I narrowed my eyes and grinned at him as Scotch and P-21 went to work next to a heap of bodies behind him. "I was wrong. Not an actor. You're a politician!"

His eyes narrowed this time. "Who do you think you are? A mare with a dyed mane that thinks to rally this pitiful resistance?!" he said as he gestured with a hoof at the gap to the west. "You think you know me? You know nothing!"

"I know it was you at Littlehorn," I said as I stood there, a perfect target, keeping a distance between me and him as Scotch and P-21 frantically smeared bloody streaks across the flight deck. "You brought the pink cloud talisman. Wired it with starmetal to boost it. The more that died, the more it killed. Pretty effective," I said with as much contempt in my voice as I could muster. "I know you grabbed Goldenblood and fell to the ground floor, then unleashed the talisman. You killed so many. And, of course, afterward both sides blamed the other."

His lips quivered behind the dragon's teeth. I had a guess that he was like Goldenblood, that he had a desperate need to vent all his accomplishments. Then his

mouth split in a wide grin. "It went marvelously, didn't it? Better than I could have ever planned. Then the fire in Hoofington? I wanted to torch Ponyville, personally, but there were too many soldiers in the way." He laughed sharply, an echo of wonder two centuries old in his voice as he went on, "But Celestia abdicating her throne and *Luna* taking it? I couldn't have planned that in ten thousand years!"

The other zebras looked on, muttering to each other as the Legate continued to stare at me. "But it's been hard," I continued. "You almost had the Tokomare activated, didn't you? So close to Luna turning it on. Let me guess, the next plan was to raise it to the surface? Get the moonstone to it then?"

His smile began to fade. "How..." And his pupils started to constrict. "No..." he hissed at me.

"The bombs falling really did ruin everything for you, didn't it? Let me guess. You planned on Luna winning, and then you'd use her dream of a futuristic, strong, Equestria to cover what you were doing. You'd keep up your exploits in the shadows till you could achieve your goal. But everything fell apart." I grinned at him. "Ashtur probably didn't like that, did he?"

"That's impossible. No..." he said as he stared at me.

"All that hard work wasted, but you're nothing if not persistent. Use the Wasteland. Use the Hoof. Use the Remnant. Use Cognitum. And then, when I stepped out with EC-1101, everything started moving again. Horizons got ready to fire. Cognitum started to move. And you had your golden opportunity."

The Legate took a step back from me. "That's impossible! You can't be! You're a fake! You're nothing! You're dead!"

"Dead?" I threw back my head and laughed. "I've died three times, and it hasn't stuck yet. I've destroyed Goddesses and purged abominations from the land. I've broken the skies and cast down the towers. I've stood in the mouth of the Eater of Stars and walked out again." I pointed my hoof at him and cried out, "I am the Maiden of the Stars, Amadi. Say my name!" His eyes bulged, as if he were in a grip of a magic spell. "Say it!" I ordered.

"Blackjack?" he whispered as if fighting to assimilate the idea, but then his eyes narrowed and he shook his head, never taking his eyes off me. "No... No! It can't be! It's impossible!" he said, his voice tightening in horror. He pointed his hoof at me. "Kill her! Now!" But not a one moved against me. I saw more bars turn yellow than stay red.

“Shoot me and be forever cursed!” I warned, watching more bars turn yellow.

“You’re not the Maiden! She’s gone to the moon!” His eyes dug into me.

“Not yet, I haven’t,” I countered. I raised my hoof as I saw P-21 finish painting and signal me with a hoof wave. I swallowed, glad he couldn’t see me sweat. If this didn’t work... and there were so many ways it could fail... he’d stop talking and start trying to take me apart. I raised my hoof over my head. “Now, as Maiden of the Stars, I call on the skies to strike you down and smite you.” I paused, swallowing. “Right now!” His shock melted away into a smoldering rage. “Any second...” I said as I glared upwards. “Now, damn it!”

“Idiot,” he said in disgust as he turned from me. I watched those yellow bars turning back to red as he said contemptuously, “Kill her.” Then he froze as he stared at the ground behind him, and the letters L, E, G, A, T, and E written ten feet tall inside a crimson arrow pointing right at him.

There was a resounding ‘CHOOM’, and he disappeared in a blinding beam of light. I fell hard on my ass, wondering which airship had taken the shot. I’d kiss them all if we made it through this. Even Afterburner and Hoarfrost. I blinked repeatedly to try and clear the line burned in my vision. Where was the Legate? I saw a blackened form in the middle of the burned patch twenty feet away.

Then I heard the scream. The inarticulate scream rising higher and higher as the body reared on its hindlegs in a scorched circle, a blackened silhouette of charred meat pulling itself back together. An accretion disk of dust swirled around him, drawing back into his body, and everyone watched in horror as the charred carcass was wrapped in muscle and organs, then blood, then skin. The blackened skull tumbled from his head and bounced around his hooves.

When it ended, the Legate stood there, his black stripes now vivid, blood red. His face covered in the satellite pattern of the Starkatteri for all to see. Smoke rose all around him as he turned and stared right at me with all the malice in the world in his gaze. “It’s true,” muttered one of the Remnant soldiers. “Starkatteri.” Almost unanimously, the remaining red bars turned yellow.

“True? True?” He gaped at the Remnant as they turned from him. He gestured to me. “She is our enemy! She will destroy all we have worked to achieve! Kill her!” he ordered.

I stared at him in bafflement. Why the heck wasn’t he popping my head off personally like he had the others? Then it struck me. “You’re afraid to fight me,” I

said, a smile creeping across my face. "That's it, isn't it?" I stepped towards him and watched as he took a step back. "It's not just Xanthe and Lancer, is it? You're afraid of me too. You're afraid I'm the real thing, even if you thought you'd made the prophecy up, and even though you're an immortal beast, you're afraid I can stop you!" I said as I advanced, watching him fall back. "And best of all, if you're afraid I can... then there's a way."

More and more Remnant were emerging, and baffled, battered Harbingers were showing themselves as well, the ponies looking around as if not sure what they should do now. Had they finally gotten the same message that Nails had given the other Harbinger groups, or were they simply realizing that they were in over their heads?

"Kill her!" he screamed, and there was a long pause, and then, as one, the Remnant raised their weapons.

At him.

"It's over, Father," Lancer said from one of the clumps. He stepped out with his sniper rifle. Sekashi and Majina were at his flank, the filly repeating him silently to her mother. "Surrender."

"Over?" He seemed to mull the world in his head. "Give up just like that, and be left with nothing?" He gave a little smile and shook his head. "No. I've pursued this for thousands of years. I will never surrender."

"Give up, Amadi. She has your name. It is foolish to continue," Sekashi said flatly. "A thousand years of folly weighs heavy, but redemption starts with a single choice."

He licked his lips, his red eyes desperate as he looked at me, then the zebras and Harbingers around him. For several seconds he stared at me, and I tried to will him to give it up. Do better. Find a good way. "It would be wonderful, wouldn't it? No more plotting. No more desperation. No more fear. Peace."

I approached him. "It can still be that way." He seemed to relax and gave a little nod and for an instant I smiled too and extended a hoof toward him. Then his arms snapped out and seized it, and his eyes locked with mine. For a second, I thought there might be a chance, some shred of equinity that I could appeal to... and I realized that I'd finally dared to forgive too far. Thousands of years of hatred, war, blood, and more thundering behind his eyes in an unending storm. He twisted the limb almost completely around, and fire bloomed as I heard bones snapping and joints popping.

“Fool,” he spat at me as I fell. Lancer shot his father, the Legate’s speed nearly carrying him clear of the bullet but the blow still ripping away half his head and spinning him away from me. The blood and bone spray slowed and returned as P-21 and Scotch Tape dragged me away from the mad zebra.

As his eye regenerated and head reassembled, he proclaimed, “I still have the Brood, and it is a mighty army! Greater than all of you together. As we speak, that fool is travelling to the moon. She carries the soul of the true Maiden within her, and without that, you cannot defeat the Eater of Souls. This world is done!”

P-21 pulled me to Sekashi and Majina. My leg was twisted around, the pain so sharp and real that I almost wished I had my old body back. More and more zebras and ponies tried to shoot the Legate, but their bullets couldn’t begin to seriously inconvenience him as he reassembled himself again and again.

“Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow,” I repeated over and over. Sekashi didn’t waste any time. She grabbed my hoof and twisted it the opposite way. Once again, the leg let out a number of pops, grinds, and snaps that nearly knocked me completely out. Then she jammed a bright purple potion in my mouth, and I chugged for all I was worth. Majina was giving Scotch Tape loads of the precious little purple bottles. I had a sick certainty that I’d need them.

“Brood! Destroy them all! Kill everything! Kill it all!” he cried out. “And destroy those rockets!”

From the bodies on the ground came a rasp as they began to rise. The large doors set in the walls cracked open, and out came a surge of Brood fliers and cyber zebras. The defenders in the gap suddenly reversed, turning inward and rushing forward. There were only three rockets left on the pads. If they took out all three...

“Crap,” I muttered as I rose to my hooves. “He really doesn’t like the Maiden, does he?” I said to Sekashi, trying to sprint to the nearest launchpads.

“You are not the Maiden,” she said. “You are the Fool.”

“Gee, thanks,” I said with a roll of my eyes, tears running down my cheek as my leg still zinged. I drank another healing potion.

“It is not an insult. The Fool terrifies because not even the Fool knows what they can do! They gamble against odds no others would dare. They dance on the edge of the precipice because they can. They overcome where all other sensibility would fail. Tyrants have always feared the Fool, for they bring disaster and suffering for their plans. They are heroes without parallel and monsters without equal, because

they do what they will, and damn the plans of others.” We started moving towards the closest rocket.

“That Starkatteri mare called me the Gambler, though,” I said with a little bafflement.

She gave a smile. “They are one and the other. The Fool plays at odds no wise person would dare. They are minions of chance, agents of chaos, and tools of discord.”

“Then what is the Maiden?” I asked, making sure she could see my lips.

“Hope for some and despair for others,” she replied. “She breaks bonds and ruins fortunes. She challenges and overcomes, and breaks her enemies. She is, like the stars themselves, a catalyst. Keep her at rest, for should she act, it will mean joy for some and terror for others, and none can say which for whom,” she said gravely. “I have many stories about both, but I fear that there is no time for them now, Blackjack.” She sighed and looked around. “It is a bad day when there is no time for stories.”

“Yeah, I know the feeling,” I replied. Then I caught her gaze again. “The Legate has a balefire missile aimed at this place. You need to get the Remnant out. As far from here as you can.”

“We will see you on your way first,” she said, and then she turned and started to speak in rapid fire tongues to the other zebras.

I stood and looked up at the nearest rocket. “Gambler and Fool, huh? That suits me just fine. Ante Up.”

There were Brood between me and my rocket, but I had a squad of zebra commandos at my flank. Together, we charged in. The cyberzebras were trying to duct tape explosives to the booster, but precision snipers were blowing holes in their heads before they could. I made it as far as the base of the launch tower steps when there was a loud ping and a fwoosh, a short jetting puff of white vapor shooting from the side of the rocket. Alarms began to sound as more bullets punched more holes, vapor jetting from some, liquid dripping from others. Dozens. Hundreds. Eventually ones were punched too large or jagged to seal shut on their own. Brood rushed in, grenades gripped in their mouths as they continued to fire. I grabbed P-21 and Scotch Tape, and we fled. The bulwark fields rose up just before one of the boosters tore itself into a storm of shrapnel and fire that disintegrated any Brood caught inside and called the other three boosters to join it. The bulwark protected us from the devastation and the fireball rising into the night, but the twisted wreck hidden by

the smoke wouldn't be flying again.

One down. Two left. I didn't waste any time. The emergency field died within a few minutes, spilling flaming fuel across its flight pad. Most of it had gone up, but there was still plenty of fire. "Don't let the Brood take this one out!" I yelled as we pelted towards the next-nearest launchpad. The snipers opened up and picked off the Brood racing us. We made it to the launch tower without a problem, and I sprinted up the stairs. "Up! Up! Up! Up!" I shouted as P-21 and Scotch Tape climbed after me.

"Blackjack, look out!" Boo shouted from below. I stared down at where the blank mare stared up at me. "Tank!" she shouted, pointing her hoof to the side.

I leaned out and spotted the tank that had been in the gap rolling around the wreckage of a rocket, thankfully one of the ones that had already been ruined when we arrived, and swiveling its cannons towards us. "Down! Down! Down! Down!" I shouted as we all but fell down the stairs in our haste. There wasn't any way we'd get across the bulwark before it fired. Then blue dust whirled around it, coating it in a glowing blizzard of magic. Ice began to form, and I stopped. Maybe... maybe... I looked back up at the rocket hatch.

Then the tank fired, the shockwave shattering the ice on its front. The shells gouged deep lines in the flight pad. "Down! Definitely down!" I screamed as the frost-rimmed turrets began to elevate. The magic might be slowing it down, but I didn't doubt that it would fire. We hit the flight deck and ran for our lives. The tank fired again, and the base of the rocket blossomed in flame. I jumped, rolling across the talismans moments before the bulwark raised. . . mostly.

When the tank shell had torn the pad, it had crossed the circle of talismans. The thin, dim field across the gap held for a split second, then yielded. A river of fire, hotter and wider than the breath of a dozen dragons, poured out and washed over the tank. Even on this side of the rocket, I could feel the cyclone-like gush of blazing heat. The tank didn't stand a chance. It exploded like a firecracker in a flamethrower's scream. Then the entire fire-fused mass of the rocket and launch structure gave a whine and slowly keeled over. It hit the weakened side of the bulwark, and the field began to fade. "Running! Keep running!" I yelled. The bulwark collapsed, and the entire flaming wreck tipped over on the tank. The explosion sent flaming bits all over the pad, and our PipBucks were clicking like mad as the rad rate doubled, and doubled again! What next?! Remnant and Harbinger alike fled from the rain of flaming debris.

"I am already tired of this day," I groaned. Boo rushed up to me, throwing her hooves around me. "Hi, Boo," I said lightly. "How are you doing?"

She blinked at me a moment. "I'm fine. I found a Reaper pony with a thingy and he said he'd tell everyone to get the fuck away." She made a scrunchy face as she glowered towards the gap. "Reapers are really rude."

I nuzzled her ear and pulled myself to my hooves. "Well, glad you're back."

I struggled to see the last rocket through the heat and haze and steam. Sweat soaked my barding through as I wiped the droplets from my eyes. It rested on its pad, our last hope to getting to Cognitum. There were fiery bits all around it and burning on the launch tower. "Come on," I said as I rose to my hooves and started towards it, trying to get past the burning pools of fuel that were now spattered all around the flight deck. Here and there, ruptured fuel lines spilled gouts of fire into the air. The emergency shutoffs must not have been working too well. Of course *they'd* be the things that'd fail...

We crossed the central pad, one of the few places that wasn't on fire, Boo scooping Scotch onto her back after seeing the smaller mare struggling to keep up as we made our way to the base of the gantry. I stepped in something that looked like steaming water only to have ice immediately form on my barding's hoofboot. When I staggered back, too close to a burning chunk of metal, the whole leg burst into flame for few seconds before I could slap out the barding.

Funny, I never imagined that there was a place worse than Hightower. Fire. Explosions. Building radiation. All it was missing was smooze.

We'd lost our zebra escorts in the second explosion, but it looked like the Brood were dwindling. He might have an endless supply of them, but that didn't mean he had all of them here. Between the Harbingers, the Remnant, and their self-destructive attacks, it was abundantly clear that even they weren't lasting long. That was just out here, though. I looked up at the window of the control room and saw flashes of gunfire and energy beams.

We had to get in the rocket and get her out of there. Why had we separated? Why hadn't I stayed behind to guard the command center? But I was only one mare... I couldn't do it all myself. No pony could.

The third and last rocket was still intact, and I thought for a moment that I'd finally beaten the odds. But as I got close, I heard the strangest humming, and when I put my hooves on the metal steps, I could feel them vibrating beneath me. I stared

up the stairs and spotted the Legate halfway up. His forehooves were a blur as he pounded them against the thick steel beams of the tower. A normal pony would be beating their hooves to nubs under that pounding, but of course his regenerating body would never succumb to injury. Nor would he tire. But what was he do—

There was a sharp ping, and a rivet near the bottom of the gantry popped out. As I watched, the bolts were turning slowly in their sockets as the vibration only grew more and more intense. I remembered how the Legate fought, his blows disturbing the energy in a body. This gantry was just one enormous body, and he was adding more and more energy to it, resonating it at the perfect frequency to shake it apart.

“Go!” I shouted as I tried to rush up the stairs. My hooves were sliding and humming under me as I struggled up to where he pummeled the metal. Welds cracked, and one step fell away under my hoof as I put my weight on it. The humming reminded me of the monotone note of Enervation. I felt an ominous swaying start as we made it to him.

I didn’t even hesitate; I readied Sexy and charged him, if only to break his rhythm. Only then did I really realize how infuriated Scotch Tape must have felt fighting Pythia as his rear hoof deftly flicked my gun aside and smashed my temple, the blow sending me to the vibrating deck.

P-21 lifted Persuasion, did something to the grenade in the breach, and then fired it at the Legate. The grenade struck him like a solid iron hoofball, knocking him into the girder he’d been pummeling. The grenade, however, didn’t detonate, simply bounced and rattled to the catwalk floor. He loaded a second, took aim once more, and fired again. This time, the Legate kicked out, the limb folding like snapped wood as it deflected the shot, only to pop back out again. The red-striped zebra sneered at P-21. “Futile.”

“Flashbang,” he replied. The Legate immediately covered his face. I wasn’t going to waste this opportunity! Two three-round bursts sent him flipping out over the railing. One hoof grabbed the gantry, but a third burst blew the limb off at his shoulder. As he fell, I glanced down at the grenade.

“Dud?” I asked with a frown.

“No. I just trusted him to know more about flashbangs than you,” P-21 replied as he carefully picked up the grenade and tossed it over the edge. For a brief moment, I wondered if I’d been insulted or not, but I really didn’t have time to ponder the issue.

“Scotch! Is it going to stay up?” I asked, feeling the still-humming gantry. “Shhh!

Shhh! Please stay up!" I said, as if trying to hush the humming, swaying structure. There were still pops and pings, and now groans too. I became aware that the whole immense structure was starting to lean sideways.

"I don't think so, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape shouted as the rocket began to make metallic groans of protestation. "Run!"

"No! We can't! It's the last one!" I shouted, starting for the steps up.

P-21 grabbed me and pulled me back. "And that won't mean anything if we die when the tower collapses!"

I stared up at the inviting hatch for several seconds, the boarding catwalk already slowly scraping away from it across the rocket's skin, then turned and followed Boo down the stairs. The tower leaned further and further over, and we finally had to leap the last ten feet. Don't lock legs; roll with the landing. Good lessons. I looked up and back to see the tower fall sideways, away from the rocket. . . maybe it would still work. . . and then the tower hit one of the launch clamp supports, and I saw that the opposite one was already lying in pieces on the launchpad. The support twisted under the weight of the tower, the clamp still attached to the rocket pulled it away from the other other two, and the great ship crumpled in the middle and toppled, smashing into pieces and a great pool of steaming liquid on the ground. "Maybe we can fix it?" I muttered as we backed away.

Then the puddles exploded, the bulwark going up and slicing the rocket in two just in time to save us from frying. I looked at the still-open, now deformed hatch in the rocket's upper half as we hastened away from the flames, just in case the bulwark had been damaged by the fall. The last rocket. . . the last chance to stop Cognitum. . .

The entire world had grown oddly silent. I staggered away, reached an intercom box on some machine I couldn't identify, and sat down hard. With no way to stop Cognitum... and no Folly... there was no way I could win. I pressed my head to the warm metal, trying to abate the throbbing in my head.

"What now?" P-21 asked.

"Now... I dunno," I answered, unable to look at him.

There was a crackle on the intercom. "Blackjack," Glory said with the sound of gunshots behind her. Apparently there were still Brood that hadn't gotten the memo they'd won.

"Get out of there, Glory. It's over." Maybe LittlePip could park the SPP hub in the

path of Tom. Was that possible?

“No. It’s not. Get to pad one.” I frowned and looked across at the pad next to the stairs. It was one of the rockets I assumed had been destroyed in the fueling, the one covered in ice. But now... it was covered in zebras... “Cerynitis and the other Propoli are getting it ready to fly. They’ve already fixed the problem that stopped it last time; you just have to keep the Legate from attacking it long enough for them to get the oxygen tanks filled. They’re doing it now.”

Hope, terrible and wonderful hope, stirred in me. “Keep him busy...” I said as I rose to my hooves. “Yeah. I can do that.” I could see a sole remaining red bar on my E.F.S., out in the middle of the launchpads. I made sure my magazines were topped off, put on my helmet, and started walking.

The Legate stood in the middle of the circle of rockets as the flames danced around the launchpad. His blood-red stripes seemed to glow with a light that outshone the roaring glare and chaos that reigned around him. Brood against Harbingers. Remnant verses Brood. Reapers fighting Remnant. Brood slaughtering Reapers. And in the eye of the madness, in the center of the grated hole of the ESS-A1’s launchpad, thin warm steam rising around him, stood the striped stallion.

And he was laughing.

It was a joyous laugh. A rolling, ragged, elated laugh finally free of the constraints of discipline, like a slurry of madness and hateful delight was pouring out of him, and he spread his hooves wide and whirled. Head thrown back, mane snapping in the wild winds tearing around the launch pad, he shrieked in glee, reveling in the slaughter all around him. He wasn’t killing a single pony or zebra himself; he celebrated like a child who’d successfully destroyed a deep friendship out of petty spite because he had no such solace.

I stepped onto the grate with him, the wind whipping my black and red mane as I stood there, facing him. “Beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked, his back to me. “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting for this day.”

I was done with witty repartee. Sardonic retorts. I answered him with a storm of lead. His spiritually-fortified body jerked and spasmed in a dance of bloody spray and meaty chunks as the slugs tore him to pieces. Yet again, the bloody bits reversed direction in the air and returned to his body as soon as they were separated. The red-streaked hide reassembled it before my eyes, facing me, his smirk rematerializing before me.

So I smashed the gun across his face. He whirled around, but this time I reversed my swing immediately, keeping the metal between him and me, and he slammed his foreleg against the stout barrel. I was rewarded with the sight of his foreleg bending like clay around the metal with a crackling noise like snapping plywood, but even more satisfying was the look of shock on his face. Pity that that expression disappeared an instant later as I blasted away his face.

“Futile,” he rasped from a shattered, reforming throat. But I didn’t stop. Even without eyes, he had an uncanny ability to strike back at me, his left hind hoof pistoning into my face. I staggered back, the blow making my head throb and vision blur for several seconds. But I didn’t let myself delay, pushing through the pain to spray a full auto fan of lead in his direction. Most missed, but the hail of rounds took his hooves out from under him and gave me a second to refocus. I made like a zebra: shouldered the gun, braced it with a hoof, and bathed him in fiery lead. His head and torso liquefied under the barrage, and then the drum went dry.

I looked down into the bloody ruin of his chest cavity and saw his heart. It reminded me of the phoenix talisman, but carved from a dark stone. Spiral runes and zebra glyphs decorated its surface. Attached to it was what looked vaguely like a PipBuck broadcaster made of starmetal, red and green lights flashing on it, with spikes wired directly into the stone. I watched as his tissue seemed drawn back to it, reattaching and reassembling itself around the silvery box and stone. “Glory is going to die,” he glurbled through a face ripped in two by my firepower. “Right now, I am sending every Brood I have to blast her to pieces. I might have them play with her a little. Indoctrinate her into your and P-21’s little club.” He face reformed enough to make a leer.

I did the only sensible thing I could in that situation. I reloaded.

“Blackjack!” P-21 snapped as he emerged from the smoke and haze, holding me and stopping me from turning the Legate into paint again. “He’s stalling you!”

“I don’t care!” I snapped, aiming at him once more as a sooty Scotch Tape and Boo emerged as well.

“Oh, but you do! You care!” the Legate hissed at me as he sprang casually to his hooves and we started to circle. “Shoot me. Shoot me all you can. Maybe you’ll find a way, false hero. Some way to end me. Some trick. Some gamble. That is what you are, after all. Dice thrown by higher powers in a desperate attempt to change a future that is immutable and irrefutable. You care so much it causes you pain.”

Then the Legate exploded, the lump of rock and gore bouncing across the grate. “He

talks too much,” P-21 said as he lowered Persuasion, then turned to me. “Blackjack, he’s stalling you. He knows we’re trying to stop Horizons. Fighting him is doing what he wants.” I blinked at him, then over at the reconstituting lump of pure, unadulterated bastard. “You can’t shoot evil to death, Blackjack. You just have to do better.”

“Let’s go, Bwackjack,” Boo nodded.

“We’ve got bigger things to do,” Scotch Tape agreed. I slowly approached and stared down at him. His spine appeared fused to the pieces pulling themselves back together again. His eyes reformed, glittering with malicious spite.

I couldn’t just walk away from him. Not after all he’d done. Not after all he’d hurt. I knelt down, seeing where his body was trying to reform through the launchpad grate. I stared right into his eyes and said the one word I was sure would get him like no other. “Discord.” My lips curved in a smile.

The mirth and malice disappeared as he stared at me. I rose, delighting in the opportunity to see my foe in mental anguish. It was a heady drug. “No,” he said. “No, you can’t. He didn’t. . . you can’t be. You were broken!” he spat as his pupils shrank. “The stars never lie!”

“So? Not the first time I’ve been put back together,” I said coolly. “And now I’m going to stop her, stop Tom, and stop you. Because Discord convinced Cognitum to take my soul and put it in this blank.”

“No! That’s impossible!” he roared up at me, all mirth gone. “You’re trapped here.”

“Discord could do it. Uncle Discord saved Blackjack,” Boo said with a fond smile. “Even if he had to die, he did it.” Funny how much love one mare’s eyes could have for one of Equestria’s ‘villains’. I couldn’t say I didn’t feel the same.

“Blackjack,” P-21 warned.

Still, I couldn’t help myself. “See that rocket? That frosty one? Turns out it still works.” I checked Sexy’s magazine coolly, then slapped it back into place. “I’m going to get my body back, and not you, not Cognitum, not even the *stars* will stop me.”

I started to turn away when a thought occurred to me. “Hey, Amadi. When I put my mind back into my old body, I guess I really will be the Maiden of the Stars. Least for a little while. Funny, huh? That the ‘prophecy’ you made up will actually come true?” And I turned and started away, a satisfied smile on my face. Gloating might be a terrible habit, but damn it felt good!

Then he screamed. It wasn't a scream like one a pony could make, or any beast's. It was more the harrowed howl of a feral ghou, devoid of any sanity, ripping from a throat indifferent to injury. An expression of such rage and fury that it encompassed every aspect of the note. If that scream could be weaponized, it would have rivaled a balefire bomb for its fury.

"You're dead! All of you! Everything! Dead! Dead! Dead!" he ranted as he struggled. For several seconds he went on like that, and then suddenly he went silent. I froze, turning to see him watching me. His eyes were wide, wild. But a smile rested on his face. A look of triumph. "Dead," he stated, low and certain.

But what could he do? He was just making idle threats. The idle threats of a trapped lunatic. He probably really had lost his mind. And yet... yet... what could he do? I didn't see any Brood charging the field. He was stuck. So what... what...

That device... that thing he had wired to his heart! That had to be how he controlled the Brood. And maybe much more. Our eyes locked, and I saw such malice it stunned me. He'd use anything to kill me. Anything at all...

Oh shit. "You're going to launch the missile," I whispered. His eyes narrowed as his smile widened. Time seemed to slow as our eyes met and that moment of clarity and understanding joined us. The noise, the battle, the Legate suddenly didn't matter. "We have to go! Now! Right now!"

We raced towards pad number one. The rocket was a dingy little sliver of gray, sheets of ice still dangling from its sides and the girders of its support structures. It was half the size of any other, but now it was my last, best hope. A dozen zebras worked to attach hoses and bang off the ice. From behind me, I heard the moan of bending metal and the wet rip of rending meat. I dared to glance back and saw in horror the muscles in the Legate's forelegs bulging as he pushed himself out of the grate, the bars tearing lengthening rips in his body even as the force of his flesh trying to regenerate bent them.

Cerynitis met us at the foot of the tower. "You made it," he said as he brushed the frost off his brow. He waved a hoof at the rocket. "There was a catastrophic failure of the LOX hoses and the pump safeties on the first loading. We wrote the rocket off, given that it's the oldest model we have we could make work at all. First generation. The fuel is loaded; we'd nearly finished that last time, and there's nothing wrong with that system."

I nodded. "Listen, the Legate has a balefire missile, right?" Cerynitis gulped. "He's fired it."

“...Fired it?” He gaped at me, looking around wildly. “We have to go. Now! Right now.” That wasn’t the response I wanted.

“How long?” I asked him.

“I don’t know. With the missiles we had... if the crews back at Dawn Bay are slacking, fifteen minutes? Much more if they have to fuel first. But if the missile is ready to fly... five? Less? And how long ago did he fire?”

I swallowed and looked up at the rocket. “Okay. Soon as you can, get out of here. I don’t want any of you dying if I can help it.” I looked up at the window of the control center, but it was dark. “It’s a minute between starting the launch sequence and taking off, right?”

“About that.” He nodded in agreement, then turned and started shouting things to the zebras working on the rocket. From the urgency in his voice, I had little doubt they knew this was coming down to the wire.

“Boo!” I called as I turned to them. I had to trust her luck. “You have to find Big Daddy and Lancer. Tell them that the missile is on its way now!”

“But I wanna go with you!” Boo wailed. “I just got back!”

“If you don’t, hundreds are going to die!” I said as I turned and faced her. “I need you to do it. You’re the only one lucky enough to pull it off!” I pulled her close and gave her a fierce hug. “You’re a big girl, Boo. I’m so proud of you. Now find them. Get them out of here as fast as you can.”

Boo hugged me back and sniffed, “Come back quick, Mama. Come back safe.” And then she was gone, running back as quickly as she could.

“Scotch Tape! Get in the cockpit. Do your best to figure out what we need to do when this takes off.” She gaped at me. “I know. You don’t have a missile cutie mark, but there’s got to be an instruction manual or something.”

“Blackjack! I can’t read a manual for a rocketship in three minutes!” she protested.

I tapped her PipBuck. “Use S.A.T.S. That should buy you a little extra time.” She made more faintly strangled noises. “I know you can do this, Scotch. And hey, if you mess up, no one’s going to be able to tell you that you did. So get it right. P-21, they installed some kind of terminal in these to make them fly. Make sure it’s working.”

“What are you going to do?” P-21 asked.

There was a thud as the Legate landed next to us. His back was a grisly jumble of

steel and flesh. “Buy you time,” I said. “Hurry.”

“You have no time to buy,” the Legate shouted as my friends ran, and then he launched himself at me once more, just as fast as before but now filled with a dreadful urgency. He went into his usual blinding flourishes of kicks and stomps, spinning this way and that, but I’d seen his technique... felt it, too... and knew it was all about circles and momentum. I refused him any momentum. I used Sexy like a shield, holding it vertically in my magic for him to break his hooves against... and his bent hoof, bones jutting from the limb, pulled the weapon aside and smashed his face against mine.

It didn’t matter how my horn gouged him; he had everything to lose if he didn’t kill me or stop that rocket. The impact nearly broke my horn, sending an icepick of pain right into my skull and making my eyes water, my vision blur. I’d taken three steps back when his rear hoof swept mine out from under me, dropping me hard on my back before leaping down and smashing my gut and ribs with his extended hind legs.

I managed to snag his leg and roll, knocking him on his back beside me as I struggled to suck in a single breath, but he sprang back up to his hooves the moment he touched down. I pushed through the burning feedback in my horn and blasted him in the face with three S.A.T.S.-guided magic bullets. As he staggered away I chugged two healing potions at once, feeling my ribs popping back into place beneath my barding. Before his face could fully regenerate, I smashed the bottles between my hooves and telekinetically flung the shards into it.

I figured glass inside regenerating eyeballs had to count for something, and it did. His blows were now off by inches. I now simply focused on not getting hit. He whirled, his leg whistling as it almost took off my head more than once. I gave ground and did all I could not to block. Then he switched from the spinning kicks and punches to a forward lunge, grabbing my face and headbutting again. I felt skull grinding against the tip of my horn right before I was knocked on my back yet again.

He arched up with a jagged spur of metal, and as little P-21s danced in my vision, I watched him rip the eyes from his sockets and mash them between his hooves. A second later a bloody slurry swept back up and reformed them. He tossed the bits of broken glass at my hooves as I stared up at him. “Even without augmentations, you fight well,” he said as his eyes narrowed. Then he turned his head and looked right at the Propoli trying to get the rocket ready to fly. “They don’t.”

He raced towards the rocket as I rolled to my hooves. If only I could teleport! Instead,

I slipped into S.A.T.S. and targeted one of his hindlegs. Two magic bullets blasted it off halfway, but the stallion barely broke stride. I grabbed the dismembered leg with my magic as it slowly started to return, wrapping my hooves around the length and letting it drag me after him. As the leg reattached itself, I pressed Sexy to his pelvis and fired a full auto spray of buckshot straight into his torso.

The Legate exploded, again.

I rolled twice, then ran to the base of the rocket. "Hurry!" I exhorted them as the Legate rose to his hooves.

If that balefire missile was on its way, I was already dead. That rocket was my only hope, and he was charging straight at it. I got in his way, unable to dodge and keep him back at the same time, and tried to block one swinging forehoof with Sexy's reinforced barrel. I succeeded, but he gripped the gun, and his hind leg swung back, striking me in the head so hard I heard something crack and suddenly saw three of him. Then he dove past me at some hoses marked 'LOX' dangling from one of the launch structures. I didn't dare shoot, so I did the only thing I could: I bit down hard on his tail, lifting my forelegs to block the double kick to my face. Bones in my forelegs cracked at the impact. Still, I kept my grip, struggling to pull him back from the rocket.

The Propoli were now fleeing for their lives, moving down into maintenance spaces at the base of the wall. Cerynitis ran to the intercom and shouted into it, "Miss Glory, is everything green?"

"Yes. Pad one is green." More gunshots over the intercom. "You need to hurry," she said.

"Wheel, lever, and wedge, Miss Glory," he said, as if the words were a benediction of some sort, and then he turned and left as well. It was now between me and the Legate.

He might have been extremely strong, but even he couldn't tear off his own tail, no matter that I tasted blood in my mouth. My feet skidded as he pulled me closer to the hoses. My horn glowed as I swung the barrel sideways and knocked his feet out from under him.

"Blackjack," came Glory's voice over the loudspeakers. If I hadn't been dragging the Legate back, I would have cheered to hear her voice. Instead, I battered him with my shotgun as I tried to pull him away from the remaining rocket. "I see you on the monitor. There's a missile coming!" Rapidfire gunshots tore out of my PipBuck, and

she cried out in pain. "Please! Hurry!"

His rear hoof hammered back, smashing my forelegs again, and I felt bones snapping. I needed a healing potion before he crippled me; I took a chance, released his tail, and gulped two down. Battering him with Sexy, I pulled out two more, barely able to hold them with my fractured hooves. I had them half drained when his hoof flashed out and shattered them against my teeth. I screamed then as my mouth tried to expel bloody glass while healing at the same time. My magic focus was lost, and I grabbed Sexy in my hooves to keep him down with the swings.

The Legate grabbed my gun, and as I lifted it, it pulled him up enough that he slammed his hooves against my horn, breaking my focus. Then he swung one of his forehooves across, tearing open my scalp under my compact spire. Blood dripped into my eyes as I finally released his tail and raised my forelegs to try and block him, but, now free, he dropped down and punched me hard in the gut. I vomited noisily onto the concrete and fell back, barely able to breathe.

He raced straight for the rocket, reaching over his shoulder and ripping out a long strip of bloody shrapnel from his back. It dragged along the ground beside him, and my heart froze as I made out tiny goutts of flame flashing from the fuel soaked into the poured stone. All it needed was to ignite a large enough volume, and we'd all go up!

Then a blue cannonball landed right on his back, knocking them both to the ground and making him drop the metal bar. P-21 wasn't a fighter, he wasn't even all that big for a stallion, but he slammed his hooves into the Legate's head again and again till finally the zebra was forced to fight him off. With a wild toss, P-21 went flying, landing next to one of the hoses.

"Enough of this!" the Legate shouted, "No more! No more plotting. No more scheming. No more fighting. No more wasting my time with this annoying, futile hope! I am the chosen one! Supreme! Invincible!" He then snatched up the bar, the sharp, jagged edge glinting in the floodlights, hooking it in his hooves and raising it for a downward swing on one of the hoses.

I struggled to put together enough focus to try a magic bullet. For all I knew, it would ignite everything anyway.

Then P-21 grabbed one of the hoses near where it joined a pipe on the tower and pulled with all his might. The old tube, coated in frost, gave a ripping noise and suddenly popped free in a cloud of white. He turned and pointed it right at the red-striped zebra, bathing him in a stream of evaporating fluid. Some safety had to

exist, because after several seconds, the flow cut off. The Legate stood there, bar overhead, a rime of frost covering him from head to hoof.

I had to drink a healing potion just to see clearly, wiping the blood out of my eyes and spitting out a shard of glass stuck in my tongue, then approached the Legate. Some of the freezing fluid was still dribbling down his body, and I could hear little creaks and pops. “Invincible this,” I said, and swung the bar with all my strength. The Legate’s limbs shattered, falling into the puddle of freezing fluids, breaking like a delicate figurine upon the ground.

I rushed up to P-21, trying to pull the hose away as it drooled cold-steaming liquid... It took a great deal of his fur with it... and other things that I’d need healing potions for. He shivered horribly against me. “He talks too much,” P-21 muttered, ice dangling off his mane.

“Come on,” I said, not knowing how long we had before the Legate thawed or we all fried. Levitating my gun, I put him on my back, carrying him up the spiral gantry in the rocket’s launch tower. “Glory? Are you there?” I asked into my PipBuck as we reached the open hatch at the top. “Soon as you can, you need to start the launch sequence and get back here.” I reached the hatch. “Glory?”

“Got it,” she said a little lighter than I liked.

“Are you okay?” Magical interference be damned, if the answer was no, I was going to break the laws of physics and magic to bring her back safely.

“I’m fine, Blackjack,” Glory said. “Hurry. You don’t have long.” More gunshots sounded from the PipBuck. “I’ve started the pre-launch countdown already. It’s all automated.”

“Good. Come straight away, okay?” I asked as I tried to ignore the sounds of shooting over the radio. I got P-21 inside the much snuggier interior of our rocket. There were just four passenger seats, the fifth with the controls occupied by a cobbled-together terminal machine like the ones in Cognitum’s rocket. I set him down in one and started buckling him in. Four small portholes along the wall and in the door let me see out.

“...I’ll try,” Glory said quietly. That set alarms off in my head. More gunshots sounded, now from both my foreleg and a speaker in the capsule. I spotted a terminal showing the control room. Heaps of dust, dead zebras, and slain Brood littered the place. Glory looked up from a terminal and smiled at the camera. Almost instantly, a unicorn Brood teleported into the room. Glory immediately whirled at

the flash, the beams from her gun lancing out and biting deep into it. Magic bullets slammed into her as her beams cut down the machine, the jacket absorbing many of the hits. . . but not all. Her wings and haunches wept with dozens of wounds.

I rose to my hooves as Scotch Tape strapped herself in as well. "Hang tight. I'll be right there!" I said as I started towards the door.

It swung shut in my face. There was the sound of bolts being driven into the hatch with whirring noise.

I slammed my hooves against the metal. "What's going on?" I shouted, slamming my hooves against it, looking around for the doorknob as I heard the bolts thunk shut. "Glory!"

I looked out the window in the door, which pointed right at the large window to the control room. I could see flashes of light from inside. "I can't leave, Blackjack. I don't know how to disable the controls. If I leave, they could abort the launch," she said, my ears straining to catch her words over the rattle of gunfire. I rushed back to the terminal, watching as she hunkered behind the terminal, blasting again and again.

Back to the hatch, back to trying to figure out how the damn thing opened. "Get out of there, Glory! We'll leave! Find another way," I yelled as I beat my hooves against the metal. There had to be some way. "Open this thing, Scotch!" I said, looking at all the knobs and levers. I whipped my head around and screamed, "Open it right now! I have to get to her!"

Scotch Tape stared at me. Tears streaked her cheeks as she stared from me to the shivering P-21. "Do it!" I screamed at her.

"No," P-21 said through his chattering teeth.

"I'd do it for you!" I yelled at him. "I'd do it for you, Scotch!" I snapped at the stricken filly.

"And she is doing it for you," he answered, tears streaking the lingering frost on his cheeks. "Just like we would do it for you."

No. No no no! "I don't want anyone to die for me!" I said as I slammed my shoulder against the hatch. Where was the 'emergency open'? Something! "Glory!" I sobbed.

"Blackjack, the missile will impact in a minute," Glory said calmly, glancing over at a display. "I can see it here." There was a thunk, and a hiss, whine, and rattle sounded in the guts of the rocket. "I've checked the flight path. You're going to get to the Lunar

Palace a little behind Cognitum.” My view of the control room was briefly blocked by a moving beam as the launch tower swung down and away to the sound of klaxons.

“Please, Glory. . . Please. . .” I tried to teleport, and hit the wall. . . tried again. . . hit it again. Whatever zebra talisman kept me back refused to yield. I levitated out the gun, pointing it at the hatch.

“Don’t! You’ll kill all of us!” Scotch yelled.

“Blackjack,” P-21 said in tones intended to help me accept the unacceptable.

“No!” I shouted, my hooves beating against the metal.

“All systems nominal. Launch tower disengaged,” the heartless computer stated coolly. “Starting core stage engines.”

I wanted to slay the damned machine, but it was the only thing that would get me to my destination. I bit my lip so hard trying not to scream that I tasted blood. “We can’t just leave her.”

He reached out and put a hoof on my shoulder as the bulwark field activated around our rocket and the hiss beneath us turned into a roar.

“Core stage engine thrust stable. Booster ignition in ten, nine, eight...”

“No, Blackjack. It’s that... I’m sorry,” he told me in tones that couldn’t begin to console me, with words that couldn’t begin to make this right. He was also the only thread of sanity keeping me together. What was one life to that of the whole world?

Everything.

It was a price to be paid. I could accept that. What I could not accept was another person paying it. I sobbed, looking out at Glory as she rose and turned to face out the window. Despite the distance that separated us, I could still make out her smile as she stared back at me. I saw her lips move, but the words were stolen by the dull roar bursting into a cacophonous thunder. The computer said something I didn’t catch. Glory and the space center were gone from the window, and I staggered over to the communications terminal against crushing pressure and the shaking of the world.

I stretched a hoof towards the monitor as I saw her slump. There was blood in the corner of her mouth, one wing shot clean through and dangling beside her as if about to fall off. Out the window behind her, I could see a column of magical fields vanishing as steam drifted over an empty launchpad. I collapsed to the floor, reaching towards her, straining my hoof to touch the glass. She placed hers over

mine, two ponies separated by a pane of cold glass. I stared, willing the glass to dissolve, for her to come tumbling through, tears streaking down my face.

“Blackjack,” she murmured, smiling as she wept. “Tomorrow.”

Outside the windows, the world grew light, a sunrise from below. The monitor went dark. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Glory beneath the floor. Glory meeting me in the shower. Glory’s tears in the rain. Glory hovering beneath me, hoof outstretched, aglow. The feel of Glory holding me. Glory saving Scotch Tape. Glory throwing me across the room as Dash. Glory dancing with me in her stunning dress. Glory flying through the skies with me. Glory giving her speech to Thunderhead. Glory walking away. Glory giving me a sad smile.

I threw back my head as I was crushed to the floor, crying out her name for the whole universe to hear, lost in the roar as her sacrifice carried me into the heavens.

(Author’s notes: Horrible chapter. Just horrible. Horrible to write. Horrible to edit. I think this chapter has taken more time and effort than any chapter before. I’m sorry for the wait and I hope that everyone who’s read continues to do so. I want to thank my editors for extreme frustration and exhaustion many of them have faced. Many of them suffered major sleep deprivation for this chapter. I hope to get the next chapter out because... hell of a place to leave things.

I’d like to thank Kkat for writing FoE. It’s really amazing to think we’re so close to being done after so long. I’d like to give special thanks to Hinds for his... expansive knowledge of rockets, Heartshine for her expansive knowledge of crazy people, Swicked for his expansive knowledge of knowing when a fight just ain’t good enough, and Bro for actually knowing great synonyms for ‘Look’.

I also want to thank everyone for reading as long as they have. Right now work is bad, given that I’m losing 500 dollars this month and 1000 dollars in december. No sub work over holidays. So I hope folks will help though Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Gifts are so needed and appreciated. Feedback... sigh... yes, I hope to hear from everyone. Just know that I’m sorry.

Music I was imagining for the final scene.)

(Hinds: ...Well now. That was... quite the ending. As you probably can understand (particularly if you know who my favorite character in PH i– was), I’m feeling slightly emotionally dazed at the moment. I wrote the release note before reading this end scene, and I’ll probably have recovered by the time it’s time to post the chapter (hopefully) tomorrow (later edit: We’re now going to be trying for next Saturday.). Well, technically later today, since I’m typing this timestamp at 010220. Yeah.

...Well, I’m not sure what more there really is I can say about that ending. And my writing isn’t at its best at the moment. So... on with the note I planned before I even knew that this chapter would have a big ending, much less what it was. Ahem. Regarding the aesthetics of the rockets, I imagine that the ESS-A1 looks rather N1ish and the older ships have some similarities to the R-7 family. There are

of course differences; sizes vary, and the ESS-A1 is a single stage while even the most primitive of the older ships is two stage, core and boosters, among other things, but I like to think that the general *looks* of the ships have commonalities. For those of you curious about the propulsion systems, the idea is that both the ESS-A1 and the older rocket core stages use Magical Thermal Rockets (propellant generating), with similarities to NTRs (including having an onboard magical reactor for power) but using magical heating on propellant generating by hydrogen talismans (as introduced in the original FoE for airships and here also powered by the reactor). Both the ESS-A1 and the older rockets therefore have effectively unlimited Delta-V in space as long as nothing breaks and the reactors have power, but they have differences in available acceleration. Most impactfully, the ESS-A1 has enough thrust to take off and land on Equus as a full SSTO. The older rockets do not; when tail-landing at the ends of their missions, they run their engines in LAMTRpg mode. Since they don't have oxygen talismans, though, they have to run that on an internal LOX tank, and the designers decided that it would be prohibitively difficult to make this large enough for both takeoffs and landings. Launches are therefore performed with the assistance of four conventional chemical RP-1/LOX boosters. (The boosters originally were LH2/LOX, but then it turned out that Somber wanted burning pools of fuel scattered around the place; please let me know if we've missed any places that still suggest LH2, which now probably isn't on the launch field at all.)

...And now I'm sad again, because it occurred to me that Glory would probably enjoy this little educational interlude...

...Which reminds me of a bit more education, at least: Blackjack really ought to have been able to find a way to get that hatch open, and pretty quickly and easily, too. Sadly, Apollo 1 provides us with ample evidence that hatches poorly designed for emergency opening are not unrealistic. Of course, if Blackjack *had* gotten that hatch open, it may well have doomed the planet, but... Sigh...

There wouldn't really have been another way for Glory to make the launch unstoppable, under the circumstances, other than sabotage, though, and that she didn't know how to do. With all the technicians dead, she'd be more likely to either do nothing or stop the launch herself.

...And I think I'm just kind of rambling now. Well, goodnight, everyone!

And welcome to the endgame of Project Horizons. It is going to be a bumpy ride.)

(swicked: I like zebra ^_^)

Also: it is truly tragic you guys will never have the pleasure of hearing the enthusiasm in Hinds' voice when he describes his rocket erections.)

(Hinds: ... You know full well I'm talking about raising rockets from their horizontal transportation positions to their vertical launch positions. :))

(Heartshine: this chapter came in a time when life was really kicking everyone's butts. Also the line "It was a price to be paid. I could accept that. What I could not accept was another person paying it." hit me a lot harder than I thought it would when Somber and I talked about it a few months ago. Uhg... Not envious of BJ and would totally have been tempted to blow the damned door open. Somber and I have had long conversations on the meaning of sacrifice, and it's always interesting to hear other people's points of view on it. All I know is that I'm used to being the one who makes sacrifices, at least with my job. So when put into spots where I can't make that sacrifice, things tend to end emotionally about as well for me as they did for Blackjack. Anyways, no one probably cares, but goddesses if this chapter didn't hit hard.)

(Bronode: “No one probably cares”

So yes, rocket erections. I believe we have it on good authority that horsecock-shaped rockets would be “aerodynamically unsound” Three guesses where that came from.)

(swicked: Only if they’re uncut.)

(Bronode: [Broken at the behest of Swicked’s purile sense of humour... and horse circumcision is an ongoing area of investigation - look for the conclusions in your favourite pone-dong-related, peer-reviewed journal soon!] I wish I could remember more, but I kind of... *overdid it* on the sauce this chapter in anticipation of *my* favourite character getting scrubbed. To be honest, Glory going out like that kind of came out of left field for me. I actually sat down hard later and said “Glory can’t just be gone. She’s too boring to go out like that.” Three years, I’ve spent with that character. I was the one who gave her her AER-14. She wasn’t my favourite, not by a long shot, but still. And there’s at least another four chapters of this to go. Seems Somber’s not gonna be happy unless I end up with cirrhosis.)

72. Captive Audience

"You guys have gotta get me out of here! I'm gonna climb the walls!"

"Ooh, just like a spider! Did the crash somehow give her super-duper spider powers?"

For a time I couldn't measure, the suffocating hoof of acceleration crushed down on my spine and pinned my limbs to the floor while the roar of the engines drowned out all of my thoughts. I struggled for every breath, my body fighting my mind's desire for oblivion. I wanted it to push harder, crush me down till nothing was left. I was thankful for the agonizing respite, but it tapered off far too soon. I lay there, aching and throbbing and trapped with that horrible moment.

Events replayed again and again in my mind, as if trying to correct a horrible mistake that had been made. I kept attempting to edit those thoughts through force of will alone, trying desperately to see Glory soaring to the rocket seconds before the launch... to see her scramble for safety with the rest of the zebras... to see a protective bubble of magic envelop the control station...

Something...

Anything...

Gradually, I was forced to acknowledge the reality around me. I heard Scotch Tape sobbing inconsolably as P-21 did all he could to console her anyway. I cracked an eye open, spotting him reaching as far as the harness would allow. There were no tears in his eyes, only a sad knowledge. I envied his calloused heart and loathed my petty emotions in turn. He glanced at me, and in his eyes was another tie between us: *I know what it's like to lose somepony you love right before your eyes.*

Freezing fluid had splashed everywhere when he'd pulled out the hose, and I guessed that he had burns on his back and flanks, too. Being sprayed with it hadn't burned him like a flamer would. The frost was already melting, but it was clear from the mats of fur missing from his limbs that he was in great pain. Bald, red-raw patches of skin looked like so much thawing meat.

I closed my eyes again as I heard Scotch Tape snuffle. "I'm sorry. I killed her. I am so sorry."

"You... killed her?" I asked as I sat up and felt myself bob upward, my body incred-

ibly light. Any other time I would have welcomed and marveled at the sensation. Scotch immediately fell silent, pressing her face into her father's outstretched hoof, the only part of her that would reach. "What did you do, Scotch?"

"She saved our lives, Blackjack. She saved your life. That's what she did," P-21 said, his voice low, thick, heavy, and reasonable. I didn't want reason. I wanted to vent the pain and bile coiled up inside me. This was worse than Lacunae. At least with Lacunae I could feel like it had been for a greater good. That her two hundred years of being the Goddess's garbage dump had entitled her to an end to her pain. Now I wanted to hurt somepony to get the pain out of me, and the only targets I had were the two who deserved it least.

"What. Did. You. Do?!" I demanded, tears and spittle floating away from me and lingering in the air like miserable little stars.

"I overrode the hatch. I kept my hoof on the button to close it," she whimpered, looking at me with dread. Rage and horrible words were ripped to pieces as I hissed through my teeth.

"Why?" I spat.

"Because if that hatch hadn't been locked down when the rocket took off, we would have all died, not just Glory," P-21 said firmly, but with compassion still in his voice. Still, I could see the warning in his gaze. "If the hatch had come open during flight, we would have all died. If it had aborted the launch, we would have all died. You can't be on the verge of launch, stop everything, and then take off again a minute later."

"I could have saved her!" I screamed at him.

"How?" he shouted back, and with that one, simple word, the blazing indignation in me died. His voice returned to reasonable levels. "How, Blackjack? Did your teleportation kick back on? Do you think she could have healed her wing and flown back here fast enough? And if we had died, then *everypony* would have." His words were a cold, smothering blanket on my rage, dousing the flames and leaving only smoldering char in their wake. "Besides," he added, averting his eyes. "I killed her."

"No..." Scotch Tape moaned, shaking her head. "I did it. I..." But she trailed off, left staring at her hooves.

"I should have stayed with her," he said, low and evenly. "If I'd been there, she would have been able to focus on the launch. We might have been able to take all the Brood out sooner and get her out of there like she planned! But I stayed with you."

"Daddy. That Legate would have killed Blackjack and destroyed the rocket if you hadn't been there," Scotch Tape said, then twisted in her harness to pull out a healing potion. She started to pass it to him, but the bottle slipped from her hooves. Rather than fall to the deck, it spun away slowly through the air, before bouncing dully off the far wall. "What the hay?" the filly asked, and then noticed at all the little tears floating in the air. "Oh. . ."

I reached out with my magic to float the errant potion to P-21. He drank it immediately, and I pulled myself to sit on the other side of him, hooking my legs into the supports of his couch to keep from drifting away. "You don't really think you killed her, do you?" I said with a little mirthless smile.

"No, but considering how you two were acting, it seemed like the thing to do," he said as skin slowly regenerated over the raw patches. "The Legate killed Glory. Not us. She wouldn't want us to be mad at ourselves or each other. She'd want us to look ahead."

But how could I look ahead when behind hurt so much? How could I look ahead to a future without her in it? A tomorrow with no Glory? I pushed off from the couch, floating across the air and reaching one of the windows. Don't think about it. That hurt least of all, right now.

Below us I could see the grand arc of the world, a mottle of blue, green, gray, and brown. I thought we might be over the zebra lands now, or maybe somewhere else in the world. Wherever we were, I didn't want to visit. One area was illuminated by a fiery vortex that seemed to gyre slowly amid molten mountains and what I thought might have been the outlines of a city. Another flickered and flashed like a constant lightning discharge. Another was a dark blot, like ink, staining the land. Megaspells, I realized. Megaspells running amok even two centuries later. Who knew what other effects were down there, making life hell for the inhabitants?

"How is she floating like that?" Scotch Tape asked as I floated above the ground, tail and mane waving as if I was underwater.

"We're falling," P-21 answered, getting an alarmed expression from his daughter. "Think about when I shoot a grenade from Persuasion. The grenade rises through the air, reaches its apex, and falls. The bigger the charge, the further the grenade flies." Scotch Tape nodded, seeming to follow what he was saying. "Imagine if I had a charge big enough to throw the grenade over the horizon. If there wasn't any air to slow it down, where would it land?"

Scotch furrowed her brow for a second then looked back to her father. "It wouldn't.

It'd just keep flying over the horizon." Her eyes widened. "Ohhh!" Then she frowned again. "But... what about the sun and the moon and stuff?"

"Magic," I answered, getting a groan from both of them. "No, it was in one of those magic books of Twilight's. A disertingy. The natural magic of the Equus system keeps the sun and moon and other natural satellites in their own magical spheres; the moon is in the first, the sun in the second, and other planets further and further out."

"If magic keeps the sun and moon in the sky, what would it do for something like the Eater?" P-21 asked gravely.

Huh. If the Eater had enough magic, would it just float back into space again? It'd have to find a way to push through a mile of rock first, though. "Maybe. I never thought about it." And I tried, and failed. Glory would... and that stopped my speculation cold. "I don't know." I turned to Scotch Tape. "So this rocket runs on magic?"

"A little. Part magic and part physics. I don't really know how though," Scotch Tape admitted. "I can kinda guess how it works a little, but not why. I think I have more of a civil engineering cutie mark and less a gadgetry cutie mark." She twisted, as if consulting her flank for confirmation. Then she undid the restraint clasp and gave an exploratory push. Instantly she started to backflip slowly in the air. "Whoa!" she shouted, waving her hooves as she attempted an awkward hybridization of walking and flapping in the air. "Daddy, you have to try this!"

"No. I don't," he said as he leaned back against the couch, looking decidedly green. "You have fun, though," he said with a permissive wave of a hoof. "Don't hit the self-destruct button by accident or anything."

I turned my back to both of them, moving away from the window and around to the next. The sun blazed as it came around the curve of the planet, much smaller but far more brilliant than the planet it illuminated. A star like any other, its magnificence undimmed by remoteness. The glare stabbed at my eyes, and so I moved further around to the next window.

Stars. So many stars. I stared out at them, and they seemed to gaze back into me. All those I'd seen before, few as they were, flickered. But these were steady points of light, and so many, the sky becoming ever more full with them as my eyes recovered from the sun's radiance. I could see how some might see them as evil portents, cold and remote and cruel, but to me they felt warmer. They were remote because they had to be. They were trying to light up all that blackness and fill it with

color and life. It was all so vast and dark, but it was still filled with endless beauty.

My hoof brushed against a rough burr on the otherwise smooth metal around the porthole, and I glanced down in dull curiosity. 'For Tarot. May she see the future.' I ran my hoof back and forth over the words. Marigold had been here in this very rocket. The first mare to leave the world by pony ingenuity and return safely. She'd brought Twilight Sparkle's baby all the way up to the stars during a time of war and strife, in the hope of seeing a better future. She'd been rewarded with scandal, snide insinuation, accusation, the end of her career, humiliation. . . and a daughter. Tarot's future had ended in a stable, and ten generations later, here I was, walking in Marigold's hoofsteps. Returning to the moon.

Scotch Tape bumped against my back. "Blackjack," she said in delicate tones. "I'm sorry. . ."

"She's not dead," I contradicted, not taking my eyes off the stars.

"Blackjack," P-21 began in worried tones.

"She's not!" I said as I whirled on them. . . and had to grab at the edges around me to stop myself. I had to brush my mane out of my face and take a moment to inhale deeply. I regarded both of them, staring with matching expressions of concern. "She's not."

"Blackjack," P-21 repeated, this time in resigned tones.

"She isn't dead," I repeated firmly. "Think of all the stuff I survived by the skin of my teeth. She's smart and resourceful. She'd find a way to survive." I couldn't take his skeptical, sad gaze any longer and turned back to the comforting glow of the stars. "She's not dead. She never gave up on me, even after that megaspell. I won't give up on her." And until I held her corpse in my embrace, I wouldn't believe it.

"Blackjack," Scotch Tape said in a voice so like her father I wanted to scream. I turned to snap but halted at her smile. "Maybe you're right. I mean, that place was huge! It had magical fields that could hold back a rocket's exhaust. They even stopped explosions. Maybe there was something similar around the control center." She held my shoulder and turned to face her father. "And that Lightbringer, she survived a balefire bomb that was right underneath her!" She turned from him to me and back again, her smile becoming more strained, tears in the corner of her eyes. "It's possible. . . right?"

Her desperation steadied me, and I held her firmly, hugging her close. "Yeah," I murmured in her ear. "It's possible." I started as I felt two more hooves circle around

both of us. I twisted my neck in surprise, meeting P-21's gentle, reassuring gaze as he held the both of us.

"It's possible," he echoed, and pressed his head to mine. For a moment, I was content to just float, comforted by the press and warmth of love and hope, no matter how thin and pale that hope was. I gave my first sincere smile as I caressed his neck.

"No sudden motions. It'll spoil the moment if I vomit on both of you," he muttered as we floated in the rocket.

The comment made me laugh. A tiny, short, pathetic laugh, but a laugh none the less. Since when did he become the funny one? I carefully pushed us all back to our seats with my magic. I was feeling a little queasy too, and I hoped that we'd get to the moon before any of us had to use the bathroom!

It was amazing how little things could help so much.

When we were back down, P-21 regarded me. "Blackjack, do you have a memory orb you can go into for a while? I need to talk to Scotch Tape privately." I blinked in surprise, and so too did the olive filly. Then she suddenly seemed wary.

"Um... maybe?" I thought of the orbs I already had, then thought of something even better. I withdrew the Perceptitron. It was a little battered around the edges, but all the little lightbulbs and whirly bits still lit up when I plugged it into my PipBuck. I checked my copious list of PipBuck tags and frowned. Right there at the top was Glory's. It glowed at me with awful temptation. All I would have to do was put it on and find out if she was alright... or not...

And if I put in that tag and found her dead... could I take it?

My hoof trembled, eyes tearing up as I stared. Right now, I didn't know. Right now, I wanted to believe so much that she was alive. I needed to. But if she were dead, or alive and dying... no. I felt myself falling apart just thinking about it. So I picked another tag at random, and let my world swoosh away.

oooOOOooo

Of course, I ended up in Goldenblood. I couldn't get away from him, even if I wanted to. His body felt wrong. There was a heartbeat, but it was a tepid, reptilian beat. He breathed at a glacial pace, like a flywheel that still possessed just enough inertia to creep long after the motor driving it had died. Even the burning pain throughout his chest for most of his life had dimmed to the consistency of wet charcoal.

I was rather surprised to see him in the exact same conference room at the Skyport where Lighthooves had once confronted General Storm Chaser. It made sense, though. Charming as Star House was, it was no place to conduct a war from. The chamber had been transformed. A half dozen green alicorns sat in a row, munching on biscuits as Velvet Remedy paced from one to another. A blue alicorn sat boredly beside the table, projecting a tiny illusory display of the Hoof, complete with tiny glowing blue ponies and red zebras. As Goldenblood read a report about the Halfhearts fighting against increasing numbers of Brood, a purple alicorn winked in, passed over several notes, conferred briefly with Velvet, and then winked away again.

“A report from Stable 99. Five hundred estimated Brood from the coast through the Boneyard and down to the Fluttershy Medical Center.” As she spoke, she looked pointedly at the blue, who sighed and flashed her horn. The illusion added a wall of red along the northwest corner of the map. An almost solid ring of red encapsulated everything. Over on the southeast side hovered tiny glowing Raptors.

“Thank you, Velvet. Without your children, this wouldn’t have been possible,” Goldenblood rasped as he took the papers and glanced at each one almost faster than I could read. “The Brood might be blocking our communications, but they can’t stop them.”

“And they’re not being used as weapons. That’s all I asked,” Velvet said, still looking a touch disturbed.

“Is something wrong?” he asked.

“I just. . . didn’t expect we’d separate like this. It feels wrong,” she replied as she rubbed a leg, looking pensively to the door.

“Like the ministries,” he murmured as he read a few scrawled lines on one of the notes giving numbers of enemy soldiers. Velvet swallowed and nodded. He gave a small smile. “I know the feeling. Honestly, I contemplated tasking the four of you with tracking down and stopping the Legate, but since the explosion, he’s been missing. And the fact is, right now, you’re more effective apart than together.”

“Is that what you told the Ministry Mares two centuries ago?” Velvet asked sharply. He glanced at her and saw the determined scowl on her face. “I’ve heard the rumors.”

He returned his eyes to the paper. “I was a different pony back then. I made mistakes, had the wrong priorities, trusted myself too much and others too little.”

This note talked about scavengers in the Core. “The fact is that I didn’t know the Ministry Mares beyond reputation. I didn’t... respect them... as I should have. I thought their lives were secondary to Luna’s reign and Equestria’s survival. That they were disposable. I was in... *gross* error.” He sighed and closed his eyes. “The fact is, I anticipated prison time for Applejack and Pinkie and executions for Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash. An ‘accident’ for Rarity. Fluttershy would, of course, be pardoned.”

“You’re disgusting,” Velvet said contemptuously.

“Indeed,” he replied evenly. “Which is why, this time, I’m trying to do better.” His magic scribbled out a note. “This message needs to go to Big Daddy. Scavenging is fine. Encourage it and seize anything useful they find. Refugees seeking shelter are not. Tell him to encourage the scavengers to embellish the stories about the monsters and killer robots that dwell there. After all, the scavengers don’t want competition with refugees,” he said as he finished scribbling out the note.

“That’s doing better? Lying to them?” Velvet Remedy asked, clearly unimpressed.

“Well, I could order them shot,” he replied, deadpan, and then added, “You know. After a formal apology.” Velvet shook her head and trotted back to the row of green alicorns muttering under her breath.

General Storm Chaser trotted in. “I have good news. That zebra doesn’t have a clue how to use his forces.”

Goldenblood frowned at the map. “Despite all evidence to the contrary.”

The pegasus gave a grim smile. “Actually, yes. He’s an outstanding fighter, but he makes a piss-poor general. With the forces he commands, he should be able to annihilate us with ease. Use his flyers to attack our flanks without giving us a chance to respond. Make rear sorties. Target our strong points with pinpoint strikes. Feel out weaknesses and punch holes in our lines. *Then* drop the hammer of a full assault on our disorganized, scattered, leaderless remains. I could beat us in about two hours with all the forces at his command. One if I forced the raptors to retreat. Instead, he’s encapsulated the entire city and is making a single uniform ground and air advance.” She sighed as she looked at all the red. “If we weren’t outnumbered ten to one, I’d go on the offensive.”

“And that, I assume, is where the good news ends?” Goldenblood asked dryly.

“Unfortunately, yes,” the gray pegasus admitted, sighing and shaking her head. “With his numbers, he doesn’t need tactics. And we’re already seeing their re-

inforcement patterns matching our expectations: a momentary decline in combat force is followed by immediate resupply. We're fighting a hurricane: no matter how long we flap, it keeps pushing us back. It's not warfare so much as crude attrition." She jabbed a hoof at a red dot, one of three, glowing in the air. The image flickered as her hoof made contact with the projection, and the blue alicorn grumbled. "Sorry," the general said to the alicorn.

The blue huffed and rolled her eyes. "The Goddess is not pleased with being used as a projector!"

"You're not the Goddess, Bubblegum. Remember?" Velvet reminded the alicorn kindly. The alicorn's blue ears folded, and she dropped her eyes.

Storm Chaser gave her a comforting smile. "What you're doing is appreciated, though." She gestured to the display once again, careful not to hit the glowing images. "In any case, the lack of tactics is good. He might be performing some kind of complicated feint, but I'm just not seeing it. Since we're screwed if he really is up to something, I'll bank on him being as stupid as he seems. I'll take a strong but stupid opponent over a weak but intelligent one any day."

"It is a refreshing bit of good news. Until the bunkers are eliminated, shall we proceed as planned?" Goldenblood asked.

"Dig in, hold on, and fall back in unison," the general replied. "We're going to lose a lot of territory in the meantime." Then, addressing Velvet Remedy, "But it will minimize casualties."

"Thank the Goddesses for that," Velvet murmured. "I hate war."

"I don't," the General said grimly, getting a dirty look from Velvet. "Oh, don't mistake me. I don't love it either. I respect war. War is a state of change. If it hadn't been for your LittlePip setting off our war with the surface, the Enclave would have continued to stagnate. The war, horrible as it was, has forced us to come to terms with a new reality. So I look upon it as a hurricane: it's terrible to be in, but it clears the skies after its passing." That seemed to give Velvet a little bit to think about.

"Clear skies aren't much good to the ponies who didn't make it out of the storm," Goldenblood pointed out.

Velvet Remedy chewed her lip. "You're certain that Blackjack got out on that last rocket?"

"Meatlocker is sending in ghoulish teams to extract any survivors before the Brood cut off the ruins. If they find her... well, I guess we'd better pray Cognitum is right,"

Goldenblood said. "Otherwise, this will all be for naught."

"Do you expect to find friendly survivors?" Velvet asked. "That blast... I..." She shook her head. "When LittlePip talked about it, I didn't really understand what she went through. And she was in a chamber designed to survive that explosion, and very nearly didn't." Velvet gave a little tremble. "She... she lost a leg." A tiny note of horror was in her voice.

"She was fortunate to be able to regrow it. I don't know if Blackjack's blank body would be as resilient." Goldenblood hung his head. "I can only hope that if there were any friendly forces caught in the explosion they either died quickly or found proper shelter. Now, I need updates from the Burners about the northeast. They've been silent for too long, and we need to check to see if they need pegasus reinforcements."

"Just like old days," Storm Chaser murmured.

oooOOOooo

I cut the connection, feeling a migraine starting. Okay. That wasn't exactly as optimistic as I'd hoped they'd be about survivors. I'd rather have heard something like 'Oh yeah, sure, balefire bombs! Pfft, hardly a risk at all.' I heard P-21 and Scotch Tape still talking, the filly sniffing. I pushed the helmet back enough to see him cradling her, holding her in his hooves as he talked too softly for me to hear. A younger me would have listened in. Instead, I entered in another PipBuck tag, and the world went swirling away once more.

oooOOOooo

Okay! This was a little more intense than I anticipated! This body corkscrewed through the air, twisting around as bullets zipped around it. No thundering heart-beat. No gasping for breath. Only the barest hint of straining muscles. There was sensation of movement, but the body's exertion was absent. Still, the power armor and natural strength of the body I was in couldn't be denied. A glance back, past a snapping purple cape, at three cyberwinged zebra flying behind—

Suddenly she... or a very unfortunate stallion... flipped vertical, hooves and wings spread wide, abruptly braking in the air. The Brood directly behind her didn't react in time as the body I occupied arched and flipped backwards. Two armored hooves looped around the zebra's neck. An instant later came a powerful jerk, the zebra's head drawn all the way back to his flanks with a resounding snap. Her body stole momentum from the Brood flyer for a few seconds, then released and banked away

sharply to the left as the Brood tumbled to the earth like a broken bird.

The second target had stopped short, firing at her as she spiraled in, the streams of bullets in a deadly dance with her approach. Some bullets found their mark, sparking and thudding into the armor that covered her, punching numb, dull holes in the meat beneath and ripping tatters out of the cape. She closed in on the Brood's side, hooking her hooves around the gun in its battle saddle, gripping it like a lever and slamming her rear legs into its head while it continued to fight. Twisting the second Brood in the air, she turned it like a shield towards the third, who was callously strafing both her and the body of its comrade.

As the cyberzebra's metal wings began to spasm, she pumped her own and drove the second Brood right into the face of the third before it could evade. As it struggled to untangle itself, she flipped over his head and landed on his back. She braced her rear hooves against its guns, hooked her front hooves around the base of his wildly flapping wings, and stood. With a horrible wet noise and a shriek of metal, she tore the wings right off the third Brood's back. The pair tumbled down to join the first.

A few dozen pegasi clad in enclave armor hovered aghast nearby. One carried a rather uncomfortable-looking Homage on his back, Spitfire's Thunder a clue to his identity. The cowpony hat glued to the top of his helmet didn't hurt either. "Whoa," came Calamity's voice as he stared on. A green alicorn flying in the back nodded her agreement.

"What? It's basic aerial hoof to hoof combat. No biggie," Mare Do Well replied, then looked at the massive SPP tower to the south of the Core. Like a hive, it buzzed with Brood. "That might be a biggie though." She didn't take her eyes off the swarm. About three quarters of the way up the tower was a ring with a multitude of dishes and antennas pointed out at the wasteland. "You sure this is the one they're using?"

"Mostly," Homage replied, and Mare Do Well glanced back at her tapping on her PipBuck. "It's definitely got the strongest interference. I think it's our best bet to take down the Brood's network."

"Right," Mare Do Well said as she studied the SPP tower. "So how do we get in there?"

"I can pick them off one at a time," Calamity said confidently, then balked. "Well... if I got perfect headshots a hundred times in a row.... and they obliged by hanging back while I worked through 'em... fer a few hours..."

"We can do what you did," a mare with Twister's voice offered. "Lure out stragglers

and take them out in small groups. Winnow them down.”

“There’s only so many stragglers,” Dusk said. “Hard to lure those without bringing them all.”

“We could always try for a frontal assault,” drawled Boomer, drawing helmeted looks that I could only imagine as glares. “What? I finally got more missiles loaded on me than I ever dreamed! I wanna use ‘em!”

Mare Do Well studied the swarm defending the tower. “We’ll need a diversion. I’ll get her inside. Any of you have StealthBucks?”

“I do,” a stallion said as he moved to the front of the herd... er... flock? Flerd? I really needed to ask GI— He wore curious Enclave armor that seemed to bear Neighvarro styling but had some clear modifications to it. “Never leave home without one, if I can help it.”

“Oh really, Windsheer?” Calamity asked with a bit of an edge in his voice.

“Yes really, little brother. I also never leave home without a beam rifle, a dozen optimally charged cells, my PipBuck, a half dozen healing potions, and my arcane toolkit,” Windsheer countered calmly. “Knowing that I was coming to a potential warzone, I made sure I brought a whole lot more than *that*.” Calamity gave a sharp snort, but Windsheer went on to Mare Do Well. “Also, you’re dealing with the SPP. Since I’m one of the few in the skies with some knowledge of those kinds of pre-war information technologies, you’ll want to bring me along.”

“I swear, he was adopted,” Calamity grumbled, shaking his head.

“That’s one. Anypony else have some StealthBucks?” Mare Do Well asked as she looked at the other soldiers.

“We do,” a mare said in a synthetic voice as she and two companions drew close. Something about the fluidity of their armor’s movements made me wonder. They hovered as if the metal covering them was skin, and normal power armor didn’t need levitation talismans in the wings.

I wasn’t the only one to notice, either. “You... you’re augmented?” Twister asked. The mare nodded. “I thought all of you died with the tower.”

“We were close enough to the medical ponies that they were able to save us when our strings were snapped, and they took us with them on the last Raptor out before the tower blew,” the lead mare said with a nod of her head. “If your goal is stealth, we will assist.”

Mare Do Well stared at the hovering trio, taking in their integrated beam rifles. The longer I looked, the clearer it was. "You three have a name?"

"We don't go by our old names," the mare answered in that synthetic monotone. "I'm Silver. These are Cobalt and Steel." She gestured to the two behind her with a nod of her head.

"I don't have a penis, by the way," said the one on the left, Steel. "Just so you know," he added in a buzzing synthetic voice.

The other, Cobalt, covered his visor with a hoof.

"Good to know," Mare Do Well said evenly, then regarded the swarm. "So here's my plan. The six of us will take Homage and go high around behind the tower. Boomer can hit them with his missiles. Draw their attention. Fall back and pull them away from where we want to enter. We get in, neutralize any remaining guards, and get Homage where she needs to be to disable the tower. If we're lucky, they won't even know we're in there. If not..."

"Then we'll stand. Just like Security," Silver said with a nod of her head. "At least inside they can't come at us all at once. We'll hold out long as we still have power."

"Anypony else?" Rainbow Dash asked as she surveyed the crowd. No pony answered.

"Well, looks like this is it," Windsheer remarked. "Do take care of him, Lensflare. I want to see his face at the next family reunion when I retell this." Calamity groaned, getting a chuckle. "Oh, admit it, Calamity. The next time the five of us are together is going to be epic levels of awkwardness."

"You got to live to tell that story then," Calamity muttered.

"I plan on it. Oh, and thank you for not killing Dad. I have to see the look on his face when his perfect son does something so..." He balked a moment, then finished, "selfless."

"Don't be a hero," a stallion near Windsheer warned.

"Of course not. I'm going to be a real Wonderbolt, Lens," Windsheer chuckled. Rainbow Dash stared at him as the armored stallion turned his head away, adding in a lower mutter, "For once."

"Take care of yourself then," he said, and his beam rifles gave a 'vree' noise as they charged.

The pegasi shared looks, then nodded. "See you later, Brother," Calamity said.

And like that, the pegasi moved into action. I'd seen plenty of ponies move in concert before, but there was something about the cohesion of a pegasus flock that was just breathtaking to behold. They transferred Homage before the unicorn could blink, Calamity almost casually tossing her shrieking through the air before Mare Do Well caught her. Then Homage was under the cloak as the four flew higher and higher up in the sky.

Below, the rapidly shrinking pegasi launched in like a horizontal twister, corkscrewing inwards towards the tower. At some unknown signal, the mouth of the twister widened and the foremost let out a strafing barrage of beams while the ponies further back unloaded pairs of missiles and potent sniper shots at the swarm. Like a black blob, the Brood reacted with overwhelming force, firing a storm of lead from the platform ring and the fliers. Yet the pegasi didn't scatter. With astounding grace, the funnel suddenly turned inside out, with the leading edge spiraling away from the tower while Calamity, Boomer, and a few others continued their heavy fire, ending only when the entire mass retreated around them.

The Brood started to pursue, moving like tentative fingers trying to snatch the fliers out of the air, only to hesitate when stretched too far. When the Brood halted, the pegasus cone reversed once more, with beam-armed fliers tearing into the outer edge of the Brood swarm while Boomer and Calamity resumed firing. The fingers that had been retreating to the tower suddenly reversed, bulged, and surged towards the pegasi. Some brave fliers fell, flaming, to the ground below, but far more of the Brood, out of their element, died first.

Three times the cycle repeated, with more and more of the fliers being drawn away from the tower, leaving only a fraction on the platform ringing the massive structure. Each pass through the cycle, those fingers of Brood stretched thinner and longer. Finally, they tore as almost the entirety of the Brood flew out after the pegasi in an angry buzzing cloud of murderous chaos.

"Now," Rainbow Dash said, and they flew along the underside of the huge mushroom cap that topped the tower. Up close, the uniform dome actually seemed to resemble layers of feathers, each barb longer than a Raptor. I could only imagine how they were built and couldn't imagine how they worked. Maybe they literally, mechanically, waved winds around? Skimming the underside of that cap, the six streaked down the backside of the tower towards the thin ring. Again, with that pegasus teamwork that amazed me, they all activated their StealthBucks within a second of each other, disappearing in midair.

Mare Do Well landed where the platform met the door. Somepony had cut it open, and silent as ghosts, they disappeared inside. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of ammunition crates with zebra glyphs had been stacked up in the hallway inside the door. Well, that'd simplify demolition if it came to that.

Like Shadowbolt Tower, the SPP towers were hollow tubes. Unlike Shadowbolt Tower, the inside of the SPP was so choked with pipes and conduits that it was almost impossible to imagine how anypony could rise or fall inside. There were more Brood inside, unicorns this time. Worse, they stood out from the standard cyberzebras; they had a smoother design and more talismans and seemed more independent of the rest of the swarm. Was the Legate upgrading them as the old models proved ineffective? As the six pegasi snuck past a room with a half-dozen of them inside, I watched two more of them appear with four more fliers. Then the pair disappeared.... then reappeared with another four... Shit. Teleporting in reinforcements?

"Next left. The broadcasting hardware should be through—" Windsheer started to say when Mare Do Well came to a double door marked MASEBS/SPP SIGINT-BRDCNTR. What the heck was that supposed to mean? The door opened, and three things became apparent all at once: first, the room inside had once been a control room of some kind, with a multitude of terminals. Second, it was now holding the corpses of a dozen or so dead zebras, none of which were particularly fresh. Third, it had been wrecked. The terminals and controls were smashed, gutted, or dead. Cables and wires were strewn every which way.

"Oh no. No no no!" Homage said as she wiggled off of Dash's back. "This is bad. This is very bad!" Her horn glowed, illuminating the wreckage more. "I was expecting having a decent access point! Enter in some MASEBS back door codes I know. Maybe hack through an added-on zebra security system at most. This is..." She gaped at the mess.

"Ugly, but manageable," Windsheer finished grimly. "We can work with this. It's just going to take time."

"Time," Rainbow Dash said as she looked out at the hallway. "How much time?"

"More than we probably have," he answered. "But then that's what makes it challenging." Windsheer chuckled as he rubbed his hooves together. "Miss... Homage, isn't it? I'll operate, if you'd care to assist?" Homage gave one last look at the mess and nodded.

Silver, Steel, and Cobalt appeared. "And what do we do?" Silver asked, pointing at

the door with a wingtip. "Watch the door?"

"Yeah. Be ready for trouble," Dash replied grimly. The three cyber pegasi moved into position around the door, and she glanced back at the pair starting to work on the communications system. "Why the mess?"

"No idea," Windsheer said almost cheerfully as he pulled out a clipboard, paper, and pencil. He held the lattermost between his pinons as he casually began scratching notes. "If you want me to guess, though, I'm betting that these zebras lacked the M.A.S./M.o.A. access codes, and so they just went for a hard bypass... swapping zebra terminal hardware when they ran into a brick wall... which is about as effective as trying to transplant a zebra heart into a pony body. You can do it, if you're not too concerned about dying in a few weeks." He sighed, looking at the mess of wires and the bodies. "Or else they were utterly incompetent and thought randomly wiring things would work. Your guess is as good as mine."

"So you're just going to unplug the zebra parts?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"You make it sound so simple." He sighed. "You're assuming... and I am praying to whatever fickle demon of communication technology... that they didn't just chuck the original components off the platform to get them out of the way." He transferred the pencil to his mouth and began writing more things on the board, flying up and noting where things were plugged in, or unplugged, and scratching them down on the board in precise little notation. Homage levitated the mess out of the way, inspecting the maneframes as well.

Rainbow sighed, going back to the door. "All this, and our success comes down to tech support," she muttered. "I hope the others are doing better."

oooOOOooo

I took off the helmet and immediately felt a sensation like a drill boring its way through the back of my skull, through my brain, and into my eye sockets. Off came the Perceptitron, and I curled up, pressing my hooves to the sides of my head to try and squeeze it back together. Unfortunately, tossing the Perceptitron had sent me flipping end over end through the air, and my stomach immediately threatened to come out my mouth. Then, suddenly, two hooves were gripping me and holding me tight. "Ow... ow ow ow... Ow..." I hissed over and over.

"What's wrong?" P-21 asked.

"Nothing. Just used the Perceptitron a little too long is all," I said as I rubbed my temples, the throbbing subsiding bit by bit.

“Did you...” Scotch Tape began to say, then halted. “Glory?”

I pulled the helmet back to me and studied the battered thing. Really, I was lucky it worked at all. “No. The Perceptitron is kind of hit and miss. You turn it on and hope that the person’s talking about something you want to know. Either you get lucky or you don’t.” I frowned and glanced at P-21. “Did you know that Calamity’s brother was here?”

“It’s a big valley, Blackjack. Is there a reason he shouldn’t be?” he asked with a small frown.

“No. It’s just... it seems like it’s all gotten way bigger than me now. There’s ponies fighting that I don’t even know. Some that I barely know. I don’t know how to feel about it,” I said, and gave the pair a wry smile. “I know. It’s not always about me.”

“Blackjack, this is bigger than any of us. We’re in a rocket going to the moon to stop something from killing everyone in the world,” P-21 said gently, putting a leg around Scotch Tape. “When I left 99, I couldn’t have imagined any of this. Now, I’m having a chance to be a part of it, and for the better. It’s... what he would have wanted me to do.”

Scotch Tape then extended her hooves towards me. “Gimme, Blackjack. I want to try it.”

I blinked and considered it. “Are you sure? I mean, it gives you a wicked headache.” She started to wave her hooves at me, so I levitated it over to her. She pulled it onto her head, plugged it into her PipBuck, and started typing something. “Do you have some tags you want to check up on?”

“Something like that,” she said, then fiddled with the buttons some more. “A PipBuck cutie mark would be pretty sweet right about now,” she muttered as she fumbled with turning it on. Then she glanced at me and grinned. “Hey, you think that Lightbringer person could do special things with hers? Like figure out how to get secret radio signals and—”

We didn’t discover what ‘and’ could have been, because she started screaming. She thrashed hard against the restraint straps; I pulled her out of them with my magic and levitated her to me. “What’s wrong? Scotch! Scotch!” I shouted as I pulled the helmet off the sobbing filly.

“I tried to go into Glory!” she said. “I... I thought... I’d go in and see if she was... but... it was pain, Blackjack! Nothing but pain!” she said, rubbing her eyes. A sensation of horror crept over me.

P-21 pulled himself off his couch, leaving plenty of blue coat on the couch behind him as he drifted to her. "You were inside her mind?"

"No." She shook her head. "I wasn't anywhere. It wasn't like I was in a body. I was just... nowhere. And everything hurt!" P-21 and I shared a look, and I was sure the horror on my face was clear to him. He gave a firm shake of his head and then hugged her.

"It's probably because her PipBuck was damaged. You weren't in a hurting body. Something must have gone wrong with the Perceptitron and it fed back into you," he said firmly, the voice of authority. "Has anything like that happened to you before, Blackjack?" The stress on the question left only one viable answer for me to give.

"Yeah. Sure. Once or twice," I lied, swallowing. "Real pain when it happens. I'm sorry... I mean I'm sorry you felt that. It's a real doozy," I said shakily as she sniffed, but the terrified expression on her face faded a little. I patted her head. "Thanks for trying, though. I..."

"You would have probably whined and cried about it twice as long," P-21 said casually, and though his tone was playfully dismissive, I saw the seriousness in his eyes. "Now, maybe you have a tag for a PipBuck you know is okay?" It took a second for the translation to arrive.

I immediately transferred a few over to Scotch. "Yeah, sure. Pop in and see how the Zodiacs or Whisper are doing for me."

She pulled the helmet back onto her head. I had to give it to her, she was more resilient than I would have been after that. "Yeah. Sure. Okay," she said, then looked at P-21. "And you two can have your talk." From the worried frown on her face, it was clear that there was more going on than I knew. She tapped her PipBuck and went slack, floating in the air. I nudged us both back to the seat, hooking my legs on it again to stay in place. For a moment, silence reigned... and then Scotch Tape blurted, "Oh man! I have a penis!"

He glanced at me in concern. "What?" I said defensively. "It's true. And don't tell me it's not a thing for stallions. It's one of the first things a mare usually notices when they get into a stallion's body." He sighed, shaking his head, and I patted his shoulder. "Thanks for that, by the way."

"Thanks for going along with it," he answered, rubbing his face. "When she screamed like that..."

"I know. And I... do you... do you..." I fell silent as he gave me a pitying smile. "What

a mess,” I muttered, gazing out the window at the distant stars.

“I think that goes for life in general. When it’s all done, you look back on it and it’s just one big squishy, lopsided mess,” he answered, and we were both silent again as Scotch Tape ran in midair, waved her hooves around, and said ‘whoa’ a lot.

“Do I do that?” I asked in bafflement. He shook his head, and I pondered the sight of the filly flailing. “Huh...”

Clearly, it didn’t interest him much. He put his hoof in mine. “I don’t know what’s happened to Glory. I hope... I hope that when this is all over, you’re okay and she’s okay. That’s it. It’s too much to hope for more than that.”

“Yeah,” I said as the fear crept through my mind again, and I clenched my eyes shut. I was such a coward; the little olive filly was able to do what I couldn’t. I should have been the one to try and make contact with Glory. She’s okay, I told myself. Don’t think more than that. She’s okay. I inhaled deeply and opened my eyes, and saw the sober expression on his face. “What?”

He stared straight into my eyes, and said evenly, “I want you to take care of Scotch Tape if I die. Make sure she lives.”

The two sentences hit me like a pair a hooves upside my head. “Excuse me?” I asked, faintly.

“You heard me,” he replied evenly.

“No!” I shouted, pushing off the couch intending to rise to my hooves and instead continuing to rise till I smashed my head into the ceiling and, a second later, my butt against the floor. I hissed as I slowly turned in midair, weightlessness really losing its charm as I glared at him upside down. “No! I am not having this conversation. You are going to live, understand? I don’t care what I have to do, you’re going to live, and we’re going to go back, I’m going to have my babies, and you’re going to get the chance to be a father from day one and Scotch gets to be a big sister. That is what is going to happen.”

He shook his head slowly. “How is it you can have an almost identical reaction as a filly almost half your age?” he mused, then leaned out and took my hoof, pulling me in towards him. “I didn’t say I plan to die. In fact, recently I’ve really rather warmed up to the idea of living. I want to do all those things. Be a father. Find another stallion. Live with you. Live... at all...” P-21 said as he stared into my eyes. “But what happened to Glory might happen to me. Or you. Or...” His eyes went to Scotch and he gave a little shudder. “Her. I know it’s unthinkable, which is why I want to say

it now. Not... not have it thrust on us like what happened with Glory.”

“Glory is alive,” I insisted, feeling tears creep into the corners of my eyes. “It’s going to be like LittlePip, but better. We’re going to have sunshine and rainbows when this is all done.”

“I hope so,” he said as he pressed my hoof between his. “But I want to know... I want to make sure you know that... no matter what happens to me, Scotch lives. Get her home. She’s a good girl, and I’m proud of her. Promise me.”

“No,” I said flatly, trying to jerk my hoof free... and sending me straight into his embrace. Damn cheating anti-gravity. “I won’t. You’re both going to live, no matter what. And when this is through, I’m going to teach you both the fine art of cheating death.” I gazed into his eyes, feeling tears return and seeing them reflected in his. “You... are... all of you are... not... you’re not...” He pulled me in close, holding me gently, stroking my mane as I wept against his neck. “Promise me you won’t die... please...”

“I promise,” he replied, and I heard the smile in his voice. “Now. What do you want me to do if you die?”

I pulled away, running a hoof through my mane. What to do if I die... like, dead dead. For good... “Celestia... you’ll have to stop Horizons. The pair of you... she’s knows the hardware and you have the bombs. Disable it however you can, get back to the rocket, and get home. Bury the Eater as deep as you can... the Legate with it if you can find a way. Get our babies from Cognitum... Wipe her from my old body and drag it back home and just... don’t go back to the Med-X. No matter how bad you hurt, push through. See if Calamity’s brother is into threeways or... or something. But be happy.” I met his eyes again. “I just want everypony to survive and be happy. As long as that happens... then okay.”

I glanced over at Scotch Tape as she peeked at us and abruptly tapped her PipBuck again. “Oh yeah. These Zodiacs... wow... They’re pushing their way into the bunker. This Gemini girl could give Rampage a run for her crazy, but I think she’s casting two spells at once. And watch this Sagittarius go... yeah...”

“Scotch, I know you’re not watching somepony else. There’d be a lot more ‘whoa’ and a lot less commentary,” I said dryly.

She sighed. “Yeah. It got boring. They’re pushing into the bunker over by Happy-horn. I don’t really know the Zodiac ponies. I mean, they’re good fighters, but they aren’t you.” She tapped her PipBuck a few times. “Let me spy on Charity. When

we get back, I'm going to drive her nuts with little hints and stuff." She went limp for several seconds, then frowned. "Seriously? She's balancing books?" She stuck her tongue out and blew a little raspberry. "I was hoping for something good."

"Try Whisper and Stygius," I suggested.

"Sure. I've never flown before," she said as she plugged them in, and her whole body went rigid. "Whoa! Whoa. Wooooooooaaahhhh!" she started shouting, waving her hooves in the air. "Oh yeah!" she squealed in glee.

That was more like it. I gave P-21 a smile and shrug. "Yeah. She can amuse herself with that." I took a deep breath, glanced at him, and felt a strange awkward silence begin to surround us. For a minute, my eyes wandered about the ship, then back to the floating Scotch Tape, then returned to him. "So..." I started, trying to think of something to say...

"So," he replied.

I was stuck in a metal box for several hours with a stallion I loved while a mare I loved might be dead and a filly was flying and oblivious to what we might do in the next few hours while I faced the possibility of not just the death of my two remaining friends but also everyone else in the world, but had nothing to do and no preparations to make while we travelled through space and what about Glory and how I was even thinking about this now of all times and what kind of a horrible pony was I to think of this and and and...

And P-21 made it all go away in a way that only he could, and for once, I was glad I was so easy to placate.

"I think there's something wrong with me," I muttered as we floated a few inches above the couch, taped together to keep us from drifting into Scotch or the controls.

"I think that Glory said sex is your psychological and emotional reset button," P-21 replied, giving a little shrug. "I think that you stable and happy is better than you unhappy."

I felt his heartbeat against my chest. "You didn't enjoy it," I commented. I couldn't help but feel a little dirty. Like I was using him.

"It was good," he said, and I peeked up warily to see him smile. "The act is good. Climaxing is good. Knowing you're better is good for me. It's not all I want, though,

no. I was thinking of Life Bloom half the time, to be honest,” he admitted with a small, casual shrug. He flushed a little. “There’s something about unicorns...” He sighed and shook his head, returning his eyes to me.

“Did you two...” I started to ask, watching his blush spread.

“Wanted to. Talked a little about it during the party. I’m not a good flirt. He’s not casual, though. It’d have had to be an exclusive relationship, and... well...” He gave a helpless little shrug. “He’d be nice, but the way things are...”

I sighed and nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. “Wow. I thought I was the only one with messed up relationships from 99.”

“It’s not always you, Blackjack,” he said with soft chuckle... one not quite as sincere as I’d like, but I’d take what I could get.

“Well, if you ever do find a boy to play with I will totally back you up,” I said with complete sincerity. “I owe you, after all, for helping me like this.”

He nuzzled my neck and sighed. “That’d be nice. Sex with a stallion just... is better. It feels right to me. It’s not the sex... that’s not that different. It’s the smell and the feel and the touch and... just... everything attached to the sex. And it’s nice to be on bottom with a good stallion taking care of you.”

“Sorry I can’t take care of that for you,” I said with a little flush. “Twilight doesn’t have that in her book of magic spells, or I would.”

That made him laugh, and I was glad to hear it. He had such a wonderful, low laugh. “I know you would, but I can do it with you well enough. If it was any mare but you, it wouldn’t be okay... and it wouldn’t happen. But it helps you, and since it does, I don’t mind doing it.”

Scotch Tape sighed and pulled off the helmet, wincing. “Wooo... my head is...” she froze, looking down at the pair of us taped up. “Really?” she asked flatly.

“Hey, you had the Perceptitron!” I protested. “What did you expect me to do?”

“Read a book? Take a nap? Knit a sweater?” Scotch Tape suggested, and huffed. “Knowing you two, you’re going to gum up our air filters. Ugh.” Then rubbed her nose. “Now I’m gonna have to smell it till we get to the moon. Ugh. I should have brought along someone for fun play too. Instead I’m stuck with my dad and... Blackjack...” She paused as she peered at me speculatively, then shook her head hard. “Nope. Can’t. Feels like thinking about having sex with my mom or something.” I didn’t know if I should have been flattered, insulted, or relieved.

“Sorry,” I apologized with a sheepish smile. “Just. . .”

Scotch Tape gave a casual shrug. “Don’t worry about it, Blackjack. I get it. And if you still had your metal body, I wouldn’t want to. But you’re. . .” she gestured to me with one hoof, gestured to him with the other, and gave an ‘ngh’ of frustration. “This... thing. This family thing.” She cried out in frustration, “Why does my brain have to keep thinking of you as ‘Mom’ rather than ‘super sexy mare to bang’? I want my turn too! It’s not fair!”

I didn’t think I could laugh like that anymore. It took several minutes for me to compose myself and Scotch to quit her pouting and join us. Scotch was young, but ten or less years’ difference wouldn’t raise any eyebrows back in 99. “You really think of me as your mom?” I asked when we pulled ourselves together.

She rolled her eyes. “Well, yeah. I didn’t want to have sex with her either, and she was one of the few mares that made me feel that way. Well, Rivets, but more ‘cause she was a million years old and her hoo-hah probably tasted like licking the mouth of a rusty gray water pipe.”

“More like a bag of stale grass chips,” P-21 interjected casually.

Scotch Tape and I both froze, staring at him, and I couldn’t help but shudder. Scotch scrunched up her face. “Daddy! Ew! I did not need to. . .” She clutched her head. “Ah! Stupid brain! Stop thinking about Rivets’s hoochie!”

“What? It did. With a slight tang of. . .” P-21 said as if he were recalling a old vintage of wine he didn’t particularly care too much for.

“Daddy! Noooo! There is no tang! No tang! Ah, stop thinking, dumb brain!” Scotch wailed. She covered her ears with her hooves, chanting loudly, “La la la, not thinking about Rivets’s tangy hoochie...” She paused and cried out, “It’s not working!”

“Ha! It takes years of practice to master the art of not thinking about it, Scotch Tape,” I said with an amused smile. Then P-21 looked at me, his eyes narrowed. “What?” I asked him, arching a brow. His lips curled in a small smile, and I felt a little nervous sweat run down the back of my neck. “What?” I repeated nervously, flushing.

“Your mom tasted like. . . apples,” he said with such certainty that I knew, from that point on, I would never be able to eat Sugar Apple Bombs without thinking about the part of my mom I wanted to think about least.

“Oh. . .” I closed my eyes. “I. . . didn’t want to know that. Why did I have to know that?”

"You're evil, Daddy," Scotch Tape said with a pout.

He gave a great smile of satisfaction and crossed his forelegs before him. Meanwhile, to get my mind off the flavoring of parts of Mom's anatomy, I turned to Scotch and asked, "How are Whisper and Stygius doing?" Anything to not think about... stop thinking about it! Damn it... I liked that cereal!

"The batponies are fighting like everypony else," she blurted with a grateful smile. "They're evacuating a lot of ponies into that stable under the Citadel before the castle is overrun. I totally want wings, though. Flying like that..." she shivered and shook her head. "Anyway, they're going to be falling back soon. The zebras are bringing up a tank, and millennia-old walls just aren't built to stand up to that kind of punishment, even with enchantments and fliers." She pulled off the helmet and looked at it. "She really does love him, though, doesn't she? I mean, she's a bitch at times, but she really loves him."

"I think so. I can't really explain why. Maybe it's a good stallion, bad mare thing," I suggested, though I doubted it. Whisper wanted to be loved. She wanted something good in her life. Stability. Family. She might be a Reaper, but she wanted a better life. I could respect that. I carefully disengaged both of us from the strips of tape. "They're both okay though?"

"Yeah. If they weren't outnumbered, I'd think they'd be okay. Those batponies can fly, but being a pegasus... so *fast*..." She shivered again. "Yeah. Totally need to get cyberpony wings... maybe not wired into me, but mounted on a backpack or something." She rubbed her chin, then held the helmet to her father. "You want to try it, Daddy?"

He shook his head, raising a hoof. "No thanks. Spying on another pony like that... no. Thank you." As he shifted, I saw something amiss on his rump. The hide bearing his male symbol and dots was now mottled and peeling off in large flakes. Beneath, I saw something red and silver. "P-21..." I breathed. "Look..."

He turned his head and stared at his flank, then his eyes shot wide. He reached down and scratched at the surface, little flakes of blue coming off. "It must have been the liquid oxygen," he murmured. "How..."

"Medical must have covered your real cutie mark with a decal. Couldn't have stallions with talents other than breeding equipment," I said as I reached up to scrape it again. He stopped my hoof, and I glanced at him. He wore a pensive, and slightly afraid, expression as he stared at the tiny bits of red and silver peeking through the cracks. "What... don't you want to see it?"

"Yeah, Daddy. How could you not want to know?" Scotch Tape asked, then frowned. "I really don't think it'll be a toilet or penis cutie mark. I mean, it probably won't be. I can understand how you'd be nervous though."

He pulled his eyes from it and looked at the both of us, then gave a little smile and shrug. "I don't need to know. I am who I am. It doesn't matter if it's something good or something bad. It makes no difference to me. So don't worry about it," he told both of us.

"But—" we began in unison.

"Don't worry about it," he repeated, calm and low and sure. We deflated in unison.

"Ugh..." I muttered, slumping a little as I took the helmet from Scotch Tape. "I guess I should peek in on other ponies. See how things are going," I said as I jammed it on my head.

"Why don't you spy on Cognitum?" Scotch Tape asked.

"Because right now she's probably doing the same thing we are: sitting on her ass waiting to arrive. I can't just hang out in her head for hours waiting for her to say something interesting. Besides, I'm curious how the fight is going for those bunkers. How Stable 99 is doing. Chapel. You know... stuff!" I entered in a PipBuck tag, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Fluttershy Medical Center had shifted from hospital to warzone and back several times while I'd known it. In the latest cycle, for a while it had been a hospital and shelter to those wounded by the Brood attack. Now it was reverting back to a fortress, keeping the Brood at bay as they pressed in on three sides. Within, purple flashes blinked in and out as alicorns worked tirelessly to bring reinforcements to the center and teleport the wounded away to the Collegiate. A tank out on the periphery had ignited the upper floors, but the fire had yet to make its way down. The stout tower resisted collapse, and it would take some time yet for the defenders to be overcome.

Candlewick lowered his binoculars, and the besieged building transformed into just a blazing candle in the distance. The hilltop the Reapers occupied was behind enemy lines. Below, the very slopes that I'd once seen Big Macintosh and the Marauders fighting so valiantly to defend were once again swarming with hostile striped forms. They'd excavated the face where a rusted tank had once flipped free, and now two streams poured into and out of the earth through the hole where it had been

interred. On one side of the hole, a line of soldiers raced to the surface and out to the battlefield in three different directions; on the other side, tributaries fed a river of haggard Remnant zebras hauling in slain Brood.

“Miserable bastards,” Candlewick muttered.

“Takes one to know one, don’t it, Bro?” Toaster chuckled as he put a hoof around Candlewick’s neck and pulled him into a chokehold. “Well, you’re a bastard. My daddy actually married Mom. Think he actually liked her... before I cooked his ass, anyway. He burned real pretty.”

“You’re fucked up, Toast,” Candlewick said as he forced his head free of the grip, scowling at the older pony covered in faintly smoking cooking appliances.

Toaster grinned broadly at the younger stallion. “Yeah... fucking hot, ain’t it?”

Toaster, though, was eying the rest of the group. Big Daddy and Brutus spoke with Storm Front while a scruffy-looking unicorn stallion in heavy plate armor adorned with spikes swigged from a flask nearby. Dazzle and a green alicorn listened in to one side. The scarred buck lowered his head. “Remember, Bro. You and me get out alive. That’s it. Once we take out these cyberstripes, you burn them. Burn them good. We’ll be the last ones standing on the heap of ashes.”

“That’s Big Daddy you’re talking about, Toaster!” Candlewick hissed.

“Shhh!” Toaster retorted, grabbing him in another headlock, this one much more crushing. “Keep your voice down. I’m tough enough to go a few rounds with him. Brutus too. That’s why they wanted me along, after all. All that muscle and skill doesn’t mean shit when you’re on fire. Burners know that. And Burners stick together. We do this, and I’ll make sure you have a dozen unicorn mares to fuck, if you want. But we got to do this right.”

“Fuck. Security-” he began, but the headlock tightened so Candlewick could barely breathe.

“Security’s either going to kill that zebra, or that zebra’s gonna kill her. Either way, we burn whoever is left. Glass ‘em if we have to. You got a canister of the good mix, right?” He relaxed the grip enough to gesture to the flamer tanks pressing down on Candlewick’s back. Candlewick struggled to nod. “Good. That shit’ll maintain three kK. No zebra or unicorn’ll be a problem wearing a jacket of glass. Save it for the end.”

“But when she gets back—” Candlewick gasped.

"Then she'll have to deal with us. We'll be in charge, not the Reapers. If she doesn't like it, we can glass her too." Toaster chuckled. "Everything burns."

"I don't know," Candlewick muttered, glancing over at where Dazzle was checking her beam rifle.

Toaster followed his gaze, and then his eyes snapped back at Candlewick, the two yellow orbs blazing. "'Cause of her? A fuck Filly? I mean, come on, a fuck's fine, but we're talking about FIRE! Burning your enemies! Past allies! General areas! Turn up the HEAT! Rain down the napalm and boil the earth! Yeah! Woo!" Candlewick gritted his teeth, and Toaster stopped. "Bro? Fire?"

"Not everything is about fire, you ass—" Candlewick started to say. Toaster grabbed Candlewick's coat and reared back, hauling Candlewick off his hooves and glaring into his eyes.

"*Everything* is about fire, you pussy." Then he tossed him away. Candlewick lay on his back, Toaster glaring down at him. He regarded the smaller stallion with a speculating squint, then lowered his voice and continued relentlessly, "You know why she looks at you? Pity. Fucking pity. She doesn't like you. She doesn't respect you. I'm your brother. The Burners are your family. We don't pity each other. We burn the world like it burned us and leave nothing but a scar behind us. Let those Fillies and Halfheart pussies moan about emotional pain. We live in pain. We deal with it together, and we got a chance to move up and take the Reapers down. It'll be the Burners who are the biggest baddest bastards in the Wasteland. But only if you keep your head on straight, Candle."

"You two coming?" Storm Front shouted at the pair, waving a wing at them.

"Yeah yeah. Keep your feathers on," Toaster said, releasing Candlewick and muttering under his breath, "That fucker's gonna be extra crispy." The scarred stallion returned his gaze to Candlewick, stern and unflinching. Then he grinned and patted him on the head, turned, and trotted towards the others. Dazzle looked over at Candlewick with a warm smile, and the stallion tugged his firepony's cap. When the pair joined the group, he nodded to the scruffy rust-red stallion in heavy full plate armor who had to be the second buffest unicorn in the Wasteland. "Heya, Hammer. How's it hanging?"

"Over yer head," the unicorn replied in a thick, odd accent, levitating the massive mallet towards Toaster. The unicorn's powerful build carried the weight of the reinforced metal armor casually. "Still using my armor, I see," he said as he eyed the scarred earth pony.

"I always wear the best, Hammersmith, my man. Always the best."

"You planning on paying me for it anytime this year?" the unicorn said sourly. Toaster laughed, but it wasn't shared by anypony else. He turned his gaze to Big Daddy and gestured to the bunker below. "The others?"

"We need some of the Top Ten to watch the Stadium," Big Daddy replied. "The rest will be on the lines wherever that scarred son of a bitch needs them. I might not trust Storm Chaser as far as I can punt her, but Goldenblood doesn't have a stake in this beyond winning." He shrugged. "He's not going to sacrifice surfacers for fliers. I can respect that."

"So Fluttershy won't be coming?" Dazzle asked with a little frown.

"Psycho's retired. She's got her batpony now, and they're fighting for their castle," Big Daddy said, shaking his head. "All I know is, if they get married, that gray squeaker better be able to survive a fight at the nuptials. I won't give her away to some jackass who can't go three rounds with Daddy."

"So, we doing this or what?" Toaster scoffed.

Big Daddy stared at the pair for several long seconds, his sunglasses betraying nothing of the eyes behind them. "Alright then. We got no map of the inside. No clue their numbers and forces. So we're going to rip a hole right through 'em and keep ripping till nothing's left. Toaster's our center. Hammersmith, you'll back him up. I'll be on the right, Brutus on the left."

"Aww, what's wrong? Getting too old to lead the charge, Big Daddy?" Toaster said with a chuckle and a barely concealed sneer.

"What's wrong is this is bigger than our usual pissing match, Toast. I need you. Every miserable bastard here needs us to pull this off. So you're our center... unless you're not up to it," Big Daddy countered.

"Heh, naw. I'm good, BD. Real good. I want to get these cyberstripe fuckers ashed the same as you," Toaster said with a nod. He glanced at Candlewick. "Right, Bro?" Candlewick turned his eyes away.

Big Daddy shook his head and looked at Candlewick, Dazzle, and Storm Front. "You three will back us up. We'll need you to clobber anything that we can't reach. Candle, I'm counting on you to light up whatever groups you can." The directness of the old earth pony made the scarred stallion swallow and nod. Big Daddy nodded back.

He turned to the rest. "The Reapers have always been the biggest, baddest motherfuckers in the Hoof. If some of us fall, it's only so the stronger can rise to be the greatest of the greats and the strongest of the strong. Gorgon, Deus, Grim, Blitz... they might be gone, but I just know that Candlewick, Dazzle, and Storm Front will shine all the brighter." He gestured down the hill with a hoof. "Reapers!" he bellowed. "What do we do?"

"We reap the weak!" the others, save Toaster, bellowed in unison. Then the seven ponies charged down the hillside towards the bunker's entrance.

As Toaster led the charge, the toasters that adorned his armor began to glow brighter and brighter. Midgallop, they began to blast jets of flame in all directions away from his body, turning him into a fireball on thundering hooves. The zebras hauling dead Brood dropped their corpses and tried to run, but one pair was too slow to avoid being crushed beneath Toaster's blazing hooves. The Brood whirled at the flaring sight and aimed all their guns at the charging stallion. "Burn, motherfuckers! Burn!" he screamed, and then he laughed maniacally as he slammed into the Brood lines. The scarred stallion wrapped his blazing hooves around the one he'd hit, and the cyborg gave the closest thing to a scream I'd ever heard from them. Toaster tossed the flaming corpse, ammo starting to cook off and spray flaming shrapnel, at another group and laughed again as he looked around for his next victim. The crowd hadn't had time to start firing yet.

Some of the Brood backed away, beginning to fire sporadically at the devastating charge, but others darted inwards with familiar zebra commando swiftness. "Oh no ye don't, laddie!" Hammersmith roared, grabbing one thrashing cyberzebra in his hooves and throwing it to the ground in front of him. "Fore!" he yelled, and the immense hammer swung around, the talisman in the sledge discharging on impact and sending the Brood's head flying off down the hillside. "That'll teach ye ta come ta our home, ya slarmy slags!"

The Brood started to pour heavier fire at the pair, but Big Daddy and Brutus were there. The old earth pony employed his own zebraesque fighting technique against the Brood, striking like a missile with hoofblows that shattered whatever bone they landed on while at the same time twisting out of the way of Brood bullets like a sapling in a high wind. Brutus simply ignored the injuries he was sustaining. I didn't know him or his fighting style beyond the fact he was enormous, but though bullets tore into his hide, he simply grunted and broke the nearest Brood with his hooves. With calm, stoic devastation, he advanced to the next Brood in range, reared up, and brought down his hooves with a bloody slam. And again, and again, variations

on the theme. I was reminded of Big Macintosh in battle, standing against the tide as if incapable of giving way.

Behind them came the crack of Storm Front's rifle. Maybe sniping was an Enclave specialty, because with each shot of the steel blue pegasus's hunting rifle, heads jerked and Brood went down. Not permanently, maybe, but the time it took for their regeneration talismans to restore their bodies was time that could be used to put them down in a more permanent fashion. Dazzle's beam rifle fired three beams per shot, the crimson lines blazing into the Brood and dusting one here and there. Candlewick clenched his teeth on the grip of his flamer and gave a twist, and from the muzzle emerged a wet sucking noise, a 'Fwooosh', and then a stream of flame arcing into a cluster of Brood. The blazing fluid splattered everywhere, spreading the inferno and transforming the enemy into fiery silhouettes.

In less than a minute, the Brood at the base of the bunker had been annihilated. "Keep pushing! Inside!" Big Daddy roared.

"Hah! That's what she sai—" Toaster was retorting when from the ceiling of the tunnel dropped a black door, slamming into the ground and nearly taking Toaster's head off. "Fuck," the stallion muttered, and then reared up, bellowing, "No motherfucking door is going to stop the Toastpocalypse!" He rammed his blazing hooves into the metal. The impact scored smoking lines on the surface, but the door remained otherwise undamaged.

"I can get it," Dazzle shouted, rushing to a terminal recessed beside the door. She banged the side of it several times and then started to type with her horn. "I'm going to need a minute."

"Take your time, bitch," Toaster said as he wheeled about at the Brood reinforcements. The dozen or so they'd killed at the doorway were nothing to the horde that spilled in from every side. The toasters mounted on his armor flared as he charged into the closest bunch of attackers, but this time he lacked his earlier devastating momentum. Two Brood seized him on either side, heedless of the burning, crackling flesh of their bodies as three more poured rounds into him. The bullets found gaps in his armor, and blood began to flow and smoke between the flaring cooking appliances from hell.

Brutus, as implacable as before, rammed into his own attackers, but now the cyberzebras piled up against him in a growing mound. Like a toppling mountain, the black stallion collapsed backwards with the Brood piled atop him. They'd added something new to their arsenal, too: silver knives were drawn from scabbards and

plunged downward, rising bathed in crimson.

“Git! Offa! Me! Ya! Bloody! Gits!” Hammersmith roared, the whirling sledge impacting with each word as he shoved and kicked the Brood trying to swarm him. The stout unicorn barely kept them at bay, knocking knives and hooves away. He could do nothing about the bullets biting into him, and even his thick metal armor began to buckle under their onslaught.

Storm Front’s rifle barked as sharply as an automatic, the armor piercing rounds ripping not into Brood but at their non-regenerating firearms. A calm smile lingered in the corner of his mouth, a half heart charm dangling from his forehoof. That smile didn’t waver as he was hit once, then twice, by enemy return fire.

Candlewick swung his flamer around in a fountain of fire, arching over the heads of his fellow Reapers. The Brood charged the stallion, and Candlewick made them melt like shadows in midday under the relentless blazing plume.

Then there was a flash, and in the corner of his eye appeared a unicorn Brood. Silver flashed, and a lance of searing pain pierced the dragonhide he wore and plunged straight into his chest. The unicorn twisted the blade and withdrew it, blood pouring out his side and rushing up his throat as the glittering, impossibly sharp blade flashed for his spine in the grip of the unicorn’s magic.

Then Big Daddy was there. The bony old earth pony moved so swiftly, so surely, so beautifully that Candlewick could barely follow him. He knocked the blade away with a flying kick, and when he landed, his rear leg swung out in a great wheeling kick that snapped her horn clean off. As that leg passed, his other hindleg hooked her neck, which was then pinched between his limbs. Big Daddy’s entire body corkscrewed, and the mare’s neck gave a mighty crack. As she went limp, he rolled forward and launched her still-twitching corpse at the knot piling on Brutus.

“Drink a potion, son,” Big Daddy rasped before almost casually continuing his fight. Like a tornado, he ripped into the Brood with a storm of kicks, blows, bites, and strikes that they could neither recover from nor react to swiftly enough. Candlewick withdrew a potion and hurried to choke it down before he drowned in his own blood, and he still spent several seconds afterward coughing and retching up crimson. Big Daddy bit down on one captured knife and held two others in his fetlocks, whirling and slicing with graceful abandon. In a space of five seconds, five attackers pressing Hammersmith fell in greasy arterial sprays. Then the blades flung from his hooves found the eye sockets of Brood shooting at Storm Front. He tore into Brutus’s assailants as they started to recover from the corpse flung upon them; any neck that

met his hooves was snapped, and any rib soon impaled a lung or heart. In Big Daddy's hooves was death.

It was almost reluctantly that he came to the aid of Toaster, finishing off the shooters and giving the blazing stallion a chance to rip free of the immolating Brood. Healing potions were drunk, but it was clear that the Reapers were going to have a much harder time than their initial charge suggested. "Time, Dazzle!" he snapped.

"Half a minute. I almost got it. Down to these five!" Dazzle shouted, not breaking her stare off the terminal.

"We don't have half a minute," Brutus said gravely.

"What? More stripe fuckers?" Toasted called happily. "Bring them on! I'll incinerate all the—" and he fell silent as the roaring of an engine and the clatter of caterpillar tracks at speed became audible. A moment later, a massive tank, double-barreled turret already starting to take aim, roared over a berm and into view. Spotlights immediately locked on the bunker door and the ponies gathered there. "Fuck," Toaster muttered.

"We cannae fight that," Hammersmith agreed.

"Brutus," Big Daddy said, not taking his eyes off the war machine as he shrugged off his saddlebags and extracted a single black bottle carved with zebra glyphs.

"Yes?"

"Finish it, son," Big Daddy said tersely, tossing the bags to Brutus and then taking a long drink from the glyph-marked flask. He grimaced, clutching his chest. "Damn zebra potions. Always taste like ass." The flask fell to the ground, dripping something luminous.

"Yes, sir," the huge black stallion answered. "They do, and I will."

"Good boy." With that, Big Daddy charged. He made no effort to hide or screen his motion, and it was as if every gun was drawn to the brown pony. The tank opened up with its machine guns, and Big Daddy leapt over the stream of bullets as it raked towards him, then dove under as it raked back. As he moved, he seemed to glow in the storm of fire and metal, and neither seemed quite able to touch him. The cannons roared, and he vanished in a cloud of dust and smoke.

Candlewick strained to see as the dust fell to the ground. Then from the sky descended the pony. The bony old stallion was now all aglow, as if his body were suffused with light. He hung in the air, rear hoof outstretched. Then he impacted

the tank with all the force of an artillery shell. He disappeared in a flash, the turret crumpling and the cannon barrels twisting skyward as the war machine let out agonized metallic shriek like a mortally wounded beast. A moment later, it exploded in a detonation that knocked all the Brood around it flat, a brilliant green mushroom cloud rising from the wreck and showering them with radioactive debris.

For one second, in the midst of that wreckage, a glowing pony stood. He didn't appear old and feeble, but strong, confident, and... tired. His eyes reached across the battlefield and met those of the Reapers, and he smiled ever so slightly in approval. The glow became more and more luminous, consuming him completely. Then he bowed his head and disintegrated in a cloud of tiny sparks that faded from view, swept east on an intangible wind.

"I got it," Dazzle croaked, the blast door rising.

Brutus turned and stormed through like an avalanche, crushing the Brood on the far side and slamming them against the walls as he cried out in rage, in anguish. Hammersmith gathered up some scattered silver knives with his magic, then followed without a word. The sledge crushed any Brood that remained moving after Brutus. "Lucky," Storm Front muttered, turning away and following the pair in. Dazzle hesitated for a second, staring at Candlewick in concern. Then she also followed them inside.

"Could this get any better, Bro?" Toaster asked with a chuckle, trotting past him into the dark doorway and towards the sound of additional battle.

Candlewick's eyes lingered at the wreckage of the tank, and then he walked to where Big Daddy had dropped his flask, picked it up, and examined it. Something like liquid sunlight glimmered at the bottom. Carefully, he replaced the stopper in the bottle and slipped it into his dragonhide cloak. He gave one final look at the place Big Daddy had stood, as if expecting to see the old stallion telling him to get his ass in gear, then disappeared into the bunker.

oooOOOooo

I couldn't speak as I broke the connection. Big Daddy... no, it couldn't be. I'd thought... I'd hoped... I'd thought that the old stallion could have survived anything. "Goodbye, Big Daddy," I finally said quietly. "I wish I could have been a better Reaper." Then I imagined him throwing me through the air for the weakness of that thought. He'd want me to be strong. A Reaper had to be strong.

I ignored the throbbing in my head, picked another PipBuck tag, any tag, and let the

world disappear once more.

oooOOOooo

There was no way I could mistake the sight of the rocky tunnel leading into 99. I hadn't travelled it all that much, true, but the two times I had had left quite an impression on me. The bones were gone, though, and somepony had put down metal plates to form a flatter floor. Also new were the heavy canvas curtains that concealed the stable door. A pile of a half dozen cyber unicorns lay in a heap to the side. It was rather chilling to see the blood leaking from their bodies transform into rainbow sludge as it crept from the corpses. Was that what happened to blanks after they died? They just... liquefied?

I was in a mare in Steel Ranger power armor, and I could see the appeal. The movement was... odd, but the feeling of being removed and protected from the world around me was comforting. The motion wasn't quite as smooth as an augmented pony, but I could feel where this mare's hooves ended and the armor began. That heartbeat was a real comfort as well.

Suddenly there were a pair of flashes as two more Brood unicorns teleported in. The mare in the power armor turned towards the closest attacker, which closed with a silvery blade plunging down from above as the unicorn charged in from beneath with an IF-33 Applebuck 12.7mm pistol. The other unicorn charged for the sheet blocking the passage.

The pistol's bullets struck with the sharp ping of armor piercing rounds, but that silver blade was far more worrisome. The mare threw herself away from the descending edge, and it sliced smoothly into the metal floor plate with little difficulty. She stomped a rear hoof down on the guard as the unicorn started to withdraw it, ignoring the bullets, even those which punched through her armor and bit into the hide beneath. With the blade temporarily eliminated as a threat, the Steel Ranger twisted, tracking the second unicorn still firing as it moved towards the sheet. The automatic shotguns at the Ranger's sides unleashed a storm of flechette rounds, and in less than a second, the Brood dropped as a heap of bleeding meat.

However, the first wasn't finished. Its horn glowed, and from the body of the second came a flash of silver as a blade was flung right at the power armored mare. She tried to jump aside, but the reaction from the armor was too slow, and the blade guided by unicorn magic corrected for what little dodging she did manage. At the last moment, she raised her forehoof, taking the blade smoothly through her foreleg and stopping it from tearing straight into her chest. The Ranger thus distracted, the

unicorn left her blade and teleported to where the second had fallen and raised a hoof to push the canvas aside.

The sheet exploded towards her face with a crushing impact that smashed the unicorn's snout into her brain, and she went flying back. The curtain parted, and through the gap strode Star Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof. His helmet off, no pony could sparkle so beautifully. His lone spectacular curl of mane was all a stallion like him needed. "Looks like the Stronghoof sense of timing is still spot on, eh Crumpets?"

"Indubitably, sir," Crumpets said with an edge of sarcasm, hissing through her teeth in pain as she kept the slammed unicorn from withdrawing the blade. "Though, personally, I think it might have been a teensy bit better if you had emerged a few bloody seconds earlier."

The Brood unicorn rose to her hooves, and two more flashed to flank her. A pair of silvery starmetal blades rose along with pistols aimed at his head. The trio wasted no time, opening fire and advancing as one. "Hrumph, hardly a challenge!" Stronghoof said as he stomped the ground and a metal plate flew up into the air to catch the bullets and starmetal blades. With lightning reflexes, the powerful unicorn slammed the plate with his forehooves just as it started to fall, sending it instead flying down the tunnel and into the faces of the trio. "You are facing the Stronghoof implacable hoof technique, one that has been passed down for—"

The trio flashed behind him, two firing rounds into his rear as the third made for the curtain. Stronghoof's nostrils flared. "Oh, so you are that kind of fiend, eh? Well then, look upon—"

This time he was interrupted by Crumpets ripping apart the third with flechettes before it could reach the curtain. "Will you stop bragging and finish them before they get inside? If they take a peek inside the stable, then they'll be teleporting in all day long!" She twisted to strafe the remaining pair, but they flashed back down the tunnel, drawing their silver knives from where they'd fallen with the floor plate.

"Hrumph." He blew out his mustache as they charged once again. "I suppose the style is wasted on these mindless monsters." As one glittering blade drove straight for his chest, he slammed a hoof down; his horn glowed, and a thick pillar of stone erupted from the exposed tunnel floor to intercept the blade. A powerful blow from his forehoof sent the top of the stone column rocketing towards the unicorn, who managed to blink aside a moment before impact and pull the blade from the flying boulder as it sailed through the air where she'd just been. Then she resumed

charging towards him as if nothing had happened. “Oh, nicely done!”

Crumpets staggered to her hooves, unable to put her weight on the left foreleg without fiery pain lancing up it. “Please don’t compliment the enemy, sir,” she groaned. She tried to unload another barrage at the last unicorn, who was making another dive for the curtain. She disappeared behind it, and Crumpets unloaded her magazines, shredding the fabric and sending the canvas tumbling down upon her. Behind it lay the open stable door with only a thin bedsheet concealing the interior.

Of course, I couldn’t teleport somewhere I’d never been before. The Brood were trying to get inside my stable, and... crap, they were trying to get inside! I’d saved the ponies of Stable 96 and given them my old home, and the Brood were trying to violate it. But of course they were. I’d escaped! Returning to find 99 rendered into a tomb once more... No! I wanted to teleport there myself!

The remaining unicorn closed with Stronghoof, silver blade swinging at him as the pistol in her mouth fired again and again. Stronghoof gave ground, protecting his uncovered head from bullets with his armored forelegs and barely dodging the swings of that silver edge. Then the blade sliced neatly through the lock atop his head. His eyes popped wide as he watched the length of perfect golden curly mane tumble through the air. Then they flattened in cold rage. “You dare defile the golden lock of my ancestors, a masterpiece of equine maneosity?!” he bellowed as he rose on his hindlegs and flexed. With a pinging of metal, the armor went flying off, slamming into the face of his foe as a corona of sparkles enveloped his muscular form. “Gaze upon the product of generations of noble breeding, foul creature, and—”

The unicorn stabbed the blade deep into his gut.

“Oooh,” Stronghoof winced, and then his unarmored body moved in a flash, his forehoof swinging upwards with such force that, when it caught the unicorn on the chin, her head impacted with the solid stone above. I didn’t know if the skull lodged in a crevice up there or had simply adhered to the roof, but the body remained hanging there, twitching spasmodically. He carefully withdrew the silver blade, unleashing a slurry of blood with a wince. “Ah, what kind of battle is this where the enemy doesn’t appreciate their foe?”

“I don’t know, sir. But we need to get you a healing potion right away,” Crumpets said as she limped to the door. “Then we’ve got to seal the stable. If they get in, we’ll either have to leave defenders, evacuate everypony, or come back to a slaughter.”

“I agree,” Stronghoof said with a nod. “The fighting above has gotten fiercer as well. We should fall back to SPP-13 soon. But not before we see to your injuries as well,

Crumpets.” Medical ponies began to slip out with bottles and vials. One levitated a healing potion over towards Stronghoof and Crumpets.

“I’m fine,” she said as she bled into her armored boot. “Right as rain, sir. Just give me a hand with this bit of nothing, a potion, and I’ll be ready for more action, sir!” she said as she held out the impaled hoof. His horn glowed, withdrawing the blade... and with it quite a bit of blood. “Oh... my,” she muttered weakly. “That’s... quite a flesh wound, sir.”

“Appears positively arterial, young lady,” Stronghoof said as he used his magic to help remove the helmet from her head. Only after she’d drunk a potion did he imbibe one himself. I could still feel the blood flowing from the half-healed gash.

“I think she needs surgery,” one of the stable ponies said.

“I’m bloody well fine!” Crumpets objected, but when she heaved herself to her hooves, the world suddenly slipped out from under them, and she crashed to the floor.

“I think not, Paladin Crumpets,” Stronghoof said. “Once you’re recovered, you’re more than welcome to join...” and his voice trailed off as he looked at the stable door. Crumpets closed her eyes as he said in a breathless voice, “Milady.”

“You’re hurt,” Psalm observed from the door. Crumpets sighed and watched as she emerged to stand before him.

“As if so minor a wound could stop such a fine specimen of equinity—” he started to say, but as he flexed, he winced in pain and struggled to maintain the pose.

“You should have surgery for that, too,” the medical mare said to Stronghoof as she started to remove the boot from Crumpets’s armor. “Those damn silver blades are nasty business.” A spatter of blood poured out from Crumpets’s uncovered wound. “Damn! Get her another healing potion and a blood pack.” Crumpets shivered as a chill feeling began to creep up her leg.

“I cannot take time out to be healed,” Stronghoof retorted. “Somepony must help the forces outside to fall back in an organized manner.”

“Well, at least drink another potion,” Psalm told him, levitating a second one to his lips. He blushed profusely as he drank it. The dark purple alicorn smiled gently as she watched him.

“Thank you, dear Psalm. I feel fitter already.” He turned to take a momentary look at Crumpets. “My dear, could you please make sure she gets to surgery? I have no

doubts regarding her valor, but I fear she may try to rejoin us prematurely.”

“I... suppose. Yes,” Psalm murmured as the medical ponies finally extracted Crumpets from her armor and wrapped cloth tightly around the wound. She was immediately given another potion as the white cloth stained crimson.

“Stronghoof... please...” Crumpets begged. “Don’t... don’t send me away.” Both of them stared at her with uncertainty, and I could feel her cheeks burn as she added sharply, “I mean, you need me, sir! Otherwise, you’d be distracted by your own damned sparkles.”

He gave her a kindly smile. “At ease, soldier. You’ve done your duty,” he told her with a smile, then nodded to Psalm.

Psalm trotted beside her and the medics. The world disappeared in a purple flash, and then they reappeared in 99’s medical ward. I almost didn’t recognize it, given the presence of so many injured Steel Rangers and the lack of any abused stallions. Psalm levitated Crumpets easily, carrying her over to an unoccupied bed. In a trice they had her laid out and a bag of blood feeding in through an IV. A doctor in bloody scrubs shouted that he’d be ready for her in five minutes.

The nurse tersely instructed Psalm, “Keep direct pressure on that artery, understood?” The alicorn nodded, her horn glowing and the bloody bandage compressing around the leg. Crumpets hissed, gritting her teeth as fire erupted up her leg. The nurse prepared a syringe of Med-X, but Crumpets shook her head hard. The nurse dropped the syringe back on its tray. “Fine. You don’t want it? I’ll save it for somepony who does.” Then she trotted to an adjacent table.

Crumpets lay there for a long moment, so long I nearly left her, but I wanted to hear how Psalm had been doing, and about the state of 99. Finally, Crumpets glanced up at Psalm. “He loves you, you know.”

“I know,” Psalm answered, not taking her eyes off the bloody bandage. “I don’t know why. I’m not her.”

“He knows that too,” she replied, breathing quickly as the hoof throbbed. “You’re like his princess. You’re big and beautiful and kind and... perfect for him.” She pressed her lips together tightly for several seconds.

“I’m not—” Psalm began to say.

“Shut up,” Crumpets interrupted. “That doesn’t matter. The fact is, he loves you. So I have to ask you... what are you going to do?”

"What do you mean?" she asked, sounding startled.

"I mean, are you going to get off your rump and help, or hide down here and let him put his arse on the line all alone?" Crumpets asked, glaring up at her, tears blurring her vision. "I've always watched his back. I've always been there to try and back him up, and now I'm not. You were supposed to be some kind of soldier, right?"

"I was a murderer, once," Psalm answered, lowering her eyes. "I'm not going to be that anymore."

"Didn't know we were murderers, then," Crumpets snapped.

"No! Not... not you. Me... I was..." Psalm stammered. "I don't want to be one again."

"Oh, well, isn't that nice of you," Crumpets retorted scornfully. "Thousands of people fighting and dying, but you don't want to. How lovely."

Psalm frowned, scowling at the wounded mare. "You don't know what you're talking about..."

"Don't I?" Crumpets snapped. "I've been up there, fighting. I've friends down here, bleeding, and more up there dying. Sure. I don't know anything."

"I don't want to kill anypony anymore!" Psalm shouted, getting a stern look from a nurse.

"And you think I do?!" Crumpets yelled back. "I don't like the killing any more than you, but being stuck down here while people I care for need me? That's way bloody worse." She clenched her eyes shut. "He's out there, and I'm in here. I can't do anything till this is fixed," she said, indicating to her bloody leg. Then she glared up at Psalm angrily. "But you can, but you won't, because you don't want to."

A nurse came over to their bed. "Thank you, I'll take care of her now," the mare said, looking sternly at Psalm.

Psalm backed away, staring into Crumpets's eyes with a pensive, haunted expression. Then she disappeared in a purple flash. The nurse pressed the needle into her IV port. "Here. A little Med-X and moonstone to take your mind off those horrible knives." And as the drug entered her system, this time without resistance, the world slipped away.

oooOOOooo

"Damn it," I muttered, pulling off the helmet. At least I hadn't seen anyone I knew die, but this was almost as bad. Crumpets. Psalm. Was there any kind of good

resolution there? Psalm didn't want to kill anymore, but I could also understand Crumpets's scorn for remaining inside where it was safe when she could have fought for them. And Stronghoof... ugh... when I got back, I was going to have to take him aside and explain how a mare like Crumpets obviously felt about him, and a mare like Psalm probably didn't. Unless she did... but...

"Ugh," I groaned, taking in the vision of the moon. "I'm not sure which is preferable, life and death struggles or emotional drama."

"I'm going to go with 'neither'," P-21 replied. "What did you see?"

I filled them both in on what I'd seen at 99, the Reaper assault on their bunker, and Big Daddy's fate. As I talked, Scotch Tape leaned over and snagged the Perceptitron from me. "My turn!" she cried out triumphantly, jamming it on her head. I didn't feel much urge to take it from her. "I wanna try out a unicorn this time." The details of what was going on were a little less interesting to a filly like her, I supposed.

"I don't know if I should be amused or horrified at how happily you two violate other ponies' privacy," P-21 said lightly.

Scotch froze in the process of connecting the helmet to her PipBuck. "Do you really think I shouldn't, Daddy?" she asked, her eyes heart-achingly big.

He glanced at me, and I gave a little shrug. "World might end in a few hours," I pointed out. He sighed and nodded to Scotch.

The filly smiled and finished hooking it up. "I wonder if I'll be able to feel what it's like to do magic," she speculated as she jammed it on her head.

"Good luck," I said. "I don't feel it unless I burn out my horn. That just feels like a migraine." We settled back in the couch as Scotch Tape floated in front of us.

"Wow. Noble ponies sure do a lot of boring talking and arguing. Just do what she says!" Scotch Tape said to nopony. "No, you shut up! She's in charge, you moron. You see this crowny thing on her head?" the filly continued as she pointed at her noggin with a hoof.

"I'm guessing she's in Grace. Or else I've picked up some really strange PipBuck tags," I said to him.

"I'm glad you chose her. She really seemed to care more about ponies," P-21 said. "I hope she does make the changes she promised."

"She will. One way or another," I said with a smile. "She's my cousin. Kinda... But she won't give up."

Scotch Tape gave us a very entertaining ten minutes where she insulted various ponies who were apparently arguing with her about evacuating to Tenpony Tower. It was sort of nice to snuggle up with someone and watch Scotch go through the motions of perceiving others. P-21 was right about the privacy thing, of course, but the fact was that it was either the Perceptitron or sitting around in a rocket for several hours doing nothing. At least this way I could stay in touch.

Finally, Scotch Tape sighed. "Yeah. Get out of here. Shoo. Bunch of yellow cowards!" she said, waving her hoof. "Honestly, I thought you weren't supposed to argue with the pony wearing the crown thingy!" Then she stiffened. "Wait, what's that? Look out!" She cried out and raised her hooves defensively. I started, levitating her closer to me, wondering if I could just yank the helmet off... or would that be bad too?

"Boo?!" Scotch Tape gasped, and I froze. "What is she... wait... no, Boo, Blackjack isn't here!" Scotch paused a moment. "It's me. Scotch. We're in the rocket!"

She's talking to Boo? I nearly took the helmet then and there, but I didn't know what that would do to her. P-21 gave a worried frown and shake of his head, and I backed off. "How is she talking to Boo?"

"It's Boo?" he suggested with a shrug. "How does she do any of the things she does?"

"Wait! Slow down, Boo! What was that about Glory?" Scotch Tape said. "No! Boo! Slow down! I don't know what that is! Boo!" P-21 reached over and twanged my horn, snapping my focus before I could snatch the helmet. Scotch Tape started nodding. "Okay. Okay. But what about Glory? Boo! No! Call off those guards! She's a good pony! Damn it!"

She disengaged the helmet and pulled it off. "I just talked to Boo!" she said in a rush, then stared at me clutching my horn. "What's going on?"

"Nevermind that," I said sharply, eyes watering. "What about Glory?"

"Oh! Well... um... it was kinda hard to understand her because she talked so fast! She said something about Glory being found... but I couldn't really understand more than that. She said something about saving Goldy, and that there was something called a Tem...something. But it was going to come and be really bad. Oh, and the Legate is apparently pissed and is going to use the Brood and Temthingy to kill everyone in the Hoof before you get back. Then the guards came and chased her off." Scotch Tape blinked, then added, "Oh. And spy on Cognitum... or... don't spy

on Cognitum.” We both stared at her, and she snapped defensively, “Hey! She’s not the easiest mare to understand when she’s talking that fast!”

I could only hope that I could find somepony referencing Glory. I put the Perceptitron on and starting going from pony to pony. Goldenblood. Triage. Storm Chaser. Rainbow Dash. Mayor Windclop. Candlewick. Sagittarius. None of them were talking about Glory! I pulled the helmet off and gritted my teeth. Finding Glory was good, it meant she hadn’t just been disintegrated by the bomb, but... Was she okay? Was she hurt? Was she... damn it! “I’ll just have to hope that Boo pops in again and I can ask her questions myself.” If she’d shown up with Grace, the next nearest place would be the Grimhoof bunker. Xanthe and her team were handling that one. If Boo wanted to give me a message, maybe she’d find me there. I tapped into the zebra’s PipBuck tag and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

When I popped into Xanthe’s body, I hadn’t expect it to feel so... normal. I mean, given what it’d been like the last time I was in a zebra, experiencing how Shujaa fought and moved, I expected Xanthe to be more... something! More flexible, maybe. Instead, this was just a healthy mare’s body wrapped up in a suit of stealth barding that was a little bit more snug than I was comfortable... actually, it was perfectly snug. Just in all the wrong ways.

Goddess, how I missed Glory.

Xanthe, Carrion, Silver Spoon, and Snails had been given the bunker under Grimhoof Army Base to eliminate. The reason why was immediately clear, Xanthe’s PipBuck letting out a constant low-level crackle from the radiation detector. This place clearly showed signs of severe damage and slapdash repairs. Many of the walls were visibly buckling, and there were even places where earth protruded through gaping rents. Water dribbled from the severed ends of hoses and out of conduit penetrations in the walls and transformed the floors into muddy subterranean trickles illuminated by whatever flickering lights still functioned.

“Need more,” Carrion rasped painfully as he pressed against the wall, holes punched in his power armor oozing a fetid mix of tar-like fluids. Silver Spoon, half hiding behind him, clenched her eyes and gritted her teeth. The sickly green glow shining through her skin flashed brighter, and Xanthe quickly stepped away as the crackling of her PipBuck immediately spiked. The armored ghoulish griffin let out a sigh of relief.

“Uh oh,” the suit chimed, then let out a hiss. A cool sensation spread up Xanthe’s hoof. “Better now.” Xanthe moved away from the pair, and the fourth of the quartet,

the skinny unicorn stallion with faintly glowing eyes, shifted next to her. A small drink tube protruded up from the corner of the collar, and she sucked down that wonderful sharp rancid orange RadAway.

“Do you have enough?” he asked in a phlegmy voice.

She consulted her PipBuck. Five more doses of Rad-X, six more of RadAway. “I’m fine, Snails. More than a dozen of each.”

“Uh oh,” the suit said, a little more sternly. Snails furrowed his brow.

“I’m fine,” she pressed, then looked around the tunnel, then down at two slain Brood. “You’re sure they don’t have a soul you can use?”

Snails pointed his horn at the bodies. Green and purple magic seemed to foam along it for several seconds, and then he shook his head. “Nope. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Xanthe said, sighing as she looked down the tunnel. “We’ll find a way in to the tree. There’s always a back door. A vent. A maintenance conduit. Something. We just have to find it.”

“We might not be able to, Xanthe. We might just have to push through the front door,” Carrion said. “Hit them hard and fast, get inside, and shoot anything that’s gold and tree-ish and popping out Brood like crazy.” His miniguns whirled a moment, and he checked the ammo boxes. “Can you top me off, Silver?”

The glowing ghoul blushed a little more greenly and started digging belts of ammo from her own saddlebags and connecting them to the ends of the belts in his magazines. “There you go.” He returned an bashful smile.

“The four of us can’t shoot our way through,” Xanthe said as she ran a hoof through her mane, then stared at the dozen black and white strands left caught on a protruding bit of the suit. “Oh.”

“Well, we don’t have to be four,” Snails said absently as he stared at the two corpses. He glanced up and saw the others staring at him intently. “Well, it’s a trick, but Ms. Rarity didn’t like it one bit.”

Xanthe glanced at the baffled Silver Spoon and then at Carrion. The ghoul griffin shrugged. The zebra sighed. “Well, if you think it will help us...”

Snail’s horn flashed with black magic, and this time it seemed to soak into the two slain Brood. The magic stopped, and suddenly the bodies jerked. Muscles moved and bulged, and the forms of broken flesh and metal began to lift to their feet. The dead talismans in the corpses glowered to life with pernicious green and purple

flickers, and the flesh began to... rearrange. It wasn't healing, per se, so much as the graying meat stretching to patch the holes in the hide. When it was over, two cyber zombies, their eyes filled with green lambency, stared down at the two of us, their striped hides and armor now bulging and twisted around the augmentations.

Carrion stood behind Xanthe, grabbing her shoulders as he stared at the pair. "No matter what happens, don't let him do that to me," the griffin muttered.

"You sound just like Ms. Rarity, eh," Snails said with a roll of his star-filled eyes. He regarded the zombies, then said, "You two can go in first." The pair moved like marionettes, and I could barely make out an ephemeral thread of light connecting Snail's horn to them. They trotted down the hallway with Snails behind them, and then he turned and looked back with a bright smile. "Coming?"

"Tiara always said there wasn't something quite right about him," Silver Spoon muttered as they grudgingly followed.

Snails frowned back at her. "Oh yeah? Well, Miss Rarity said I'm just fine how I am, eh!"

"Well, Tiara said 'Miss Rarity' was never a good judge of character," Silver Spoon replied with a snort.

Snails glowered. "Miss Rarity would tell her to take that back!"

"Well, Tiara would tell her to make her!"

Xanthe leaned over towards Carrion and whispered, "Um, I think this is the part where the Star Maiden would tell Miss Rarity and Tiara to get a room..."

A minute later, they rounded the corner and came across a staging area of some kind. The high-ceilinged chamber resembled a stable atrium. A pair of balconies ran along the second floor. Brood were walking out of a doorway to an equipment station where they donned their combat barding and took their weaponry and ammunition before heading up some stairs. There had to be at least twenty Brood currently busy in the room.

"We'll distract them!" Carrion hissed. "Get to the tree! Set the charges! Go!" He flew up to the balcony as the Brood began to react with that silent unity that always unnerved me. Those that had weapons immediately brought them to bear on the six intruders while any who were unarmed moved to address that. The power-armored ghoul flipped over the rail of the balcony and used the concrete platform for cover as he began to spray fire from his miniguns.

The two zombies tore forward, firing wildly before slamming into the nearest Brood like battering rams. Bullets that hit the pair did nothing to stop the corpses. One's head exploded in a shower of decaying rainbow gore, and it merely made the body pause long enough for a head-like replacement to push out of the stump and let out an unholy scream. Even the Brood in the atrium showed something like alarm at the dark magic.

The unarmed Silver Spoon faced a dozen Brood arming themselves as the zombies and ghoul drew their fire. "You're like... totally... no good... grrr!" she growled as her green glow became a nimbus of magical flame. Screaming a battlecry of "You suck!", she launched a blazing sphere of crackling energy right into the ammo containers. The explosion was quickly followed by a cascade of pops, snaps, and bangs as the ammo started to cook. "You suck! And you, you stupid blank flanks! And you! And you *totally* suck!" she shrieked over and over again as she lobbed balls of radioactive death powered by more than two centuries of pent-up spite.

"Shhh. Hiding now," Xanthe's armor whispered as she raced along the perimeter of the room towards the passage the Brood were emerging from. More were racing down the stairs from above, stopping short as they encountered Spoon's radioactive inferno blocking their way but opening fire as best they could. A few tried to jump through the fire, but they fell spasming as the blaze seared them. Even the Brood paused to evaluate the threat of her ghoulish flames.

They were going to do this. They were really going to do this! As two more armed Brood guards raced through the large door, she slipped inside. It was just like Hippocratic Research: a massive golden tree with branches dropping fleshy fruit. Barrels and barrels of Flux were being poured into funnels at the tree's roots to feed the production of Brood. A hole in the ceiling gaped over a hopper for some sort of industrial equipment, and a body tumbled in. The hopper made a horrible, wet, grinding noise and unloaded a slurry of rainbow goo out one end into a barrel and a revolting fleshy pulp out the other into a heap of wire-laced gore. Opposite the grinder was an augmentation pod, this one without sides; Xanthe had a perfect view of the raw Brood within being calmly sliced and implanted with squirming black wires and glowing talismans.

Grinder, pod, and tree all had a half dozen emaciated zebras supervising them. Over half were ghouls, operating frantically. Bomb collars around their necks signaled their allegiance clearly enough. Xanthe snuck over towards the grinder, hiding amidst crates of reeking pulp and dodging the notice of the ghouls who extracted talismans from the gore. Several of them had the trademark appearance of taint

contamination: warped bones, tiny growths on the limbs, eye tentacle penises, and the like. Beyond the kind of radical cyberization that brought me back from the dead the first time around, I doubted there was anything anypony could do for them at this point.

Creeping around towards the back, where something large lay covered with a tarp, she moved behind the immense golden tree. Digging in her saddlebags, she withdrew several blocks of C-4 and started to position them along the back of the tree. I didn't know much about explosives, but I guessed she had enough to blow the bottom off the damned thing.

Then there were two flashes behind her. "Uh oh," warned the armor, and Xanthe spun to look at two unicorn Brood with silver blades staring down at her. She clutched the detonator in her hooves as she stared up at the two. Then they did something more chilling than anything I'd seen from the Brood before.

They smiled.

The silver blade of one sliced through the detonator. "None of that now. You vermin have been causing us enough trouble today," the Brood unicorn said as the severed pieces tinkled around her hooves.

"You... you can't talk! The Brood don't talk!" Xanthe protested as she backed right up against the golden tree.

The mares glanced at each other, then gave a pair of identical little smirks before facing her again, pointing their blades in unison at the mare. "Oh, we don't?" said one.

"Things change," said the other.

"Improve."

"Adapt."

"Overcome."

Xanthe's eyes switched from one to the other and back again. "Then... then you don't have to do this! The Legate... he's..."

One unicorn tapped her temple. "With us. Always with us."

"He is our will."

"Our soul."

"Our purpose."

"But with us, he doesn't need to dictate everything we do. He can delegate. We can achieve his will," the last one said.

"But... what does he want?" Xanthe asked as she stared at the two blades poised to skewer her.

Once again, a glance at each other, and then as one they looked back at her, matching smirks on their faces. "To sail the cosmos with the corpse of this planet as his vessel, attended by the souls of all living things, consuming star after star, world after world. Forever," they said in unison. "Not that it matters. This was merely a test of our linguistic abilities."

"These peons are poor interactive subjects," one said, gesturing to the wretched ghouls.

"All they do is cringe," the other agreed.

Xanthe swallowed hard. "Oh. I'm... sorry to hear that," she murmured weakly.

"Yes, well," the two said, then paused and glanced down at her. With a flash, the silver blades fell upon her. Xanthe raised her hooves and screamed in terror.

The suit 'screamed' in pain, "Owie!" The blades, which should have cut right through her legs, had stopped after cutting only an inch or two of fabric. That was enough to slice her a little, but not nearly enough to maim her for good. The two were actually so shocked that Xanthe was able to dive between them, roll forward, come to her hooves, and start running back around the edge of the room towards the exit.

"I'm sorry. We'll get you fixed, I promise!" Xanthe swore. Then there was a purple flash as one unicorn appeared in front of her. Xanthe cried out, falling back and sliding on her back under the horizontal sweep of the blade. Magic bullets flashed from the unicorn's horn, slamming into the stealth suit and knocking the zebra rolling. Another flash and the other unicorn appeared over her, stabbing down as Xanthe rolled inside the cut. The edge still scraped against the barding along her shoulders, the suit giving a little whimper of pain.

Xanthe rolled to her hooves, now making straight for the exit as the wretched ghouls cried out and tried to get out of her way. "Maiden of the Stars, please lift your curse from me and let me— AH!" she shouted as one of the talking Brood appeared in front of her. The unicorns flashed again and again, and she was astonished to see Xanthe each time manage to, if only barely, tumble, fall, and skitter out of the way. One of the wretched creatures, probably half mad with taint, charged her with its three shoulder tentacles flailing, shrieking madly. It seized her for two seconds, wrapping

tendrils around her shoulders as it gibbered incoherently in her face. She screamed back at it in a panic.

Then one of the unicorns appeared, grinning triumphantly as she slashed across at Xanthe's unprotected head. Xanthe twisted her head back, and the blade passed over her and sliced right through the head of the ghoul. Xanthe lifted her head back in time to receive a few spurts of rancid blood and a horrible gurgle from the neck stump, then screamed again.

"Hold still!" the two Brood demanded in unison as Xanthe danced towards the exit on her hind legs with the corpse still clinging to her torso. Each time they chopped at her, she whirled to intercept the blade with the body, crying out in panic as she barely avoided being cut. The blades tore bloody, rancid bits out of the corpse, spattering all three of them with foul ichors as Xanthe whirled and hopped and twisted with each appearance.

"Please, lift your curse. Please lift it! Pretty please!" Xanthe begged as the twitching chunks trapping her finally detached. She pushed the torso from her, the tentacles still reaching for her, and screamed before throwing it into the face of the unicorn that had just appeared next to her. Dropping down on all fours as the Brood unicorn tried to free her face, she raced for the exit.

The other unicorn, unmolested by tentacles, appeared in her path, and Xanthe slid to a stop so abruptly that her legs slipped out from under her and she landed on her back, staring at the tip of the blade inches from her face. She let out a whimper and clenched her eyes tight. "Good... b...b...bye..." crackled the suit.

Then it was bathed in blood.

The unicorn above her danced in place as two miniguns ripped right through it, tearing deep bloody furrows in its augmented hide. As the glow around its horn died, Xanthe's hooves snapped up and caught the blade before it fell into her face. She was barely able to move it aside before the hot, bloody corpse collapsed upon her. "I am really sick of her curse..." she muttered flatly.

The remaining unicorn cut the tentacles from the torso and tossed the pieces away. Her synthetic eyes took in the sight of the four companions. Snails gaped at her, then at the slain unicorns. "Hey! Lookie there, eh! She's got a soul! Kinda..." He squinted over at her. "Kinda like a cheap knockoff, actually."

The unicorn disappeared, a flash lighting the space behind the tarp-covered heap. Carrion shoved the body off Xanthe. "Are you okay? Did you get the bombs

planted?”

“I think so,” she said weakly as she pushed herself to her hooves and wiped the blood off her face. “She killed the detonator, though.”

“Right. Silver?” Carrion said.

The glowing ghoul nodded, reached into her saddlebags, and withdrew a detonator that looked like it had spent twenty minutes in a microwave on high. Carrion took it in his hand, and the top popped right off with an anemic, electronic crackle. He covered his face with a wing, groaning. “Should have thought of that. . . Okay, don’t worry. I’ve got an egg timer. Xanthe, you know how to rig that up to the bombs, right?” Carrion asked. Xanthe nodded. “Good. Then we just have to deal with that last one.”

“Like, why do you have an egg timer? Isn’t that, like, cannibalism or something?” Silver Spoon asked, wrinkling her nose.

“I... you. . . you never know when you need a timer. Like now!” Carrion retorted.

The unicorn stepped out from behind the tarp and gazed at them all flatly. “How are idiots like you thwarting us? How can *you* be impeding us at all?” Her horn glowed as she pulled the tarp off the large heap.

...The large, *moving* heap.

I’d once seen immense pony blanks, mutants or malformed copies, in the base under Hippocratic Research. This was much worse. The immense zebroid monstrosity appeared like slab after slab of meat attached nearly at random to a dragon-sized frame. The entire thing was covered in metal plates that looked as if they’d been welded to the hide beneath. Its mouth spread far wider than any equine’s ever should, revealing row after row of metallic and ivory fangs. The scream it unleashed shook the room around them.

“I’m gonna need bigger guns,” Carrion said as he and the others backed away.

The biomechanical nightmare surged around the tree, pulping any ghoul that got under its immense hooves as it raced right towards the four. In unison, they fled back out into the staging area with the monstrosity close behind. One of the zombies raised its gun, firing impotently into the thick plates only to have the maw close down and snap it up, chomp it down into a slurry of rancid fluids, and swallow the revolting morsel whole.

“I really hope you have a magic trick we can use against that thing!” Xanthe shouted

as they retreated back towards the smaller passage they'd emerged from.

"Go away! You're ugly! You're fat! You smell!" Silver Spoon yelled as she backed away, hitting it with explosion after explosion of green energy. The blasts barely knocked the massive monster off its stride.

Snails clenched his eyes closed, and the dark magic crackled. The blood from the slain coalesced in the air before him, then formed into an immense red blade. It flailed at the abomination, but the impacts barely slowed it. Back the four fell as it snapped at the blood blade and bit the length in two, shattering the spell.

"Run! We have to run!" Silver Spoon shouted as they fled down the smaller tunnel.

The unicorn mare's laughter pursued them. "Run all you like! You'll all die in the end. But we shall live forever!"

oooOOOooo

I left Xanthe and thumped my hoof against the wall in frustration, being rewarded with a stinging pain in my foreleg. "Ow," I muttered, pushing the helmet back to glare out a window. Another choir... *another* fucking choir! If I'd been there, I could have teleported onto that monster's back, planted a bomb made by P-21, and blown its head off! Or maybe just died. Anything would have been better than watching and being helpless to change things!

"What's wrong?" P-21 asked immediately.

"Xanthe's team had a setback. The Brood are getting... smarter." And worse, what would that mean for Storm Chaser's predictions? As the Brood began to delegate and organize and act with finer precision, would our defenses remain adequate? The reinforcements had to stop, their cohesion had to be smashed, only it didn't seem like we were any closer to accomplishing either of those things! "Also, no Boo," I added, glancing at Scotch Tape.

"I'm sorry, Blackjack. I was just really surprised by her, and... well... Like I said, she's hard to understand when she doesn't slow down!" Scotch Tape apologized, ears folding back.

I sighed and looked back out the window towards the now much larger moon. "It's fine. I'm just... here. And it seems like everything important is happening back there. I wish I could get some hint that Glory was okay. That... that they're going to win it back there. But..." I sighed and shook my head.

"We'll make it, Blackjack," P-21 assured me. "No matter the cost."

I stared at the moon. “Hey, Scotch, do you think Cognitum’s at the moon yet?”

Scotch frowned and tapped her PipBuck for a few seconds. “If she’s not, then she’s really really close.”

“Right,” I said as I selected the tag. “Then this is the time I should go in and see what she’s up to. If I’m lucky, we’ll hear her plans right before they disembark.” Scotch Tape started to say something about Boo, but I didn’t listen as the world swirled away once more.

oooOOOooo

Cognitum sat in her rocket in what looked like some sort of plush passenger area. From the velvet couches and silk lined straps, it was clear that this was made for comfort. Perhaps an escape plan for Princess Luna and Princess Celestia? Something commissioned by Fancy Pants or Blueblood? Some other plot or plan I hadn’t discovered? Ugh... the thought that there could be even more secret crap made me tired.

Somewhere in the background I could hear ponies murmuring to each other, but otherwise they flew in silence.

I took a moment to focus on the body I occupied. It was... strange. Unlike any memory orb I’d ever lost myself in. There was something interfering with the contact now, like background static. It plucked at me. I couldn’t hear anything besides silence and faint whispers as Cognitum stared straight ahead at a screen showing the moon. I’d never picked up thoughts or emotions before from a memory orb, but now I did. As we moved ahead, I felt a growing, surging sensation of dread and longing. It was like standing too close to a fire, and I couldn’t pull away.

I’d been inside her once, and it hadn’t been anything like— The moon. It was huge in her screen. And as its pearly radiance filled her, that swelling emotion grew. It pushed at me through the connection. Cognitum had the soul of Princess Luna... Princess of the Moon.

And then her voice shivered through my mind. “Hello, Blackjack. So, you survived.”

“Yeah. I do that,” I said, wondering if I should break the connection or not. “I’m going to stop you.”

“So you say. Pity. You must have successfully commandeered a rocket, too; I doubt you’d be in range for this otherwise. Do tell me you killed the Legate for me. I’ll make you a countess if you have.”

A countess? *Seriously?* “Sorry. Afraid he’s not the easiest of people to kill.”

“True, though I’d hoped you’d find some way to vanquish that nasty fiend for me, or he you. Ah well, no matter,” she replied. “I’d like to make a deal with you. For your babies.”

I didn’t trust myself to speak.

“Abandon whatever fool plan you have. I will restore the Core and the Tokomare, control it with EC-1101, and restore civilization to my realm. I will give you your children, and let you, P-21, Glory, and the others go. It’s a big world, and you can find your place in it. Or, if you’ve come to your senses, I will allow you to serve me as a lieutenant. You can ensure that I am a good leader. Help me to do better. Help everypony.”

Nnnngh. . . “You’re forgetting the Eater of Souls. What you’re doing is going to set it free,” I countered.

“That zebra nonsense again. The Tokomare is not an abomination from beyond. It is a machine. It will do what it is commanded to do. No more, no less,” she replied primly.

“A machine? It’s spoken to me, Cognitum. It called me the Awakener!” I said in frustration.

“Princess Luna. And it has not to me. Ever. I was in that place for two centuries... true, with marginal senses for much of it, but still. If it was to reach out to anypony, it could have done so to me long ago. So what am I to conclude: that an eldritch abomination summoned by the zebras lurks underneath the Core, or that you are trying to stop me from doing what I wish because you fear the annihilation of the world through Horizons?”

I grunted in frustration. How could I prove what I knew? Cognitum demanded proof, and I had none to give. “I can’t risk it, Cognitum. You have to find some other way.”

“*Princess Luna*. That is the last time you will address me by that other name, Blackjack,” she said primly. “I will not let my realm rot. I made a promise to myself, my people, and my sister that I would see Equestria through the war. I mean to do so. I will not subject my Equestria to five centuries of suffering as my sister did after I was banished. That is the height of immorality.”

“Five centuries?” I balked.

“That is how long it took for ponykind to recover from the collapse following our

conflict. Five centuries of fighting off all kinds of beasts and monsters. Five centuries of losing community after community, city after city. Even our home was left behind when Celestia relocated to Canterlot.” Her voice turned even harder. “I will not let anypony keep me from protecting my subjects. Not you, the Legate, or the stars themselves will keep me from achieving my dream.”

The iron determination in her mind crushed against me. “You have my terms. Accept them, and you will have your children, and I my realm, and our people will have the future they deserve. Do not be selfish, Blackjack. Be wise.” The world then filled with static as I was ejected from her mind.

oooOOOooo

Getting ejected from the Perceptitron was rather akin to being shot in the head, and I’d know. I curled up in a ball and waited for the sensation like a red hot wire being drawn through my skull, from temple to temple, to subside. I kept my eyes closed and waited, jaw locked. I knew pain. I waited. It took me a while to register P-21 and Scotch Tape holding me and talking at me. I focused on that bar of fire. Slowly, bit by bit, it cooled off. Finally, I lifted my head enough to look at the pair.

“Note: don’t go in the mind of a goddess who can smack you back out,” I croaked.

“Are you okay?” P-21 asked at once. Funny. Did that word even apply to me anymore?

“No. I just informed her that I’m coming after her,” I said, knowing that the element of surprise was one of the few things I had had, and now... “She’s going to be ready for us.”

“Well, can we alter our flight plan or something? Arrive before she’s ready?” P-21 asked, looking at Scotch Tape.

The olive filly shook her head. “I wouldn’t want to risk it. If something, anything, went wrong, then there’s a whole lot of space to get lost and die in. It’s not as simple as ‘point the rocket at the moon’.”

I flopped back, breathing slowly. The first time I’d been in my old body, it hadn’t felt different. Now... the moon seemed to be empowering her. What would she be like once she got there? Would spark grenades even do the trick anymore? “When we get there, the two of you have to focus on disabling Horizons. Whatever else happens, we can’t let it fire.” Even if Cognitum was right and the Tokomare was just a machine, it didn’t matter. It had evil literally emanating from it. No good could come from that thing, and I didn’t care how a smarter pony might argue about ‘What

is evil?'. It was wrong, and when this was over, I'd devote myself to tracking down silver rings, tossing them under the Core, and burying the whole damned thing with a great big 'Warning, radioactive tainted poisoned Enervated area. Go away.' sign on top.

"What about getting your body back?" P-21 asked.

I closed my eyes, the lingering pain still throbbing in my temples. "I'm not sure I can do that anymore. She was aware of me inside her. No pony's done that before. She's..." I glanced up at him and admitted the horrible truth. "I don't know how to beat her, P-21. Before now, yeah. Grenades. Delete. Swap bodies. Now..." I took a deep breath and stared at the floor. "Now it feels like the fucking Legate."

Both of them embraced me. "I believe in you, Blackjack," P-21 said.

"You'll find a way," Scotch Tape echoed.

Damn it. Ignorance really was bliss. "Yeah. Sure. But just the same, stop Horizons." I lifted my head and gazed out at the moon, growing larger and brighter than it ever was when seen from the ground. *Just in case I don't*, I added silently to myself.

Two hours later, the moon filled the lower halves of all four windows. The surface was comprised of grayish white moonstone plains with immense crags of the rock thrusting up in faintly more luminous mountain ranges. The entire surface glowed with a spectral light, casting strange shadows out into the darkness. Earlier, Scotch and I had figured out how to get one of the screens to show the view behind the rocket. Before the autopilot turned the ship around to start the landing, Equus had been reduced to a hoof-sized circle behind us, and the sun was an even tinier glowing bead disappearing behind the disc of the planet. Now I stared at a cratered landscape punctuated by the occasional crystalline ridge.

Below us, I could see our destination: a square pad, Cognitum's rocket already perched imperiously in the center of it, sitting on a flat, open plain. Two lines on the moon's surface ran off from the pad at an acute angle to each other, one plunging straight into a abyssal crevasse of deep purple and black crystals and the other running to a terraced structure built into the edge of the chasm. I watched a little train streaking away from the landing platform along one of the lines, headed straight for the dark gorge, as we came in for a landing.

I owed whoever had designed the autopilot a drink. The thing led us straight and

true to the large, flat structure. Rockets fired for the last time in the flight, and we grew heavier in our couches as the ship began to slow its fall onto the platform below. The machine rumbled beneath us as it dropped foot by foot and then, with clanks and thumps as the landing gear touched down and took on the ship's weight, settled neatly on the pad beside Cognitum's rocket. A tower rose from a marked-off square on the platform, and a tube extended outwards to meet the hatch of our rocket. Something banged down below, and the engine went silent.

"Here we go," I said as I stepped to the hatch, bouncing slightly in the low gravity. I flipped open the catches and grabbed the handle.

"Wait!" the pair shouted simultaneously, Scotch Tape launching herself at the hatch controls across the cockpit and faceplanting two thirds of the way to them.

P-21 stared at me as I pulled it open and I stepped out into the tunnel. "What?" I asked in mild annoyance. Without speaking, he pointed a hoof at the 'Warning! Hard Vacuum!' signs mounted here and there all over the interior of the tower. "What? So it's clean," I said in mild annoyance.

"That means no *air*, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape said into the deck of the cockpit.

"Oh," I blinked, then said as cheerily as I could, "Well, it's open now. Let's go."

"I don't know which is more likely to kill us," P-21 muttered as he helped Scotch Tape to her feet. "Cognitum, or Blackjack's lack of vocabulary." We crossed to the tower, through a hatch, and onto a spiral staircase. There was a single red bar scrolling across my EFS as we twisted around and around. At the bottom was yet another hatch. I pushed it open and carefully poked my head through; on the other side was a corridor with, right in front of the door, a stretch painted with caution stripes. Signs warned of 'Caution: Weight Increase' and 'Caution: Weight Decrease' with arrows pointing in opposite directions, however that worked, but there was no sign of anything or anyone hostile. I crept out as silently as I was able and made my way down the hall, my weight indeed increasing back to what I was used to on Equus from one end of the caution-painted area to the other. Scotch and P-21 following me, though I had to look back to make sure the latter was there, I approached the lit doorway and the red bar at the hallway's end.

'WELCOME PRINCESS LUN' proclaimed a banner across a large lobby. Windows along two walls afforded a view of the beautiful lunar landscape. I marveled at the equine architecture, mosaics, and sculptures depicting the dark princess of the moon. It reminded me of the design in the Nightmare Citadel, but with more stainless steel and moonlight and less obsidian and shadows. Despite the banner, nearly

everything was empty and spotless. No dust, but a dry scent scratched at my nostrils. At the far wall were two signs: 'To Astrostable' and 'To Lunar Palace'.

Between the signs was the red bar.

It walked forward casually, footfalls heavy on the carpet. It walked without fear, with confidence, with certainty.

After all, what did a mare who could never die have to fear?

"Hey, Blackjack. Long time no see. You're looking good," Rampage said casually, the blades of her armor gleaming in the moonlight like cold stars. "Fraid I have to kill you now."

(Author's notes: I am so very sorry for the tardiness of this chapter. Just about everything that could go wrong, short of losing an editor, went wrong. Car problems. Dog eating a roach poison tablet. Losing 21 pages stored on a flash drive. Plague. Medical scares regarding my heart. Christmas. Yeah. But it's here, and I'm sorry that it's so terrible.

If folks are wondering why I did the chapter as I did, I want the end of Horizons to be more than just Blackjack. I hope that, even if people don't care much for the secondary characters of the fic, that they can respect what the characters are attempting in pulling together and working together. If you didn't enjoy it, I apologize.

As usual, I want to thank Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria,

[Somber's mother's machine decided to punk out at this point; he plans to finish the note later. Don't forget, any donations to david13ushey@gmail.com through Paypal would be greatly, greatly appreciated.]

Editor's notes:

swicked: Somber has informed us that extensive technical explanations in the editor's notes are NOT appreciated. Ergo, we have convinced the engineer (well, one of them, anyway) of our number to forgo a lengthy discussion on tank mechanics.

You are welcome.

Bronode: I figured out why photon torpedoes are called photon torpedoes. But I'm not allowed to explain it. So take that, I guess. Also, anything involving interphasic anything is bullshit.

73. Apogee

“Forget it, Twilight. I know what you’re up to. The second I go in, you’ll have your little minion Spike come and take Tom!”

“Tom?”

“Well, it’s not going to work.”

Once, I had met a mare. She’d leapt down upon a bounty hunter who’d been set on taking me to Deus. She’d been rude, assertive, and fearless in all things. She was a Reaper, one of the deadliest fighters in all the Wasteland, sent to find out if I had actually killed one of their own. In the depths of my home, I’d rescued her from the nightmarish fate of becoming a ceaselessly conscious, unending meal for cannibal raiders, and, over time, we’d become friends of a sort. She mocked me, questioned me, and even looked up to me. But she’d been in pain, and had wanted to die, and I... I wanted my friend to live. I could have found a way to kill her if I’d *really* tried. Found some means to end her eternal regeneration and give her the peace that life had denied her... but I’d refused. I’d been certain that life was always better. And so, she had betrayed me to my enemy for the promise of an end to her life only for it to be denied her yet again. This was a mare cursed with life.

Rampage.

Her pink eyes roamed over the three of us casually, her lips twisting in disgust. “Kill you,” she muttered, as if the word suddenly tasted bitter in her mouth. She plucked idly at the carpet with her hoofclaws, scratching it like a manticore. She sighed and rolled her eyes. “I mean, of course it’s ‘kill’. Couldn’t be to tie you up and toss you in a closet or delay you with a musical number. But let’s face it, when it comes to consistency, Cognitum’s got more than a few shorts in her processors, if you know what I mean.” She paused and added, “And I really hope you do, because that’s as far as I get with techie words.”

We didn’t answer. Behind her were the doors that presumably led to the tracks to our destination. Her casual smile turned into a small frown. “What? No banter? No comeback?” She looked at Scotch Tape and grinned. “Hey! You made it to the moon! Awesome. Is this cool or what?”

“You say you’re gonna kill Blackjack, and you wanna talk about the moon being cool?” Scotch Tape replied flatly, not taking her eyes off the striped mare.

The corner of Rampage's eye started to twitch. "Wow. Heck of a girl. When did she become such a grouch? Must take after her father." She said the last with a grin at P-21.

"Thanks," he answered calmly, returning a casual smile and nothing more. Rampage smirked and waited a few moments, and then her lips melted in a frown.

"What the fuck happened to you two? Did Blackjack botch some mind magic or something?" She surveyed the terminal. "And where's Glory? Back in the rocket? I mean I know she's not flying around out there," she pointed to the window and the moonscape. "And Boo? She's got to be somewhere around, right?" Rampage looked around the terminal, as if expecting to see the white pony appear from the air. I had to admit, I would have loved to have her with us.

"Boo's fine. Glory didn't make it," I said, forcing myself to keep my words as controlled as I could.

"Oh, you have to be shitting me? You left her behind? Fuck! She loves you, Blackjack!" Rampage said sharply. I shoved down the emotions that demanded I roar my hatred, pain, and sorrow at her. I had to stay focused. Even with the operative barding protecting me, Rampage could kill me in one good slam. She scowled at me a moment longer, then lifted her head, eyes wide. "Holy shit... She's not... she's... is she?" I didn't answer. "Oh... damn... Blackjack, I'm so sorry!" And sadder still was the sincerity in her voice. I doubted that there were many ponies Rampage would talk about like that.

"I don't know. I hope not." I fought to keep the tremble out of my voice. "It's been a long couple of days," I continued, forcing myself to stay calm. "It's good to see you, though. I'm glad to see you're still alive." A wince and a frown crossed her face. "Let me guess: Cognitum's put off giving you your death till later?"

She sighed, scowling and rolling her eyes. "Yeah. She wants her capital restored and realm back and yadda yadda yawn," she said, slouching a little and waving a claw in a circle next to her dismissively. "I figure if she doesn't do it by the end of the week, I'm just going to rip her head off. Either she'll use her überpowers to eradicate me, or she'll get what she deserves and I'm no worse off."

"Or you could help us," I said.

Rampage chuckled, rolling her eyes. "She said you'd say that." She stared into my eyes evenly, then a touch of doubt entered her gaze. "Have you changed your mind about killing me? That would really simplify things. I'm sure you've worked out some

kind of trick or gadget or . . . something. Some way to take me out by now.”

“Not really. I was kinda hoping you’d join me and help stop all this,” I answered.

“And why would I do that?” Rampage asked with a smirk.

“Because you’ve been jabbering with us instead of turning us into paste?” Scotch Tape suggested. “I mean, if you’re going to kill us, shouldn’t you have gotten started a minute ago?”

Rampage frowned. “Look, I missed you guys! I don’t even like Cognitum. None of the ponies with her will talk to me. They’re worse than Glory!” She winced as if struck, then managed a genuinely apologetic expression. “Sorry, force of habit. But unless you or pops over there are going to kill me, Cognitum’s my best chance to check out, because Blackjack doesn’t have the guts to give me what I want. What I fucking *need*!” She gave me an angry glare.

“That’s right,” I answered. “Because I know who you really are, Peppermint.”

Rampage went completely still for a few seconds, her eyes wide as she stared at me in some sort of horrified gape. “...Oh no.” I felt a little surge of hope rise as she shook her head. “No! No fucking way!” A smile crept on my face as she pointed at me and cried out, “Fuck you, Blackjack, and fuck your lame-ass Reaper re-names. I mean, Whisper? Peppermint? Next you’ll tell me Brutus’s ‘real name’ was Fluffy or... no. Fuck you.” She stuck her tongue out at me and muttered, “Really, if you were going to make up a name, couldn’t it have been from somewhere other than a candy wrapper?”

“You’re Twist’s daughter, Peppermint,” I said as I started to walk around her. “Doof. . . Deus. . . is your father.”

“Okay, now you’re just being ‘pop my head like a bloatspite’ stupid, ’cause that’s not true,” her annoyance focusing into anger. “That’s impossible.”

“It’s true, Peppermint,” I said evenly, knowing this wasn’t going to be pretty. “I touched his mind. He told me everything. He wanted me to look after you.”

“The fuck he did! My. . .” she trailed off as cognition danced behind her eyes, and she shook her head hard. Rampage growled, “This is getting really fucking annoying, Blackjack. Deus! That guy was a jackass!”

“To you?” I asked sharply. “He was a twisted monster to most people, yeah, but was he ever to *you*?”

Rampage's eyes locked to mine. "Well, no... but that was probably just because... I mean... who the fuck cares?!"

"Deus did. About you. He wasn't scared of you. He didn't want to rape you. He wanted to protect you. That's why he stopped fighting for the Harbingers. That's why he followed us around as long as he did. It was the only way he could be around you," I said as I held my gaze. Some of that might have been guesswork, but it felt solid. "It wouldn't surprise me if he was involved in you becoming a Reaper, even. Why else would one of the Top Ten want to kill you at random? Doesn't it strike you as odd that you'd cross paths with a Reaper so soon after flopping out of the Core?"

"She heard that I was talking shit," Rampage answered.

"And who'd she hear that from?" I challenged.

"I... don't know. She tried to kill me, and when she couldn't, I killed her," Rampage stammered. "But I'm not this Peppermint! Why don't I remember it?"

"You had the memory removed. If I had to guess, by Priest. He would have been willing to help give you a chance at some peace." I couldn't prove it, but it made sense to me. "You locked it up in your old room at Miramare. I'm guessing without it, all the other memories in you crowd out memories of that life."

"I'm not Peppermint," Rampage countered sharply. "I'm Rampage. A killing machine! That's all I do! I'm a monster!"

"You're Peppermint, a filly younger than Scotch Tape. Think about every time you're disintegrated. It doesn't return you to being as you are now. It turns you back into a filly, and then you grow up into who you are now." I kept my eyes on her. Any second now.

"Shut up, Blackjack!" she shouted back at me, tears in her eyes.

I really wished I had the recollector right now. I pulled out the memory orb I'd retrieved from Twist's quarters. "This has it all. Twist trying to take you off the base. The bomb going off. Her shoving the phoenix talisman inside you. All of it." Then I realized that I might have something else. I pulled out the teddy bear and threw it at her. She caught it in her hooves. "You left that behind."

Rampage trembled as she held the teddy bear in her hooves and stared into its slightly forlorn face. "I've..." She brought it to her muzzle and inhaled the scent. "I... I know this... but..." She shook her head hard and glared back at me. "No! It's... you're trying to trick me! I know you're up to something, Blackjack. I don't

know what, but it's not true! I... I'm not Peppermint. I'm Rampage. And I'm going to kick your ass to the mo- er... um... sun! Or whatever!"

Damn it, she wasn't going to make this easy on me. "Demand the recollector from Cognitum. See for yourself!"

"Yeah, right. And she's just going to give it to me? And you're just going to hang around here while I use it?" Rampage scowled at me. "Now shut it, get back on your rocket, and get gone. I'll take care of Cognitum. I don't want her to kill you three anyway. Well, maybe you, Blackjack, but only 'cause you're being a jackass right now!"

Okay. It looked like this was going to be the hard way, then. "Which soul was it that betrayed me, Rampage?" I snapped in return. "Was it the Angel? Yeah, I'm sure she'd love to stop giving 'peace' to the Wasteland! Or was Softheart a dirty cop all along? Or Razorwire? I'm sure she's really into siding with authority! Or was the Doc interested in stabbing me in the back? How about Shujaa? Was she really a traitor? Or was Twist the one who sold out her friends?" She shifted her whole body towards me, leaning forward, widening her stance, and flexing her powerful hindlegs like a four-hundred-pound steel cat. "That's right. She was a worthless, no good moth—"

Rampage tossed the bear aside and charged me with a scream. I teleported out of her path as she ripped past, materializing a ways back from her. She didn't turn. She ran right to the wall and then up it, did a twisting jump upside-down off the ceiling, and landed back on her hooves to face me with an ease as impressive as it was terrifying. "No bullets or bombs!" Scotch Tape screamed as I pulled out Sexy and P-21 drew Persuasion. "'Hard Vacuum', remember?!"

Shit... that put a kink in my 'reboot Rampage' idea. And she was already on her way back at me. "Stay back!" I shouted, then teleported to the other side of the room again. I needed a way to disable her! She rounded so fast it ripped up a massive burr of carpet, then tore back at me, tugging at her helmet's chinstrap. "Give it up, Rampage! Fast as you are, you can't teleport!" I said, and as a demonstration, I disappeared back to the other side of the room once again.

And got a helmet upside the head for my trouble. It banged into me with a huge clang and nearly knocked me on my ass, and the axelike blade at the brow only barely missed my face to rip a huge gash in my helmet instead. Worse, it kept me in place long enough for Rampage to pounce. "I'm going to kill you, Blackjack!" she screamed at me.

She was an emotionally ravaged filly having a tantrum in a body that could grind me into paste. She came down, and I rolled to the side to avoid being crushed. Her foreleg swept out to the side, ripping three furrows in my armor from spine to rump. Without it, my hide would have been shredded to ribbons. I flopped over again to face her as she rose for another strike, then blasted her in the face with a magic bullet. It slowed her down only enough for me to get to my feet again.

“Rampage!” P-21 shouted. She snapped her head towards him in time to spot him raising Persuasion and firing a grenade. It smashed into her forehead, bouncing off and flipping in an arc before her. She reached out and actually caught it as P-21 and Scotch covered their eyes. Rampage’s body shielded me from the flash, but the bang made my ears ring. At least Rampage had soaked up most of that too.

Rampage shook her head hard, staggering a few steps and blinking her eyes. “Ow,” she muttered, then refocused on P-21, narrowing her eyes as she recovered quickly. “Okay. Your turn.”

“Blackjack! Boost me up!” Scotch Tape shouted as she ran to me, pointing up at the ceiling. P-21 was now backing away on the defensive as I levitated Scotch up to where she could kick open a panel in the ceiling and disappear inside. “Get her over here!” she said from above.

Easier said than done. As I watched Rampage, though, I realized that she wasn’t fighting like she could have been. Where were the commando grips? What about the Proditor kicks and tricks? Police combat and dirty fighting were also conspicuously absent. If Shujaa, Twist, and Softheart had been helping, P-21 wouldn’t have had a chance. As it was, he kept swinging, ducking, wildly backflipping, weaving, and barely keeping away from the wild claw swipes that threatened to rip him in half.

There wasn’t anything for it. I raised Sexy, glanced at all that glass with space on the other side, and hoped that it was thicker than it looked, or maybe magic, unbreakable glass. Advancing towards her, I moved till she filled most of the spread and opened up with buckshot. Sexy let loose a thundering roar, pouring a storm of lead at the striped mare. The weapon was, however, less effective than I’d hoped. The Brood that she’d so easily chewed through below hadn’t been covered in an inch of plate steel; much of the shot deflected off or pancaked on the metal. Even when exposed gaps were hit and penetrated, the shot was merely pushed out of the wound a second later.

But it did work in one respect: it shifted her attention from P-21 to me. I started to back away again as she advanced on three legs, the fourth raised and shielding

her head to prevent me from rendering her vulnerable by pulping her face. Burst after burst cracked out, sending lead flying wildly and spiderwebbing the glass with errant shots. At least it was a little tougher than it looked! Overhead, between shots, I heard Scotch mutter, "Oh, go ahead. Make us suck hard vacuum. I always wanted a special death you just can't find on Equus."

"Sorry. You got that with the Joke, Scotch," I countered as I kept backing away.

"You're the joke," Rampage countered, now moving close enough to leap at me. I turned Sexy sideways just in time and watched her claws scrape at the metal. Thank Celestia for reinforced barrels! I wasn't going to lose this gun so quickly!

Then two wires dropped down. One touched her armored rump. The other touched her unarmored mane. The second it did, there was a sharp snap, a dazzling flash, and a reek of burning mane. Rampage immediately jerked sideways, spasming and flopping like a four-hundred-pound steel-scaled fish as half the lights in the terminal winked out.

Scotch poked her head out the hatch. "Did I get her?"

I advanced to the twitching form. "Looks like," I said as I pressed the gun to her forehead. "Time to reboot."

Rampage opened her eyes, tears running down her cheeks. "Please," she whimpered, "help my little girl."

I blinked.

Then Sexy went flying as her hoof moved faster than I could see, knocking it to the far corner of the room. Rampage swept around in a circle, hooking her barbed tail in my leg barding and jerking me right off my feet. She continued the motion, flinging me in the opposite direction of my gun. "Electricity? Really? Why not try and taze me, or use rubber bullets? Or fire? That works really well!" she said sarcastically, and then she was leaping at me before I could rise.

I imagined I was fighting a tiger as I tried to use my focus to get away from her, but she was on me like a tempest. Raking hoofclaws ravaged the rest of my helmet and nearly took off my face. Her razorwire-threaded tail whipped towards me, catching my flanks and tearing the gaps in my barding even wider. Then she reared up, and I reared up as well, blocking her plunging hoofblades and really missing my augmentations. Her weight came crushing down as I backed up again and again.

"Blackjack!" P-21 shouted from the far side of the room, then hurled Sexy across the terminal towards us. Thankfully, the weapon could take a bounce or two, and, with

his usual aim, it rammed into Rampage's side and knocked her off balance just long enough for me to catch it with my hooves and magic. I now had something heavy to keep between her and myself at least, but Sexy's mass also worked against me; while it was sturdy enough to be a shield, the weapon was too massive for me to maneuver.

Rampage leapt up, pushing against the gun, grinning ear to ear over it at me as her weight slowly shoved it aside. I blasted her with a magic bullet, but while it tore the side of her head away, her body began to repair the damage immediately. I reared up and planted my forehooves against the gun, trying to push back as I danced on my hindlegs. A second magic bullet to the face failed to go through her brain. The third missed completely as we whirled about.

Don't fall! If I fell, I'd be paste. I fought to pull my focus back together to teleport away again, drawing Vigilance at the same time. That really got her moving, pushing us both in a tight spiral as bullets flew wildly at her unarmored head. P-21 and Scotch Tape took cover as we danced around and around on our hindlegs, both pressing against Sexy as I struggled to land a shot that'd blow her brains out so she'd see reason.

"Hard vacuum!" screamed Scotch Tape, and I dimly heard an alarm sounding somewhere as the magazine ran empty. Enough! I had to put some distance between us! I just needed a few more seconds to tele—

She bit my horn! Bit it! I screamed as my focus shattered and I felt something crunchy happening atop my forehead. The pain was so bad that I almost collapsed, Vigilance bouncing away. My shoulders hit the wall behind me, and something crinkled. Suddenly, Rampage stopped biting down as the crinkling deepened, a sound like cracking ice. I looked up at her, my vision swimming with tears of pain, and spotted her staring past me with a look of trepidation. . . and awe.

Then we were blasted through the window.

Instantly, I was covered head to hoof in a wrongness. My skin burned as we tumbled out together into the void. Instinctively, I tried to hold my breath, as if we were underwater, but when my back struck the cool dust, the air was blasted from my lungs in a vapor. I felt the dull impact of Rampage beside me, both of us kicking up glowing clouds of dust that settled on us as I looked up at the line of windows a story above us. A metal plate had dropped down, covering the ones we'd punched through. I stared up at the sight of P-21 and Scotch Tape looking down at me through one of the intact ones, mouths moving. My heart thundered in my ears as I

lay back in the dust.

It would be so easy to simply stay down and rest. It was so beautiful here. The moon was full of song. P-21 and Scotch Tape could finish. I could just. . . rest. I turned my head to lay my cheek on the glowing dust and gravel and pressed my bloodied horn to the gleaming surface, listening to that wonderful song as time seemed to stretch out.

Get up, Blackjack. . .

I don't want to.

Get up, Blackjack!

Five more minutes!

Then I heard it. The distant cacophony of echoing screams. A muffled concerto of pain. I lifted my head, coated head to hoof in moon dust, and stared up at Equus above me. The planet looked sick. Maimed. Bleeding and dying. I pushed myself to my hooves as I felt my consciousness failing fast. I stared up at it, my eyes feeling dry and itchy.

Will you leave its fate uncertain? Will you leave the fates of your friends for others to decide?

I turned and saw Rampage rising to her hooves, chunks of white dust and gravel tumbling off her armor. Her face twisted in torment as she clutched her head, lips moving silently in a scream. There was nothing I could do for her here. I stared up at the world above. So small. So sick and injured. Could I do anything that would help?

Where there is will, there is hope.

Where there is hope, there is action.

Where there is action, there is possibility.

Possibility. Not certainty. . . too much to hope for. I wanted to sigh, but I was feeling pretty numb and wobbly. I closed my eyes, drew in my focus, and teleported back into the terminal, collapsing in a heap under the banner. My whole body tingled from head to hoof as I sucked in air. . . wonderful, wonderful air. My whole body felt tight and swollen, my eyes burning horribly as if buckets of sand had been poured in my face, my head immediately pounding as my heart rate picked up again. Tears poured down my cheeks as I struggled to clear the grit. The moondust coating me made my horn tingle like it was plugged into an electrical socket.

“Blackjack! Here!” P-21 shouted as he put a healing potion to my lips. I drank it down eagerly, then coughed and breathed a little while longer. Huh... I couldn’t taste the potion at all.

“How come you didn’t explode? I thought you were supposed to explode on the moon,” Scotch Tape asked, actually sounding slightly disappointed.

“Sorry to disappoint,” I said, working my tongue and stiff, swollen body. Was there something wrong with my mouth? I didn’t want to not be able to taste Sugar Apple B... damn it, P-21... I slowly pushed myself to my hooves and tugged my ruined barding off. Rampage had pretty much shredded most of it. Damn, I’d been lucky to have her on my side. We walked to the windows and looked out for her.

“Where’s Rampage?” P-21 asked. I felt a frisson of fear. There was no sign of her down at the rents we’d left in the moon dust.

The window exploded in my face amid a loud bang and gust of wind, Rampage’s hooves hooking into the carpet before she could be pulled back. With my head still spinning from my own return, I wasn’t able to brace myself in time, and the exhausting air sent me tumbling into Rampage’s glowy hug. Scotch Tape and P-21 dropped to the floor, wedged in between floor and wall before they could be blown over as well. The steel shutter slammed down over the window, blocking the escape of air. “Peppermint this,” Rampage hissed as she started to squeeze, eyes bloodshot and bulging as she dribbled moon gravel all over me.

I had no tricks left. Then P-21 was there, swinging Persuasion’s barrel like a truncheon and striking her again and again across the face with it with a loud ‘poing’ noise. “Ow! Ow! Stop it! Quit it!” she yelled, relaxing her crushing grip on me as she raised a hoof to deflect the wild swings.

Scotch Tape raced by with the banner from the ceiling and pulled it over Rampage’s face, yanking it tight. She lifted a hoofclaw and slashed at the material, ripping a hole in it. P-21 fired a grenade straight at her face, the impact filling the air with a resounding *crack* as she went reeling. I managed to pull out of her grip. I assumed P-21 had loaded a dud as he had with the Legate and wheeled. I could have shot her in the head again, but I’d had enough.

She ripped the banner in two and then looked straight into my eyes. I leaned forward and jammed my moonstone-coated horn into her brow. “No, *this* is Peppermint!” I hissed. Without the recollector, there was no way she could experience the memory in the orb.

So I gave her mine, transferring a memory of a memory into her mind. It was like dumping a cup of flamer fuel into a smouldering fire. When the memory entered her consciousness, it set light to everything else. A filly didn't have a lot of memories in general, particularly underneath all the experiences she'd had since waking in the Wasteland. 'Not a lot' wasn't 'none', though, and suddenly that simple little memory was drawing up others inside her that had lain dim and dark in the depths of her mind. Shujaa giving rides on her back. Twist baking her a six layer birthday cake. Said cake toppling like a felled tree when Peppermint tried to eat the bottom layer first (Who'd miss it? It was the bottom one, after all.). And dozens more. The memories, thoughts, and emotions of the filly at Rampage's core lit up, the quickfire searing through the brambly depths of her mind.

"No!" Rampage sobbed as she released me and fell on her side, clutching her head and writhing as if in physical pain. I scrambled back as quickly as I could, flopping as I watched the armored mare flail as if in the midst of some epileptic fit. Her claws raked at her head as if trying to physically scrape the memories out of her skull, and, failing at that, ripped and shredded at the ground. Finally she collapsed on her side, sobbing brokenly, blood and tears mixing in the sparkling moon dust covering her and tiny bits of carpet drifting in the air like feathers.

"She wanted me to live. Mommies die for their babies. But I didn't. I killed my baby, Mommy. I killed her," she choked out through helpless sobs. I approached slowly as she muttered, "I'm sorry, Mommy. I am so sorry."

I knelt down and stroked her gently. "Shh... shh... It's okay, Peppermint."

"Don't call me that, Blackjack. I'm not Peppermint anymore, and I'm not Psychoshy," Rampage said as she looked up at me morosely. "She wanted me to live, Blackjack..." Rampage blubbered. "She *wants* me to live... but how can I? I killed my own baby. I... I *fucking murdered* my own daughter, Blackjack. How do I come back from that?"

Gee, where had I heard that before? She embraced me, and I braced myself as she wept. "I know it hurts, Rampage," I said gently, waiting as she held me in her hooves. "And I know that you don't want to go on, but I need you." Her sobbing continued as the embrace tightened around my shoulders. *Keep the anger in check, though.* I struggled to keep my voice even. "I need your help." Her sobbing slowed, and I waited, rage condensing to hate. "We need to save the world." Show your fucking face...

Her weeping stopped. "No," Rampage breathed as her hooves tightened around me

in a crushing embrace. Then she lifted her head, stared into my eyes, and smiled. “We need to give it peace!” There you are!

And I looked straight into her eyes, vacant as the corpse of a dead star, and pressed my horn against her forehead and unloaded... something... straight into Rampage’s mind. It wasn’t any kind of spell, per se. It was to mind magic what a balefire egg was to precision. As she started to crush me, I rammed a white-hot lance of rage, frustration, fear, and will straight into the pool of Rampage’s mind. The Angel was like an oily blot smothering the flames I’d ignited. With fiery rage and hate, I poured every bit of magic I could squeeze through my horn into her head. There was no ‘mental spell matrix’ or ‘envisioning then actualizing’ like Twilight’s books taught. This was me wanting nothing more right now than to rip, burn, gnash, tear, and obliterate that foul, bilious madness inside Rampage. White light poured out of Rampage’s eyes as I pushed everything I could into her.

The Angel recoiled. I advanced. The Angel hid. I pursued. The Angel threw images of Glory’s corpse at me. I denied. The Angel promised peace. I mandated action. Deeper and deeper, hotter and hotter, my will burned after her. It would help me kill Cognitum. I didn’t want it. It would help me kill the Legate! The Eater itself! Just stop. I refused. It threw the sensation of serene peace at me like a choking blanket.

“You want peace?” I shouted into Rampage. “Have it!”

I dug down all the way to a hard little knot that I couldn’t push into, and seizing every bit of that slimy, acidic, poisonous thought, I pulled. I ripped. I consumed. I eradicated. With mental ferocity that outpaced the ruin of any balefire explosion, I tore every last bit to splinters.

Then my horn burned out with a pop, and we both fell again. The moonstone that had stuck to my horn had turned inky black. It fell freely around my hooves, and I watched as it disintegrated, releasing a black shadow that was swept away with a tiny pathetic scream upon an ethereal wind.

“What did you do, Blackjack?” Scotch Tape asked in shock. She waved her hooves it the air. “I mean, she was all ‘Grrr!’ and then you went all ‘zap’, and her eyes went ‘wooosh’, and then you were both ‘Ohhh!’” And she slumped, as if momentarily winded by her question.

“I have no idea,” I groaned, touching the blackened end of my horn and yelping as a crackle of electricity zapped my hoof. Okay, that was new. “I was just really... really pissed when I did it, think I overdid it, and whatever it was...” I glanced at the sooty black remains of the dust. “I think it worked.”

At least, I hoped it did. Rampage was stirring. “Was it supposed to give me a splitting headache and make me feel like crap?” she asked as she sat up in a sulk, then slumped back on her rump. “Cause if so, bravo.”

“I went after that thing that killed Hope, Rampage,” I said, trying to tap my horn and getting another zap and zing of pain through my spire. “Ow. . .” I winced, then looked at her. “Did I get it?”

“I dunno. You went away, and then I came back, and...” She rubbed her face with her hooves, looking tired and older as she stared out one of the remaining windows. “Mom would be so ashamed of me,” she muttered.

“Join the club,” I said, shifting and sitting next to her as I scrubbed at my temple. “I know just what my mom would think about me. ‘Couldn’t you have done better without the bodycount?’”

“Yeah, but you didn’t kill your kid, Blackjack,” she pointed out. Scotch Tape sighed, rolling her eyes, and trotted over to examine something by the tram entrances.

“Got my stable, though,” I answered. P-21 growled, rubbing his own head as he gritted his teeth. “Most of it,” I added.

“Oh, would you two just stop?!” P-21 shouted at the both of us, throwing his forehooves into the air. “Honestly! You pick *now* to whine about which of you more disappointed your mothers? I was born with a penis. I beat *both* of you for disappointed mothers!” he shouted as all three of us just stared at him. He noticed, turned red, and blurted, “Now is not the time for this!”

I looked at Rampage out the corner of my eye. “He’s kinda got a point.” I cracked a little smile, but she didn’t share it. “Rampage, I really don’t want to fight Cognitum, but I’d feel a lot better having you with me than not. It’d be like old times again.”

“Old times,” she sighed, then looked levelly at me. “I still want to die,” she said with a small frown. Nearly a pout.

“I know.” I put a hoof across her shoulders and hugged her to me. She pressed her forehead to my shoulder.

“But Cogs isn’t going to actually turn it off and kill me, is she?” Rampage asked.

“Probably. It’s not in her nature to throw away a tool she can use. Heck, she didn’t throw out Dawn or Horse. I hate to imagine what her fridge would look like,” I said, smiling at the utterly nonsensical but unsettlingly plausible idea. Then again, I hadn’t been known for cleanliness either.

"I want to die. What I did... what she did for me... it hurts. I'm so angry it hurts," she said, almost in a whimper. "And I can't make it stop."

I nuzzled her as Mom had done me when I was a filly. "I know. But you can do it after we stop her and save the world," I pointed out.

"Promise?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"I promise," I answered.

Rampage didn't answer, and I waited. Time was running out, but if I pressed her, she'd just spend the rest of time sulking right here waiting to die. "Right," Rampage said half a minute later. "Let's do this." She rose to her hooves and trotted to her helmet. Jamming it on her head, she looked back at me and smirked. "Oh, and by the way, Blackjack? I *totally* would have kicked your ass if you hadn't broken out the freaky mind magic shit."

I lifted myself to my feet, looking at the tatters of my barding. "Yeah. No argument here," I replied, feeling as if I'd been stuck in a dryer with a load of rocks thrown in. I had moonstone tangled up in my mane. Stuck to my hide. Everywhere! It was making me feel decidedly weird, and I brushed off what I could, collecting it in a Sparkle-Cola bottle. The operative barding, on close inspection, was indeed a total loss; hopefully I'd find a decent replacement before too long.

We walked to the two doors, and I tapped the button next to the one for the Lunar Palace. "How many others does Cognitum have with her?" I asked Rampage. Another little spark of magic erupted from my horn. "Oww. What's the deal?" I asked, trying to stare at it as pain shot from the tip through the base and into my brain.

"Fourteen others. The best Harbingers she could find, along with a few mercenaries she rented. Talons," Rampage said dismissively. "Most of them are in power armor. Nothing I can't handle," she continued with a sniff.

"Right," I said as I scowled at the display over the double doors. It showed a shuttle moving from a crown-like icon to a rocket-like icon, which I assumed was where we were. I frowned at the display, then caught P-21 with an identical expression. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Oh Goddesses, if you two screw again..." Scotch Tape said in disgust. Rampage blinked at her in surprise, and she slumped, ears flat, and grumbled, "They did it right next to me while I was in the Perceptithing. I'm getting why Glory had issues."

"Seriously?" Rampage asked P-21.

"Your reset button is a bullet through the brain. Blackjack's is through her happy hole," P-21 replied with a casual smile and shrug. "I didn't make you crazy mares this way. I just work with that I have."

"Actually!" I declared to cut them all off, thrusting a hoof up at the display. "That tram, it's probably powered from the Palace, right?"

She frowned, then nodded. "Unless there's a big old reactor hidden under this terminal, probably."

"Then I'm thinking that stranding me in that tram car would be a pretty easy way to neutralize me. Either I get trapped in there till Horizons goes off, or she can just use a bomb and blow me to pieces in the middle of nowhere." I looked at my friends. "Even if I teleported away, I couldn't take any of you with me."

"Someday you really need to work out that little wrinkle," P-21 told me. I grumbled, mentally adding it to learning healing spells, finding some reliable barding, and stopping a superweapon from destroying the world.

"Huh, that's not a bad idea," Scotch Tape rubbed her chin as she considered me. "Did her chewing on your horn add a couple of IQ points, Blackjack?"

"Maybe," I muttered, reaching up to rub my abused spire, and getting rewarded with another painful shock. "Ow." I winced, then glared at the display, turned, and looked at the other door. That tram was already here. "What's in the Astrostable?"

"Dunno," Rampage replied with a shrug. "The blanks that helped build this place, I think. Cogs said she was sending a couple Harbingers to watch the place in case you tried to get in that way."

I grunted. Probable trap or possible ambush? I consulted P-21 and Scotch Tape, but they both gave shrugs of indifference. "Let's go through the Astrostable," I said as I watched the icon creep along above. "Scotch, can you rig that button to send the tram back when it gets here? Try and confuse her."

"So there's a way from the Astrostable to the Palace?" P-21 asked Rampage.

She shrugged. "Pretty sure. Those Harbingers weren't wearing space suits when they left."

"Rig it," I told Scotch Tape, then went and tapped the button to the other tram. The door hissed open, revealing a ten by twenty foot glass box with elegant polished aluminum filigree in a vaguely lunar motif on more or less every surface. Couches were arranged along the walls with a bench in the middle that seemed ideal for

setting Sexy down for a good seeing to. Rampage had scratched up her finish badly, and I couldn't help but shoot the striped mare a reproachful look as I tried to buff it out.

Two minutes later, Scotch Tape trotted in and pushed a button, and the door closed. There was a tiny lurch, and the glass cart began to roll along the elevated track. The speakers crackled, and light classical music began to play. The four of us shared a look, as if not sure if we should laugh or shudder.

The tram certainly wasn't the epitome of high speed rail, but it soon became clear why the terminal had been built out in the open flat. As we travelled, the shining dusty plains became increasingly studded by larger and larger boulders. Milky crystals the size of houses began to jut up around the track. They only grew larger as the terminal shrank into the background, rising like great shining towers. The atmospheric classical was drowned out by a ghostly choir singing sublime ethereal notes in my mind. It brought forth memories of my friends together in Star House. When I paid more attention, the song faded.

"Look at the size of those things," Scotch Tape said, gawking as we moved past crystals the size of apartment buildings. The shimmery white stone had an opalescence to it, with rainbow colors crawling along the facets.

"Eh, they're rocks," Rampage scoffed dismissively.

I turned my head and studied the display over the door, which showed the rocket icon, a studded line, and a pyramid; the tramlike icon was creeping along what seemed horribly slowly. The tram had just reached the first stud on the line after three minutes. "How long is this going to take?"

"I dunno," Rampage shrugged. "Other one was like half an hour."

"Right," I said. There was one thing this called for! I pulled out the battered Perceptitron.

"Blackjack, are you sure you should be using that thing?" Scotch asked as she eyed the poor battered device. It sure had had a rough trip with me. Some of the talismans were chipped, and the wires were split and frayed.

"I need to know what's going on back home. Unless somepony can speed this thing up?" I asked, gesturing at the tram with a hoof, looking from one to the next. "No? Then I might as well use the time productively!"

"But you've been using that an awful lot today," P-21 warned. "Maybe you should just take it easy. The state that thing is in, it'll probably give you brain damage."

“No, I’m... won’t!” I frowned at their various skeptical expressions. “Look, I can take it easy tomorrow. Right now, I have to know,” I said stubbornly as I jammed it onto my head, entered in Goldenblood’s tag, and the world—

Exploded.

I screamed as I flopped to the floor of the tram as fireworks went off from my horn, talismans popped and sizzled, and somepony started setting off balefire eggs inside my skull. Lights and voices blasted through my head as I took in images of a half dozen different ponies all at once. P-21 and Scotch Tape grabbed me, but that only made things worse as I gibbered, screamed, and thrashed in their grasp. I could see myself through both their eyes even as I saw so many other things. Finally Rampage did what she did best: she ripped the helmet off my head and stomped it repeatedly till the light show ended.

I rolled limply onto my side, my horn feeling... either numb from shock or tingly from a million different sensations. Or both. “What was that?” Rampage asked.

“Too much arcane device usage,” P-21 said tersely. “Getting her horn chewed on. Using too much magic that last fight. Covering her horn in moonstone. All of the above? Take your pick.” His voice echoed oddly, like it was sloshing around to the left and right inside my skull. “Are you alright, Blackjack?”

“Med-X,” I barely whispered. Just talking made it feel like Rampage was still chomping on my horn. I tried opening my eyes, but what I saw was just wrong. It was as if I were looking at a dozen different images overlapping, each one slightly out of synch with the next. At least I could stop the distorted visions by clenching my eyes shut. The voices whispering in my ears were a different matter. They churned inside me, each one jockeying over the next.

“... sure that they’re broadcasting outside the Hoof?” Homage whispered in my ears. “To whom? Why?”

“No idea,” Windsheer replied. “The Enclave? Tenpony? The Cathedral? Your Lightbringer? Why would the Legate want everypony to see boring footage of the Core? There’s nothing happening there. Ignore it. We’ve got more important things to focus on.”

“They’re coming again!” one of the cyberpegasi shouted as the words faded away.

The prick of the Med-X cut the pain immediately, and I relaxed. “Ooo, I really didn’t need this right now.” I could hear gunshots and shouts, but I had no clue who or what they belonged to. Somepony was screaming to run. Xanthe? I opened my eyes and

looked up at the twitching images of my friends along with shadowy flickers behind them.

“She’s bleeding out her ears and nose,” Rampage said, curling her lip as if she found my weakness disturbing. “What the hell happened, Blackjack?” I wanted to answer, but as I lifted my head to do so, everything lurched and I gagged, then gave several dry heaves. The agony in my skull exploded anew, which only made me want to throw up more. Finally I just collapsed. “Oh, we are fucked,” Rampage muttered.

“No, we’re not. We talked about this. Scotch Tape and I will find some way to disable Horizons. Rampage, you can keep Cognitum busy,” P-21 said evenly.

“Great. She’s going to use her übercorn powers to punt me to the sun, I just know it,” Rampage muttered.

“Look on the bright side,” Scotch tape said sarcastically as she put a healing potion to my lips. “That might kill you.” I had to sip it carefully. What did it say about me that I was so experienced with pain that I knew how to manage this?

“Hey, yeah! That is a good point. I mean, I tried attacking her once or twice before, but my heart really wasn’t in it,” Rampage said eagerly. “I bet if I *really* try to kill her, she’ll end me properly.”

“Just. . . let me lie here for a while,” I muttered. I’d pushed too hard. Tried too much. Now I had to deal with the consequences.

And the consequences, at this moment, were listening to a distant orchestra of horror composed of screams, gunshots, and explosions. The indistinct mumbling rose and fell like waves, sometimes merging into crushing unity that made me want to scream as it felt as if the silent, terrible weight of the whispers would blow my head apart. Then sliding out of synchronicity so that I could hear that soothing song of the moon and pick out individual voices.

“. . . don’t like it! His tactics are changing. Becoming less general and more focused. He’s mimicking our own strategy with the purple alicorns now. We barely pulled back from 99 before that group cut them off!” Storm Chaser said in my ears.

“So it’s getting difficult. Adapt. Overcome. That’s what life does,” Goldenblood rasped. “Meatlocker is in the process of being overrun. Do the ghouls have a line of retreat?”

“We’ve got a tunnel secured. Hopefully the ferals in there won’t bother them,” Storm Chaser said as there were sounds of trotting and a distant chatter of gunfire. “We’re moving everypony in the east into the department stores around Fallen Arch, from

the Collegiate to the old Boom refinery. Some scavengers bridged the gap into the Core. There're a lot of ponies wanting to go in. . . ”

“No. Stop that at all costs,” Goldenblood said sharply. “I don’t know what’s happening with that place, but I know it’s a trap. Nothing good comes from there. I know. I helped build it.”

The voices started to slide beneath the others, but Storm Chaser shouted, “Look out!”

I cracked my eyes open, catching a half dozen different scenes, but aside from a flash of stripes, I couldn’t see any sign of whatever she yelled about. Instead, I saw Sagittarius blasting at a Brood tank rolling along the inside of a flooded underground garage, smashing over equipment and steamrolling over machinery and through great sheets of water. Behind it, on a raised platform, a dozen Brood laid out a raking fire at the power-armored Aries. The red-armored pony unleashed a torrent of flame. Her armor flaked away like bloody snow as they poured bullets back on the mare.

Suddenly, one side of the platform exploded, making the defenders lurch as a pink pony shape streaked through the foaming water. A chartreuse pony lunged up, locked her hooves around the neck of one of the staggered shooters, and pulled it off the crumpling platform and into the churning flood water. A white unicorn who’d tattooed her left side in electric blue tribal marks stood on a table as lightning and ice blasted from her horn in two matching arcs, slamming into a golden tree as she laughed.

A half dozen battlefields swirled past my eyes, my ears roaring with a never-ending torrent of shouts, gunshots, and explosions. I struggled to focus on any one of them, but they kept melting away with every passing moment. My perception caught on certain scenes, though, and I struggled to latch onto them before I was yanked to some other.

I succeeded with an image of Toaster blazing like a comet as they struggled through a burning armory. No matter how much I might hate him, I had to admit that he was good at what he did. The scarred stallion burned a hole through the Brood defenders as Brutus and Hammersmith followed him. They were pushing their way towards the golden tree at the far side of the long room. It seemed as if its production had been ramped up, and it now popped out half-formed Brood that just tumbled into the converter, which was working double-time putting out malformed things that swarmed into the Reapers like a bloody tide. The malformed zebras piled on,

and when beaten or battered aside, they simply hauled themselves back up again. I watched with horror as Hammersmith bashed one to the left, Brutus slammed one to the right, and they crushed a third between them. The bodies collapsed on top of one another, merged together, and sprang upon Brutus as a three-headed, six-legged profanity of flesh. Some of them had anatomy that no zebra or pony possessed: eagle claws, lion paws, and snake tails.

The sheer monstrous mass pushed the Reapers back foot by foot. Even the blazing form of Toaster disappeared beneath cooking striped carcasses that refused to die. I clenched my eyes shut, but that just brought the voices back in force. I heard heavy breathing and the close rattle of gunfire. “We need to go,” Splendid said in serious tones.

“Go?” Grace replied. “Where do you expect to flee to, Brother?”

“Some of these alicorns have enough sense to know a good deal when it’s offered. I’ve arranged three of them to teleport us to safety. We have more than enough money to purchase a place at Tenpony for the foreseeable future,” Splendid said in calm, reasonable tones.

There was no answer for several seconds. I struggled to focus on that silence over the babble that threatened to spill forward. “It’s time we left. There’s nothing more we can do here, Grace,” he said, his voice growing softer and lower. “We’ve done all we can. It’s only a matter of time before the fighting reaches Elysium. Father wouldn’t want us to die here.”

There was a terribly long pause and then the sounds of hooves on marble. “Where are you going?!” Splendid shouted in alarm. “Grace!”

Then I heard, almost like a whisper, “*I will be the lady Father wanted me to be. I will be the noble that I’ve always pretended to be. But Goddesses, I am so scared. So terribly scared. But I can’t run. I will be the pony I must be. For Father. For the Society. For my people.*”

“Goodbye, Brother. Be sure to give Charm my love when you take her with you. I believe Tenpony will be a wonderful place for her to recover,” Grace said calmly, with no animosity or bitterness. *Take care of her, Brother.*

“Grace? Grace!” Splendid shouted after her, his voice growing fainter and fainter as the sounds of gunfire rose. A door creaked open, and the noise spiked.

“Ma’am? What are you doing out here?” a stallion asked, surprise clear in his tone. “I thought. . . well. . . aren’t you...?”

You thought I was going to run. To take care of myself. To abandon you... all of you... because that's what aristocrats do.

Grace responded primly, "Queen Blackjack appointed me regent of the Society. It would be improper for me to flee while it was still being contested. Somepony should have the good grace to stand with you at this hour of need. Now, if you please, good sir, could you explain how one goes about using this thing?" There was a gunshot and a yelp. "Oh, my! Are you alright?" she gasped in alarm.

"Never... better... ma'am..." the stallion grunted with pain. "First... please put the gun down... ma'am... and pass me a potion, please?"

The din of battle faded away to a dull roar, the hum of the tram's engines growing. I cracked an eye open. In the periphery of my vision, flickers and images danced about, but I stayed focused on Rampage, P-21, and Scotch Tape over by the door. My head had a woozy, numb sensation, as if it were wrapped in layers of cloth.

The tram was now moving through mountains of moonstone that loomed like colossal tombstones over the track, jutting out at sharp angles overhead. To one side, towards the massive chasm, the pure white was tainted by streaks of dark purple, blue, and black. I could barely make out a low structure ahead of us, the top of the terrace built into the edge of the ravine.

"I can make the tram take her back to the terminal, and stay there. She can't fight like this," Scotch Tape insisted, pointing a hoof at me as she glared up at her father.

"Oh yeah. Watch this," I slurred a little as I pushed myself to my hooves. All three watched with some alarm as I swayed. "Tadaa..."

P-21 and Scotch rushed to me, keeping me up. "Goddesses... what did you do to yourself, Blackjack?"

"What I always do," I muttered. "Now, I need to go kick... butt..."

"You need to go back to the rocket and let us do this," P-21 argued.

"No," Rampage suddenly contradicted with a scowl. "We need to get her to the Astrostable, stat."

"What are you talking about?" P-21 snapped.

Rampage stared into my eyes. "Blackjack, do you have any numbness, weakness, or paralysis? Blurred vision? Headache?" I made a muttered yes-ish noise to each. Rampage looked at the other two. "I think she's having a hemorrhagic stroke, or something very similar to one."

"A stroke? P-21 gives a great stroke," I said with a giggle, feeling a little drunk as I slumped against him, still bleeding out my nose and ear.

Rampage shoved a healing potion in my mouth, and I chugged it reflexively. That allowed the pain to abate a little, but I still didn't feel any better. "How do you know?"

"Six years of medical school and two years of residency," Rampage replied as she stared at me. "My field may be psychology, but I know severe red flags when I see them. We need to get her to the stable's medical station at once. Hopefully they'll have something more substantial than just restoratives."

"Doctor Octopus?" P-21 asked.

"Unless there's another medical specialist inside Miss Peppermint here, yes," she said tersely. "It's been an absolutely lousy few days for everyone concerned."

"You've been aware of what's going on?" Scotch Tape asked, a touch warily.

"Yes. It'd been rather difficult to maintain focus and push through the Angel's interference, but now that she's gone and dear Peppermint's back, I can address this. Drink another restorative draught," Rampage said as she put another potion to my lips. It barely made a dent in the pain. "I remember this happening to M.A.S. researchers pushing themselves too hard to meet a deadline. Burnout is a safety measure to prevent more severe damage to the unicorn. Some unicorns would try and push through burnout with talismans or drugs. The results were never pretty."

"Wasn't pushing past burnout. . ." I muttered.

"No, you were just using a highly experimental device too much with an injured horn while coated with highly magically sensitive moon dust. Completely different," he replied with soft sarcasm. "Also. . ." She suddenly leaned in and hugged me closely, but with care. "Thank you, Blackjack. Thank you, thank you, thank you," she whispered in my ear.

"Twist?" I murmured.

"I never meant to hurt my baby. I only wanted her to live. To be happy. I didn't realize what was truly inside this talisman. The ghosts trapped inside," she said with a snotty sniff. "I thought she could have a happy life. That's all I wanted. Please. Please tell her that," she begged me as she pulled back, weeping.

"Why are they all coming out now?" P-21 asked.

Rampage wiped her eyes, still holding me gingerly. Her tone returned to that of the doctor. "The Angel saw Cognitum as the best way to end the pain of the Wasteland.

Even better if the Legate was right. Her desire was so great, she stood between Peppermint and the rest of us. The shock of knowing the truth and the mental attack Blackjack made on the Angel broke her interference.”

“You weren’t fighting right,” I muttered weakly. “No special combat fighting things.”

She gave me another potion. How many did we have left? I’m glad P-21 had insisted we load up on them. “It doesn’t help that I remember things now too,” Rampage muttered. “Now that all these ghosts are woken up and... ugh...” She rubbed her face with a hoof. “I can feel Mom inside me. And Momma Shujaa... and... now I can’t really stop feeling them. And Mom wants me happy and Razor wants me to stop whining and... I’m not sure if I’m more me or less me than I was before you shoved that shit back in my head, Blackjack.”

She was flowing more easily from one person to the next. I would have considered that an improvement, except that I couldn’t really talk right. “S’rie,” I muttered, but I wasn’t sure if I’d meant to say ‘sorry’ or ‘all right’.

The tram reached the station. Past the end of the tracks and the edge of the cliff, I could see that the chasm was studded with more and more moonstone monoliths. The further down I looked, the darker the crystals were. On the floor of the chasm was an immense domed structure that glowed with a prismatic aura. A second inclined lift rose from that building far below to the base of this structure. “Come on, Blackjack. If it’s got the word ‘stable’ in it, then it has a medical bay,” P-21 said as he helped support me.

The door to the tram opened up into a foyer with a familiar immense rolling door in the far wall. Scotch Tape helped me drink another healing potion as Rampage hit the tab on the console. The lights began to flash as the klaxon sounded. The door behind us sealed shut, and then the huge round door slid away from us and rolled to the side. I wanted to hold Vigilance in my mouth, if only to shoot something in the direction of trouble. I wanted to be ready for anything.

But I wasn’t ready for the sight of fifty white ponies in party hats facing us with bright star-filled eyes, grinning happily and shouting in unison, “Welcome to the moon, Princess Luna!” As horns were blown and plumes of glittery paper fluttered into the air, I decided to get to the bottom of this mystery in the most effective and efficient method possible: I collapsed and passed out on the floor of the Astrostable.

The problem was that I wasn’t really unconscious as I lay there, because my brain

continued to work. It just wasn't working well. Whatever I'd done to myself had been a doozy, and my mind kept swishing round to things that just. . . well. . . didn't make much sense.

I saw General Storm Chaser and a squad of Enclave pegasi fighting against the Legate in the Skyport. He moved from one power-armored pegasus to the next like a force of nature, his hooves crushing, smashing, and tearing everything they came in contact with. Repeatedly their energy weapons struck him, but as quickly as bits of him were disintegrated or decayed into magical goop, the mass twisted in upon itself and reformed his striped body. Incinerated dust simply swirled back in and reassembled itself. At the edge of the battle, Goldenblood lay on his side, his legs smashed beneath him and his horn cracked off, trying to drag his broken body away from the fighting.

Then something finally made the Legate slow down: the terminal's dusty windows burst inward in a shower of glass and windblown rain, and magic shields shimmered into being between the zebra and his targets. Velvet Remedy and a dozen alicorns had come to the rescue. The shields exploded like crystal bubbles with every strike of his hooves, the alicorns grimacing when their magic was shattered, but they popped back as quickly as they were destroyed. As he turned towards Velvet with a half-grin, half-snarl on his face, her horn glowed, and somehow, then even he was staggering about as if in a drunken stupor. Now why didn't I have that spell?

But as I watched, the scene blurred and transformed to that of Ironmare Naval Base, the capsized remains of the H.M.S. *Celestia* visible as a dark shadow beside the pier. A rusted cargo ship with the name 'Applejack' spraypainted on the flaking hull and the Applejack's Rangers' flag flying was moored with a stream of desperate refugees rushing to board. Behind them, a zebra tank rolled towards the shore, Steel Rangers firing volley after volley at the war machine as it crawled into firing position. All around me, ponies screamed and pushed, a few being shoved into the foaming waters.

The turrets belched smoke, and the sea near the *Applejack*'s stern kicked up two great jets of water. The froth didn't die down, though, the disturbance from the tank shells replaced with that from the ship as, unseen beneath the surface, the propellers spun to life. The ship began to crawl away from the pier, the gangplanks starting to turn and tilt and make the frantic ponies on them shove and shout even harder to be the last aboard. Whatever pony I was in skidded to a stop at the edge of the concrete as the gangplank dropped into the water before them and was lost between the hull and pier, a few ponies going with it. The despairing, crying ponies

behind didn't stop, though, and their press sent the pony I was in into the salty ocean as the *Applejack*, laden with hundreds of lucky refugees, moved away from the end of the pier. Then the forecastle of the ship exploded in flame and shrapnel as the tank struck home.

Then from out of the smoke coiling over the waves shot a lean, blackened boat skimming across the water. The *Seahorse*, scorched and battered but not yet sunk, sliced towards the shore and came around in a hard crashing slew that sent a wave from one side of its stern and a water jet from the other. From an improvised turret atop the cabin, a grenade machine gun began its rapid bark, the fire flashing off the tank and shrouding it in smoke so that its next shots only fountained up beside the *Applejack*'s hull. Machine gun fire chattered, both tank and Brood infantry firing on the annoying mosquito of a patrol boat as it launched a salvo of grenades into the infantry and then rocketed away across the water, dodging wildly.

A glow covered my body, and I was lifted from the cold water by a unicorn in some sort of fancy robes. Then I was stumbling back along the pier as Steel Rangers escorted those who hadn't made it to the ship towards the hulking remains of the naval station. "Get clear! Get clear!" a Ranger in power armor bellowed. "Move, you sorry gits! South! Get south! Move!"

"For Applejack!" cried others as they hurried towards defensible positions between the helpless and the advancing enemy; on the water, the *Seahorse* was coming around for another pass and showering the Brood with a rain of explosives. On land, the tank growled forward, turret lights moving in the smoke cloud as the guns tracked a new target.

I tried to see what happened next, but I couldn't hold onto it. My perception just swirled to another scene, the sea and refugees melting like wax and reforming into dingy walls and wounded people. Triage walked down a hall in the Collegiate, puffing hard on the cigarette as she snapped, "I don't care! It's a choice between saving a hundred lives now or maybe... *maybe* saving one life!"

A flash of white wing and golden mane, and the stunningly beautiful Morningstar landed in her path. "One life! One life?! How can you say that?! That one life is worth a thousand of the people you're wasting it on!"

"Those people are *my* people!" Triage shouted at her. "And that machine is my machine! And the call is mine, not yours! I'm not going to pull the plug and let you fiddle with the rejuvenation pod in the middle of this battle. Right now, that machine is the only reason we're losing hooffuls and not scores!"

"The science will work! The theory is sound, whether you understand it or not!" Morningstar screamed at her.

"And if the Hoof wasn't on fire right now, I'd be fully behind the peer review process but your timing is shit!" Triage snapped back. Ponies ran by, adamantly not looking at the pair. Many dragged stretchers behind them. Wounded cried out on old gurneys while ponies tried desperately to help them. "Every minute that machine's not working, ponies die! My ponies! Ponies we need. I'm not going to take the pod offline for a science experiment you're not even sure is going to work!"

"It will work! The wing was proof! Science can do anything!" Morningstar bellowed in her face. "What would Blackjack say if she knew how you were letting—"

Triage's horn glowed, and a clipboard slapped hard across Morningstar's face. The stunned pegasus shook her head, and the clipboard swung back and struck her again. It was enough force to send her crashing to the floor with a nosebleed. Triage glared down at her and blew a plume of smoke. "Either she'd say a thousand lives are worth more than one, or I don't give a shit what she'd say. Now get out of my way and get out of the Collegiate. I have to save all the lives I can before we all die."

I wanted to hold onto that. Maybe Morningstar would say more, but things were sliding away. I saw... was it Xanthe, Sagittarius, or Candlewick's battle? Maybe it was all three. I wanted to simultaneously charge forward and help all of them at once and cringe away from the sight of the fighting that I was helpless to end.

As if in response to half of my desire, I felt those horrible, violent visions fade away to be replaced by a faint glow beneath me and a comforting darkness above and around. The glow was peaceful and calm, a blue-white illumination that drove the pain away bit by bit. It felt familiar... The same sensation I'd felt while laying on the dust outside the terminal. Sympathetic in understanding. Compassionate towards my suffering and the suffering I witnessed.

"Who are you?" I spoke at into the glow.

"A friend who has come a long way," the illumination responded gently.

"Can you help me? I hurt myself. Badly, I think," I whimpered, feeling the sensation of being held.

"No. No more than I already am. I'm sorry," the voice said in soft sincerity.

"That's okay," I murmured, imagining I was nuzzling into Mom's embrace. "I need to go back, don't I?" The thought filled me with dread, and I heard the distant echo of

battles growing.

“Maybe. Maybe not. I cannot tell. I know that this must end, though. One way, or another.”

“I want to live,” I whimpered, daring to look more directly at the massive ghostly white pony shape holding me. “I don’t want to die. I want to fix things with Glory. I want a family with babies. I want to help Rampage get better. I want so many things now!” I sniffed and smiled. “Is that so wrong? To want to live?”

“No. But life is not easy. It struggles. Day by day, it struggles. How you face that struggle gives meaning to your life. It is only when things are at their darkest that you find your greatest strength. Life for life’s sake is not always enough. It is *meaning* that makes you greater than you are, and sometimes that meaning is greater than life itself.”

“It’s not fair,” I muttered, saying the dumbest and most immature thing a pony could.

“No. It’s not. Not unless you make it so,” the glowing pony replied.

“I don’t want to pay that price,” I whispered.

“Pity the few that do,” it answered. “Pity more those who fear death and loss. Who hold life and the lives of other in contempt. Who have nothing to offer others but bile and vitriol and hate. They have made their lives a torment, and remain living only to inflict that torment on others. They have no other meaning.”

“Like the Eater. And the Legate,” I added. “And Cognitum. You think I should pity them?”

“Don’t you?” the glowing eyes stared down at me curiously.

I closed my eyes. It would have been easier to hate my enemies, but I really didn’t. There hadn’t ever been one where I’d been glad they were dead. Well... maybe Steel Rain... but just because he’d been such an ass. “I guess. I just wish... I wish so many things could be different.”

“Wishing is a start, but if you want them different, you must make them so,” it said softly. “And to do that...”

“I have to wake up...” I said to it with a regretful smile, and did so.

I woke up on a table, lying on my side, my head hurting but feeling a little better.

A green light poured down on me from a moonstone talisman mounted on a flexible swivel arm hanging from the ceiling. I heard Scotch Tape's voice from nearby. "...guys are the descendants of ponies who said 'buck it' in the last month after Goldenblood got the boot and snuck off Equestria and into this lunar stable?"

"Some of us are," a stallion's voice replied calmly. "Liaison Sapphire knew the O.I.A. was conducting regular launches transporting Flux to the Lunar Palace. She started sending members of the M.o.A. and O.I.A. that she trusted up here with each launch. She was our first overmare, too. She thought it was a terrible waste of a stable to just give it to blanks. Oddly, though, with enough time they stopped acting quite like mere blanks, even when the implants were off and they were supposed to be in a rest state. They became almost like normal ponies. You saw how they celebrated 'Princess Luna's' arrival."

"And nopony knew?" P-21 asked.

"I think, towards the end, that everything was such a mess that nopony knew precisely what was going on. Horse was in the process of purging the O.I.A. When Luna had Goldenblood arrested, that was when Sapphire thought it'd be best to leave. Of course, we all figured that Luna would come up here sooner or later, one way or another, so we might as well be friendly when she did. I have to admit, we rather thought it would be sooner."

"And so you guys just stay up here and... do what?" Rampage asked with a snort. "Spend all day wigged-out on moon dust?"

The doctor scrunched up his face evasively. "No! That's... rarely happens. Besides, the day-to-day maintenance of the stable takes a great deal of work. And there's meditation and philosophical discussions as well. Others enjoy astronomy, art, poetry, and monitoring signals from the stars or Equus," the stallion replied. I took a risk and twisted to look in the direction they spoke from. I might as well have been in Stable 99's medical bay, only everything was extremely clean and shiny. The air had a strange acrid tang to it that was a little unpleasant. The motion gave me a little bit of a headache, but far less than I'd experienced earlier.

"I've said it before. Stable ponies are just frigging weird, whether they're in the ground or on the moon," Rampage said with a shake of her head.

The stallion they talked to wore a medical coat and reminded me of nothing so much as a male Boo. His mane and hide were both pale pink, and he had eyes that seemed to glow faintly with stars.

“So. . . I gotta ask, Doc Comet. When’s the next scheduled orgy?” Rampage asked, looking around as if expecting group sex to break out at any moment. “Come on. If this place is based on 99, it’s got to have something perverted going on.”

The stallion leaned away from her. “Uh, I just met you, so no. Thank you, but. . . no.”

Rampage pursed her lips, then shrugged. “Eh. Probably for the best. I’m only a filly, anyway, so it’d be sick and wrong.” She trotted away, casually fishing a tin of Mint-als out of her armor and shaking a mouthful into her mouth, munching them like they were candy. The white stallion looked at the other two, mouth working silently in bafflement, but they just shook their heads.

“We should get going,” P-21 said as they started for the door.

“Wait!” I groaned, half climbing and half falling off the table. “Wait. I’m coming.”

“I thought she was out!” Scotch Tape hissed. “Wasn’t she drugged?”

“Yeah. Blackjack doesn’t really do the whole ‘out for the count’ thing,” Rampage said with a sigh and a shake of her head over by the door.

The doctor trotted to me and shone a light into both of my eyes. From his frown, I got the impression I’d done something wrong. “How are you feeling?”

A very good question. The screwdriver was out of my horn, and I could move my head without a little ball of agony searing my brain. There were still flickers in the periphery of my vision, but I could ignore the whispers. “Better. What happened to me? Have I been here long? Did Horizons fire?”

The white stallion consulted a clipboard. “Hemorrhagic aneurism of your temporal and visual cortex. Good thing your friend had you slugging down restoratives like crazy. You were slowly bleeding into your brain. The rejuvenation talisman stopped the bleeding, but you’re looking at some scarring, plus complications from acute moonstone poisoning.” He paused and then squinted at me a little skeptically. “Did you *actually* go rolling around in the stuff?”

“Something like that,” I muttered, working my mouth. “Is that bad? My tongue feels numb.”

“Your tongue?” He arched a brow. “No. That’s just an effect of hard vacuum. Moonstone poisoning. . . well. . .” he coughed and stared into my eyes. “Are you hearing singing? Seeing time dilation? Uncontrollable extrasensory perception?”

I stared at him silently for a few seconds. “Maybe?”

“Yeah. That usually takes a few years of exposure to small amounts. From what your friends told me. . .” He consulted the clipboard. “You rolled around in the stuff, then did radical and uncontrolled mind magic, then used an experimental extrasensory perception device. I’m shocked your head didn’t explode.” He sighed and set the clipboard away. “Anyway. You’re talking coherently and not bleeding out the nose and ears anymore, so I suppose that’s as close to a clean bill of health as I can give. Normally I’d be bundling you up in a corner to bliss out among the stars while sticking you under that talisman for a few more hours.”

“As for Horizons,” P-21 broke in firmly, “no. It hasn’t. We’re going now. And you’re staying here.”

“Nope! I don’t—” I tried hopping off the table but tripped over my hooves and tumbled to the floor, landing on my head. The impact gave me a dozen flashes from places that were decidedly not my head. “Ow!” I groaned as little stars shot across my vision. “We’re not splitting up.”

“She really is that bad,” the doctor remarked. “I mean, from what you told me. . . she just had multiple microstrokes, and she wants to go fight?”

“Yep,” Rampage said. “Tie her up and give her a good dicking. She likes that.”

“No time for quickies now!” I waved a hoof at all twelve-ish of them. “I am not getting left behind. I’m coming with all of you and that is that.”

“Blackjack, you’ve had a stroke,” P-21 explained as I rose to my hooves.

“It’s not the first time I’ve fought with brain damage!” I said as I swayed and thumped against one of the tables. “I have to go. The big glowy pony of light said so.” I rubbed my temple and then noticed the incredulous looks on their faces. “What? You’re doubting I’m seeing things now?”

“Not with eyes like that,” Scotch Tape said as she pointed at a polished bulkhead. I stared at my own reflection and was immediately taken by the sight of hundreds of motes of light swirling in my eyes. I couldn’t see them in my vision, but they gave my eyes a faint luminescent glow like Snails had.

“Well. . . fuck. . .” I muttered at my own reflection. “My eyes glow. Again.”

P-21 simply nodded. “Yep.”

“...kay. Well... it’s not the first time. Still going,” I declared, marching forward, a picture of resolution.

“Not the first...” the doctor said weakly.

Scotch tape shook her head. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

"Yup. Doesn't matter. I'm marching right out this door and kicking her—"

"That's the supply closet," P-21 informed me gently.

I blinked at the door. "Right. I knew that." And turned to the other door on the far side of Medical.

"I can drug her," the doctor said, and I felt a little stab of fear that I might actually have to fight my friends on this.

"No. She'd get a spoon and defeat you. She's tricky like that," Rampage said with a sigh. I tripped over my own hooves and faceplanted into the floor in front of everypony... again. "Very tricky," Rampage repeated, solemnly.

"We don't have time for this," P-21 said as he trotted to me and helped me to my hooves. "Are you okay?" he asked as he lifted my face and stared into my eyes. I could see the glow reflected off his irises. "I mean *really* okay, Blackjack?" *Just tell me what you need.*

I gazed at him for what felt like forever, and licked my lips nervously. "I have to go," I whispered softly. "I can't stay here while you face her," I told him, trying to keep my head together as images flickered in my vision. "I can't stay here and see... what I'm seeing... and do nothing... I'll go mad," I whispered, trying to keep my fear as calm as I could.

P-21 returned my stare equally as long, then smiled and gave a little nod. "Okay." He straightened and looked at the others. "She's coming. Let's go."

"Daddy... sometimes, I think when it comes to Blackjack, you don't think so good," Scotch Tape grumped, then asked the doctor. "Is moonstone poisoning fatal?"

"Not in and of itself. Severe cases usually incapacitate the victim. It takes a long while to work out of the system, though," he said with a more concerned frown. "And you really shouldn't be fighting with a case as severe as yours."

"You, Triage, and Rover should write a book: dumb patients fighting when they shouldn't," I said as I took a seat and breathed hard. Then I regarded the doctor and gave him a sincere smile. "Thank you for helping me, Doctor. I mean it. And I don't think I got your name."

"Comet. Doctor Comet," he said with a small smile in return. Then he sighed and rose to his hooves. "Well, I guess I'll walk you to the tram down to the Palace. If you relapse, I'll be nearby."

Together, we walked out of Medical and into... 99, as it should have been. Stepping out into the hall, I was hit by a wave of nostalgia. There was a drinking fountain, right where it would have been in 99. Down there was a bathroom. In the other direction, a sign pointing to the atrium. Unlike 99, there'd been no Incident here. Stallions and mares walked past in stable barding with 'LA' on the collars talking excitedly of Equus being able to support spaceflight again. The blanks were harder to notice here, even with their white manes and eyes, as they followed along and nodded to conversations. The lights were steady, the air clean with the faint ozone tang.

"I know. Freaky, isn't it?" Scotch Tape said as she walked next to me. "I actually walked into some stranger's home thinking it was my quarters in 99. And they have similar recycler systems." Trust her to check that. One thing that was definitely different, though, were the clouds of mechasprites flying in little swarms overhead. I saw them dive into a trashcan, and, after some fearful chewing, fly out carrying small rods of aluminum and iron and a lump of carbon. "That's new, though."

"Hey! Do you eat your own poop and dead?" Rampage asked Comet.

He furrowed his brows. "We try not to think about it like that."

I laughed. It was like coming home... even if it was nothing like coming home. "I hear ya. Has Cognitum come here?" Our passage drew all sorts of odd looks from pale-colored ponies who kept their distance but seemed to regard us as welcome curiosities. Only a few had the starry eyed gaze that I did, and none were as bright as mine. I wished that I had more time to meet them and find out more about life on the moon.

"You mean the princess? No. Not that it was that surprising. It makes sense she'd see to the Palace first. And our ancestors did flee here to escape her law at the end of things. Hopefully she's pleased by all the hard work that's gone into the Lunar Palace." He grew worried. "Of course, we've gotten alerts from the Palace security system since she arrived, but we're not involved in defense of the Palace."

"What is, then?" I asked as we walked.

"Robots," Rampage said with a yawn. "Turrets. Mechasprites. Pretty straightforward, actually. She's got enough firepower to get through it all eventually. I'm surprised the pair she sent over here haven't caused trouble."

"Oh, them?" the doctor said with a smile. "Yes, they were very assertive when they arrived. Made some rude and threatening declarations. It's a wonder how some moonstone and Med-X can pacify certain aggressive individuals, though. Hopefully

the Princess can sort out the confusion when she arrives.”

That sorting might involve body parts if Cognitum was in a bad mood. “Do you know about Horizons?” I asked.

“Project Horizons? Yes. It was Goldenblood’s plan to restore Equestria by sending a magically infused moonstone to a certain location on the surface. I don’t know the details personally, but I’m sure the Overstallion could explain it better,” Doctor Comet said with another smile. I was sure he couldn’t. Still, I couldn’t miss the wistful look on P-21’s face. I could easily imagine him here as a teacher. Or husband. I glanced back at his flank, where red and silver peeked through the flakes of blue.

“Not a bad stable, huh?” I said to him as we walked towards the steps to the utility sections. On the way, we trotted past something else 99 hadn’t had: windows! How freaky was that? They looked out into the crystal-lined chasm in the moonscape.

“Will it be okay if Horizons fires?” he asked.

Oh, that was something I didn’t want to think about! A stable full of good ponies, and. . . “Just more reason to hur—”

The hallway exploded before me, the tank rolling through the smoke and flames, treads churning up oil-slicked water. I raised my hooves and screamed as the crushing treads rolled over me.

Then I was aware of ponies holding and shaking me. “—bad idea!” the doctor was saying. “We’ve got to get her back to medical!”

“No! No. I’m fine,” I said, shivering, sure that somewhere, somepony definitely wasn’t. I picked myself up to my hooves. “Just a reason to finish this sooner than later. People need us back on Equus.” I shoved my way out of their hooves so they couldn’t drag me back.

We didn’t chat again as we went down and down, reaching the reactor level and then a sign that read ‘To Lunar Palace’. Trotting towards the tram doors, I tried to ignore the sounds of gunfire. It was all in my head. All in my head. . .

Wasn’t it?

The tram doors slid open, and a pair of ponies in combat armor came into view. One levitated a disintegration rifle. The other wore a battle saddle with two miniguns. I blinked, not sure if they were Brood or not. Then Rampage dove atop me as the miniguns opened up with streams of lead. “Ow! Ow! Ow!” she hissed as the metal deflected wildly off her plate armor, bouncing every which way in a flurry of glowing

shrapnel.

P-21 immediately sent a grenade flying towards the pair, but the unicorn with the disintegration rifle raised a shield of shimmery green magic just in time for the explosive to detonate outside it and blast back at us. More shrapnel flew around us, biting hide wherever it could penetrate. P-21's eyes blazed with rage at the indignity of eating his own grenade. Rampage lunged off me, racing towards the door as the smoke cleared to show the field still intact. Then two small holes formed in the wall of magic, and a rain of bullets poured through them and pushed Rampage back on the concrete floor.

I tele— Correction, I faceplanted into the ground as my horn sparked wildly and went dead. Worse, I suddenly had images of three cyberpegasi fighting hoof to hoof against Brood soldiers while Homage and Windsheer worked furiously on terminals. No! Focus! I looked past Rampage's legs as the unicorn created a third hole, lifting her rifle to point back down the hall at us.

Biting down on Vigilance with my mouth, my cheek pressed against the ground, I saw the force field flickering where it met the floor. I dropped into S.A.T.S. and targeted four armor piercing shots at her front left hoof. Two splashed against the field, but two ripped through and right into her forehoof. The mare cried out, faltering as blood spurted from her crippled hoof. She started to pull back, cradling it, and closed the hole she'd opened to fire through.

But not before Persuasion sent a grenade soaring through it.

The explosion flattened both ponies, the field popping like a bubble as the mare was slammed to the left and the minigun-armed stallion to the ground. He managed to get to his feet for all of a second before Rampage hooked her hoofclaws into the back of his neck and ripped his head from his shoulders. The mare tried to haul the disintegration rifle around to point at Rampage, but I put three more rounds into her before she could fire. The rifle clattered to the ground as I approached.

She wasn't a pretty mare. Blue-gray like homage, but with a flat black mane. Her eyes stared up at me. *I'm hit. Fuck. Can't feel... can't move... fuck! Her eyes widened as her breathing picked up, blood bubbling in her mouth. No. I have to kill her. Russet will be okay if she dies. Everyone will...* Her body trembled as I gazed into her eyes, a tear cutting through the blood on her cheek. *Russet... my beautiful girl... I have to... have to... to...* Then she went slack, slumping over as her red bar disappeared from my E.F.S.

"Blackjack?" P-21 asked me, putting a hoof on my shoulder.

I jumped at the touch, looking at him and feeling his worry in his stare. "I'm fine. I'm fine," I lied, and he knew it. I tore my eyes from him, back to the mare. "Give me their barding. And see if you can rig that battle saddle to Sexy and me."

I turned to Doctor Comet. "Thank—" I started to say, and then I saw him lying prone on the ground. A bloody hole oozed in the pink hide of his forehead right where a unicorn's horn would be.

I bring the Wasteland everywhere I go. Xanthe was right. Help me, and it gets you killed. Face me, and it gets you killed. "Come on," I croaked as I stepped into the tram, dragging the mare by the collar. Rampage brought the other one. Once we were inside the steeply inclined tram and it had started off, I removed the mare's combat armor. A few holes wouldn't compromise it too badly. I pulled a picture from a pocket. It was just a charcoal sketch of the unicorn I'd killed and a small, smudged filly.

"Daddy, you should put on that other barding," Scotch Tape said in a small voice as she took the mare's rifle and fumbled with it. *He's going to die. Blackjack's going to die. Rampage is going to die. I'll be all alone.* "I wish I knew how to use this thing better." *I'm useless. I shouldn't have come.*

I glanced at P-21, felt the worry dripping off him, and then looked at Scotch. "Hey. It's not that hard. Find something to brace against. Point that end. Fire. Repeat. You'll be fine." I rubbed her head. "We're not going to die."

She stared at me. "Well... no duh. I knew that!" She gave as brave a smile as she could as she fumbled with how to reload the rifle. I tried to keep her from firing it by accident... though, for all I knew, the thing I thought was the safety was actually the trigger! Ugh... arcane magic weapons were just bizarre.

P-21 mumbled, "Do I have this on right?" I returned my eyes to him and started at seeing him wearing the stallion's scorched and dinged combat armor. He'd removed the miniguns; he really didn't have the frame or skill for the weapons anyway. Lacunae... sigh...

"You got these buckles mixed up," I said, flushing as I gently corrected the straps and got the combat barding in place. Aside from a big gap between the shoulders from Rampage's tear, it was mostly intact.

"What's wrong, Blackjack?" P-21 said as he hooked Sexy to my battle saddle. Unff... I really wished I had an earth pony's frame for this. I tried to use my magic, and from the blue stallion came words as if from an old stereo. *Just get through today.*

Whatever happens, get through today with no one else dead. Just get home, and everything will be alright. Get Scotch Tape home safe. Watch Rampage. Damn, Blackjack's ass is almost as nice as Calamity's. Get back safe.

"I think..." I started to say, then stopped. What was there to gain by telling them that there was something else wrong with me? "Just... I remember back when my life was just patrolling through the stable halls and the occasional illegal poker game. I just have to wonder how much more weird my life can get."

"Well, we're on the moon. That's a good indication for starters," Scotch Tape said as she stared out the window. *I miss Mommy so much. I wish she could see this. I wish she could know what I did.*

I rubbed my horn vigorously and was rewarded with an electrical zap and a muting of my friends' thoughts. I had to stay focused. As the tram dropped down the canyon wall towards the shining dome at the bottom, the moonstone crystals took on the appearance of amethysts. Dark swirls of magic ran circuits around the spires. "Did anyone else hear that?" P-21 asked sharply.

Rampage rubbed her eyes. "Hear that? Did anyone see that?"

"Are you guys seeing and hearing things too?" I asked them.

"Whispers. Flickers. Like... I thought I saw Nightmare Moon and Princess Celestia," Rampage said as she looked at one of the dark purple crystals particularly close to the track.

"I saw something like that too. Nightmare Moon leading an army towards Princess Celestia's army," P-21 agreed.

"This must be what it's like to be Blackjack," Scotch Tape muttered. *It's scary. How does she handle it?* I rubbed my horn again, hard.

I looked at another dark purple monolith. "I think this is where Nightmare Moon was trapped for a thousand years. These stones... I think they're like giant memory orbs." I stared at the swirling darkness around the stone. My vision blurred, and I heard Princess Luna crying out. *Why don't they like me? I give them wonderful dreams and beautiful nights! I do so much work for them. Why is it always Celestia, Celestia, Celestia? Why is it always her?!* "They're not true memory orbs, so we're not sucked into the experience. And... I think these are thoughts..."

"Why would Goldenblood build Horizons here?" P-21 asked as we dropped towards the Lunar Palace below. It wasn't a perfect hemisphere; it had a slightly conical shape to it, like the little end of an egg. Most of it appeared to be huge crystal

windows, the ones at the apex glowing brightly towards the planet the planet above. I wondered if it was visible so far away, a glowing eye in a patch of shadow. The tram was dropping down towards the base of it.

"I don't know," I answered, and started to speculate. "Horizons was a trap. When Cognitum tried to deactivate it, she set it off. That's probably why it had a countdown. It was trying to get a response from Princess Luna. I half bet that if nothing was sent, Horizons would have just gone back on standby. After all, there must have been megaspells and balefire bombs going off before I fired Folly. The only difference was that this time, Cognitum fell into the trap." I studied the dark crystals. "I think that he put this here so that, if Luna ever did come here, it would be a sign she was actually Nightmare Moon. Princess Luna would never come here if she was sane. This place represents her very worst."

Rampage regarded P-21 and Scotch Tape flatly. "Is it just me, or is a hornhead's life really fucking weird?" I smiled at the simultaneous agreement in their thoughts, then smacked my horn again.

"Why do you keep doing that?" P-21 asked in concern. "I thought you were trying to recover from burnout."

"Um... actually, I'm trying to stop reading your minds," I admitted, shuffling a little. "Not all of them! Just... kinda... what you're thinking at the moment."

"You can read my mind?" Scotch squeaked in shock, then pressed her hooves to her temple. *Don't think of having sex with daddy. Don't think of having sex with Rampage. Don't think of having sex with Blackjack...*

"It's not like that. It's more just... words," I said as I rubbed my horn to try and scatter it.

"Oh yeah, prove it. What am I thinking?" Rampage demanded. I glanced at her, stopping my rubbing and letting my horn tune in. *I'll tell her she's wrong no matter what. Goddesses, Blackjack is frigging weird sometimes, though. Still, if she's wrong, maybe Scotchy won't think she's actually reading minds, because frigging weird!* "Well? It's a number between one and billion." *No, it's not!*

"Uh..." I blinked at her. "Seven?" I glanced over at Scotch.

Rampage blinked as well, then pointed a hoofclaw at me and laughed loudly. "Hah! Wrong! I was thinking your butt is fat!" She snorted at me, rolling her eyes. "Reading minds. Yeah, right."

I relaxed a little and smiled at her. "Yeah. Guess I was wrong. I'm frigging weird

sometimes,” I said, robbing her of her laughter. “Just saying,” I added.

“So frigging weird,” she muttered, looking at me uneasily.

Too bad it's not two way. That would be useful. P-21's thoughts came with a warm tone that matched his smile.

I looked back and thought. *Yeah. I miss Lacunae.* Maybe it was just an effect of the moment, but I gave the thought a little added emphasis. I imagined I was pushing it out at him.

All three of them jumped as if simultaneously shocked. “Lacunae! You miss Lacunae! You thought it at me!” Scotch tape said, then glowered at Rampage. “And you're a liar.”

Rampage flushed and rolled her eyes. “Sorry, kiddo. You were kinda freaking out.”

It took a few minutes to work it out. Apparently, as long as they were thinking it at me, I could pick it up, and vice versa. The only limitation was that my friends couldn't think at each other, which was probably for the best. *You know what this is, right?* P-21 asked with a small smile as the tram reached the base of the ravine.

Yeah. I thought back at all of them with a small, hopeful grin. *An edge.*

The Lunar Palace rumbled like an immense turbine in bad need of a new bearing. As soon as the tram connected to the airlock, the vibration resonated under my hooves and into my teeth. Above it, a high frequency squeal keened out, barely within my upper threshold of perception. As soon as the airlock opened, a dusty miasma reeking of gunsmoke, ozone, and burnt candy blasted in my face. Beam turrets crackled as they spat magical death while sentry robots boomed their warning for trespassers to leave and be destroyed. The muted crumps of missile impacts paired up with the loud zaps of beam guns in an unholy orchestra of annihilation that made me wonder if our ‘edge’ wasn't nearly as big as I hoped it was.

Inside, the Lunar Palace was an immense open space dominated by a huge circular hole in the floor that emitted the white glow. From this angle, I couldn't see how far down it went, but it felt deep under my hooves. Four smoldering Ultra-Sentinels lay scattered around the rim. Above it was an elevated platform ring connected to the floor by four broad stairways. The ring was studded with perhaps a dozen beam turrets beneath and a dozen sentry robots above. In the center of the ring, over the direct middle of the shaft, was an even higher dais connected by walkways

and topped with an enormous throne of moonstone and steel. A familiar golden mesh dangled from the top of the throne, and I felt my scalp itch at the sight of the thing. At the tip of the dome, a hemisphere protruded down from the roof, a cloud of mechasprites swirling around it like a miniature steel galaxy. Cables dangled down from the half-sphere to the throne.

Whoa was all I could think as I watched Cognitum and eight Harbingers fighting their way up the steps. Whenever they destroyed one of the robots, a swarm of mechasprites would fly down and start repairing it even as more fire pressed in from other sides. Cognitum had erected a blood-red magical field that protected her and only her as her two floating turret drones returned fire. I looked at the intense firefight, considered my friends, and then considered the battle again. *Um... thoughts?*

P-21 and Rampage looked around me, the latter almost climbing onto my back to get a good look. Scotch Tape moved around my legs and peeked into the room. Okay, they could have waited for me to move out of the way first! She gave a mental grunt, then pulled herself back into the airlock. When the door closed, she looked at the rest of us. "Okay. That's stupid."

Rampage clapped her hooves together. "Okay. Good answer. It's stupid. Can I go kill them all?"

"You'll be Peppermint-sized in two seconds with all those incineration and disintegration beams going off," P-21 told her.

"What I mean when I say it's stupid is that that room doesn't make any sense architecturally." She sighed, took off her saddlebags, took out some paper and a pen, and sketched the room. "So... like... why put an enormous platform over a deep pit with a throne in the very middle, out in the open?" She scowled and pointed up at the glowing hemisphere. "For that matter, why put a maneframe up there? There's no maintenance access, and if it fell, anyone on the throne would be smack underneath it! It's like somepony wanted this room to be the most impractical thing imaginable."

"Well, duh. That's got to be the controls, right?" Rampage asked. "Whoever gets to the throne rules."

Scotch Tape looked at me and P-21 flatly. "Did we have a throne in Stable 99?"

I glanced at him, and he shrugged. "She had a really big desk," I replied. "And controls. And a secret passage."

"Right! Because she used all those things! She was the Overmare." Scotch Tape

gestured at the closed door. "Who is the person sitting in that huge fancy seat supposed to be ruling?" I thought about it a little, but a stable of blanks really didn't seem fitting. "It's not even all that defensible, because it has four nice big stairways leading up to it! The person sitting in the throne is exposed on all sides. Puts the person sitting in the throne out in the open right in the middle of a great big pit. And if something did happen to that dome, they'd be smack underneath that great big computer as it comes crashing down!"

"Shit," I muttered as I realized she was right. "Horizons was made to kill Nightmare Moon. This whole place... the throne... the glowing pit... even the name... it was all one big lure to Nightmare Moon's vanity."

"So, what's the plan here?" Rampage asked. "I rush into the middle and draw all their fire while Blackjack does whatever she does that makes her automatically win?"

"Tempting," I mused. "I'd really like to pull it off. But the priority is preventing Horizons from firing." Besides, Cognitum had taken my auto-win talent. I turned to Scotch Tape. "If the key to this place isn't the throne, then where do we need to go?"

Scotch Tape's eyes widened. "You're asking me to guess the layout of a super-weapon on the moon?" *I can't do it. There's no way! Everypony is going to die because I can't...*

I reached out and held her hooves. "You can do it, Scotch. Just give your best guess. If it doesn't work, we can go with Rampage's idea."

Why am I always plan B? Rampage huffed in annoyance.

You're usually plan D or E, actually, but you're also the most reliable. I thought back at her. That seemed to brighten her up a little. I didn't add that was because that happened when the plan was the shit hitting the ventilator, but it was good to have her on my side again.

Scotch Tape's eyes worked back and forth. "It has to be beneath us, Blackjack. I don't know where or what Horizons is, but the mechanism has to be under our hooves. I just don't see anything we can reach in that wide-open, empty chamber than could control a megaspell."

"Okay. We go in there and find an access point to get down below. Find where it's fired from. Stop it or break it. Then we deal with Cognitum," I replied. We shared a look, then nodded in unison.

Back out in the Lunar Palace, Cognitum was a few feet closer to her throne. She stood composed, powerful, and cruel. A princess in all but fact, but a cruel bitch of

a princess. A princess of hard data and harder contempt. Her gun pods flashed and blasted as the enemy fire splashed and flickered off her magical shield. Deadly crimson bolts blasted from her horn with crushing force. The mechasprites worked tirelessly to repair and restore the defenders, but the wedge of attackers kept ripping the turrets and sentry bots apart with their steady fire. Every now and then, one of her soldiers would fire a spark grenade far from Cognitum, sending a swarm of mechasprites tumbling down into the pit in the center of the chamber. I couldn't get close enough to see what was in that enormous hole, but I had my suspicions.

Keep your thoughts as hostile as you can. Yellow bars will stand out. I thought at my friends as we moved along the edge of the room.

Blackjack, who do you think you're talking to here? Rampage scoffed. *I'm like a dozen different flavors of hostile right now! I'm frigging infra-red hostile!*

We searched, but the walls were virtually seamless. *They seem to be molded like clay instead of assembled from pieces.* Scotch thought as we moved, tapping the grayish walls. *Is that metal or ceramic?* We skirted the edge of the fighting, moving around towards the far side of the chamber. I could only hope the automated defenses would focus on the nearer, more obvious targets instead of us.

Grate in the floor! P-21 thought at me, and I ran to where he was pointing. Rampage hooked her claws into the grate, its bars spaced widely enough to admit mechasprites but strong enough to support sentries that rolled over it. Her body strained, metal scraping on metal, and then the bars snapped free with a loud crack and peeled up. Below us was about a ten foot drop.

Then a crackling red bolt of energy slammed into me, sending me flying away from the hole and into the far wall. The ceramic plates of my combat armor, as well as something inside me, crunched from the impact. *Ow!* I thought plaintively, but I hid my pain from my enemy. Cognitum walked to the edge of the platform, staring down at me as her mane snapped in an eternal wind. Thousands of tiny stars, little blazing red giants and cold white dwarfs, glimmered in that billowing magical mane. "Blackjack," she said, her voice magnified by speakers in the hovering gun pods. "It seems Rampage wants to live forever after all."

"Eh, you're too much of a pussy to kill me anyway!" Rampage bellowed back at her. "Must be that body you're in!" *How's that, eh? Reverse psychology!* Rampage smirked back at me. Then a crackling bolt of crimson magic enveloped her and flung her high into the air. As she began to slow down, the magic suddenly flared and slammed her into the ground hard enough to make her bounce twice. *Ow.* A

second later, a red aura illuminated around her, and as it grew Rampage burst into flame. *OW!*

I had to give her credit, I would have been screaming incoherently right now as my nerves burned, regenerated, and burned some more. I scrambled to my hooves, trying to ignore my own pain, as I faced Cognitum. From her horn emanated a red cone of magic that focused on me like a spotlight, and I felt myself start to grow warm. Really warm! *Rampage, jump to your left!* I thought. She spang, somewhat ungainly, into the path of the cone.

Agh, fuck, Blackjack! You bitch! Fire sucks! she thought at me, or maybe shouted, it was hard to tell as I hit the ground behind her, peered at Cognitum, and fired a magic bullet right at her face! The spell was twice as hard to cast as usual, but I felt great that it worked at all, even if it just popped ineffectually off her magical shield.

Then for an instant I was a pegasus flying through the rusted remains of a factory or something with a half dozen Brood fighters on her tail, a dusky gray batpony at her side. She twisted on her side, threading her body through a space so narrow I felt it brush her belly. Stygius just teleported past the obstacle. As he reappeared, she actually leaned forward and kissed him with a mid air smooch, then banked off as the fliers caught back up with the pair. Fortunately, the vision only lasted a few seconds.

Okay... that was bad timing. Luckily, it seemed Cognitum was in a monologuing mood. "Do you really think you can defeat me? I am the Princess of the Night! I am a thousand times what Celestia was. I live and walk again while my sister's feeble mind and soul are bound to a hulk of metal and steel," she crowed as she fired bolt after bolt of dark magic at me. The crimson energy crackled with electricity, arcing from Rampage's metal armor to me and making my mane stand on end beneath the helmet. It would have been great to shout back that she was just a damaged mind and soul on a hijacked cybermare, but my jaw was clenched shut from the discharge.

Then a spark grenade went off against her shield. I glanced over to where P-21 was halfway through the hole, his hindlegs braced against the walls of the shaft as his forelimbs and mouth aimed Persuasion. The blue sphere of electrical energy crackled against the magic and evoked a scream of pain from Cognitum, making her rear up on her hooves. Her talismans flickered, but they didn't die. Thank Celestia she still had that vulnerability at all, even if it didn't shut her down completely as it would have me. "Kill them. Kill them now! This has gone on long enough!"

Four of her Harbingers ran down the nearest staircase, one of them with a missile launcher. Rampage wasn't burning anymore but hadn't regrown her eyes just yet, so I shoved her forward. *Move! Move! Missiles!* I thought desperately as she staggered forward. *Left! Your other left!* One came streaking past and detonated behind me, a magical field flickering to life over those immense windows. F.A.D.E. shields.

"Stop pushing! I got my eyes back, Blackjack!" she snapped. Another of the four had a sniper rifle, a pegasus carried a gatling beam gun, and an earth pony rushed at us with a chainsaw clutched in his jaws and light machine guns on his sides... wait, how he pull that off?! Rampage paused at the sight of him. "Oh, hey! I think I know that guy! Didn't you use to run a gang called Buzzkill last year or so? Operated around Withers?"

Sniper rounds pinged off the floor much too close to my head for my liking. *Who cares! Get in the hole before that beam gun fillifies you.* It was days like this that I really wished LittlePip could be here. Or Calamity. Or Glory... definitely Glory... or somepony with some precision and range! But nooo, I gave away my own sniper rifle. It made me uncomfortable! Ugh...

Blackjack, are you meaning to think all that? Scotch Tape thought at me. I shut up my mental whining, rushed to the hole in the grate, and dropped down. Halfway through the hole, I felt a distinct lurch in my stomach as I went from normal gravity to lighter gravity, landing not nearly as hard as I'd expected.

Underneath, we entered a world of scaffolds and girders, wires and strange equipment. Glowing talismans sang their strange melodies to me as my brain swirled. I rolled out of the way a second before Rampage came flying down the hole at me, landing with a loud thud. *This way!* Scotch thought, waving at us from the end of a walkway... no, not exactly a walkway. Clearly, this sublevel hadn't been made for ponies to move around in it. This was more like a broad, flat support for a number of cables. Even in the reduced gravity, it flexed alarmingly under Rampage. Below us lay more of that diffuse white light, like glowing milk.

Quickly! Quietly! Carefully! I thought desperately as we moved from support to support, girder to girder, moving away from the hole. Now I was glad EFS didn't show height.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" a mare taunted.

"Shut up. Spread out. Find them, kill them, and then we can go home," a stallion replied.

Spreading out was good. They must not have thought we were all a threat. *Scotch Tape, P-21, find some way to shut down Horizons. Rampage, you and I get to stop them.* Rampage rewarded me with an eager grin that was a disturbing blend of feral viciousness and foal-like glee. Being down here narrowed our odds quite a bit, and...

... That was a lot of Flux.

Below us was an incredible churning, swirling pool of the shimmery fluid. There was no way a few rockets brought that much Flux up here. Ten thousand rockets, maybe. I could only guess that somehow the Flux had expanded... or maybe they'd found some way to make the stuff... or maybe it just naturally broke the laws of nature out of habit. All I knew was there was a Maripony-sized lake of the stuff a few hundred feet down. And who knew how deep it was!

I really didn't want to find—

Then the world around me exploded. Thankfully, there was a girder between the blast and me, saving me from the shrapnel, but I was still knocked off the edge and into the air. I went flipping end over end, crashing onto a junction box of some kind several feet down and getting the wind knocked from my lungs. Above me, a petite orange unicorn mare in combat barding popped the missile launcher levitating beside her open and slipped another missile in. "So much for Blackjack," she chuckled.

She barely had time to take a breath before she was soundly smashed by the spiked wrecking ball that was Rampage. She sailed across the gap between girders and barely managed to grab onto one fifteen feet down. "Let me guess," Rampage said happily, "your nickname is Boom-something, right?" She grinned down at the mare struggling for a grip. "Trust me, you're better off dead. If you live, Blackjack will just name you something embarrassing like 'Pillow'."

Rampage! I mentally shouted at her. *Unicorn!*

Huh? So wha— Rampage turned her head to look at the levitating missile launcher pointed right at her. *Aw shit.* The missile fired and detonated almost immediately, turning her into a spiked cannonball sailing away from us, some of her limbs flying off in different directions from her body. I only hoped she recovered or landed on something before she fell all the way to the bottom.

I pointed Sexy at the dangling unicorn and unloaded a burst, but just before I fired, she let go and dropped to the girder below her. A second blast glanced her; but she

managed to get behind cover before I could really tear into her.

“MADAKADMARAKAMRGH!” roared a muffled voice around the grip of a chainsaw a second before the blood-red earth pony wielding it leapt down, motor roaring, chain whirring, and guns blazing. I didn’t have time to shift and blast back, barely managing to jump sideways off the junction box. Crazy landed and didn’t even stop shooting, pelting himself with ricochets and bits of metal. He continued to scream into the grip of the chainsaw as he twisted, walking his fire after me.

There was nothing for it. I needed to telepo—

Charity stood atop Chapel’s stockade, wearing combat armor that looked as if it had been magically shrunk to fit. The walls had been reinforced by skywagon hulks and bits of scrap metal. Atop the guard towers, filly and colt fireteams crewed machineguns and miniguns set into pivoted braces. As many adult stallions and mares stood along the walls as the young ponies. From down the hill, a dwindling stream of refugees raced as if their lives depending upon it. “I need three-oh-eight!” a stallion shouted, and a colt raced to the post office, coming back with an ammo crate balanced on his back.

“Here they come, kids,” a mare muttered as, along the hilltop the dead trees swayed and crackled. Then the Brood emerged as a solid wall of dark shapes. Suddenly their tactic didn’t seem simple. It seemed terrifying. Above the Brood on the ground were fliers. Amidst the Brood on the ground, unicorns put up shields. “Shit, where did they learn that trick?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Charity said. A shot rang out from the defenders, and she shouted out, “Ten caps from any moron who doesn’t wait for them to come in range! Wait!” In unison, the Brood advanced down the hill towards Chapel. From behind the defenders came screams from refugees, who began to move across the bridge and into the Core. “Damn it! Stay out of there unless you want to die!” she shouted back behind her. Then from beyond the Core she spotted something strange: a long gray V of rapidly swirling clouds. It almost appeared to have a massive face covering one side of it.

Then a bullet pinged off her barding, nearly taking her off the wall. The yellow mare beside her caught her before she fell. “Easy there, kid,” she said in alarm.

“Call me kid again, and you’re paying double for your ammo,” she warned, straightening and rubbing her sore shoulder before looking at the advancing Brood. “Wait for it!”

For ten horrible seconds, the Brood advanced, unchallenged, laying down a steady, withering rain of fire. There was a horrible inevitability in their advance, a casualness in their slaughter that made me want to shiver. Then Charity waved to a purple batpony colt who had his legs wrapped in bandages and was almost blinded by his oversized combat helmet. He gave a salute with his wing, drew a detonator from under his other wing, and gleefully depressed the shiny red button.

It sounded like the world's largest machine gun going off. From left to right, every ten feet along the Brood line, the ground exploded in a plume of mud, steel, and meat. In less than three seconds, nearly a thousand feet of Brood had the ground blown out from under them. "Thanks, Nomad," Charity said to the purple batpony, who seemed stunned at what his little detonator had done. Then she turned back to the battle and murmured, "Over fifty thousand caps of C-4, though... "

"Worth it," the yellow mare replied.

With the detonation, chaos erupted as well. The Brood, rather than pulling back, reforming, and resuming that unified advance, now attacked in disorganized rage. "Fire! Ten caps per Brood!" The Brood fliers dove in, but the machine guns along the walls opened up in an earsplitting chatter of bullets. One Brood flyer swooped at the wall as bullets tore into its body, and when it landed atop the wall, it exploded with as much force as the bombs that had torn up the field. Charity rushed to one of the machine guns, the foals crewing it stunned by the close blast, grabbed the handles with her hooves, and mashed the trigger, pointing the gun towards the next Brood flyer sweeping in towards the wall. "My home is not getting blown up a third time, you get me?!" she yelled, barely audible over the chatter of the gun as two colts helped steady her aim in time to take the head off the lead flyer.

Blackjack! Snap out of it!

Huh? The intrusion of P-21's thoughts made the sight of Charity blasting away melt away, though the gunfire didn't stop. I found myself draped over a beam, forelegs dangling over one side and hindlegs over the other. "You gotta be kidding me," I muttered. Was my horn going to be doing this for good, now? A chainsaw motor roared above me, and I blinked as I became aware of a hooves straddling either side of me. I glanced up to see Chainsaw holding the weapon aloft in his forehooves, ready to swipe my head clean off. Worse, I couldn't use magic or twist around to shoot him.

So I used gravity instead.

I dropped back off the beam, spreading my hooves wide and clipping his hooves out

from under him as I fell one way and he, overbalanced by the chainsaw, the other. Of course, now my problem was more of the falling-to-my-death-impaled-on-some-spur-or-hung-from-wires sort rather than the imminent-decapitation-by-chainsaw sort. My legs flailed wildly as I hoped to catch something, anything, before I either splatted on a girder like a bloatsprite or tried swimming in Flux. Who knew what that much would do to me? Heal me? Turn me into one of those fat blanks from Hip-powhatever? Give me super powers?

While the screaming did nothing, my swinging hooves got caught in some black cabling strung horizontally across a gap. The cable jerked and started sliding through the brackets that had been holding it, but the extra drag started gently slowing me. Fortunately, something at both ends must have held, and the slowing ended in a stop instead of the cable joining me in my fall. Unfortunately, it left me dangling in the middle of space by one foreleg tangled in the point of a taut vee. "Okay. I've dealt with worse," I muttered as I tried to swing myself to the nearest beam.

Then the pegasus with the gatling beam gun dropped down a parallel shaft to mine, snapped his wings out, hovered with his weapon pointed at me, and opened fire. Swinging spared me from a few shots, but plenty more scorched and scoured my barding. I managed to hook my hindlegs around the cable and get Sexy out to point at him, upside down, though, then bit down on the trigger rig and gave a new definition to the term 'wild fire'. The shots made the pegasus bank sharply out of the field of fire, but suddenly, with all the jerking around, one of the ends of the cable gave. I just had time to clutch the cable and Sexy to my body, and then I was swinging down between the girders. The pegasus, clearly an overachiever, flew after me.

Suddenly I was whipped up as the cable snagged on something and was wrenched from my grasp, my leg coming free from the tangle, sending me flipping freely through the air again. The low gravity gave me a momentary sensation of being a pegasus as I sailed along. Then I smashed down on an honest-to-goodness walkway, acutely aware of a multitude of aches and pains as I struggled to my hooves. Low gravity didn't mean none.

The pegasus popped into view at my side, hovering next to the walkway, and I tried to turn to face him even as the crimson beams scorched my hide and drew black lines of soot on my barding. *Ugh, this would be so much easier with my magic!*

Then the pegasus exploded, a grenade shredding his wings. The ruined limbs flailed desperately in the air, struggling for purchase before a second grenade found him and sent him screaming down into the abyss below. I scanned my surroundings

and spotted P-21 and Scotch Tape at a terminal set on a rail on the walkway about fifty feet behind me. *Awww, she doesn't have her magic.* Scotch tape thought sarcastically. *However will she get by?*

For a filly who I can still paddle, you're awfully snarky. I thought back at her. Where were Boom Boom and Sniper? *Rampage?* I thought at the striped mare. *Where are you?* A second later, the girders a ways away above me and to the left exploded. *Ah, there you are. Carry on.*

We looked like we were halfway between the floor of the Lunar Palace above and the Flux below. The walkway seemed to make a circle around the central core, passing by all sorts of strange equipment. As I trotted over to my friends, I also saw an access stairway leading up to a hatch we hadn't had time to find. *Tell me you have good news.* I begged.

We have good news. Scotch Tape thought back as P-21 resumed typing on the computer. *The good news is that this place has only the basest Stable-Tec programming security. That's about it for the good news.*

Horizons is going to fire, Blackjack. P-21 thought grimly. *Technically, it already has fired. The Flux reaction just hasn't completed. And it's going to complete in the next fifteen minutes, which is good enough to hit the Core just like Cognitum and the Legate want. It's autocorrecting the F.A.D.E. fields it's using to aim at the Tokomare.* He tapped the keys rapidly. *There's some sort of buffer talisman or safety spell that's slowing the reaction down. I'm refreshing it as often as I can, but it's buying us literally only seconds each time.*

What about Goldenblood? Is he fighting you? He looked blankly at me. *He's supposed to have copied part of his head into the machine running this place.*

You mean 'Goldenblood_kernel'? P-21 thought back at me, still typing rapidly. *It's here, but it doesn't seem to be paying as much attention to us as it is to... gotta refresh!* A deep thrum sounded underneath us, the light shivering. *It's not paying much attention to us. Mostly on Cognitum. It's fixing any attempts I make to mess with the system, though. I'm lucky I can discharge the failsafe talismans and buy us time. Backdoor access just isn't helping us as much so far. I need root access to really rip into this system.*

Shit. Can you aim Horizons to miss the Core, at least?

No. Something like that requires you to use the mind interface on the throne. Of course, the second you do, the F.A.D.E. targeting fields will go off and trap you inside

the firing tube. He gritted his teeth and typed some more. From below came an odd sour note, and the Flux turned a little more rainbowish. *And there's someone else in the system already messing with things who's not making it much easier. They keep trying to juryrig the F.A.D.E. fields to hit the Core. If you stop them, I might be able to get us a few more minutes. If we can just delay things an hour or so, Horizons won't be able to correct the aiming enough, and it'll just hit somewhere to the east of the Core.*

Someone... shit. *I'll find him. You two keep buying us time and see if you can find some way to stop this thing from blowing up the world. Maybe take the fields down. Be creative.* Stalling to save the world... well... whatever worked.

Then P-21 staggered, blood fountaining between his shoulder blades. He dropped, eyes bulging as he collapsed to his haunches, his eyes still on the computer terminal. "No!" I screamed, turning Sexy towards the girders above, switching to explosive slugs, and going to town as I screamed mentally at Scotch Tape. *Healingpotionhealingpotionhealingpotionnownownow!* I couldn't lose him. Not him! Not now! Not ever! Sexy screamed along with me as I sprayed the upper girders where I guessed the sniper had taken the shot from.

Ohnoohnoohno! Scotch Tape thought back just as fast and desperately, her hooves fumbling on the potions before pouring one, then another, into his mouth. His throat worked weakly, and I burned with the wish that Glory was here. She'd know what to do with a gunshot! All I could do was *give* gunshots. "Drink, Daddy! Come on!" she begged as she gave him a fourth.

Finally, he stirred, pulled himself up, lowered his head, and vomited a slurry of blood and healing potion on to the floor. *Need to refresh...* he thought, then pulled himself back up to the computer and typed the series of commands again. The thrum sounded again, and he coughed up some more blood. "I think the bullet it still in there," he said, grimacing. "Feels like a shaft of metal straight through me."

"Hold on. I'll find him. Maybe he has root access. Then we'll get this taken care of," I said in a rush. *I love you.*

He looked back at me, in obvious pain, and smiled. *I love you too.* He smiled a little wider. *If only you were a stallion, Blackjack.* Then his smile faded. *Take care of Scotch Tape, no matter what.*

I will. I promise. I replied, then leaned forward and kissed him firmly. *Just a little longer. We'll get out of here, and everything will be sunshine and rainbows. Promise.*

Then Scotch Tape fired her disintegration rifle up at the rafters. "Will you two stop thinking at each other and get going? I think the sniper is still up there!" She fired again and thought, *Hee! Blackjack and Daddy sitting on the moon. He's gonna make her...er... damn it.* And she fired another burst with renewed vigor.

I swept my eyes around our surroundings. There were my friends. I was guessing that that rapidly moving yellow bar was Rampage up above. That left one yellow bar thataway, on the other side of the great big... enormous... glowing...

Oh. That must be Tom.

It was hard to overlook a small mountain hovering in the middle of the shaft, but it was so big I'd missed it in the confusion. The moonstone was shaped like a multifaceted teardrop and was suspended in the center of the walkway ring and a loop of talismans. The only thing I could compare it to size-wise was the *Celestia*. It pulsed with a steady, warm illumination. Something seemed to swirl around inside as I watched, but I couldn't tell if it was a trick of the light or not.

I made my way around Tom, keeping my eyes open for Sniper or my target. The sound of fighting was growing ever quieter above me. Cognitum would be down here herself any second. I had to find him... and he didn't make it hard for me. As I trotted around the curve of the giant moonstone, I spotted the yellow stallion sitting before a terminal, his eyes focused on the screen as his hooves worked the keys. I trotted right up behind him.

"Hello, Blackjack," he said without turning from the terminal.

"Hey, Dealer," I replied as I sat next to him. "So. Been busy?"

"None of us really have time to chat. If you were smart, you'd get out of here, get on your rocket, and go back to Equus," he said, eyes on the screen. "Or you could just kill me."

"That'd be a waste," I replied. "After all, you went through so much hard work to get that body back." That made him pause a second. "You have to help me stop her, Echo."

"And then what? The Wasteland stays poisoned and polluted forever? Hope that six heroes magically make everything better with their friendship?" He typed faster than I could follow, even faster than P-21. If they worked together, maybe they could do something. "Has the Wasteland changed pony nature, Blackjack?"

"This is not the time, Dealer," I replied sharply. "I just watched my dearest friend nearly get killed. End of the world shit going on. You know that Cognitum is fucking

crazy.”

“Maybe. Or maybe she’s exactly what we deserve right now,” he countered as he continued to stare at the screen. “Two hundred years of savagery and butchery. Two hundred years and we’re still fighting wars. I’ve seen all the same slaughter you have, Blackjack. Is the fate of the world to continue being a postapocalyptic nightmare?”

“Of course not. We make it better!” I countered sharply.

“Just like Luna and the Ministries did?” he asked as his hooves worked the controls. I could have yanked him away, but if I did, I could probably write off any chance of his help. “Two hundred years, and the most we have to show for it is the same mess we had after the bombs fell. You might think this Lightbringer is going to make everything all right, but that’s exactly what everypony thought when the Ministries were announced. ‘Oh, Luna is taking over. Everything will be different!’ And it was, only it was *worse!*”

“What about what I’m trying to do, Dealer? I’m trying to make the world a better place. And stopping Cognitum from achieving her goal is definitely a big plus in my book,” I shouted, wondering if this was a hopeless cause.

“She’s what we deserve!” he shouted, turning away from the screen and looking at me with anguish in his eyes. “We fucked up. We fucked it all up! We deserve a monster like her to rule over us. To punish us for taking two centuries and still not setting things right!”

I sighed and rubbed my face. Echo sure had spent way too much time around Goldenblood. “You don’t get to make that call. Neither do I. But nopony deserves a shittier life. Not me. Not you. Not even Cognitum, even if she’s causing all this mess. Everypony needs a chance at a better life, and if they blow it, another chance. Nopony deserves a worse life. Ever.”

He stared at me, and I couldn’t tell if he was marveling at me or pitying me. Maybe both. “How do you do that, Blackjack? Be so right and so wrong all at the same time?” He stopped typing and sat, closing his eyes. “I just wanted to live, Blackjack. I didn’t want to fade away inside that nothingness. I felt it happening ever since we first left 99. Like slowly bleeding to death.” He gave me a stricken little grimace. “And I knew you’d forgive me, too. That made it so much easier and so much worse.”

“Yeah, well. . . I lived. I’m here. And now you get another chance to do what’s right,” I said as I stared into his desperate eyes. “Help me stop Horizons from firing.”

“I—” he stammered.

Now, I’ve had a lot of experience with things messing around in my head. Sad to say, but I’ve become a bit of an expert on outside sources intruding on my mind. From the Goddess’s relentless pressure to machines playing with my perceptions to supernatural thingies gibbering in my brain, there’d been no lack of experiences with things reaching out and making contact with my head. So I really shouldn’t have been as shocked as I was when a stallion’s rolling deep bass voice boomed out, *NO! HORIZONS MUST FIRE! THE EATER OF SOULS MUST DIE!*

It knocked me right off my hooves, and from the sight of Echo, he’d heard it too. It had him curled up fetally, a nosebleed starting to drip out of his yellow nostrils. “Too loud!” I thought and shouted at the same time.

OH. SORRY. I’LL TRY AND TURN DOWN THE VOLUME. the voice said with a lower rumble. *HOW’S THIS?*

Well, it wasn’t quite splitting my head open this time. I thought I could handle it, at least. “Better. So... who are you?” I frowned. There was something familiar to this voice. “I’ve heard you before.”

YES, IT’S NICE TO FINALLY MEET YOU FACE TO FACE. The voice chuckled. I turned, looking left and right, then behind me at the massive moonstone. Only this time, the light that had swirled within had coalesced into a gargantuan glowing pony-shaped outline... an alicorn-shaped outline. Well, that raised a couple theological questions I didn’t want to think about at all right now! The pony’s eyes were ovals filled with bluish light. *CALL ME TOM.*

(Author’s notes: Okay. In order to prevent a sixty page chapter, it was best to end here. Hope it was okay. This one was a pain to edit, but I’m glad that all my editors put in the time and effort to make it better. I want to thank them for their hard work at making sure this ending is everything I planned it to be. I hope it turns out alright.

Thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria in the first place, and thanks to everyone for reading as far as they did. Next chapter is the showdown with Cognitum. I hope It’s decent too. I look forward to reading people’s feedback on Cloudsville, FimFic, or Reddit. Let me know what I did wrong.

Also, if folks want to help out, bits would be very welcome now. I’m not going to be able to do the teaching abroad thing... and the IRS decided that there’s a problem with my tax return, and are sitting on it till it gets resolved. (Someone used my SSN to file their taxes). So bits to David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal are very much appreciated. It’s the difference between paying rent and not these days. I’m working on getting a Patreon account going. I have no idea if it will work but I can hope...

Anyway, thanks for bearing with me. I hope it all turns out okay.)

Hinds: Just thought that I'd clarify, for anyone who was wondering, the design of the Luna Astrotable and why our recent edit of Chapter 19 to change the design did not change it to what is seen here. Out of universe... Let's sum it up by saying that there was much confusion and miscommunication. In-universe, changes were made; Stable 90 already showed both the readers and Blackjack, after all, that what was seen in Chapter 19 did not always correspond to the reality.

Heartshine: I don't have any clarifications, but a little bit of praise for Somber, as he accidentally did a clever. This was a really... interesting chapter. The ability to feel the moment of death of one of my enemies is one of my own worst nightmares.

swicked: Special thanks to Heartshine for teaching me, if you ever feel a bit too excited while looking at Stonehenge, just eat a whole raw potato and those less than double-holy thoughts will clear up in a snap.

Heartshine: Just trying to help swicked out when he needs to study.

74. Call

"I have to find a way... To make this all okay... I can't believe this small mistake... Could've caused so much heartache..."

There was a certain point somewhere in my life where reality and my expectations of it diverged sharply and never really realigned after. Maybe it was being trapped underground, watching my friend's wing fall off. Perhaps it was back when I woke up with more metal in my body than any living mare – any living creature, come to that – should have. Or it might have been when I found out I was related to one of the most famous Ministry Mares. A goddess hijacking my body to kill a friend counted pretty high on the list, too, but just a little underneath getting my mind trapped in a machine. Or course, deaths one, two, or three might count.

So when I stared up at a giant glowing alicorn-shaped figure within the moonstone, the only thing I could reply with was a neutral, "Huh." It was pretty darn high on the wierdometer, sure, but didn't even make the top five. Well, its name was Tom... maybe number five? "Look, Tom, I hate to tell you, but we're a little occupied right now. I'm trying to save my world from your moonstone annihilating the Eater. Sorry." I turned back to Echo. "So, are you going to help us or not?"

His unfocused eyes were fixated on the huge, glowing form. "Huh?" he asked, seemingly unable to tear his gaze from it.

YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND. THE EATER MUST BE DESTROYED. the voice boomed, the volume a little below stroke-inducing.

"Right. Unfortunately, I don't want every single person I know to die," I said, glaring up at it. "And I don't have time to argue this."

AH! EASILY REMEDIED! The glowing blue eyes flared brightly.

I lifted my hooves in alarm. "No! Wait!" But the world swirled away.

When it coalesced, I found myself alone, wearing my old security barding, in Stable 99's atrium. It was definitely cleaner than I'd ever known it to be. It felt so very wrong to see it pristine and utterly deserted. I sat at one of the long dining tables set out in the atrium. "Hello, Blackjack," a stallion said calmly. I turned and looked at an oddly familiar unicorn sitting with his hooves clasped on the table in front of him. Not Goldenblood, thank goodness. A pale white unicorn stallion with a candy cane

mane smiled at me. "This should be a little easier."

P-21, Scotch Tape, and Rampage appeared at the table. They looked around, equally baffled, till their eyes landed on the strange stallion. "Charity?" Scotch said. "What are you doing here?"

"Charity?" Rampage asked with a frown. "That's Big Daddy!"

I sighed and rubbed my face with my hooves. "This is all in our heads," I groaned, then regarded Tom flatly. He appeared far too comfortable with this little trick. "We're all seeing someone different. For me he's some strange stallion from my stable."

Rampage clutched her head and groaned. "Unicorns... flipping unicorns... Unicorns living their weird unicorn lives..."

"So, this isn't Chapel?" Scotch Tape asked as she stared around, in wide-eyed wonder. "But it looks just like it!" Then she frowned a little. "A little too clean though. And we haven't even started on the windmills yet!"

"That's because it's coming from your head," I said, then glared at Tom. "You built what we're seeing from our memories, didn't you?" He nodded once, and I grunted sourly. Mind games were getting old.. but he'd also made sure it was clear this wasn't actually *real*, like Happyhorn. I grudgingly gave Tom a point for that. Tom smiled, folding his hooves patiently as he waited. I looked over at P-21, who seemed a little troubled. "Who do you see?"

He looked over at Scotch Tape, then at Tom. "Somepony... who helped me..."

I stared at Tom a moment. "So you're appearing as somepony who can help, but not ponies we love. And I bet this isn't happening in normal time, right?" I asked, thinking back to being trapped in the Happyhorn simulation. He gave another shake of his head.

"But why are we here?" Scotch Tape asked. "I mean," she continued, pointing a hoof at me, "weird stuff happening to Blackjack is normal. I'd freak out if she went a month with nothing strange happening."

"Gee, thanks." I snorted and rolled my eyes. Still, I had to admit, I was curious too.

Tom smiled and spread his hooves. "Who can say? I intended this to be a party of one, but it seems the moonstone she rolled in and her affinity for all of you has pulled you in as well. I can only speculate that the malfunction of the divinatory device resulted in this gestalt." He arched a brow at me. "Or did you do this intentionally?"

Rampage burst out laughing and snorting. "Blackjack! Doing something like this?"

On purpose? Hah!” The three of us stared at her flatly as her laughter faded. “What? I’m just saying you usually do cool stuff on accident and mess up if you. . .” She trailed off, then said sulkily, “Well, I thought it was funny.”

I sighed, closing my eyes and wishing there was one more person here who could have made sense of this mess. I could imagine Glory sitting beside me, willing me to be smart enough to figure all this out. I thought about it a moment and took a deep breath, then met Tom’s eyes. “Okay. You brought us here for a reason.” I remembered what it had boomed out at me. “You want us to let Horizons fire so that you can destroy the Eater.” He nodded again, his eyes turning sympathetic. “Even though it will kill everything in the Wasteland.”

“Not everything,” he replied. And suddenly the walls around me were torn away in an enormous explosion. The blast whipped at my mane, and I lifted my hooves to protect my eyes from the blinding light. Of course, it wasn’t a real explosion, and the gale of dust and smoke soon died, leaving the table undisturbed as it floated in the air over an immense bay of flat water. The sky was the color of flux, and the mountains appeared as if they’d been shoved up and scoured by colossal claws. Millions of tiny motes of light swirled around us like an animated luminescent blizzard. The ocean seemed thicker than normal water, as if it had clotted, congealed, and set.

We drifted in midair over Hoofington Bay, heading west towards shattered mountains. At least, I thought it was west. The sun and moon were huge orbs in the rainbow-hued sky. “No. . .” Scotch Tape whimpered, and P-21 put his hooves around her. I could have used a hug as well.

“What is the point of this?” Rampage roared at him, sweeping her hoof over the devastated, ravaged landscape. I thought I saw Spike’s mountain as a shattered pile of rubble. There were no ruins. Trees. Even rivers. Nothing. It was as if a great hoof had scraped the land bare in all directions, melting and burning everything in its path. A few shattered ruins remained further away, smashed beyond recognition. I spotted the enormous shell of the SPP in the distance, crushed like an egg against the side of a mountain. As another coast came into view ahead of us, I saw what might have been Manehattan, looking as if all buildings had been stacked on their sides and crushed into the earth. The sky was filled with countless motes drifting around us like snow. “Showing us. . . this?”

The table set down on a rocky boulder surrounded by a heap of gravel and mud. “That,” Tom said as he looked at the muck. As we watched, the pebbles stirred, then tumbled down as something green poked its way out into the open. It was some of the puniest, sickliest grass I’d ever seen, but it was alive.

“That?” Rampage scoffed. “That’s it?”

“Wait,” Tom said, and the sun and moon began to move faster and faster through the sky above us till both became solid, flickering bands, one golden and one silver. The glowing motes began settling to the ground, disappearing into the earth. Rain fell, washing the blasted land, then snow. Then blankets of white appeared and disappeared again and again, and with every disappearance, that green, sickly patch darkened and spread. It crept like fingers along cracks in the rock and around the edges of muddy puddles. It seemed to appear by magic. The grass deepened and elongated, died and regrew as years whirled past our eyes. Bushes sprang up, followed by thin trees. The remains of the old world rusted away and disappeared under a verdant carpet of life.

And it wasn’t just plant life, either. Insects crawled amongst the sprouts. Fish splashed in the clear creeks. Frogs jumped along the bank. Birds reappeared in the sky. Then more animals, some I knew and others I didn’t. The millions of motes in the sky had now dwindled to just a few, disappearing ever faster into the trees and land. The table lifted off the earth, and I saw that the life wasn’t just here in Equestria. It was everywhere. The oceans became a deeper and more vibrant blue, fading to green nearer to the coasts. The clouds were cleaner. The megaspells I’d seen ravaging the far world were gone, and the scars they’d left were fading with the passage of time.

We floated over an Equus so transformed that it was impossible to imagine it ever being any other way. And in the dark, there were lights. Small ones, perhaps nothing more than scattered campfires. . . but lights. The first guttering sparks of civilization. “It’s beautiful,” Scotch Tape said in awe as we floated between the planet and the moon.

“That is why Horizons must fire and the Eater must die,” Tom said simply, his hooves still clasped before him and a sad smile on his face.

“And all of us, too,” I pointed out, hoping the unacceptability of that was clear in my tone. “LittlePip. Her friends. Everypony I know who is fighting for survival. They all have to die as well?”

“Yes,” he answered, and I was glad he wasn’t smiling when he said it. “And they will not be the only ones.”

“Well, screw that!” Rampage said, standing and slamming her hooves onto the tabletop. “That’s. . . that’s. . . like the Angel. The only way to peace is through death? No. Hell no!” I could have hugged her.

“There was a way for more life to be saved, but sadly, it was undone,” he said, his eyes landing on me. The urge to snap at him warred with the desire to kick myself for taking the Redoubt out of the shadow world. “Death is not an ending,” he continued. “It is a transition. The matter of our bodies is only rented from the universe.” Scotch Tape gaped at Tom, her mouth moving slowly and the side of her face screwing up. “We borrow it for a time, gaining a chance to change the world for the better. We take from our surroundings to survive, and when we die, what we take is returned. It is then reassembled into different forms. The carbon in your body today might have been a tree a million years ago, and it might be a diamond ten million years from now. And you, free of your body once more, will continue the song you began far before you could ever remember, on into the future further than you could ever grasp. The song you sing even now, though you cannot always hear it.”

Then we heard the singing of the stars. One note, then a second. A third. A dozen. A hundred. A thousand. Countless voices and melodies resonating from the universe around us. The familiarity and beauty tugged at my heart and drew tears to my eyes. Bright and piping symphonies. Low and deep somber voices. Some sang fast, others slow, some loud, and others softly. As the harmony surrounded us, filling my ears, I could hear a stirring within myself. A song so familiar it felt as natural as breathing, and I looked around as songs rose from within my friends as well. And Equus sang with us, in a voice more beautiful and wondrous than any before. Because it was our world. Our life. Our song.

We all had tears in our eyes, but it was P-21 who broke the reverie. “And if Horizons doesn’t go off? Or if Horizons doesn’t destroy the Eater?”

Tom closed his eyes, the beautiful melody of the stars suddenly quieted, and in the near silence the table plunged to the now-poisoned world below. The song of Equus, sickened and dissonant, fell softer and softer. We hovered above the Core. There was no fighting. Everything was still and quiet. Time accelerated again, but now on the ground came the opposite of the explosion of life we’d seen before. What meager greenery there was in the Wasteland dwindled, the valley turning grayer and stiller. We rose again and saw the Wasteland struggling to recover. Even with the skies cleared, life labored and ponies with it. It was as if life itself was being leeches from the land they struggled to make flourish. I had no idea how many generations passed, but soon the entire world had entered a stagnant stasis.

As the planet turned below us, we watched the seas assume the color of lead, and lands even on the far side of the world grayed and browned, withering. The seas seemed to dwindle away, the air thinning. The ground shrunk and wrinkled, canyons

and gaps spreading as the planet shriveled. The moon and sun drifted closer and closer to the rock, the former crashing in a momentary firework of light and energy, then darkening to nothing. Finally the sun itself smashed into the world in one last flaming burst of defiance. Sucked dry, the rock itself withered to dust, then to nothing, and all that remained was a shriveled shell, floating like a dark, frozen rock in a dimmer, emptier universe.

“That. . .” I started to say, but words failed me.

“That’s fucked up,” Rampage murmured.

“You’re saying that what the Lightbringer did was worthless?” P-21 asked with a scowl.

Tom shook his head. “No. Certainly not! In fact, the Lightbringer bought time and hope for your world. Had she not helped, this demise would have come far sooner and surer. The Lightbringer broke the slow slide of entropy and decay. She snapped countless people out of complacency. Even if Red Eye had survived and the Enclave remained in the skies, they still would have fallen within a generation. And neither would have seen their enemy. The Eater is a parasite within your world, claiming whatever life it can. By the time that it woke from the trauma of its fall, Equus had recovered, and for eons after, the generation of new life far exceeded what it could consume. But the cataclysm that struck your world destroyed that. Now more life is eaten than is renewed, and with each year, the gap grows as the cycle is impoverished. Exhaustion will take centuries, millennia, perhaps... but it is inevitable.”

“Bullshit,” Rampage said sharply. “What if we just periodically drop little bits of moonstone on it? Not enough to obliterate the world, just wear the Eater away.”

Tom regarded me as if asking if I wanted to answer. I sighed and did. “It won’t work. The Eater can convert moonstone to starmetal before it explodes. We’d be doing what Cognitum wants to do, just in slower amounts.”

“Indeed,” Tom said gravely. “It claims the spiritual energy within the stone and makes it its own. Horizons’s mass and speed, and my presence, are necessary to prevent the Eater from simply transforming the moonstone to starmetal.”

“But why didn’t the Eater turn the moonstone pendants to starmetal?” Scotch Tape asked.

“With enough time in proximity, it would have. You already know that moonstone protects from Enervation, but you don’t know why,” Tom replied. “More important

than the stone itself is the soul it contains. The Eater's arrival on Equus extinguished incalculable life, and that life was condensed in the moon. The souls in pieces of moonstone protect the souls of the living."

"That singing noise is a soul?" P-21 asked as he looked out at the distant stars.

"Yes. Inside the moonstone, a soul is protected, though not completely, from the pull of the Eater's own nature. The Eater seeks to make all like it and destroy that which is not," Tom said soberly. "One song. One voice. One note."

"So. . . it consumes them?" Scotch asked in horror.

Anger flashed in Tom's eyes. "No. That would be merciful. It tortures them eternally until they choose to join it in singing its praises." And the scream filled the air. The scream I'd learned so well since coming out of my stable. It was blessedly short-lived, but it still sent a shiver along my spine.

"But what if what Cognitum said was true, and she can control it? Wouldn't that let everypony live?" Rampage asked, anguish on her face.

"Even if she could control the Eater like a machine with EC-1101, she gave up the only kind of body that could have resisted the Eater's influence; she would be controlled in turn," Tom said soberly. The dawn broke, and around us was the Core, alive and bright. It was the promise I'd seen while I'd been trapped in the city. Thousands, millions of people living in the massive metropolis. Ponies, zebras, griffins, sand dogs. . . even dragons. . . all augmented and living in unity. All distinctness blurred together, differences squashed under the combined pressure of millions of connected minds.

"Why. . . why is everyone augmented?" Scotch Tape asked with a small frown, shying away from the sight of augmented fillies and colts trotting along in perfect unison. "And. . . why is it so quiet?"

"They're wired together," I said, then narrowed my eyes at Tom, an idea niggling at my head. "This isn't just a coincidence, is it?"

Tom beamed his approval. "Indeed. The Eater encourages technology that leads to replacing flesh with machinery, merging minds, and greater strife." The scene abruptly changed to a strange, exotic land, a battered city of cracked and patched minarets surrounded by a sandy desert. Row after row of augmented alicorns and pegasi flew in precise formation, strafing the equine defenders on the wall, while dark earth pony and hellhound phalanxes marched in neat regiments below, approaching with relentless might from all directions.

We drifted away over the sand, leaving the imminent carnage behind us. An image of me appeared above the table. My legs were replaced. Then 'upgraded'. Then my body. Wings were installed. Finally, Cognitum's changes.

"But why?" Scotch Tape asked. "I mean, I get why it'd want more war, but why augmentation?"

"Because augmented ponies are easier to predict, and connected consciousness blunts the chaotic mix of individuality," Tom said, and the image split in two, one with my original body and one as Cognitum. "Living organisms are inherently more chaotic and unpredictable than non-living organisms. One day you eat Sugar Apple Bombs. The next day you feel peckish for carrot chips. The constant slurry of chemical reactions, hormones, and metabolic shifts creates a more dynamic individual. As more and more organic systems are replaced by predictable, regulated systems, the individual becomes an ever simpler equation." He leveled his eyes at me, smiling paternally. "You may note that I'm having this conversation with you four and not with Cognitum herself. It would be futile."

"So, you think we're going to let Horizons fire?" I said, rising up and slamming my hooves on the front table. "No! Never! I refuse to give up!" I swept a hoof out, pointing below me, and the desert was replaced by the battle at Chapel. "I won't just write them off while they're fighting for their lives!"

Tom closed his eyes. "This isn't about them, or you. This is about the universe. Equus could... should... be a contributor to the great song. Your lives are temporary. You'd be giving them to better the universe."

"Begging your pardon," Scotch Tape interrupted, "but if this is such a big deal, why doesn't the universe give us some help?"

Tom gave her a wry smile. "What do you think I'm here for?"

P-21 stared at him a moment. "You're going to die to stop the Eater, aren't you?"

Tom closed his eyes and gave a little nod. "It is likely. Almost certain, actually."

"But... didn't the Eater trick Goldenblood into using the blanks to bind you?" I asked.

Tom smiled. "Yes. It was quite helpful. The Eater needs a star spirit. I will be that spirit. But I have not weakened myself by struggling against my restraints. I've waited, patiently. And when we meet, he will not have a spirit enfeebled by exhaustion to devour, but a star of equal might. And even if it costs my existence, it is a price I must pay." His smile vanished, and his eyes turned hard. "The Eater

is one of my kind, one who should have returned its essence to the cycle long ago. My passing is a small, inadequate recompense for the harm it has perpetuated."

We all stared at him in silence. "Aren't stars supposed to live... forever?" Scotch asked in a tiny voice.

He closed his eyes, lips in a stern frown. "Nothing does. Nothing should. Our lives are rented time, every moment precious." He opened his eyes, and rage twisted his placid features. "The Eater, through fear or hubris, cheats that rule. One of our own. Our own! It will not be allowed!" The force with which he barked that made us all share an uneasy glance. He closed his eyes again, but his smile did not return.

"What... what if... what if the Legate is right?" I asked in a whisper. There was no reaction. "He's got a plan... a way to use magic shields to catch you and feed you to the Eater. What would happen then?"

He didn't answer at once. I didn't know if it was because he was unsure, or sure and too harrowed by that certainty to respond. "It doesn't matter," he said at last. "You must stop Cognitum from altering the trajectory of entry and then still allow Horizons to fire. The alternative... no..." He shook his head.

"And what happens to us?" Rampage asked. "We just... live on the moon?"

"Yes, if you like, though the detonation of the Flux below us would be more than sufficient to vaporize your talisman," Tom informed her.

Rampage froze, eyes wide. "Really? It would kill me? For certain?"

"The chaotic energies unleashed would shred the necromantic enchantments like tissue paper, and the souls within would be released," Tom answered. I was about to snap at him before he went on, "If you stayed, though, in a generation or two the surface should be ripe for resettlement. Other races have taken their own steps to survive catastrophe. You could start anew."

"Yeah, that sounds great," I pressed, "but what if the Eater catches you in its trap?" He fell silent again, swallowing. I looked at my friends, then back at him. "Well?" He still didn't respond. I grit my teeth in frustration, then snapped, "Tell me!"

Tom didn't answer, but we suddenly relocated far in the sky between the clouds. Behind us, I thought I could see Ponyville. Then a white light appeared in the sky above us. The brilliant bolt illuminated everything like a new sun as it plunged down towards the Core. Suddenly, a ghostly funnel rose from the ground, and Tom was caught as it streaked down, shedding great plumes of blue-white fire as it scraped against the magical fields and slowed in its plunge. As it reached the base of the

funnel, a second pillar of glowing light appeared, surrounding the enormous flaring moonstone and holding it in place. The fields pulsed as the blue light flared and blazed inside them.

Then the Enervation scream began, a howl of agony so absolute and all-consuming that it would have shattered my flesh had it been real. From that horrid nexus of light, a green luminescence began to spread across the land. Tiny motes of light winked into life, hovering like tiny stars before sweeping towards that green nightmare. Mountains seemed to decay and split as the tiny souls merged into rivers of light streaming towards Tom's dwindling blue glow. The clouds around it were swept up in a great whirlwind, a hurricane of annihilative magic whirling under my hooves. In the distance, I saw the SPP hub burst like an egg, one immense soul ripped into the storm and followed a half second later by another tiny mote. Rivers of souls surged from across the sea as well, pouring through silver rings spread centuries ago and now fulfilling their horrible purpose.

The scream built and rose, and with it the blue glow disappeared entirely, and a thing... a horrible silvery thing bathed in a green aura... rose from the earth. I didn't know if it was flesh or metal or some horrible alloy of the two, and I didn't want to know. I just knew that it was wrong, and the very existence of such a thing ripped at my sanity. I could only pray that Tom wasn't giving this vivid a vision to my friends. Scotch Tape had clenched her eyes shut, and P-21 closed his as well as he embraced her. Rampage looked on, but her face was a mask of horror.

Then darkness. Merciful darkness. Then we found ourselves hovering over the moon again. I dared look at Equus, but it had burst open like the SPP hub. Massive boulders were slowly spreading out from where I imagined Equestria and the Core had been. Thankfully, from here, the Eater was just a baleful green star. "That," Tom said in a harrowed voice, "is why the Eater must die, even if it costs all of you your lives. I'm sorry. Cognitum must be stopped, and Horizons must fire."

"Shit," Rampage muttered, rubbing her face. "Seeing something like that... Horizons almost makes sense."

P-21 and Scotch Tape didn't answer. The filly just sobbed into her father's neck. I wished Glory was here. I wished she'd seen everything I had. I knew... I just knew... if she were here, then she could figure out some solution. Find some way to make it all make sense! It was too big. Too much. Too much for anypony. I wanted her here. Wanted her to hold me.

I felt a pair of hooves around my shoulders, and a pair of soft wings encircled me.

Purple mane fell on my cheek, and her lips nuzzled the back of my neck. I turned, gazing up at her gentle smile, then at Tom. The stallion just gave me a sad smile, and I held the hooves embracing me, closing my eyes and pressing back against her. "Please tell me this is real, and not just in my head," I murmured to her.

Glory just smiled, then leaned in and kissed my lips for an eternity far too short. Then she faded away before me. I wanted to weep again, but I knew what she'd want. I took a deep breath and looked Tom straight into the eye. He'd given me some clear choices, and it was obvious which the best to take was. He met my gaze, his eyes understanding but also pitying.

There was only one answer to give.

"No."

I didn't imagine many brain-invading star spirits wore expressions of shocked surprise like the one I saw on his face. The poor stallion appeared as if he'd been shot. "Blackjack... You must not understand..."

"I understand plenty," I countered, startling him again and earning a worried frown. "We might just be ponies, but we get it. I understand that you think this is the only thing we can do. I get the stakes. I get them plenty. But you are insane if you think I am going to help murder everyone that I love and care for." I looked at my friends, one after the next, and saw matching resolution in their eyes. "We'll stop Horizons, and Cognitum, and deal with the Eater without everyone dying."

Tom stared at me, his mouth working. Suddenly, a laugh broke out from the air, echoing all around us. "Told you," a familiar voice purred in wicked glee. Then a translucent, ghostly form, slinky and with mismatched limbs, appeared hovering next to Tom. Extending a paw towards the stallion, it continued, laughter still in its voice, "Ten bits. Pay up."

"Discord?" we gasped, almost in unison. "But you're dead!" I added the obvious.

"As a doornail," Discord replied. "But I'd hardly let a little detail like that keep me from this moment." He grinned at a disgruntled Tom. "I *told* you she wouldn't take your offer. Ponies are so delightfully entertaining!"

"She should. It's irrational for her to pass it up," Tom argued.

"Of course it's irrational!" Discord said with another laugh. "Since when have rationality and reason triumphed over whims and needs?" He lounged in the air over Tom's head, pulling out a pair of square wire framed glasses and a small chalkboard with way more numbers and diagrams than any decent person needed and

explained in a pedantic voice. "You can present her with all the possible futures you want, with exact probabilities of every result and a clear explanation of what you think the future should be. . . ." Discord tossed the glasses away, bouncing them off Tom's head, drew a smiley face over the diagrams, grinned, and continued, "and she... or any of them really!... can tell you to shove it where the sun doesn't shine!" A devious glint sparkled in Discord's eye as he leered at Tom. "And considering you *are* a sun, that's something I'd *really* like to see." And he tossed the board over his shoulder where it exploded like a grenade with a pink mushroom cloud.

"But her actions may doom the planet!" Tom snapped, gesturing at me.

"So what?" Discord countered flatly, crossing his arms. "The point of choice is not knowing the future. You and Eaterpants are so dreadfully all-knowing that the only choice you can imagine being right is the one you think should be done. It's all too easy to fall into that trap. Look at Cognidumb. Moldy Goldy. Twilight. . . Twilight. . ." He hesitated and screwed up his face. "Spike was right... eh." He shrugged and went on. "Even Mopelestia and Lunatic. All certain that what they did had to be done. But Blackjack doesn't know what the future will bring. She does what she feels is right, even when it's the wrong thing to do. She learns from her mistakes, sure, but she never thinks she knows the only way." Then he looked past me at my friends. "And it's not just her, either."

P-21 held Scotch Tape to his chest protectively. "If you think I'm ever going to just let my daughter die, then you're deluded at best and evil at worst. I don't care if we do get to spend eternity floating as souls or spirits or whatever. I want that chance to be a father. To have a family. And I won't rob thousands of others in the Wasteland of that chance, either."

Tom gaped. "But. . . how can you be so selfish? If the Eater is allowed to remain, or worse, be reborn, then you are dooming millions upon millions of years of thriving life! You will be robbing the universe of the songs he has taken, yours likely among them! The loss is nigh unthinkable!"

"And what about our lives now?" Scotch countered. "Don't they matter as much as that life millions of years from now? I don't know what my future will be. I don't know if I'll settle down in Chapel and help out the Hoof or go wandering around like Blackjack trying to make bad places better. Maybe I'll have a coltfriend, or a marefriend, or both. Maybe my own babies. Don't I get a chance to have that life and find out?"

The stallion stared at her in worry. "But. . . but the lives of billions. . . trillions. . .

numbers beyond your reckoning are at risk! Your life, and your own babies... the lives of the few cannot equal the lives of so many."

"Bullshit!" Rampage shouted, thrusting a hoof at Tom. "You can't say that those lives in the future are worth any more than ours today just because there are more of them! You can't guarantee they're going to be better people, or even that they'll exist at all! Some other catastrophe could come along and ruin things for them too." She looked at all of us and then added, "Now, I wouldn't have a problem dying myself and getting a fresh spin on the spiritual wheel or whatever, but there're thousands of ponies I know who do deserve their chance at life."

"Yes, they do! They will! Just not... I..." Tom stared at her, then looked helplessly at the translucent draconequus.

"I told you," Discord sang teasingly.

"Here's an idea," P-21 said as he rose. "Instead of any of us dying, why don't you get a couple more stars, and we can pry the Eater out once and for all? And once we do, since Equus means so much to all of you, you can help us fix the Wasteland and do all kind of snazzy, helpful things." Tom bowed his head, a solemn expression on his face. It appeared almost as if he were ashamed. "What? Too busy shining?" Discord, to his credit, also didn't smile. In fact, he seemed to pity the star.

"They don't care about Equus," Tom murmured. We stared at him for several long seconds. "You are... very small... so weak already." He shook his head. "Most of us have our own concerns. Others would just as soon annihilate both the Eater and Equus at once." And like that, we were whisked away from the planet to a distant star that glowed a cold, blazing blue. We followed it as it drifted past Equus, and then with three puffs of flame it consumed the moon, sun, and planet without even stopping. The universe rotated around us, and another star, surrounded by a disk of whirling gasses, shone a brilliant beam of energy focused on the reappeared planet. The beam liquefied the surface and left it a glowing sphere of dead black glass. This spun away to be replaced by another Equus that hovered in place for several seconds before a small brilliant pebble of a star smashed the planet like an egg, blasting the moon and sun away in opposite directions. As the rubble whizzed out of sight, another Equus shone in the night. Then a ripple of something unseen and massive passed by, and the entire set of spheres disappeared with three brief, tiny flickers, gone as if they'd never been.

So many ways our world could be destroyed from without. Yet, despite that, I still wasn't about to just let Horizons happen.

One last turn and we were back over Equus again. Tom lifted his eyes. “Those that do care, and we do... please believe me... we do... they have their own trials and problems keeping them from acting. Other threats, some not entirely unlike the Eater. Some far, far worse. I lost my world long ago. The Eater’s detonation tore it to pieces. I will give all I can to stop him and to make up for my failure.”

Discord sighed and flashed from above Tom’s head to the ground next to him, hooking an arm around the stallion’s neck in a smarmy hug. “Dear me, things are getting maudlin.” He patted Tom’s head, getting an annoyed glare from the star spirit. “It’s very nice that you’re willing to do that. However, that doesn’t change that this is their world, Tommy. You’re asking them to give up their lives, and while it’s grand to say that they’ll be reborn, that doesn’t make *these* lives any less precious.”

“For that matter,” P-21 went on, “it’d basically shit on the lives and sacrifices of everyone else who’s died to make the Wasteland better. To make anything better in the whole of our history! I don’t care if our souls or spirits live on after we die. Life matters. Ours. Yours. Everyone’s. If we die giving it our best shot, then I can accept that, but I can’t accept that our best shot is the one that kills everyone even if it works.” He rapped his hoof twice on the table and locked his eyes with Tom’s as he repeated, “Life matters.”

I couldn’t restrain myself. I threw my hooves around him and kissed him as hard as I could. I didn’t even try to restrain myself when he said those two words. I only stopped when I heard music. Rampage had an accordion apparently glued to her hooves while lit candles occupied the tabletop, and Scotch Tape and Discord both wore strange little hats atop their heads. Discord, smoking a cigarette and sporting a T-shirt with broad stripes running horizontally across it, sighed deeply. “Ah. C’est l’amour...”

“Must you?” Tom asked him with a long-suffering look at the ghost.

“Since you asked, yes, I must,” Discord said, pulling the shirt, cigarette, and funny hats off with a single sweep of his paw. “Chaos is infinitely superior to annihilation, as I’ve told you again and again. It’s brought us here. It opens up fascinating new possibilities.”

“Such as defeat,” Tom pointed out.

Discord blew a raspberry. “Oh please. It’s no fun if there’s not some terrible risk of losing. I’ve lost multiple times, but I never let that stop me.”

“Not even when you’re dead,” I pointed out, and jabbed a hoof at him. “How are you

here at all?”

“Well, I could guess that I’m just a subconscious projection of your desire to defy authority and establish your own control over your own destiny, or maybe it’s simply because you’re trotting around in a body made of reprocessed me. None of us are truly *here* at all. This is, after all, in your head,” Discord said as he reached over and opened a square hole in midair like a door. He poked his head inside only to immediately pull it back out, blushing furiously, the sound of slapping flanks and my moaning drifting through the opening. He slammed the door shut, manifested some planks, and hammered them over the thin air. “Oh my... Well, I think that that’s enough exploration of your mind, thank you very much. Twilight’s fantasies were so much more... literary. And much less sticky.”

“Can we *please* get back to stopping Cognitum?” Rampage asked plaintively.

“Right...” I said as I looked at Tom and then down at the world below us. “I’m sorry, Tom. I think you’re okay, for a star. You want to make Equus a better place. I’m all for that. But I’m not taking any option that kills everyone I care about. I don’t care if they do get another shot in an afterlife. Every one of them is fighting for their survival. I can’t just end that. I have to do something else.”

Tom didn’t reply for several long minutes. “How?” Tom asked, cocking his head curiously.

“I don’t know!” I admitted, “but we’ll do it! We’ll find a way.”

And once again we hovered above Chapel, but this time there were ponies working with zebras to entomb the city. Deus and the Raptors leveled the towers of the Core and all the tantalizing treasures that lingered within. The rubble was buried beneath the earth, and then Gardens spread an immense rainboom of magic that swept over the world. Ponies worked hard planting crops and healing the poison and scars of the land. They gathered up the silver rings wherever they could be found, returning them to the Core to be entombed with the Eater. With every one, more life bloomed and thrived, and ponies and zebras lived again, wiser and aware of the threat the Eater posed.

Tom stared at me as the Hoof, a great green bowl of life and civilization, spread out beneath us. It would happen. I was certain of it. As certain as a super smart star spirit from space. We’d live with the Eater, deny it whatever we could, and perhaps someday find some way to deal with it safely. We could do it. Ponies and zebras and griffins and... everyone. We could make the world better.

Tom started to laugh and shook his head. "How... unexpected." I expected a patronizing reply, but he simply smiled at the four of us.

"I told you," Discord said with a grin. "Sometimes these 'mere mortals' can accomplish truly staggering feats. They would even have redeemed me if those haybrains had stuck to the script!"

Tom nodded and sighed, then turned to us. "It seems that I must place my fate in your hooves. It's your world. If you have the maturity to make such a decision, then I will respect it. I only hope that you are right."

"Trottenheimer's Folly!" P-21 said, looking at Rampage, then me. "It can destroy Tom, right? And Cognitum has it, doesn't she?" Rampage snapped out of a daze and nodded a little in response. "Then you just have to get it from her and blast the rock. Heck, you might just be able to wreck Horizons's infrastructure with a lucky shot or two!"

"But... what would that do to the star spirit... *thingy*?" Scotch Tape asked, and we all glanced at her. She flushed and snapped, "What? It's not like Blackjack has a monopoly on the word!"

"I would pass on. To what, or where, I do not know. Perhaps I would return to the beyond to shine again, or remain within this sphere, or proceed to some other destiny." He gave her a gentle smile. "Do not fear for me, young one," he continued with a wave of his hoof. "One way or another, I will endure."

"If not as a spirit, we live on as memory," Discord said with a nod.

"Right," I said, my mind racing a mile a minute. I could do this. I could! I just had to neutralize Cogs and... I stood and smacked my hoof against the table. "Right. Let's do this. One last game, with the whole damn world in the pot."

"I think you are making a mistake," Tom said with that calm smile, "but I will abide. I made peace with this long ago. The falling of one of our own shall be rectified one way or another. I have faith that you mortals will make it so."

"Alright," I said as I looked at each of my friends. "We can do this. We've come so far. We'll finish this once and for all."

"There're still a few mooks to wipe up," Rampage pointed out. "That bitch with the missile launcher is being more annoying than your typical unicorn." I arched a brow at her coolly, and she grinned back. "Present company included."

I sighed and bowed my head, but gave a smirk in reply. "Okay. I'll work on Echo.

We're going to need him if there's any way to get Cognitum out of my old body. P-21, keep stalling the launch. Scotch, make sure Snipey keeps her head down and doesn't tag him again. Rampage... just do what you do best."

"Sweet! I'll finally have the chance to stun them all with my interpretive dance!" she said as she jumped to her hind legs and struck a funny pose, one foreleg stuck off to the side. We all stared at her for a second before she waved her hoof dismissively. "Oh, you mean the whole slaughter thing. Yeah, I can do that too."

"Oh, I like her!" Discord said with a grin. "Like the pink one with half the giggles but twice the mayhem!" He swept Rampage up and planted a deep kiss on her lips, pulling away with a pop.

Rampage blinked back at him and slammed her hoof across his face, twisting his head around like a corkscrew. "I'm a filly, you pervert!"

"Everything gets weirder every minute," Scotch Tape remarked, shaking her head. Rampage stuck her tongue out at her. Tom frowned from Scotch Tape to Rampage, pointing a hoof from one to the other, and then shook his head, muttering about needing more notes on these mortals.

I looked at each of them in turn, taking in P-21's certain smile, Rampage's eager grin, and Scotch Tape's nervous smirk. I wished Glory was here, if not to help in the fight, then to think of a solution for if... no. Nothing was going to go wrong. We were going to do this! "Okay. Let's go."

The world faded to white as we all stepped away from the table. Distantly, I heard Discord say, "Double or nothing?"

When the chamber under the Lunar Palace returned, I heard my friends as a chatter of thoughts. Echo blinked at the enormous rock at my back, then at me. "What... there was a voice in my head... telling me... telling me not to do what I was doing. We'd all be machines like her if it worked, and dead if it didn't..." He shook his head. "What did you do, Blackjack?"

"Do? I don't have *do* things to have weird shit happen to me. I can trigger it just by standing around," I replied as I put a hoof around his shoulders. "You were with me for *how* long and never figured that out?"

He dropped his eyes. "You can't beat her," he muttered. "She's going to rule us all. She should..."

"Can't beat her? Yeah. Just like I couldn't beat Deus. Or blow up a battleship. Or take on the Enclave. Or go to the frigging moon," I said as I jerked him around and

stared into his eyes. “But I need you if I’m going to do it. I need you to back me up, just like you used to back up Big Macintosh. You’ve got to trust me, Echo. Do that, and you can go on with your life not feeling ashamed for the mistakes you’ve made. Okay?”

Echo stared at me for too many long seconds. *How can she trust me after all I’ve done to her? So like him...* Finally, he gave a shaky nod. “What do you need me to do?” I kept the gaze. *I’ll do it right... for once...* At that, I smiled.

“I need you to delay Horizons’s firing. If you can find a trick to shut it down completely, that’d be even better,” I said as I looked high above. Cognitum was nearly at the throne. “Will any of those Harbingers help us?”

“Maybe. She’s convinced most of them that she’s unstoppable, though,” he replied. “Or she’s promised them riches. Or they really hate you. Or all three.” He bit his lip. “Cognitum didn’t even put kill implants in them. She doesn’t seem to think she needs them.”

‘Cause she had my ‘victoryness’ working for her. “Right.” I nodded and concentrated on my friends. *Echo is going to take over stalling Horizons. Mop up the rest of her muscle as fast as you can. Then we’re going to have to get her attention.* I turned and stared at Echo. *Can you hear me?*

He glanced over from the terminal. “What are you staring at me like that for?”

Urk. I really wished I had more time to figure this telepathy shit out. “Nothing. Just buy us time.”

I trotted over to where I had a better view of Cognitum way up above me. I couldn’t risk teleporting; I might end up stuck in somepony else for time I couldn’t spare. I couldn’t shout that far... not over the dwindling gunfire and occasional missile or grenade detonation on the far side of Tom. But... I did have one thing she might hear.

“Hey, Princess Fuckslut! I’m still alive down here!” I shouted into my broadcaster, transmitting on as many frequencies as I could. She froze in midstep and I grinned. “You know, for being a unicorn princess, you’re pretty lousy at killing me and my friends. I thought Princesses were supposed to... you know... be able to accomplish shit.”

“Blackjack,” my broadcaster crackled. “Your impudence is pathetic. Your obscenities betray your utter futility. Do you really think I’ll succumb to petty insults when I’m so close to my triumph?”

“Why not?” I replied. “You’re not exactly the most advanced artificial intelligence I’ve bumped into. They didn’t have half your glitches, Cognitum. Then again, I guess you don’t need cutting-edge programming to get fucked by a horny Horse, do you, Sweetie Butt?”

“It has always been the purview of fools to insult their betters. You will see, Blackjack. I will make sure you survive to see it,” Cognitum countered haughtily. “I am Princess Luna. I will restore my realm and rule it as my people deserve. They will enjoy a second golden age!”

“Oh, get off it. You’re not Princess Luna any more than you’re me. I don’t see Princess Luna using incineration spells. That doesn’t exactly scream ‘moon themed’ to me. You’re nothing more than a computer glitch pretending you’re actually a person. A bad copy in a fragmented memory that snatched a body she can’t handle and a soul that you pretend makes you Princess Luna.” I stared up at her as she froze, right at the edge of the throne.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she stated primly. “About you surviving, that is. Get down there and kill her. Now.” Two ponies appeared at the edge and immediately started to leap down from girder to girder towards me. “Now, it’s time to alter the stone’s trajectory.” She sat on the throne and reached up for the mesh with her hooves.

The first of the two was a unicorn stallion in a black longcoat and shades levitating two automatic pistols. The other was an earth pony mare with a strange long, slim, single-edged sword gripped in her jaws and her mane tied in a topknot. “Go ahead. Pull that mesh down. Soon as you do, I’ll teleport right next to you and pull your plug.”

She froze, then lowered her hooves. “Perhaps it would be amusing to watch you finally silenced for good, Blackjack,” she said as she sat imperiously on the throne. If she wasn’t actually a princess, she could pull off the look pretty damn well.

Pistols jumped onto the ring that encircled Tom, followed a second later by the blue-gray earth pony mare with the sword. The sickly white unicorn took a moment to shake a cigarette out of a pack and slip it between his lips... as the swordsmare charged in much much faster than I expected! She ran like a pegasus, closing the distance between us with astonishing speed. I unloaded with Sexy, but the moment before I fired, she leapt into the air. The unicorn, farther back from the spread, hit the deck, covering his head.

The mare came down, her head twisting like a zebra’s to bring the blade down in a vertical slash. I rolled onto my side, interposing Sexy’s thick barrel between me and

the blade. Despite the thick steel barrel, the edge bit into the metal. I bit down on Vigilance's grip and slipped into S.A.T.S. . . . twenty percent chance to hit? Only five for her head? And even in the spell, the mare slowly moved back from me! Was she on chemo or something?

I tried four shots, but all four missed the swordsmare, cutting through the air inches from her body as she leapt to the side. *Anata ga shinimasu, yariman.* Wha. . . what the heck did that mean? I kicked my legs and spun around to keep facing her. The mare moved as fast as any zebra, keeping ahead of me. I rolled to my hooves, slowed by Sexy's weight. Damn it! Why couldn't I be strong enough to manage it like an earth pony?

Then I yipped as a pistol round bit into my rump. Mr. Pistols had lit his cigarette and had two matte black IF-21 automatics with dual laser sights, silencers, and extended magazines. I quite approved of his taste in hardware. *Hold still, darlin'. We'll end this nice and neat. Easy paycheck.* He advanced slowly, cautiously, but not fearfully, maintaining excellent trigger control and aim. Worse, he was on one side of me and swordsmare was on the other. I'd have to turn my back on one to deal with the other.

I need help. I tried to maneuver to put the swordspoon between me and Mr. Pistols. I failed in that, getting a slice right across my snout that filled my nose and mouth with blood. Now I just concentrated on moving, shielding myself with my forelegs and Sexy's bulk as best I could. From where he worked behind the terminal, I saw doubt in Echo's eyes.

I'm coming! P-21 thought at me. *One minute!* A moment later came the thoughts. *I'll save all of you like you saved me. I won't let you die.*

Touching thought, but I didn't have a minute. I couldn't use any magic beyond levitation. And if Echo thought I was going to lose. . . . If I did lose. . . .

No.

I turned my back on the swordsmare and stared right at Mr. Pistols's sunglasses-covered eyes. Now there was fear. I knew that the swordsmare was coming for my head. One slice to finish me off for good. But I was going to kill Pistols first, and he knew it. Everypony knew it.

So I ducked.

The blade passed right over my head, scraping off the top of my helmet as its wielder flew in front of me. Her eyes were wide as she looked back over her shoulder at me, and I entered S.A.T.S. as she landed. I saw every muscle tense as she prepared to

leap away to safety. A part of me noted she had one fine ass. Not as sweet as a pegasus's, but still. . . *Dame!* she thought desperately. I toggled one burst, the spell not yet having recharged enough energy for more, and fired.

It was enough.

Her body shattered into bloody rags and dropped to the floor as so much twitching, writhing, gasping meat, her broken sword skittering away across the metal. She didn't have a fine ass anymore. She didn't have *any* ass anymore. She crawled her way towards the broken hilt of her sword as she bled out, her entrails slowly spooling out behind her. *Watashi wa... meiyō nashi de... shinu koto ga... dekinai...* She stretched one bloody hoof towards the hilt. *Usō megami-sama...gomen na-* Then she went still, and her red bar winked out.

Then I got shot in the head.

It must have been a hollow-point, because thank goodness for the combat helmet that deflected most of the shot, but it still felt like a hammer against my skull. *Take her down quick! Get my fucking money! Never look at the fucking moon again! Fuck this place!* Mr. Pistols thought desperately as he unloaded as rapidly as he could into me, moving to keep the curve of Tom to give him cover while levitating his guns out and into the clear. Even without a direct line of fire, he had phenomenal aim, and I was forced to shift to the side to try and buy myself cover. It didn't work, and my appreciation for earth pony annoyance with unicorn magic grew in leaps and bounds.

"You know, Blackjack, I'm wondering. . ." Cognitum purred over my PipBuck. Not now, damn it! I leapt to the side to try and catch the black-longcoated unicorn in the open, but he nimbly jumped off the circular catwalk and onto the girders. Sexy roared my frustration as he took cover behind a vertical beam, and then a second later his guns appeared to either side of the beam and fired back at me with way more precision and luck than any blind-firing unicorn deserved. I was bleeding from rounds that had managed to penetrate the combat barding, and the impacts that hadn't penetrated made me feel like somepony had been using me as their piñata. "Is there something amiss with your magic?"

"I'll teleport up there in a second, and you'll find out!" I shouted back over the broadcaster connection, moving to the side. Something apple-shaped was levitated out from behind the pillar on the right and flung at me. He jumped out to the left, rolling along the metal beam with impressive grace and rising to a crouch to aim both weapons at me. I countered by shooting the grenade as it was halfway through

the air, the spheroid exploding in a cloud of shrapnel while the remainder of my fire sent him behind the cover of another girder. The grenade shrapnel still cut into my chest and forelegs, though, and I was reminded of an adage about horseshoes and hoofgrenades.

Wheezing and bleeding, I fished out a healing potion and found that I only had two left. What, had I been drinking them like... oh, yeah. I had, hadn't it? I gulped one down, thankful for the sweet relief the healing magic provided.

Meanwhile, Cognitum purred, "No, I don't think you will. I think you can stay down there and witness my victory. I am Princess Luna, reborn!"

She reached up for the mesh, grabbed it with her hooves, and, as if she were coronating herself, lowered it onto her head. Now would be a great time for that computer to short her brain out! Taking the legs off her was still an option in my book! And I had a momentary stab of hope when her whole body went stiff. Then, suddenly, hundreds of talismans along the walls flared to life, and the entire chamber gave a great rumble.

Then, when I was distracted, Mr. Pistols of course took the opportunity to lob another grenade at me. The metal pinged once off the deck beside me, and all I could think of was to kick it away from me before it went off. Luckily, my kick sent it over the edge of the platform a second before it detonated. The underside of the platform rattled like a hoofful of bolts had been flung against it. Of course, while I was dealing with that, I took two more rounds in the barding. *Wear her down. Take her apart bit by bit.* Mr. Pistols's thoughts were a whole lot more cool and composed than mine were. *Then get the fuck out of here and spend the first million caps on booze and whores to forget this fucking place.* Well, mostly.

Two more minutes, Blackjack. P-21 promised. Soon as I can get Sniper to step on a mine, I'll be there.

There was another distant explosion. *Run out of fucking missiles, damn it!* Rampage snarled in my mind.

Owwie! She shot my leg! What kind of pony shoots a kid? Scotch Tape cried out. *I'm okay, but I won't be able to get to you, Blackjack.*

There was nothing for it. I scrambled off the circular walkway and into the girders. Mr. Pistols was somewhere in here with me. I checked Sexy; the swordsmare had really cut part of it good, but it just had to get me through today. There was a red bar ahead of me. I had no idea if he had an EFS or not, but he was a lot more mobile

than me. I had only one edge. I'd have to make the most of it.

Where is she? Cognitum said she'd be easy. That thing needs to look up the fucking definition. Must be in the girders. She'll have an EFS. Just need to get above her. She'll come to me. Above us, there were the sounds of screaming, and through the girders I could see flashes of energy. And here I was, dealing with a pony who was apparently doing all this for money! I moved slowly forward, keeping my eyes up. My boots clanked on the metal. *There. I hear her. That's it. Come towards the red bar.*

If he could hear my hoofsteps. "I don't want to kill you, you know. I just want to stop Cognitum and go home. I think we all want to go home." I concentrated, trying to tune in to his thoughts like a radio. *Bingo. Just like that freak said. Trying to get me to give up and change sides. Just keep talking while I move over you.* I sighed as I saw a bit of movement in the shadows above me. Was it his longcoat?

I sat down and sighed. "I'm so tired of fighting. I don't know who you are, but I'm ready for a change. I don't know what Cognitum told you. How much money she's agreed to pay you. What threats she's made. I just want this to be over. I want to go home. Start a new life. A real life." I levitated Vigilance under the platform behind me where I figured he'd be most likely to drop down, and suddenly I heard the chatter of gunfire and ghostly screams, of Calamity screaming for Homage and of Velvet begging someone to stop. Focus. . . . Focus on Mr. Pistols.

Get behind her. She's apparently survived headshots, but nopony survives without a brainstem. Fuck, but she's a talker. What the hell is she talking about? Change? Nothing changes. Everything gets worse. Everything dies. That's the one promise of life: it ends. What matters is how much booze and money you get from beginning to end. I felt the girder I was on tremble slightly as something landed behind me.

I turned and saw him crouched, pistols raised. I could have turned out like him. If I hadn't had EC-1101 to give me direction and friends to keep me good, I could have ended up just like him: fixated on enjoyment and my own wants, screw everypony else. I was pretty self-centered at times. "I don't want to kill you," I said as I kept Vigilance levitated. "I just want to go home. If you help us stop Cognitum, you can come with us."

My turn seemed to unnerve his shaky sneer. *How the hell did she hear me?* "Damn. Here I thought I was being quiet. But that Princess Whatever promised me all the money, and paid me a million up front. A million. If she can just throw that cash around, she sure can take care of me after we're back. Unless you can beat her

offer.” *I really should put a bullet in her head, but maybe she can.*

“You bet I can. Easily,” I countered. “Your life.”

That made him chuckle. *Fuck, how original.* “I got two hollowpoints aimed at your head. You can’t turn that cannon towards me fast enough to finish me off.” *Shit. She’s got me talking. Time to—* He paused when I levitated Vigilance from underneath the platform next to him, out of his view, and pressed it against his temple. *Fuck.* “Fuck.”

“I don’t want to kill you, but I will. I want to stop her. I need help. Echo has switched sides. You can too. You can do the right thing, right now, when it matters most. . . or I can blow your brains out. I should do that anyway,” I said as I glared at my own reflection. “But honestly, the biggest difference between me and her is I’m giving you a chance to do the right thing.”

She can’t be serious. Fuck. I knew a shipping container of caps was too good to be true. He didn’t twitch a muscle. I should have pulled the trigger. If he thought faster than I, he’d take me out. But I’d been given a chance to do better. I had to give that chance to others.

He lowered his guns. “Shoulda known better. Any job that has you going to the moon is no good.” *I should blow her brains out when she turns away. . . but. . . fuck. I’m in over my head here. I’ll never get back to Dise at this rate.* “Couldn’t say no to that much money though.” *If it looks like Cogs is gonna win, I can just take her out and say it was all a ploy—*

I smacked him with the barrel of the gun, nearly knocking his glasses off. “No. Help me or run away and hide.” There was another rumble and a scream of rage from above. “There is no taking me out. No ploys.” He stared at me with bafflement, then horror.

...Oh, you have got to be kidding me. She can read minds? I would have doubled my fee if I’d known that. “I’m not a hero, Security. I kill ponies. But I try and do the job I’m paid for.” *Fuck! If anyone finds out I broke a contract, ugggh! Not worth dying for. Can’t pussy out either. Fuck.* “I fucking hate today,” he muttered.

I smirked and rolled my eyes. “Please. My ‘today’ has lasted for months,” I countered, then thought at my friends. *Don’t kill the one with pistols and the longcoat. He’s agreed to help us too.* “Head on back to the ring.” He seemed to get the hint that I wasn’t going to tempt him with my back and headed back.

Too bad. Wish you could have convinced this sniper. She died praising Luna after

stepping on a mine. P-21 thought. *How'd you do it?*

I gave him a chance. I thought back. Hopefully it was a chance to spend his pay and not a chance to stab me in the back. *Meet at Echo. We need to find out what's going on. Rampage?* I thought as we started back towards the ring platform around Tom.

I still haven't gotten her. I think she's down to her last missile, though. I've gone through way too many legs with this cunt. Rampage paused. *What do you mean you hope I give her a choice to give up! That's your bag, Blackjack. I got four ponies in me telling me she's going down!*

I didn't think it! Did I? Ok, if I did, I didn't intend too. Just do what you have to and meet up. I looked at the stallion as he jumped onto the platform. "Okay. Don't kill Cognitum right away. I'm trying to get my body back." The blank look I received for that comment could have told me his thoughts without mind reading. "Look, can you kill the gun pods first?"

Thirty seconds and I'm already regretting this. "Yeah. Sure." He shook out another cigarette and lit it with a brass lighter, snapping it closed with his magic. *Fucking doomed. Again.* "No problem."

Scotch Tape limped as P-21 helped her over to us. I took a second to look around and up, and. . .

Okay. This wasn't good.

Cognitum contorted and twisted in the seat as lightning arced along the cables connecting her to the throne. All around us, even more milky white talismans were coming to life. The Flux was starting to send up geysers that slowly twisted the girders into increasingly warped shapes. Parts of the entire girder lattice were starting to bend and groan as they began to collapse. The whole plate above began to sag and tear in places. Magical fields along the periphery of the structure sprang to life, and enormous runed symbols of magic filled the air, some lining the walls and others around the throne.

Okay. This was getting a little ridiculous. I ran to where Echo worked furiously, his eyes staring at the terminal screen as he juggled a dozen little tasks at once. "What's happening to her?"

"She altered the trajectory. Then this happened," Echo said, tapping a button.

"You are a tyrant," Goldenblood hissed over the speakers. "A monster unrepentant. You could have spared Equus the nightmare I wrought. Instead, you've demon-

strated that you are unworthy of rulership. I will correct the mistake I made, Your Majesty!”

Echo killed the voiceover. “It’s been repeating versions of that ever since she made the alteration,” he said as he resumed his furious typing. “She’s been locked in ever since. Her gun pods tried to scrap the computer, but it’s shielded.”

“Are you sure about that?” P-21 asked as he peered up from under the brim of his hat. “I think she’s doing something.”

I stared as well. It was hard to make out, but it looked like she was manipulating something small and shiny. Something like a large pistol of some kind. Something familiar. . .

Folly.

“Oh shit! Hold on!” I screamed as a blinding bar of light exploded above us. Cognitum’s aim had been off, and the beam hit the field of magic to the left of the throne. The magic interacted, and instead of one beam blasting clear through the roof, a hundred smaller refracted beams lanced out in a fan that then ricocheted wildly off a second magic field behind the first. Beams of blinding white light ripped through the cavernous Lunar Palace, as the plate and platforms came apart.

Once again, I consulted the list of magic spells I wished I could cast right now but couldn’t and moved a shield spell to the top. The plate ripped and tore, coming to rest like an immense spiral staircase around us, the platforms a twisted helix rising up to where the throne, inexplicably held up by a single support, remained. Beams and rebar punched right through the plate decking, and something caused the entire thing to lunge up and hang at an angle. Cables dangled and sparked. The F.A.D.E. talismans remained where they were, suspended in midair by their active enchantment.

On the plus side, none of my friends were dead, the dome hadn’t been breached, and my body hadn’t been vaporized.

On the minus side, Cognitum was free. The mesh dangled from the throne.

“How dare he?!” Cognitum roared as she loaded a second silver bullet into Folly. “How dare he think he can trap the Goddess of the Night like vermin?!”

Go to the moon. Become fantastically rich. Why did I think coming to the Hoof was a good idea? “Tell me you’re taking point,” Mr. Pistols said. If you think I am. . . shit, mind reader. . . um. . . you’re fucking crazy.

“Who are you?” Scotch Tape asked, a bit suspiciously.

“Bastard,” the grayish white unicorn said simply.

“Seriously?” Scotch Tape clearly wasn’t impressed.

“It’s what everyone calls me. The Bastard. You Bastard. Mister Bastard.” *What is it with mouthy fillies these days? Honestly...*

“Are you still connected?” I asked Echo, who had clutched the terminal for dear life when the platform we’d been on had lunged up and was now hanging with it at a sharp angle above Tom.

He tapped the keys. “I am. The subsystems must be embedded in the walls. I think the computer’s using mechasprites to keep things working till Horizons goes off.” He glanced down at the surging and bubbling sea of Flux and rapidly touched several keys. “I’ll try and keep things together. Cognitum is your problem now.”

Yeah. It was time. I considered each of my friends, and they each gave a nod.

“Die, traitors to the goddess!” screamed a mare from the wreckage of the scaffolding slightly above us, about a hundred feet away. The bloody and battered yellow unicorn pointed her missile launcher right at us. Then something was flung from above, striking her in the head. A dismembered hoof. “Ow!” she cried out, rubbing her horn as she picked up the foot. “Why aren’t you dead yet?” she screamed as she swung the missile launcher up at the descending Rampage.

Unfortunately for her, Rampage landed atop her. She’d lost most of her spiked armor from who knew how many detonations, but she still retained enough weight to crush the petite unicorn under her. Then she reared back her head and smashed her forehead into the unicorn’s until, on the third impact, the unicorn’s horn broke off. Perhaps that would have been an ideal time for Rampage to stop, as the unicorn shrieked and her magic disappeared, sending her missile launcher clattering down into the wreckage below. Rampage wasn’t one for stopping though, and she repeated the head butts a dozen more times till the unicorn’s face was a concave bowl.

Rampage hopped easily over to us, scowling. “Damn it. I had a half dozen retorts I could have made, but I was too busy smashing her face in. Now she’s dead.” Rampage scowled at me, her face a mask of gore, but then she shrugged. “Eh. Oh well. Maybe I’ll get lucky and Cognitum’ll vaporize me with one of those shots, eh?” She grinned and tapped my side with her hoof.

“You still want to die?” P-21 asked with a frown.

"I just smashed a mare to death with my face. What do you think?" Rampage said, then looked up at Cognium. "Oh, hey, she reloaded!" Rampage started to jump up and down and wave her hooves in the air. "Here! Coggerhead! Me! Shoot me!"

Shit! I was running, and it didn't matter where. The collapsed plates had made two incredibly steep, broken ramps that I could make my way up, but it wasn't easy. I had to reach her, make her stop using up all my shots of Folly. My hooves struggled for any crossbrace or twisted bit of metal that I could use for purchase as I tried to close the distance. Behind me came another brilliant pillar of light. It punched a perfect hole down through the wreckage and into the Flux, which seemed to suck it up as if hungry. The mass of metal and fluid gave an almost tectonic rumble. Only the talismans and magical fields were keeping it up, though a cloud of mechasprites worked to reinforce things as best they could. From below me came Rampage's plaintive wail of "Oh come on! Hit me already!"

The gun pods swept out to either side of Cognium as I scrambled up the shuddering ruin of the Lunar Palace. She stood imperiously above us all, a condescending smirk twisting her lips. *Pitiful. Pathetic. Presumptuous. She actually thinks she can win.* Her horn began to glow. *Just like Twilight. Well, I won't make the same mistake twice. This time, her friends die, starting with her sex stallion.* I glanced back, spotting P-21 exposed for a moment as he struggled to maneuver past a twisted loop of girder.

Look out! P-21 raised his head in time to spot the flare of red light atop her horn. The crimson beam sliced through the air, and he jumped aside, springing nimbly and keeping his head low as he avoided the beam. It left a glowing, molten line where it passed, singeing the corner of his hat. He met my eyes and sent back a wave of gratitude.

Annoying gnats! The two gun pods dropped towards me as I reached the second half of the fallen platform, halfway up to her. Then two more moved around from behind the throne and followed the first pair; apparently she'd been keeping spares in reserve. The two pods on the attack sprayed me with crimson beams, and I screamed as I felt myself burned by their salvos. *Yes! Burn, you insufferable fool!* The damned things jinked far too quickly for me to even attempt to hit them with Sexy, even with S.A.T.S. I drew Vigilance, loaded armor piercing rounds, and slipped into the magic to hit one of them three times, but aside from breaking a targeting talisman, I did little to disable the hovering weapons.

Then a grenade wrapped in a glowing teal nimbus launched up from below me and streaked like a guided missile straight at one of the quartet. The explosion peppered

me with shrapnel but tore the front off the drone, which whirled wildly, firing blindly in all directions as it spiraled down towards the Flux. I glanced down and saw Bastard, taking cover behind a broken fold of steel, send another grenade aloft, but a beam from Cognitum detonated the apple before it reached the remaining drones. Then another. When Cognitum blew the third out of the air, he snapped, "Damn it! Those are a hundred caps each!"

However, Cognitum couldn't block Scotch Tape's wild fire with the disintegration rifle, a torrent of green bolts spewing up at the pods, the cybermare, and me. Cognitum's crimson shield absorbed the fire, but the gun pods had to scatter to avoid it. I pressed myself to the floor and struggled to down my last healing potion. One of the pods took that opportunity to nip in, grab one of my hindhooves with a claw on a tendril, and lift me into the air, hauling me over the really... incredibly... ridiculously high drop. It pulled me up towards Cognitum, her horn blazing in triumph.

Don't worry; I got you! Rampage thought as I twisted around, trying my best to shoot Cognitum and not look down as I wondered how Rampage of all ponies was going to help me all the way up here. And then an enormous wagon-sized chunk of metal scrap came flying through the air straight at us. The gun pod only managed a feeble volley of red beams at the metal block before being smashed aside, and Cognitum's eyes widened in shock as the block continued towards her unimpeded. She reared up, folding her wings in front of her, and as the block impacted with her shield, her wings flared out, slicing burning lines of fire in the metal and sending the shrapnel raining back down.

I didn't quite have the best view of this, however, because the impact with the gun pod had sent it whirling in midair, and when the claw released my hoof, I went flying up above Cognitum and her throne. *I shall break these upstarts! I shall show them the futility of their opposition! I cannot be defeated!* her mind roared at me as I reached the apex of my fling and... hey! The gravity talismans clearly weren't working up here!

I flailed my hooves around as I struggled to stabilize myself, finally taking a page from LittlePip's book. I used my magic to grab myself within my own telekinetic field. If I hadn't been on the moon, no doubt it would have been futile. Here, I managed to stop my spin and orient Sexy towards Cognitum below me.

Unfortunately, using magic sent my perceptions wandering. I was Rainbow Dash standing in the midst of a scene of carnage. Dead Brood choked what looked like a hallway in an SPP tower. "Is he dead?" Rainbow Dash asked tersely.

“Yeah,” Silver said. “Even we die when our heads get cut off.” The augmented mare was missing a foreleg, and both her wings were shattered. “Damn it. . .” she said as she regarded the two dead Enclave cyberponies she’d formed a trio with. “I was going to try and get that Morningstar guy to grow him a new penis. . . or a new body. . . or something.”

“Later,” Rainbow Dash said as she turned and went into the room where Homage tended to an injured Windsheer. “Is he going to make it?” Rainbow asked as he breathed heavily, blood dripping from a nostril and out the corner of his mouth. He gave an annoyed twist of his lips, pushing her away with a hoof.

“He needs a healing potion. We’re out,” Homage said, leaving him and turning her attention to a terminal next to him. The room was an absolute mess of wires, equipment, cables, and corpses. “Also, they must have gotten an interface into one of the sealed compartments. Probably with a teleporter. They’re probably working to bypass our bypass.”

“What’s going on?” Rainbow asked as she looked at monitors. Several showed tons of ponies streaming into the Core, overwhelming the few trying to keep them out. Two others showed the Skyport with a tornado in the midst of it. A tornado with a face. Three Raptors were battling the swirling wind. “What’s happening at our command?!”

“I don’t know. It’s all falling apart. We should have gotten an alicorn resupply an hour ago. Something bad happened,” Homage said as she typed furiously on the keyboard, tears running down her cheeks. “Damn it! I can’t do anything but watch!”

Wait. . . why was I suddenly getting hot? I cut the magic, the room faded away, and I found myself being bathed by crimson light projected from Cognitum’s horn, the cone of energy focusing into an incinerating beam. There was nothing for it. I had Sexy pointed in the right direction, so I let her rip. The full automatic stream of slugs pounded into her shield like a river of hammers. One by itself might not have been a problem, but twenty within three seconds were enough to make her focus on defense once more. It also had the added effect of launching me away from that incinerating magic and towards one of the shimmering magical fields.

Contact with the surface of it was like standing on tingling ice. I spread all four of my legs apart to keep from falling on my face and kept Sexy focused on her. With the real Luna’s soul empowering her, she might not need to chow down on gems constantly, but she still had to manage her power. The gunfire kept pushing me against the F.A.D.E. shield and not plunging down to a messy end. From below,

Scotch Tape and Bastard kept up a withering fire on Cognitum. P-21 fired a grenade of his own which went right past the two remaining gun pods and detonated against Cognitum's shield with a crackling sphere of lightning. She screamed not just in frustration and rage but in pain as well. Parts of her shield flickered away.

Suddenly she curled up, and for a brief moment I thought maybe this might be an opening. But then she launched herself into the air between the throne and maneframe, and when she flung her wings wide, a sphere of fiery energy blasted out from around her. It smashed me like a bug against the F.A.D.E. shield as she roared, "How dare you? How dare you! I am Princess Luna reborn! How dare you stand against me? Me!"

"You're a nut!" Scotch Tape screamed up at her. "Luna doesn't mean fire, you ditz! You can't even get her powers right!" I could have cheered, but I was too busy sliding downwards along the crackling surface of the shield.

A massive slab of steel ripped out of the wreckage. "I will not suffer the insolence of foals!" And the skywagon-sized chunk streaked down at the Scotch, her eyes wide... only to halted just before impact, the girders under the filly groaning. The slab of metal, still glowing with Cognitum's magic, shifted to the side, and I saw Rampage's striped form standing over Scotch, her legs straining against the impossible weight as only an earth pony could.

"No you don't!" Rampage shouted up at Cognitum. "You owe me a death, and you don't get to kill anypony else till you do me! You hear me? I'm not dying last! I'm dying next!" With a great heave, she shoved the block to the side and then grinned savagely up at Cognitum. "So take your best shot!"

"I should have deactivated your talisman when I had the chance," Cognitum snarled as she hovered in the air. "I'll not make that mistake again!" she said as her magic reached out, grabbed all five of us, and pulled us into the air.

"Fuck! I hate this job!" Bastard shouted as he was hauled up.

"Daddy!" Scotch Tape screamed as we were clustered together before the cybermare. The remaining pair of gun pods rose up behind us, covering any possibility of getting away. Something in the vast void below us gave great rumble, and through the wreckage came a throbbing pulse of sound. I only hoped Echo was still alive and keeping Horizons from going off.

Cognitum drew Folly and slipped a silver bullet inside. "Enough. You will either bow and submit, or you will die. I am through indulging you foals in your delusional

fantasy of resistance!”

“Never,” P-21 declared evenly, his eyes drilling into Cognitum’s glowing eye plates. “It doesn’t matter what power you have. You’re a tyrant, no better than our Overmare. It doesn’t matter how much power you have. Eventually, people will resist, if only out of spite. Killing us won’t change a thing. You’ll never be a princess.”

Cognitum stared at him. *I can’t kill them instantly. They must suffer. They must despair! I must prove them wrong. I must break them!* “Give it up, Cognitum,” I retorted. “After all we’ve been through, all of us, do you really think we’ll break now? Ever? You can’t defeat us. All you can do is kill us.”

Then Cognitum smiled as she drew me closer. Her magic pulled Sexy from me and, with a flare, scrapped the weapon. *Oh, come on,* I thought plaintively. “Oh really. Nothing?” she said, grinning maliciously. And from her flowed a deluge of hatred like a waterfall of flamer fuel. She hated my interference. My stubbornness. My pride. My organicness. My naïve optimism. My friends... oh, how she hated my friends! And then her head turned to regard them one by one.

“No,” I whispered in horror.

“Oh, yes,” Cognitum purred. I opened my mouth again to scream at her, but her magic muzzled me. “Now, which one first?” Rampage brightened and raised her hoof but the crushing magical grip silenced her as well. “Not. You,” Cognitum declared firmly. “If I have anything to say about it, you’ll live out the rest of time wandering lost and blind on this wretched ball of rock. And not the other traitor, either. Though I am gravely disappointed with him, he’ll be able to make up for it in servitude to me for the rest of his days. That leaves...” She pulled Scotch Tape and P-21 in front of the rest of us. Her horn pointed from one to the other as she said in my own voice, “Eenie. Meenie. Miney. Moe...”

I was barely able to open my mouth as tears ran unbidden down my cheeks. “Please. No. Kill me if you have to.”

Scotch Tape struggled as her plasma rifle was torn away and melted. The tiny purple unicorn in me wondered why Cognitum’s magic was so different from Luna’s. Was it her desire to destroy, her hatred, that corrupted Luna’s old gentle nature? Was that fiery magic something my old body was capable of, now amplified immensely due to the princess’s soul that imbued it? I thought these things because it helped me ignore the telepathic scream of panic coming from the struggling Scotch Tape. I couldn’t begin to break through to her as she sobbed frantically over and over again.

But I looked over at P-21 next to me.

Calm. Complete calm. He even wore a small smile. I didn't know if it was the telepathy or just that we'd gone through so much together, but I knew. . . just knew. . . it would be alright. *It's not always about you, Blackjack.*

Cognitum caught my look to him, and he was pulled away from our line towards her. "You. Yes. You'll do. Then the filly. Blackjack last. Rampage can be entombed alive here, and the traitors can return with me as witnesses that I am the greatest princess of all time!"

She levitated him to her and for a moment hesitated, lips pursed, turning him this way and that. His utter composure left her nonplussed. As with Scotch and myself, Persuasion was yanked away, bent like a nail, and tossed aside. "You likely have some bomb hidden in your tail, don't you?" she sneered, and the shadow of a grimace flickered across his gorgeous features as her magic ripped out great big chunks of his mane and tail, casting them into the void below. Half a dozen grenades he'd secreted tumbled after them. He clutched the black duster hat to his chest as he was divested of his armament. *Stupid, sentimental stallion.* Cognitum's mind worked furiously as she studied him, bilious rage pouring from her. *How to make this hurt Blackjack the most? Burn him alive now? He was her little fuck pet, rutting her every second they could. So obscene!* Her lips curled. "Any last words for your friends?" she asked as she turned him to face us.

He nodded, then bowed his head. "Yeah," he said, then lowered his face into the cowpony hat. For a moment his face was completely hidden inside it. Then he withdrew it and smirked at us.

And dangling from his lips were a half dozen metal stems.

The detonation was like a lightning storm as six spark grenades went off in unison. I felt my mane stand on end and tasted batteries as the crackling disruptive magic washed over us. Even for me, in an entirely organic body, it was disorienting this close.

And Cognitum was much closer.

The cyberpony screamed as magical will vied with her technological nature. Then the talismans adorning her body flickered and struggled. Finally, they died. The five of us fell. Scotch Tape luckily landed on the stairs right next to the walkway leading up to the throne, where Cognitum collapsed with a crash of metal. Rampage bounced and skidded halfway back down to Tom. The rest of us landed scattered

across the wreckage. I hit a beam so hard the wind was knocked from my lungs and I was left coughing and aching. Better a beam up here than a beam way, way down there, though.

I struggled up onto the span and crawled over to the broken walkway. "Where's P-21?" I shouted and thought at once. Then I grew more alarmed as I looked around and didn't see him. I struggled for several seconds, before looking over the edge and trying to find a tiny blue form. Again, nothing. Then I spotted P-21's black hat dangling from a broken spur of metal. I picked my way over to it, the structure groaning under my hooves as I made my way to it and scooped it up in my hooves. "P-21! Where are you?" I projected and shouted.

"Daddy!" Scotch Tape cried out.

"I got him!" Bastard shouted, the longcoat-wearing hitpony levitating P-21 from over the edge. I limped over to him. His eyes fluttered open, and with a pained smile, he croaked out a weak "Hey." He looked a mess, his body battered and abused but intact. Huge bloody clumps had been torn from his hide, and he looked as if he'd been tossed in a thresher. I hugged him gingerly. "Anypony got a healing potion?" I asked, mostly looking at Bastard.

"You don't know a healing spell? What kind of unicorn are you?" he replied skeptically, trotting over to P-21 and setting his horn alight. It wasn't as impressive as a medical pony could have done, but it stopped the bleeding and repaired most of the scratches and holes.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You know, once upon a time, unicorns only had a few spells related to their magic talent."

"Yeah, and once upon a time, ponies banged each other with swords and clubs while rolling around in shit all day. Then we invented guns," he drawled, finishing the spell and drawing a cigarette. "Best I can do," he said as he lit it and took a drag, then looked at Cognitum slumped against the throne. "Can't believe you beat her."

"We haven't. Not yet," I said, realizing we were running out of time. "P-21, go down and swap places with Echo. I'll need him for the mind transfer. He's as close as we're going to get to a specialist. Rampage, haul my body onto the throne and hold it there. Scotch Tape, help me take her legs and wings off. Bastard, if you can lower P-21 down and lift Echo up, it'd speed things up a lot."

"Sure. Why not? I always wanted a career as an elevator," he drawled. His magic lifted P-21 off his hooves and over to the edge, sending him down in a controlled

fall.

I joined Rampage and Scotch Tape up at the throne, the filly already busy removing my old legs and wings. “Her design is all strange. I mean, it’s mechanical, but it’s... like... warped,” she said as she pulled off one wing. “Still, joints are joints. I just hope I don’t put your wings back on backwards.”

As we worked, the swarms of mechasprites were rebuilding and restoring the structure, gobbling up wreckage and spitting it out properly formed. Only the material that had been obliterated by Folly was gone for good, apparently. From the steady rumbling below, it felt like we were working in a volcano on the verge of erupting. I popped open the back of the throne, trying to find a... there it was! I yanked out the plug and tugged out enough cable to reach the data port in my old temple. I plugged it home as Echo was lifted up to the platform.

“How long till it goes off?” I asked the sallow yellow stallion.

“I have no idea! Your fight has thrown every sensor in this place for a loop,” he shouted. “If we could keep it up for fifteen minutes or so, it might miss the Core completely. Be a bad day in the Highlands, but...” he shrugged and then rushed to where Scotch was taking off my left foreleg. “Wait! Leave it connected. I can use her PipBuck to help in the transfer.” He twisted it and started typing. “Okay. Gotta compress the files...”

Suddenly, my old body went rigid, and Cognitum’s eyes flared. “No! No! I will not be defeated! I will not be a thing!” she shrieked, her horn blazing with overglow. Rampage lunged against her, pinning her to the throne. “I am a princess! You can’t do this to me!”

I bit a spur of scrap and smashed her across the horn again and again, making her scream in rage and frustration. “Can’t you just delete the cunt and be done with it?” Rampage asked, struggling with her.

“Sure. Do you want to run the risk of residual Cognitum inside Blackjack? Blackjack’s had neural contamination already. I doubt she wants more.” I thought of what Lacunae’s memories had done to me and shook my head hard. “Just give me a few more seconds,” he continued. “I’m compressing the Cognitum kernel, and then I’ll transfer it into a buffer and download the Blackjack kernel.”

I kept smacking Cognitum with the bar while Rampage, Bastard, and Scotch kept her thrashing, half-disassembled body pinned in place. “You’ll die! All of you will die! Die die die! I hate you all! Hate hate hate!”

"You really need a software patch or two," I told her. She got out a crimson beam, slashing it across us. Scotch Tape fell back, crying out, but the rest of us kept working. I shoved her face to the side, pressing it with my hooves and keeping her reinforced horn away. She tried to telekinetically fling us off but got a bar across the face for it. "Echo?!" I cried out as a red glow began to build around all of us.

"Got it!" And he lunged up, grabbed the mesh, and jammed it on my head. "Two more seconds!"

"No! No!" Cognitum screamed. "Forbidden operation! Kernel panic!!"

The world swirled away.

I was in the black void place again. From somewhere near me came a white light... no. I was the light. And I was going to a place. Ahead of me was a thing. It was a pony on fire. A pony made of faces. A hundred screaming, enraged faces that belched fire and wept blood. A thing that should not be. It charged straight at me, hooves exploding like balefire bombs as it loomed larger and larger. It swelled to the size of an alicorn. A giant. A titanic behemoth.

It didn't matter. I would not deviate, falter, or surrender. I didn't know how. I smashed into its massive, contorted chest with a flash of light like a nova, and the massive flaming monstrosity was sent flying away off to the side, wailing and screaming into the darkness as I continued to my destination. It opened before me like a flower of light, and...

I screamed.

I was in a place that was not meant for me. This body, once my own, was as cold and merciless as the surface of the moon. It was as hostile as the Core. As callous and cruel as I had been in my wanton slaughter at Yellow River. It was wrong. Anathema. Twisted. Perverted. Corrupted.

This was the body of Nightmare Moon. Oh, it might have originally been mine. Carried a few scraps of my original DNA. But it was no more mine than the raw ore hammered into an executioner's axe belonged to the mountain. It had been changed on a fundamental level, and I did not belong here any longer. My mind was a square peg trying to fit into a round soul. But I didn't know how to leave. I couldn't, even if I did. Too much was on the line. My friends. Everyone in the Hoof. Everyone in the world. How could anyone give up with all that on the line?

There was another flare of white light, like with Tom, only when it faded I was in a dark place filled with cold and hateful stars. We stood on a space rock of some sort,

the surface studded with craters and spurs of black ice. Broken and half-finished features of gothic architecture rose around us. Heavy black chains anchored my hooves to the ground before an obsidian throne. Sitting upon it, tall, cold, and regal, was Nightmare Moon in all her terrible glory. A swirling nebula circled behind her like a halo of blue, green, and purple. And unlike before with Tom, I was completely alone.

"So. We meet again," Nightmare Moon said coldly as she sat upon her dark throne.

"Yeah. I guess we do," I said, tugging at the chains and finding them far less cozy than Tom's table. "Last time, though, you were a lot less... this..." I pointed out, gesturing at her with a hoof. Her draconic eyes narrowed coldly. "Princess Luna."

"Princess Luna?" Nightmare Moon laughed. "Oh dear. How wretchedly pathetic. You maintain your incapacity to grasp the patent truth, even now." She rose from her throne and spread her wings wide. "I have always been Nightmare Moon!" Lightning flared and flashed all around us, and she laughed riotously.

Once upon a time, I would have soiled myself at this. But I'd been in too many minds, experienced too many weird dreams, and faced too many terrors to be impressed. I sighed and bowed my head. "Okay. Look... I know you're trying to be impressive and terrifying and stuff, but stop. It's just not going to work."

There were a few moments I wanted to treasure forever. The startled, wide-eyed expression on her face was one of them. "You... you mock... me?"

"If it were any other day than today, yeah. I'd probably take you a lot more seriously, but I was in a very impressive dreamscape like five minutes ago! And he did a better job than starry spooky blackness! I mean, really... I've seen worse." And because this was a dream, and I was so tired of today, I took a step forward, despite the chains. I made them shatter with my refusal to acknowledge their physicality. "And you're not Nightmare Moon. You're Princess Luna."

Her eyelid twitched a moment before she narrowed her eyes and blasted me with a stream of dark magic from her horn. It actually hurt... maybe she could erase me here and leave my friends outside with two drooling, mindless bodies. "You dare presume to tell me who I am? I am the Queen of the Night! I am a monster beyond your reckoning!"

I picked myself up, trying to 'wish away' the pain like I had the chains. Wasn't working. "Actually, I've faced quite a few monsters. I've *been* a few monsters. So I can reckon pretty well. You're right around the same level as Deus... pre-tank.

Dangerous, capable of hurting me? Yes. But like smoke and mirrors, deep down you're actually... kinda disappointing. Almost pathetic." I frowned up at her, trying to think of the best way to handle this.

"Dis... disappointing?" She actually stammered. "I... you... how dare you..."

"Stop," I said firmly. "I need my body back. You're in it. That means I need you. Which means we need to knock this off right now, Princess Luna. Can I call you, Luna?" From the eye twitch, I guessed another— Yep! Black lightning slashed at me. I imagined an alicorn shield like a white bubble blocking it... but there was no escaping the fact that I was out of my weight class. The blast sent me sliding away from the throne, and for an instant, my body flickered, as if it was in danger of disappearing completely. And, of course, it hurt more. "Ow..."

"I will not suffer such impudence," she said coldly. "I am Nightmare Moon! You *shall* respect me!"

I sucked in my breath and then sat up. "Right. Okay. Why do you think you're Nightmare Moon and not Luna?" I asked as I pulled myself to my hooves.

"Do you not realize how many ponies I have killed?" And the rock in space became a parade ground across which marched a legion of zombie soldiers, all mutilated and dripping gore. I spotted at least one of each Ministry Mare and a half dozen Big Macintoshes. The legion multiplied and multiplied till millions of dead marched before us.

"I'm going to guess... lots," I countered, and the parade of soldiers became a parade of raiders, Steel Rangers, stable ponies, pegasi, Harbingers, and zebras. "I've done it too. And unlike you, I actually killed them all personally." I frowned at my own gory crowd and realized something was missing. Oh yeah... a few dozen dead foals joined the ghastly display. "I killed children too." She gaped at me as I stared into her eyes. "Believe it or not, killing people... even ordering them to their death... doesn't make you Nightmare Moon. It just really sucks." We locked gazes for several seconds, and I added, "Or did you like it?"

"Like it?" she asked, with another little eye twitch that made me tense. "Of course I didn't *like* it. But could any of you understand the depths of my manipulation? What I created?" From behind her erupted six ministry hub buildings... well, they were great big buildings, so I supposed they represented the ministries. "The ministries were my tools and weapons! My means to control the population while—"

"While escaping any accountability or responsibility," I finished flatly. "We've had this

conversation before, remember?” Nightmare Moon stared at me for several seconds in bafflement, and a question snuck into my mind. “You don’t remember, do you?”

“I am Nightmare Moon! I have perfect memory of all my great works and terrible crimes!” she declared, the ministries crumbling into rubble behind her. “I have orchestrated disaster! I alone am responsible for all the ruin we suffered.”

“Oh stop!” I shouted back at her. “What about the zebra Caesar? What about your sister? What about those nobles and businessponies who said war was the only option?” And as I spoke, a shadowy zebra loomed to my left, an adumbral Princess Celestia on my right, and a horde of faceless ponies in fancy dresses and business suits in a semicircle around me, facing her. “You made bad calls. Do you think you were the very first?” I stared at her and let the shadows fade away. “You really *don’t* remember talking to me earlier, do you?”

“I am eternal. I am the night! I am forever!” she declared imperiously, and redundantly.

Of course she didn’t remember. She wasn’t a mind. She was a soul. The final summation of all her experiences personified. Only I refused to believe that the summation was this... thing! How could it be? I stared at her for what felt like the longest time, then slowly approached her. There was only one thing I could think of to break through to her. “Why? Why did you create the ministries?”

“Fool! Did you not hear what I said? To deceive. To control. I wished to dominate all the world! You cannot understand the burdens of such a choice!” she declared boldly, but I could smell a whiff of bullshit coming from her. Monsters never talked about their crimes or burdens.

“Oh, yeah? I had to decide who’d rule the Society. Who to put on top and hope that it’d work out okay. I’ve had to make big calls before.” This wasn’t her. It couldn’t be. And then I reached out with my hooves and grabbed her helmet. Her eyes widened in shock, and green lighting raked me as I felt something like a pulpy blanket tear away. The haughty and cold facade ripped away, and the world around me reassembled into a royal throne room. The shadows now became blinding, glaring lights that bathed the real Princess Luna from every angle. She sat upon a throne decorated with suns, staring at a mob of ponies shouting questions and muttering angrily about the war.

Luna bowed her head on the throne. “I was... ill prepared to take the throne. A month... one month... that was all the preparation I was given. And even then...” The crowd and mob faded away from the room, and Luna gazed at the despairing

posture of her sister, slumped in a chair, her face contorted with grief. “Celestia was inconsolable after Littlehorn. Truly, she’d suffered an injury more grievous than any I’d inflicted on her as Nightmare Moon.”

“You didn’t have a choice, Luna,” I said, putting a foreleg around her shoulder.

“Yes, I did,” she said, closing her eyes. The throne room returned, only this time she was in the back of the room. On the throne sat Twilight Sparkle, surrounded by her friends. “I could have stepped aside. I wanted to. I had no experience with ruling or even a desire to rule anymore. I once went to Ponyville for a festival and ended up insulted and abusive to ponies simply because I didn’t understand what had changed in my absence.” Then she looked at the six, and her eyes hardened. “But I was her sister. I was a princess. I had to rule. I had to make up for the mistakes I’d made... the betrayal I’d committed when I’d become Nightmare Moon.”

“But you couldn’t rule as Celestia,” I said, and the world morphed into Goldenblood’s hospital room.

Luna stared down at the broken, dying stallion. “I remembered him from the school. Such a conundrum, not fitting into Canterlot society. The historian with a fondness for rocks and sculpture. So strange. But wise. I thought he was going to die... all the doctors thought he would... Even if he was, I felt he could help me come up with some way to rule without feeling like I was going to wet myself. And he did. He gave me everything I ever wanted, and more.” She closed her eyes and gave a sniff. “And everything I wanted went wrong!”

Suddenly she hardened, and Nightmare Moon returned. “No! It all went horribly right!” She laughed, turning her head and blasting me with more lightning, sending me flying away from her. “I had my army! My ministries to hide and obscure my evil plots! My secret projects... oh so many secret projects! I was drowning in secrets!” A cybernetic alicorn army soared overhead in perfect formation while Steel Ranger and Enclave power-armored ponies marched in two columns past her. Above all of us were the shadowy shapes of Thunderheads and Raptors. “I did nothing to stop it! Nothing to rein it in!” She threw back her head with a blast of lightning from the skies. “I reveled in my war!”

Shadowbolt Tower erupted into the sky behind me. “Bull!” I shouted. “If you had really wanted a slaughter, you would have used those megaspells soon as you got them.” The immense shadowy structure imploded, sucking into itself and raining down debris. “Maybe you didn’t wave a magic wand and end the war, but I know how hard it is to keep peace!” As the monolith crumbled behind me, shadowy Reapers

loomed up facing equally imposing Steel Rangers. Above me, phantasmal Enclave ponies slammed into spectral cyberponies. I stared her in the eyes, willing her not to lapse into that stupid evil for evil's sake mindset. "And I remember way back when the war started. You weren't calling for the zebras' heads on sticks. And when she offered you the country, you turned it down. You weren't Nightmare Moon then. You never wanted to rule." I stared into her stunned eyes. "So why *did* you take the throne?"

The noise and chaos faded away as she stared into my eyes, stricken. The Nightmare faded with them, and tears streaked her dusky cheeks. "I... I had no choice. I had to. Celestia couldn't... she wouldn't..." Beside both of us, a scene of a bedroom with Celestia lying on a bed faded in; at first, I thought she was dead. Her eyes stared out, tears running down her cheeks. Through a doorway, I could make out a dozen vague ponies in uniforms waiting and talking silently like puppets. "Celestia blamed herself for Littlehorn. It had been her idea to place it there. Her joke." Luna sniffed, raising her head as tears ran down her cheek. "I think she gave the school to me to keep me as far from the fighting as possible. Like how she tried to protect Twilight and her friends."

She shook her head. "But I could have said no! But how could I have said no?" she begged as she stared at me, anguish marring her face. "I was the next in line. The little sister. It was my chance to show everypony I could rule just as Celestia did. To make up for what I did as Nightmare Moon. I was going to be as good as Celestia! But I could have stepped aside." And the image of the bedroom became the one of Twilight Sparkle sitting on the throne, flanked by her friends. Luna and I now watched from a shadowed doorway to the side. "I could have done other things, and left the responsibility to Twilight. To Cadance. To anypony else."

I reached up and embraced her, staring into her eyes as the images faded away. "When Deus invaded my home, I didn't want to go running out into the Wasteland. I could have just given EC-1101 over, or worked out a deal, or something. Something smart. But I stepped up when I had to, and even when it was rough, I kept with it. Just like you." I stared into her eyes. "I know you're a good pony, Luna. Even if you don't think you are." Visions of Psalm in the orphanage appeared beside us, like silent films. Of Goldenblood lying in his hospital bed. Of Luna helping foals with their nightmares.

Luna smiled and wiped her tears away. "And I know you're a good pony too, Blackjack." And now on our other side were images of me saving Scotch Tape from 99, fighting to protect Chapel from Dawn and Deus, and fighting Cognitum in the Lunar

Palace. "Even if you don't think you are." She sighed, and all the images and shadows faded away. The ground around us began to glow as if we were standing in a pool of starry moonlight. "So... what do we do now?" We touched horns and brows, and both of us gave sad smiles to the other.

In unison, we said softly, "We do everything we can to make up for it, knowing that we'll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. We devote ourselves to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And we pray with every single good act we do that somehow, when our lives are over, that our lifetimes will come close to making up for the wrong we committed."

And the light grew and grew until the darkness was no more. It flowed through us, and when sensation returned, I found myself levitated before the others, who stared on in awe. The limbs that had been removed were returning to my frame and changing as if sculpted by invisible hooves. My wings spread wide, and the black metal vanes transformed into snowy white feathers. The flaming mane softened into gently shimmering fields of red and dark purple, like the colors of a sunset right before dusk as I felt the magic run through me. I felt my body whole, not strictly biological anymore but not mangled and pieced back together either. My synthetic limbs now resembled the dark purple armor the batponies wore, though mine was far more stylized with delicate engravings of moons and stars. It ran from my rump all the way up my spine to my shoulders, where a crescent moon decorated the chestpiece. Atop my head sat a simple crown. And then...

I blinked.

Lifting my hooves, fingers slid smoothly from the ends with perfect articulation, and I stroked my face. Nose. Mouth. Eyelids. I'd gotten my face back! And I looked over, and down, at all of my friends. The corner of my lip curled in an awkward smile. "H...hey. It worked."

And best of all. Most wonderful of all... I could feel that sensation of life inside me. Maybe like this, I could have my babies. I could have... everything.

"Blackjack? Is that... are you in there?" Scotch Tape asked, as if afraid.

"She's got feathers. Does that mean... what does that mean?" Rampage asked as she scowled at my wings. "Damn it, Blackjack, you're not allowed to get any weirder! You've exceeded your maximum allotment of weirdness!"

"Whoa," Bastard muttered.

"Are you... okay?" P-21 asked as he stared at me with the closest thing to awe I'd

ever seen.

"I... think so?" I replied, not one hundred percent certain myself. "Don't ask me to wiggle the moon around just yet... but yeah..." I finally smiled. "I think I am okay."

I looked down at the blank me lying on her side next to Echo, who was working on my old PipBuck with a small, worried frown. The blank body stared absently out, a little bit of drool starting to drip from the corner of her mouth. She wasn't even ambulatory like Boo or the other blanks. Just a puppet with her strings cut. "Cognitum's not in there, right?" I tensed as I suddenly expected my own eyes to turn and look at me, my old body to grin with malice.

Echo smiled as he worked my old PipBuck. "No. She's not. I made damn sure she couldn't double back." Then he frowned. "Though the buffer I set up is full of junk data now. Just need to pick her out of it." A low buzzing resonance began to fill the room. Something going on with Horizons? With Cognitum? Damn it. I needed to get my friends and myself out of this place!

"Find her. I need to make sure she can't cause any more trouble." Maybe not delete her. There might be some way Virgo or somepony could debug her and give her a second... I suddenly had an image of jars holding captured ponies. Okay. She better not be in my head... Regardless, there was no time to waste. I took my weapons, ammo, figurines, and supplies from my old body and then walked to where Folly had fallen.

"It's been a while," I said as I lifted the weapon, turning it over with my magic, holding it in my hooves. I cracked it open. A silver bullet rested inside. I snapped it closed. That buzzing noise grew as I walked to the edge of the platform. "P-21, get clear!" I shouted out as I aimed the weapon down at Tom nestled in the heart of the wreckage. From Cognitum's second shot, I hoped it would just punch a hole clean through Tom. He could go back to being a star spirit, and I'd go home and work on trying to rehabilitate Equus while building the world's biggest 'Do Not Dig Here' sign over the Core. And there was the issue of families. Maybe a wedding. How did you even *do* weddings?

I couldn't wait to find out. I leveled the gun right at Tom's sparkling heart. I saw P-21 wave from a pile of rubble, carrying a terminal on his back. Goddesses, I loved him.

"Where is she?" Echo said in worry. "I've scanned the buffer twice. She's not in here!"

I paused. "Well, she's not in my other body, right? And I don't think she's in this

body. So where else could she..." That buzzing, growling noise grew louder and clearer. It was three words, chanted from a billion tiny mouths rising from all around us.

"HATE! HATE! HATE!"

"KILL! KILL! KILL!"

"DIE! DIE! DIE!"

My eyes snapped up above us. The computer at the apex of the dome now seethed with crimson light as millions of mechasprites, eyes glowing red, altered and transformed its surface into a mockery of a living organ. Maybe, while being in my body, Cognitum had developed something like a soul, twisted and wretched but enduring past any normal program. I had no idea what those machines were doing as they cannibalized the covering, exposing the technomagical guts of the maneframe, rewiring it before my eyes.

"Oh you have got to be fucking kidding!" Bastard shouted as he reloaded his guns. "No payday is worth this shit!"

The mechasprites swooped in towards us, and from my horn erupted a dozen magical bullets that streaked out and exploded in the midst of the swarm. Thousands swept around the detonations, swirling like guided shrapnel towards us. "I can stop her!" Echo said as he worked furiously on my old PipBuck. "Just give me five seconds!"

That was four seconds more than we had.

The swarm flowed around me and straight at the yellow stallion. I tried to throw up a shield like I'd seen everypony else with a horn do and actually succeeded; the mechasprites slammed into it like a pile driver. It held but did nothing to prevent two other clouds of machines from swooping in from above and below. "They only eat metal!" Echo shrieked as he tried to sweep them off his body. "They're only supposed to eat metal!" he screamed as he disappeared beneath the swarm.

Three second later, only a puddle of blood remained where he'd stood.

Scotch Tape cried out as the mechasprites swept in at her next. "Oh fuck no!" Rampage shouted, curling herself protectively around the filly and slashing her tail though the air. She stomped and snapped, crushing the machines in her jaws. The holes bitten in her flesh were regenerated almost instantly, but the mechasprites consumed her armor bite by bite. Then Scotch Tape started to scream in pain;

Rampage gave a shout of "Hold on!" as she grabbed her and leapt away to a lower level with a stream of mechasprites following.

Bastard flung a barrage of grenades with his magic at the swarm coming for him but exhausted his supply after a dozen detonations. He raced away from the throne as well. "Sorry girls, but it's time for bottomless magazines," he snapped at his guns, and his horn flashed. The magazines in each of his automatics glowed, and, biting down on his cigarette, he unloaded a stream of bullets far in excess of the ten each magazine usually carried. Astonishingly, he kept one swarm at bay with bullets alone. It wouldn't do anything for the two others sweeping in at his flanks, though.

I raised a new shield around myself, and the swarms of mechasprites coalesced into an enormous red-glowing steel alicorn. Her hooves ripped down the throne, flinging the debris to the side. I levitated my old body onto my back, almost by instinct. Even if it was just an empty shell now, it was still me. I flew into the space between Cognitum and Tom as those enormous hooves smashed against my shield. I poured my magic into it, hoping it would hold. I didn't know the spell, exactly; I was just copying what I imagined every alicorn did. Unfortunately, even when it was holding, every impact rattled me to my core, and if my shield failed now, I'd die. We'd all die.

My eyes turned upward towards the throbbing mechanical thing, the aborted child of the Eater. I peered down at Tom below me. I saw Rampage running, Scotch Tape clinging to her back as she screamed for Daddy. I watched Bastard desperately trying to keep the sprites away from himself with his guns, the barrels growing red with all the shots he'd fired. I peered at P-21 pounding away at the terminal, keeping Horizons from killing us all. I looked up, past the technological grotesquery, at the ailing blue-green sphere that was the home of millions of people who needed me to do the right thing.

Three lives... plus Bastard... versus the world. It was an easy choice.

But then, I'm not a clever pony.

I pointed Folly straight up at that twisted, tortured, tormented spawn of technology, entered S.A.T.S., and fired. My will was so sure. So set. It didn't even ask me if I was sure. My shield dropped, and an instant later a brilliant white beam emerged, streaking up towards the apex of the dome. The mechasprite mare let out a scream as the beam punched straight through the top of the dome and out into space. The tempest that followed blasted the mechasprites out after her, scattering the machines as the wrecked Lunar Palace trembled, the debris shifting and grinding.

Pieces of scrap went flying as the pressure shifted, and for a few horrifying seconds, I had a good idea what it was like living in a blender. Then a piece of flooring, caught in the gust like a kite, smashed up against the hole in the ceiling. There was a whistling shriek for several seconds, then silence.

I hovered there in the air, my old body hugged to me. I checked my inventory. No more silver bullets. For all I knew, there weren't any more left in the world. I stared down at Tom, still glistening and held in place by magic. I put Folly back in my saddlebags in the tiny hope that I'd find one more silver bullet in time. "Is everypony alright?" I called out.

"I hate the moon!" Bastard shouted from somewhere below.

"Oh please," Rampage said as she emerged from underneath a smashed Ultra-Sentinel. "We've had lots worse than this, right kiddo?"

"No, I think this tops it," Scotch said as she followed, picking her way carefully along the twisted metal and broken girders.

"Oh, come on! The megaspell was way worse than this," Rampage replied. "I'd say this was number three on the list. The space center and Maripony were tied for number two." I dropped down to them.

But Scotch wasn't listening. "Daddy? Where are you?" she called out as she stared at the jumbled mess. Apprehension prickled at me as I moved towards where I'd spotted him last.

To my relief, he called out, "I'm over here."

I swooped ahead of everypony else towards the folded girders whence the call had come, a smile on my face. I set my blank body down as I spotted him lying out on his stomach, hooves still working the terminal, leaning against a half-dozen slim metal shafts. "I think... I think I have a problem," he rasped, not taking his eyes off the screen. I slowed as I looked beyond him lying there to the shafts and... no... no no...

They weren't against him. They were impaled through him. From the middle of his back to his haunches, the rods pinned him to the floor like a butterfly to a mat. He didn't take his eyes from me. "It's bad, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's bad," I whispered in horror.

"Figured it must be. I can't feel anything below my shoulders." He glanced over at me and gave a tiny half smile. "You look good, Blackjack."

No no no. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right! "Rampage, keep Scotch back!" I yelled. "Bastard. I need you!"

"Keep me back from what?" Scotch Tape shrieked, then screamed, "No! Let me go! What's wrong?!"

Bastard stepped into view, and he tugged his glasses down, teal eyes widening in horror. "Shit..."

"You can do healing magic, right? I'm going to pull the rods out, and you heal the holes," I said, adamantly.

"I... This is way beyond a healing spell. How the hell is he not dead yet?"

"Shut up," I said, glaring imperiously at him. "I am going to pull, you are going to heal, and P-21 is going to keep living and keeping Horizons from going off. Understood?" He swallowed and nodded as I seized the first slim rod and gave it a tug.

The metal above us let out an immense groan as the rod moved a few inches up and started to shift. "Hold on!" Rampage shouted, rushing to the hollow we were in and shoving up against it. With her immense earth pony strength, she was able to stabilize it.

Unfortunately, that meant she wasn't able to hold onto Scotch Tape. The filly darted in around her and froze, staring at the sight. "Oh no. No no no no." She rushed to him and hugged him around the neck. "Daddy. Hold on, Daddy. Just hold on."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said with a smile as he nuzzled her, then tapped the flickering terminal again.

"Do something!" Scotch Tape pled to me, tears streaking her cheeks. "Anything! You're a princess now or something, aren't you?"

I swallowed as I dug into my repertoire of magic. A pair of magical scissors appeared, doubly reinforced with hydraulics. I put them to one of the rods, but as they started to shear through, the rod started to twist. Blood spurted from where it pierced his body as he cried out. "Stop!" Bastard yelled, and I relaxed the scissors, the flexing rod returning to its original position. P-21 gasped for breath, then typed the commands again with shaking hooves. Bastard frowned up at me. "By the time you get one rod out, he'll bleed out."

"Shut up!" Scotch snapped. "Do something else!"

But what else could I do? I doubted a mustache would help much. I focused my imagination and tried to imagine the burning beam cutting through all the rods at

once. Instantly, a jet of flame flowed out across the metal, but the rods, instead of instantly vaporizing it, turned red, and P-21 started to grunt as he fought the pain. My wings fanned the rods before they could burn him any more. A giant glowing grinding disk appeared and started to work through one of the rods. If I was lucky, I'd get through one in five minutes... but there were six... Finally, I tried to use my magic to shift the immense bulk of weight above me, but Rampage cried out, and her legs trembled as she pushed back. "Stop!" she cried in alarm. "This whole thing is ready to come down like a house of cards." I stopped my magic, and she relaxed.

If I'd had a few hours, I could have extracted him. I didn't. And if I rushed, I could kill us all. Damn it. Why couldn't I have brought LittlePip with me?

P-21 took a hoof off the keyboard to caress Scotch Tape's cheek. "You have to go. I can't delay it much longer. Cognitum tweaked the targeting talismans before you blasted her. It'll go right to the Core now. You have to get out of here and survive to do something about it." The ground under us rumbled, and he grimaced in pain before he tapped the terminal keys again.

"No. No, we can't leave you!" Scotch Tape begged. "Please, Blackjack! Do something!"

I wanted to do something. Anything. Anything to undo this. To come up here alone, and... but no. If I had, I wouldn't have made it. It was always because of my friends that I'd been able to do anything at all. Could I teleport him out through the bars? Then he'd have a half dozen holes he'd immediately bleed out through. How many magic bullets would it take to blast through? We didn't have Scotch's rifle or my sword... he was way too close to use a grenade, even if we had one left. The ground rumbled again, and he tapped the keys once more, silencing it.

"Please," he murmured at he looked up at me, smiling with tears streaking his cheeks. "Remember what I said..."

I swallowed sickly. He was right, but then again, he'd always been the smarter pony. "I'm sorry, Scotch." I wanted to be sick. It wasn't fair. I'd gotten my body back. Our babies back. Why couldn't I have gotten a chance to be with him? For him to see Scotch Tape grow up into a strong and happy mare? To help him raise his babies? My babies? Why couldn't the universe just give me a clean win for once?!

I looked over at Tom's sparkling form. "Please," I prayed. "Please save him."

I cannot. I am bound until I face the Eater. I am sorry, Blackjack.

I bowed my head as Scotch Tape embraced him, tears running down my face. I

could cry again. Damn him. Damn all the stars. What good were they if they couldn't save a single pony's life when we needed them to? What good was everything that had happened to me if I couldn't save him? Security saves ponies. Princesses protect their subjects from harm.

There was only one thing to do. I met his eyes, gave a little nod, and received a little smile in return.

"I love you, Scotch Tape," P-21 said, nuzzling her. He pulled his battered black hat off his head and placed it atop hers. "I'm so proud of you. I know you're going to do great things. Build great things. Grow up strong and beautiful and... I wish I could be there to see it all. Wish I could hold you when you need me to and just... be a real father...." He punched in the keys again.

"You were a real father, Daddy. You were the best daddy any pony could ever want," Scotch Tape sobbed into his mane.

He smiled, twisted his hoof to hold her close, turned, and kissed her ear. "I love you, Scotch." He closed his eyes. "Goodbye, my little filly."

"No... no no no..." Scotch Tape sobbed, shaking her head. "Just a little longer..." I tugged at her. I walked to Bastard and gave him some instructions, a promise, and a number. He nodded, pushed his glasses back up, lit a new cigarette, and then levitated Scotch Tape with his magic.

"Come on," he said as he pulled her away. "We have to go. This place is going to blow up, and you've got to live."

"No! No!" she screamed, flailing her hooves wildly as she was pulled away from him. Bastard lifted my blank body with a grunt, setting it across his back, and pulled both of them out of the space. "No! Please, Blackjack, no! Don't do this! No!" she screamed, tearing at me with her cries. "Daddy! No! Let me go, you bastard!"

When she'd gone, I broke down, crying and sniffing too. "It's not fair. It's not right."

"No. It's not," he replied. "But that's life. Thanks to you, I got to have a few more months. Got to see incredible things. Meet good people and make friends. Be a father. A lover. A person. You showed me that I could be so much more than a number. You gave me that chance. I wouldn't give it up for anything, even if it ends like this." His warm smile faded. "You have to get back to Equus. You can't give up, Blackjack. Find a way to beat this. To win. You can. I know you can."

How could I speak after that? I wanted to tell him that I couldn't do this without him. That I wanted him besides me. And in his eyes I saw understanding that I knew I

wanted to say all that. Of course he did. So why waste these last moments with arguing? I sniffed and leaned down, kissing him on the lips for one horribly too short moment. "I love you," I whispered into his ear as he gave one barely muted sniff.

"I know," he answered, just as quietly. When we parted, he entered the suppression command again. He lowered his eyes, then murmured, "Before you go, though... my cutie mark..." He looked pained and gave a small half smile. "It's not a penis, is it?"

My throat produced something between a hiccup, a laugh, and a sob. I leaned over and brushed my hoof over his flank. The last flakes of blue came off completely. The male symbol and twenty-one dots were gone. In their place was a bold red heart bursting through a ring of chain encircling it. My throat seized up, and it took me several seconds before I could croak, "No. It's not a penis."

He nodded. "Good. That's all I wanted to know." He gave a little chuckle. "Silly." He entered in the command on the terminal again. "You should go. You don't want to miss your flight."

Tearing myself from his side was like tearing my heart in two. But I had to go, no matter how much it hurt. Since I had to go... I did. I always did what I had to... even if I couldn't save the ponies who mattered most to me.

Then I turned and saw Rampage holding up all that metal. A somewhat sheepish smile crossed her face. "Yeah. I just realized it too. I move, and there's a good chance he gets squished and Horizons goes off with you in it. Go get going, Blackjack. He can't stall this thing forever."

"No..." I muttered. "No... not... no!"

"Yes," Rampage contradicted me. "Look. This is the best for everypony. You get to live to stop the Eater. I get to die saving your life. And I get to die for good." Her pink eyes softened. "This is what I want, Blackjack. I might be Peppermint, but... I don't want to be the last one to die. Tom said this place going off can take me out, so... yeah. This is where I need to be."

P-21 frowned. "It seems stable enough. I'm not going to be wiggling around down here." He gave a cough, looking pale. He had to be bleeding out slowly around those shafts. "Go, Rampage. Help Scotch Tape. She'll need you. Blackjack needs you."

"Go," Rampage told me. "At least this way, neither one of us has to die alone."

I was so riven by grief, I couldn't argue. P-21 couldn't delay forever. If I tried to fight

Rampage, I would likely cause the collapse she was trying to prevent. So the only thing I could think of... the only response... was to walk away in the direction of Scotch's sobs.

"Hey," Rampage called after me, and I looked back. Rampage stared at me from over her shoulder. "It was fun." She smiled, her eyes streaked with tears.

"Yeah," I answered weakly, with my own, tiny, half smile. "It was."

What more was there to say after that? I flew to where Bastard struggled with Scotch Tape near the tram hatch that was marked 'To Terminal' and levitated them through, flying behind them. When we were all inside, I pressed the button, the doors closed, and the tram began to roll, heading up the steep track. Bastard looked at me as he set my blank body on a couch. "Where's Rampage?" he asked.

"She's not coming," I answered hollowly. Scotch Tape curled up in a tighter ball, the young mare shaking in her grief, her tears exhausted.

This must have been a shorter route than to the Astrotable. I looked back at the cracked dome of the Lunar Palace as the minutes passed by. I wanted to see them both, one more time. But the link... the special link we'd all shared... it was broken.

Wasn't it?

I walked to my blank body and regarded it for a moment, then reached down and touched my horn to my own brow. The space within was empty, except for a number of tiny windows like monitor screens. There, I saw Rainbow Dash arguing with an injured Storm Chaser. There, Velvet Remedy riding a wing of alicorns through a howling storm. There, Charity and the defenders of Chapel were in a terrible firefight with three tanks slowly rolling towards them. There, Xanthe and her team were lost in the rubble of the bunker.

And there was P-21 typing on a terminal. As I focused on that window, I could hear his voice coming from the image. The terminal screen was showing a diagram with all kinds of red and white flashing symbols that I couldn't begin to understand. *Hurts... glad I lied that it didn't. They would have given me Med-X. I'd rather die tha... heh... that's funny... no. Got to stay focused. Discharge the stabilization talismans. Almost missed it that time. Getting lightheaded.*

She'll be okay. Blackjack will take care of her. Blackjack will move the world if she has to. She won't give up. I know it. Refresh. Discharge. Crap! Discharge! Focus, P-21. Focus. Recharge. Refresh. Discharge. Focus... Why does that 'calculated force' number get bigger every time I refresh? Nevermind. Recharge. Refresh.

Discharge... I couldn't look away as minutes crept by, and again and again he entered the commands that delayed the inevitable. I didn't hear Rampage. Perhaps there wasn't anything for them to say to each other. *I should have looked earlier. Maybe come up with a better name. Like Blackjack. Recharge. Refresh. Discharge. Eh... if only she had been a stallion. If only Priest... if only... Recharge. Refresh. Discharge. I hope she makes it. She will. Just made... a... mistake. Not her first... Refresh. Discharge. Error? Wait...*

The screen was now flashing all white. "Damn..." he whispered hoarsely as the white light grew brighter and brighter. "Sorry, Blackjack. Hope it was eno—"

The window winked out, and I snapped my horn away. The tram was shaking as it crested the ridge of the massive chasm. Then, suddenly, the dome exploded, Tom shooting out faster than I could see amidst a detonation that not only ripped roof off the Lunar Palace but blasted the very foundation of the building out into space. The floor of the crater erupted in a massive cascade of rock and debris, tons of dust and glowing crystal vomiting out. The magical fields lasted just long enough to stop any of the high-speed ejecta from impacting the chasm walls or the Astrostable, but we still felt the vibrations through the floor. Maybe the Hoof wasn't the only place that was going to be hit... but really... I couldn't care. My heart felt as if it had been ripped in two. I wanted the synthetic pump back. I wanted the old, corpselike body that hadn't felt. That had been more like a machine.

Then the tram stopped and went dark. "What's going on?" Bastard asked in alarm. "Why'd it stop?"

"It was powered from the Lunar Palace," Scotch Tape said dully. "That, or something broke in the track."

I rose to my feet. The terminal was just a few dozen feet ahead now. I could see the two rockets sitting on the pad. "This is ridiculous," I said as my horn glowed and I tried to propel the tram down the track manually. It didn't budge. "Come on! Move!" I tried to lift the vehicle, but something groaned dangerously underneath us.

"The brakes probably engaged when the power was cut," Scotch Tape pointed out. "After all, they wouldn't want the tram to slide all the way back down that slope."

Suddenly, there was a reverberation through the ground as a boulder twice the size of the tram car thudded down only a hundred feet from us. Then another. Then another. The entire tram lurched as something banged into the ceiling, and several of the windows cracked. "Okay. Everypony get close," I said as I gathered them all up around me, Bastard on the left, Scotch Tape floating on my right, and my blank

body across my back. I closed my eyes, imagined a Blackjack-shaped hole in my mind between here and the terminal, and pushed my way through.

There was a pop, and I opened my eyes to see the dimly-lit terminal around me, all the window shutters closed but otherwise with no more signs of damage than there'd been when I left. "Yes!" I shouted as I felt my blank body across my shoulders.

And just the blank body.

I looked to either side of me, set the blank down, and teleported back to the tram.

"Where did you go?" Bastard demanded as I reappeared. A rain of hoof-sized gravel was starting to patter down. "Why did you leave us?"

"I've always had problems with teleporting others. If you know how to do it right, by all means, you can send yourself back to the terminal!" I grabbed Scotch Tape, focused with all my might, and teleported again.

Alone.

I screamed in the terminal, my voice echoing as the floor shook. There was some kind of thunderous crash overhead. I teleported back to the tram and saw that the old rocket now lay on its side across the roof, a boulder lodged in its nosecone.

I tried to teleport them both again. And again. And again. Every time I did, I only took myself. I tried to focus on just teleporting Scotch Tape. On just teleporting Bastard. But every time I did, I sent myself through that mental hole alone.

Back in the tram, it was getting cold and a little hard to breathe. I panted, sweating, as more and more rocks rained down, now covering the roof. If only Lacunae were here, teaching me how to do the spell right step by step. If only I were a little more talented. A little more powerful. A little more...

Scotch Tape hugged my hoof, and I jerked my head, looking down at her tear-streaked face as she smiled. "Just go, Blackjack."

"What?" I muttered dumbly.

"Just get into the rocket, and go," the young mare said in a tiny little voice.

I couldn't answer. The thought... no. Not after Glory. P-21. Rampage. No... "It's okay," Scotch Tape promised with that tiny little smile. "I'll be with Daddy again. You can save everyone. Like my brother... or sister... or whatever."

"Fuck that!" Bastard snapped. "Between Cogs and what you promised me, I'll not only be able to pay off those assholes in Dise, but retire. In Tenpony! With a frigging

harem! Of solid gold alicorns!”

Scotch Tape regarded him flatly. “Oh boo hoo hoo.” She looked back up at me. “Just go. Before the other rocket gets hit by a boulder too.” As she spoke, there were shards of jagged crystal falling to the ground around us like javelins. “It’s okay... go.”

“No!” I shouted. “I’m not leaving anypony anymore! Not anymore! Lacunae... she died to save others. Glory... P-21... they died to save me. Rampage... she... at least she got what she wanted!” I sputtered as I walked back and forth in the tram, trying to think of some way I could break it free of the track without snapping it like an egg. If only there were more time! More time. “I’m not leaving anypony to die anymore! Not anypony!”

Suddenly there was another thud, but this one was from the rear of the tram. And it was accompanied by a shriek of metal from where the tram was locked to the rail. I rushed to the rear windows and looked down.

Rampage shoved again. The mare, her eyes boiled shut and her ears caked in blood, heaved her body against the tram, pushing and straining hard. Every few seconds, her body regenerated and then began to die again. But she pushed and shoved as rain and gravel showered down upon her. The brakes screamed in agony and motors ground as the car was violently projected forward by the striped mare.

She came back. She came back. She chose to live rather than to die.

The tram shuddered as it connected with the terminal. The doors parted enough to let Scotch Tape and Bastard out. Then I realized...

There was no way to get her inside.

“Rampage!” I beat my hoof against the window, looking down at her. “Rampage! You have to find a way in!” But did she know one? If I peeled one of the window shutters open for her, would it still come back down? If it didn’t, we were all dead. “Rampage!”

Her face healed enough that she could look at me through her desiccating eyes, and she pointed a moonstone-encrusted hoof up at Cognitum’s rocket. Her lips moved silently, but there was no mistaking the word on her lips.

Go.

I shook my head again. “No. No no no! I can’t leave you here like this! You can’t die here!” I yelled at her. Of course, it was futile. She couldn’t hear me, could barely see me. “Rampage!”

She pointed at the rocket again, then staggered back. Being exposed to vacuum, even with her regeneration, had to be agony. It was everything she'd ever feared.

"Rampage!" I yelled at her, half out of my mind now. "I forgive you! I forgive you! I'll come back for you, Rampage! I promise! I'll come back for you!"

But if she could read my lips or not, I couldn't tell. She just smiled. Smiled... as if she was a happy filly going for a walk on the moon, then staggered to the side, slowly walking away amidst the blizzard of pebbles and stones and dust now raining down on her. "Rampage!" I shouted after her, wishing I could send her the thoughts. Let her know that somehow, some way, I forgave her.

Bastard threw his forelegs around my neck and pulled me away from the window. Away from the sight of my friend disappearing into the dust of the moon. "We've got to go! Come on! The terminal is losing air!"

"Let go of me, you bastard," I snapped, ready to kill him.

"You want it all to be for nothing!?" he roared in my face. "Then die here! You want to make it mean something, then get your fat, melodramatic ass in that rocket now!"

I gave one last look at the dim outline of my friend as she wandered, blind, deaf, and immortal into that void, then tore myself away. The terminal was filled with a whistling noise as air leaked out around a spear of moonstone piercing the room completely through. We struggled to breathe as we made our way up the gantry tower connected to Cognitum's rocket. Through the tower's windows, I could see some of the sides of the chasm sliding in to fill the void. I couldn't see the Astrostable though. Maybe it was lying in the bottom as well?

We pushed into the rocket and sealed the hatch. "Launch it, Vodka," Bastard said to Scotch Tape, who was examining the makeshift artificial pilot in the center couches.

"My name is Scotch, asshole," she replied, sharply.

"Got it. Glad to see you're moving to anger. Now, will you launch this damn thing?" he asked as he threw himself into a seat. She hit something and took another couch, and the rocket rumbled. I lay down too, and the rocket surged towards the stars. It passed through the rain of tumbling rocks. Several enormous ones were spinning right towards us, but I reached out with my magic and pushed them away. Soon we were clear of even the spinning arcs of dust. The rocket curved, and I tiredly struggled to reach a window.

It had to be my imagination, but I thought I saw a lone bump at the end of a scratch moving away from the terminal. The hole that had once held Nightmare Moon was

now a half-collapsed depression rapidly filling with rubble.

And above us, Tom glowed, trailing a stream of dust like a tail after him. On his way to where the Eater waited, ready to ensnare and devour him. I turned my eyes to the stars, but where once they had offered solace and wonder, now they only seemed cold and indifferent. Did you think it would be easy? Did you think it wouldn't hurt?

I pressed my cheek to the cold glass. Pain was the price of living, and I hurt worse than I ever imagined. I fumbled for something to fill the silence. Scotch Tape lay on her side, face pressed to the fabric of the couch. Bastard... I didn't really want to talk to. So I opened my Delta PipBuck and found something to take solace in. I found it in a song I'd picked up sometime ages ago, back when I'd been younger... more innocent... more... me.

The music started to play, long and slow guitar, and a gravelly old stallion's voice, a dead ringer for the Dealer long ago, began to sing.

I hurt myself today... To see if I still feel...

I focus on the pain... The only thing that's real...

The needle tears a hole... The old familiar sting...

Try to kill it all away... But I remember everything...

The guitar built up louder as I thought of that angry blue stallion telling me he'd shoot me if I gave him a gun. Telling me he'd end me if I ever killed another through my stupidity. Him wiring a tyrant up with bombs and killing him. And as I thought, hot tears ran down my cheeks. How I'd stopped him from hanging himself. How I'd helped him face his addiction. He'd hurt so much, and now... now...

What have I become... My sweetest friend?

Everyone I know... goes away... In the end...

And you could have it all... My empire of dirt...

I will let you down... I will make you hurt...

I'd let Rampage down. Denied her the one thing she'd wanted more than anything. I hadn't been wrong in my selfish wish, but I hadn't respected her. Not as she'd deserved. From the moment she'd leapt upon Leo Zodiac's back, to her smiling up at me through those drifting clouds, I'd done everything I could to keep her alive. I'd driven her away, to my enemy, because I hadn't been able to end her pain. Not till it was too late. Too late... the music softened and slowed as the old stallion sang on

with the Dealer's voice...

I wear this crown of thorns... Upon my liar's chair...

Full of broken thoughts... I cannot repair...

Beneath the stains of time... The feelings disappear...

You are someone else... I am still right here...

The music built as I remembered us all together in Star House. Lacunae. Rampage. Scotch Tape. P-21. Glory. Laughing. Happy. Broken ponies taking solace in each other. A piano began to hammer a note louder and louder as the music built.

What have I become... My sweetest friend?

Everyone I know... goes away... In the end...

And you could have it all... My empire of dirt...

I will let you down... I will make you hurt...

I sobbed, and I wasn't alone. I should have stopped the music then, but I couldn't. I could bear to think as the old stallion went on, singing of the pain that burned inside me as I imagined a life with five friends, together... free... happy...

If I could start again... A million miles away...

I would keep myself....

I would find a way

(Author's notes: the song is Johnny Cash's version of Hurt. This chapter is too painful to talk about too much. Sorry.)

(Heartshine: I agree. I argued for Superior's "Polaroid Millenium". But I'm also tired of trying to type through tears.)

(Bronode: Fuck it. Just... fuck everything. A high blood alcohol level usually just provides adequate editorial performance. This time, it's the only reason I made it through.)

75. To the Last

75.1 Part One

“An exercise in rhetoric.”

There were no words for what I felt. Everything within me had been yanked inside out and scraped raw. I wished I could be like Scotch Tape, sobbing my eyes out, or Bastard, sitting cold and composed in his couch, a thin trail of smoke drifting through the air from the cigarette clutched between his pursed lips. Probably all kinds of safety hazards but I really couldn't care less. I'd just lost two more friends in the worst possible way, one forever and the other abandoned on the moon. If the Astrostable had survived... if it hadn't collapsed into the crater or been buried by rubble, there was some chance that she might find it. I had to cling to that hope. The alternative would drive me mad.

P-21... don't think about it... don't think about it... please don't... I gritted my teeth, feeling myself shake. No. I had to keep it all together.

I needed distractions, fast. So I could not think about... P-21... Rampage... no, damn it... No! Glory was alive, damn it! I wouldn't believe it was otherwise until I saw it with my own eyes! She was alive and we were going to... we were going to... no. I had to keep it together. My people needed me...

I scanned frantically around the cabin, looking for anything that could occupy me and not remind me of... I glanced at my hooves and found what I sought. What the heck had happened to me? I'd thought that Cognitum was the one who had altered my body when she'd inhabited it... a sort of evil renovation. But alicorn souls seemed pretty darn powerful... Now I had to wonder if it had just been an effect of having Luna inside her, an evil, Nightmare Moon version of what had happened when I got my body back. Speaking of which, now that I had a moment's peace, I could figure out what had happened to me.

Parts of my body were still synthetic, but I couldn't tell where machine ended and flesh began. The magic that had transformed me transcended anything that could be designed. I felt alive, entirely alive, not like clunky metal fused with flesh. My body was armored in places, but it didn't cover me from horn to hoof. The design was sleek and fluid, with tiny shooting stars and crescent moons. Talismans gleamed in

my 'armor', but what their functions were I couldn't guess. I turned my hoof from side to side, seeing through gaps in the plate armor the intricate gearwork within, listening to it whir and click softly inside my limb.

My E.F.S. still had all the old energy and health displays. I fished around in my old saddlebags, took out a garnet, and sucked on the gem, enjoying the sweet and sour fruity taste for a second before it melted away with the familiar surge of energy. Okay, I couldn't see Princess Luna eating rocks, so clearly there was some of the old me in here. Maybe all this alicorn-ness was like a special suit of alicorn barding, and when I got my old soul back, I'd revert to just flesh and metal Blackjack? The magical projection could—

Wait... when had I thought like that? I rubbed my brow, then turned my head, looking at my reflection in the window. My eyes still had the tiniest flickers of red light within, but now I worried about things bigger than just physical alterations. I had Luna's soul inside me, but what precisely did that mean? I didn't have Luna's memories or magic. I couldn't begin to imagine how one raised the moon. Our commonality had allowed us to share this body without that horrifying sense of corruption and violation I'd initially felt, but in its place was... something inexplicable.

I carefully drew out the figurine of Rarity, and I turned it over in my hooves. There was a piece of soul in each one. Each piece subtly nudged me in different directions. Little hints and impressions. They didn't stop me from being me, but they might affect my decisions or outlooks in elusive ways. So where was my soul? Cohabiting in this body? Left behind in the blank? Was some Blackjack-ness keeping me... me? Or was Luna slowly tugging me towards being more like the ruler of Equestria she was two centuries ago?

The fact I was wondering these things at all scared the fuck out of me, and the amount of stuff I was trying not to think about was reaching unmanageable levels. I'd given up so much... lost so much... This didn't feel right. These weren't my thoughts. I didn't deserve these wings. Just like Luna had felt she hadn't deserved the throne...

"This is going to drive me crazy," I muttered.

"Yeah. That's how it started with her," Bastard murmured, taking a long pull off his cigarette as he examined the bore of one of his pistols. "When the Harbingers hired me, she was pretty upfront. A million caps for a few days' work. Oh, and killing you. That too." He gave me a supremely smack-worthy smirk, but I abstained — more from heartbroken lethargy than actual restraint — and he continued, "But the longer

we were in the rocket, the nuttier she became. . . like convincing herself she had to do stuff. Rationalizing it to folks who already thought she shat moonbeams or who couldn't care less so long as they got paid."

"Great. That makes me feel so much better," I said, and latched on my next bet for not thinking about things. I asked, "What's your story, Bastard?"

He shot me a momentary scornful look, then snorted out dual rings of smoke. "No story. I kill ponies for money. I owe a lot of money to some folks who will collect my head if I miss a payment. It's that simple."

"Oh." I felt vaguely disappointed. And annoyed. . .

"Not everypony is the Lightbringer or Security," he said with a thin smile. "I'm just trying to get through life the best I can."

My lips curled in a frown. "So you'll kill a foal for caps?"

"I kill a target for caps," he replied calmly. "If you don't like it, take it up with whoever hires me. I'm just the messenger." He paused, pursing his lips. "And generally, no," he added. "Foal-killing is rarely worth it in the long run. Low pay. High revenge factor. Now killing the foal's parents. . . sure. I've definitely done that before. Nothing ridiculous, of course. I don't do those 'rape and dismemberment' deals. Too messy and likely to go wrong."

"So glad you're a *professional* murderer," I muttered darkly, wondering if it was a mistake to save him. I didn't know what he was thinking anymore, but I wasn't about to admit that.

"Call it my way of fighting the Wasteland," he said with a smirk. "I honor my deals and keep everything nice and civil. I avoid collateral damage whenever possible, and strive for neatness and brevity." He paused, looking a little pained. "It was really tough breaking that deal with Cognitum. That's going to leave a bad taste in my mouth for a long time."

"You could have died and kept your honor," I pointed out.

That earned another smoky snort. "Yeah. Except I'd be, you know, dead. First rule of being a professional is to survive. Jobs go south. Plans go wrong. Dying for anything is something only morons do."

My telekinetic backhand knocked him out of his seat, across the cabin, and into the far wall. "Fuck!" he hissed, clenching his nose and grimacing. At least he was smart enough not to draw his guns. I saved this— this— this *bastard* and lost P-21 and

Rampage? Rampage hadn't been a saint, but. . . "What was that for?" he cried out indignantly.

I jerked him over to me. "You're not a 'professional'. You're a raider with a sense of hygiene," I spat in his face.

"So when I break a contract to save my life and help you, I'm scum, and when I don't, I'm a corpse? Nice," he replied evenly.

That was a kick to the nethers of my righteous indignation. When a pony would do anything to survive, they were scum, but if he'd honored his deal with Cognitum. . . ugh. . . I couldn't handle this. "I just lost two very dear friends and a pony I'd have liked to have given a second chance. One of them," I growled out, pointing at Scotch Tape, "was her *father*. Don't you dare call any of them morons."

"Duly noted," he muttered as he glared at me over his askew glasses. "Now, are you going to kill me, knock me around a little more, or give me one of those second chance thingies?" he asked evenly. I glared into his insolent eyes and. . . damn it. . . What was happening to me? I was upset, sure. . . but I wasn't really going to kill him for insulting my friends, was I?

Was I? I stared into his teal eyes, seeing myself reflected in them and the silent question hanging in the air between us.

I am not an executioner. . .

"Sorry," I muttered, releasing him. If he insulted them again, though. . .

He straightened his glasses and rubbed his bleeding nose with the back of a forehoof. "Yeah. Forgot that you do that whole. . . friend. . . thing. I got vaccinated for that years ago." He considered me and then added. "Guess you were pretty close, huh?"

"Yeah. We were. And are." I'd never forget Rampage. I'd get her home, even if I had to bring down the moon to do it.

"Well, glad that worked out for you," he said with a shrug as he finished off the cigarette and stubbed it out on the upholstery. "I'll honor our deal. Get the kid back safe. Keep her alive till the day after tomorrow." He pushed back the sleeve of his coat to reveal a PipBuck. He checked something. "Let's see. Armor piercing ammo. Need to pick her up some barding. Then play bodyguard till this mess is over." He chuckled. "Then I get paid and get some persistent bastards off my ass."

"You know, we might all die in a few hours," I pointed out. "Doesn't that bother you?"

“Should it?” he answered, as if the very question surprised him. “I don’t want to, if I can help it, but it’s going to happen. I die when I die. That big rock today, a raider’s bullet tomorrow, a mark’s bodyguard next month, starvation next year, or old age in who knows how long... something’s going to get me. Why sweat the details?”

I grunted, then leaned over to where Scotch lay strapped into her couch. Her face was turned away from us. No flying through the air with hooves waving on this trip. She clutched the battered black hat in her hooves. Had that really been just hours ago? The young mare might have been asleep, or was simply alone in her grief. “Just take care of her,” I told him, the edge in my voice present through our entire exchange now gone. He grunted once and nodded.

I stared at him for a long moment; something else was amiss, but I couldn’t put my hoof on what. He was scum... no, that wasn’t it. I was giving him a second chance. That was so me. But there was definitely something... something... something about him... He was a killer... no... he was... he...

“What?” he asked with a frown. Suddenly I levitated him to me, pulled off his glasses, and examined him closer. He was handsome in a somewhat underfed-looking way, athletic without being bulky. Really, he had a frame similar to Stygius, P-21, and Glory... and... and... Now he started to look a bit alarmed. “Fucking what? If you’re going to hit me again, get on with it.”

Fucking... that was it! I wasn’t sexually aroused or interested in him at all! There wasn’t that little part of me wanting the comfort and bliss that came with sex. I mourned P-21 because he was my friend, not because I’d lost a lover. There should have been... something! Sure, it had taken me a few hours to get with Stygius, but that was coming off of sexual trauma, and I was worried about killing him. I should be snogging Bastard. Flirting with him, at least... but... nothing. He left me cold. My emotional reset button wasn’t just not working, it appeared to have been removed completely.

“Nothing,” I answered as I released him, averting my eyes to my blank body lashed to her couch. He shook his head and drew another cigarette, lighting it. I didn’t know if the lack of sensation was a good thing or a sad commentary on my character. I added it to the growing list of things I didn’t want to think about right now... and my head was getting a little too full. “Have you... have you ever felt like you’re not yourself anymore?”

He took a long pull on his cigarette, then exhaled. “Nope. Can’t say that I have. That sounds to me like a hell of a personal problem I’m glad I don’t have. Like pregnancy.

Or being an alicorn. Or being batshit insane, on top of all that.” He pushed off me and sailed back to his seat.

“Thanks,” I muttered dryly. Unfortunately, that left me right back where I started. And his little quip... my babies... I could still feel them inside me. Little pokes and kicks. I had to not think about... not...

Damn it! Thinking about P-21 made me choke up. Thinking about Rampage made me want to hit something. Damn it... why couldn't I just win for once? One solid, inescapable, undeniable, Blackjack-gets-what-she-wants win without paying for it in blood and tears? Why? It wasn't fair. Just once... Just...

Crap, I was crying. Great, shuddering sobs that curled me over and sent tears drifting through the cabin again. First Glory... no! Not Glory! Glory was alive! She was. She had to be. She was going to hold me in her hooves and tell me everything was going to be okay. She'd figure all this out. And I'd never, ever, stray from her again.

Enough. I couldn't take it anymore. I used my magic to untie my blank body and brought it to me. It'd been able to see P-21 even when I wasn't 'home'. Maybe I could use it to get away from myself. Just for a little while. Just until I worked out what I was going to do.

I turned over my blank face. This was my face, but not mine. So young. So... innocent. Had I ever truly looked this way before? I could almost imagine that this was myself dreaming... heh... I was even drooling a little. I held my blank body close and pressed my horn to hers. To dream... but who knew what nightmares I might see?

They couldn't be worse than the nightmares I was living now. I dove into the first window I saw, it and all the others now annoyingly opaque, and let the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood lay broken on the hard granite stones of Mount Hoof, right at the edge of the nearly-sheer-sided great granite knob located at the south end of the Core. To his left, water poured over the spillways of the Luna Dam. Below, more blasted out from the outlets of the hydroelectric plant at the base. Above them loomed an SPP tower, with pegasi whirling and dueling with Brood fliers while cyberponies maintained a withering fire from the access ring near the umbrella hood at the top. To the west, I could see Chapel in a desperate fight against the Brood as the dark

horde advanced, was repulsed, and advanced again. To the east, I could see smoke and flashes amidst Scrapyard's mountains of junk. That wasn't all that far from the Collegiate. The Nightmare Citadel to the northeast was on fire; I could only hope that its defenders had taken refuge in the stable before a unicorn found a way to teleport in.

The most disturbing thing of all was the sight of a massive dark vortex over the Rainbow Dash Skyport. Three Raptors were whirling and maneuvering around the monstrosity of storm clouds and air, and as I watched, it reached out a twisting arm and sent claws of lightning raking at one of the war machines, tearing away dark cloud and blasting burning lines along the hull. To the northwest, I thought I saw Megamart on fire. And southeast, it looked as if the Brood were sweeping along the banks towards Elysium. Hopefully Splendid and the others had gotten out. I didn't begrudge them their flight.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" the Legate purred. The powerful zebra stood with a hoof on Goldenblood's spine. The ghoul's limbs were missing, but he felt only a dull discomfort from each of the broken stubs. "This world should die with a roar. Not a whimper. I'm so glad you've managed to give me an invigorating fight. It wouldn't have been fitting had you all simply submitted to the inevitable."

"So glad our battle could entertain you," Goldenblood rasped under the crushing hoof.

"Oh, you don't understand. It's not the fighting I'm savoring. It's the despair. Truly nothing is more precious than the utter abandonment of hope. I pray we'll be able to hear the wailing all the way up here," the Legate chuckled, then paused and asked, "Have you given up hope, Goldenblood?"

"Blackjack will stop you," he swore.

"Oh?" The Legate sounded amused.

"Nothing has stopped her. Nothing will stop her. She cannot give up," Goldenblood answered, and then the hoof twisted, making something in his body crack. "You should know. Your own prophecy says that she will defeat this city."

"Yes. . . prophecy. . ." the Legate purred. "I'm honestly not sure myself if the prophecy of the Maiden of the Stars is true. Oh, it was unquestionably useful. It kept my own superstitious people aligned and allied. Earned me respect and cooperation. But is it true? A Maiden of the Stars, coming down to destroy this heart of sin? Did I predict it, or simply construct a convenient lie?"

Suddenly, the hoof on Goldenblood's back lifted and wrapped around his neck. He hauled Goldenblood into the air, turning his face towards the east. "What do you think?" the Legate hissed into his ear.

There was the pale image of the moon, faint in the daytime sky, and next to it a brilliant blue star. At first barely visible, it gleamed as it grew brighter and brighter. "She failed," Goldenblood whispered. "She failed to stop my creation."

"Indeed," the Legate laughed. "The Eater will catch it as it falls into the well we've carved into the earth." He gestured to the Core. "The moonstone will be slowed by the friction and caught in our web, leaving the spirit easily digestible. Food, in all forms, comes down to the preparation."

The blue glow grew and grew. Goldenblood saw the eager grin on the Legate's face for several minutes. Then the zebra's eyes narrowed in concern. "What is happening? Something is wrong! It should be slowing in the atmosphere already! Dropping into—"

The blue spot grew brighter and brighter in the sky but then streaked overhead and disappeared out of sight behind the eastern mountains. The Legate grabbed Goldenblood by the head and turned him, squeezing his skull as he demanded, "What did you do? The moonstone was supposed to embed itself!"

Goldenblood smirked as the Legate stared at him, then the sky, then at him, and then up at the sun. The Legate's grip relaxed a little. "Oh, clever pony. The trajectory loops. I thought it'd be a straight path."

"Of course," Goldenblood rasped. "Trottenheimer worked out the math. I thought it was supposed to be a straight line too at first."

"I see. So it will orbit the world, then the sun... the moon... Oh, he *was* a clever pony," the Legate hissed.

"Yes. And wise as well," Goldenblood answered. A moment later he added, "You worked all that out quite quickly, just from seeing it once? It took me an hour with charts after I was told."

He reached up and tapped the blood-red rings that decorated his face. "My people have a special relationship with celestial bodies. Ages in the past, my tribe were oracles and prophets, though the stars are not always straightforward with their knowledge, or favors." He stretched a hoof towards the skies. "With every pass of the sun and moon, the spirit will grow more powerful. The stone will increase velocity with each pass. Maybe poor dying Equus might lend some power, too. The kinetic

and spiritual energy will build until the final trajectory will bring it. . .” The Legate paused, lowering his forehoof.

“Straight down. With a velocity far higher than that of a straight shot,” Goldenblood finished. Then he asked, “Is that despair you’re feeling?”

The Legate threw him aside, glaring at the spot where Tom had disappeared over the western horizon. “Finishing off this pathetic world shouldn’t be this difficult,” he muttered, his eyes narrowing. “I’m not beaten yet. I still have one last contingency.” He glanced over at Goldenblood, and his confidence returned. “After all, I couldn’t be sure that Cognitum would succeed.”

“What are you going to do?” Goldenblood asked.

“What any good leader does at times like this,” he said as he gazed back out at the Core. “Get help.” I waited for him to elaborate, but all he did was look down at the Core and smile. Was it me, or did the distant tempo of the fighting and screams increase?

Goldenblood didn’t answer for several seconds. “You won’t succeed. Somepony will stop you.”

“The last refuge of the powerless.” The Legate chuckled. “Well, perhaps. Perhaps your alicorns will rescue you. Perhaps, somehow, Horizons will fail, and my plan will be thwarted. But none of you have the capability to defeat me. And I will try again and again until the end of time. Even if I have to kill every living being with my own hooves.”

oooOOOooo

I pulled myself from Goldenblood’s mind. A contingency? What was it? Help? From whom? Who did he have left to get help from? I needed more information. I had to know! I pushed my way into another mind.

oooOOOooo

“We’re boned,” a tiny blue colt said as he and a half dozen bloodied Zodiacs clustered in a cramped hole blown out of a wall, waist-deep in water. I was able to identify Sagittarius, Aquarius, Virgo, Pisces, and Capricorn. I didn’t know who the white pegasus in the black combat armor was, nor the wounded zebra in the cloak.

“We’re not dead yet,” Sagittarius said as he leaned out of the cover of the hole. The chamber they were in was twenty feet tall, with intermittent pillars spaced out here and there. Rusted construction equipment jutted out of the water that covered the

floor and lapped at the walls. On the far side of the room, six Brood tended to a damaged golden tree that trickled rainbow sap into the water. Four other unicorns maintained a shimmering shield protecting them as they worked. A hulking tank sat between the Zodiacs and them, its dented and blackened armor plates popping and twisting back into shape as the repair talismans worked.

“We’re out of explosives,” the blue colt said sourly. “Those damn Brood blew themselves to pieces getting the C-4 away from the tree. Cancer’s scrap metal and Aries is probably roadkill. Gemini and Taurus are keeping the Brood reinforcements outside at bay for now, but eventually even that schizo is going to run out of magic. They’re going to have that tree repaired and popping out reinforcements in *here* soon. The Flux in the water is probably giving all of us tentacles as we speak. But that’s fine, because the frigging tank is going to kill us all long before they sprout. Oh, and we’re out of explosives. We’re boned.”

“Hate to say it,” the white pegasus said, “but we should withdraw. Regroup. Try again later.”

“No, Libra. We were barely able to get in here the first time. We’ve almost scrapped that tree twice. We just have to finish it off. Screw the tank,” Sagittarius said as he jabbed his hoof out the hole.

“Get me a new chassis! I’ll show that striped monstrosity what for!” a piece of equipment on Virgo’s PipBuck squawked as a red talisman flashed on the device.

“Hush, Crabapple,” Virgo said with a frown. “If we could get you installed in the tank, our problems would be over. We could use that tank to take out the tree, the Brood, and everything else.”

“Use the tank...” Sagittarius murmured.

“We tried that,” Libra said. “Remember? When we got between the tree and it, it just moved out of alignment and opened fire.” The white pegasus glowered out of the hole. “I’d thought the Brood were supposed to be dumber than an Enclave general.”

“Zodiacs don’t care if the target is a genius or dumb as hammers, we take it down,” Sagittarius murmured. “If we can’t get it to shoot the tree. . . can we get it to shoot something else?”

Aquarius’s eyes widened and he leaned over to peer at the vehicle now patrolling around the tree, moving through the churned-up, muddy water. “This is a bad idea,” the colt muttered.

“Will it work?” Sagittarius asked.

"It's going to get us blown to pieces," the colt said, glowering at him.

"But will it work?" Sagittarius repeated.

"Will what work?" Virgo asked plaintively as she dug through her bag for robot parts and started to wire them together. "Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

Aquarius was silent a moment, then groaned. "Ugh. . . Yes. Maybe. You're betting against Equestrian wartime engineering." He turned to the zebra. "We'll need some smoke on the water, Scorpie." The zebra mare arched a brow, but then without delay began to dig through pouches lining the inside of her cloak. She dropped various materials into an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle, which began to spew a stream of mist.

"I'll get it started while you fill them in," Sagittarius said as his horn glowed and manifested a compound bow. "Don't take too long."

The green unicorn leapt out of the hole, kicking and jumping as he surged through the water to take position next to one of the pillars. He waited for a count of ten, then drew an arrow from the quiver on his back. Aquarius was a smart kid. A little negative. . . but he knew shifting forces. He was a great Zodiac. Sagittarius would take his 'maybe' over anyone else's 'definitely' any day of the week. The arrow ended in a bulbous grenade, and with practiced care, he fired it straight at the back of the turret. The detonation was decidedly underwhelming.

The turret swiveled towards him, and he dove to the side behind the pillar. The twin cannons roared, and the blast sent both him and the water surging away, stunning him. The turret shifted, orienting on him.

Then a mouth bit the back of his neck, and he was surging sideways with a great spray of water as the cannons fired again. "I got chew!" Capricorn said through a mouthful of mane.

Libra streaked along the perimeter of the flooded garage, streaming the thick white mist from the bottle around her neck. The cannons tracked Sagittarius and Capricorn while the machinegun pods blasted a line of high-caliber rounds after the white pegasus. Sagittarius and Capricorn took cover behind one of the pillars, and he floated out his bow, shooting a bolt of green magic at the tank. It replied with an annihilating blast that nearly turned their cover to rubble. When the pair surfaced from the frothy water, Capricorn murmured, "I don't like this plan."

The mist started to thicken enough that the edges of the room became lost in a haze. All their previous attempts to assault the tree behind the tank had been for naught. As Libra swooped behind the tree, the machinegun fire stopped, but one of

the unicorn Brood blasted at her with lightning, forcing her to keep going. As soon as she was clear of the tree, the machineguns opened up again. From the opposite side of the room, Aquarius fired a pistol from behind another pillar. The turret rotated around and oriented on the colt. The cannons fired again, but he was gone, riding on the back of Pisces as she darted along the water like a missile. "It's working!" the colt shouted.

A small ball-shaped robot with two propeller blades and a small beam gun swooped into position and, hovering, let crimson beams slash at the tank. The red talisman set into the bot's front crowed, "Death from above! This is perfect! I got him now!" The turrets swung towards the robot. "Oh sparkfarts..." The two rounds slammed into the pillar, and the robot disappeared in a cloud of shrapnel. The red talisman went flying through the air, then was seized by a pink magical aura and yanked behind another heavy block of concrete. "Viggy!" it shouted tinnily. "I need another chassis!"

"They don't grow on trees, you technocretin!" the filly shrieked. "Most AIs protect their chassis somewhat, you know!"

"Bah! Plug me into a pocket calculator, a servomanipulator, and a balefire egg launcher, and I'll show you squishies how to win a fight! You're all way too obsessed with retaining your fluids," the robotic stallion shouted out.

Libra dropped the bottle and rolled sideways through the air, twisting her body as she spun and aiming her light machine guns right at the tank. Hurling sideways along the beams, she strafed the war machine with her own fire. It returned with thunderous blast after blast, tearing holes in the walls, ceilings, and pillars as it tried to swat the pegasus out of the air.

A Sparkle-Cola bottle flipped through the air from nowhere and shattered against the tank. The fluid immediately burst into flame, spreading over the cameras and sensors. The tank roared in a frenzy as it blasted again and again, careful to avoid the tree but ripping into everything else with high explosive rounds. The noise deafened Sagittarius, and all he could do was take cover under the water for as long as he could hold his breath.

When the fire stopped, the air swirled with smoke and mist. The flames on the tank had been extinguished in the tempest. Sagittarius felt as if his body had been stuck in a dryer with some big heavy rocks. Something inside him was grinding together, and as he forced himself to his feet, he immediately coughed up a slurry of blood and foul water, slumping against a stub of concrete jutting from the foaming pool.

Capricorn floated nearby, unconscious or... no, she was still breathing.

Then he lifted his eyes and stared at the two barrels of the tank. Behind it, a platoon of Brood and unicorns stood in ranks around the fully restored tree. Identical smirks rested on all their faces. "You're finished," one unicorn wearing Silver Stripe's face informed him flatly. The other Zodiacs were picking themselves out of the rubble of the shattered and blasted pillars.

A resounding crunch filled the room as a massive crack ran down the center of the roof of the flooded garage. The grinding noise rose as rocks and pebbles pattered down. The Brood and Zodiacs alike turned to stare up at those ominous slabs. *Try and fire those cannons again. I dare you*, he thought. "Libra? Scorpio? Either of you alive?" he asked aloud.

"Yeah?" the blond pegasus answered as she emerged from a pile of concrete, her scorched feathers bent in wild directions. The zebra emerged a second later from that mysterious space that zebras and P-21 hid in.

"Get everypony out," he said as he drew an arrow from his quiver, stepping out and immediately drawing the eyes of every Brood and the tank as he loaded it into his magical bow.

Pisces screamed for him to come back and Virgo sobbed, but Sagittarius didn't look back. The unicorns' horns flared as they pushed up on the slabs overhead. He drew back the arrow, water dripping off the grenade at the end. Then lines of fire were punched through his battered body as dozens of bullets ripped into him. He loosed the arrow as he fell, his vision darkening as the roaring barrage concluded.

As he collapsed into the churning water, the crack overhead exploded, and the two gargantuan slabs slid down like an immense house of cards collapsing in slow motion. Through the gap, for a moment, he could see the floor above, and the floor above that, collapsing as well, dropping rusting construction equipment down upon the tank, the tree, and the Brood. Then, as he started to slip beneath the waves, everything going black, the green unicorn smiled.

oooOOOooo

The memory window winked out before me, and I was left staring at the void in my old and empty mind. Sagittarius was gone. I looked at the lingering pools of thought. How many others would I see wink ou— and another one disappeared right then! I gasped. Who was it? Calamity? Velvet? Whisper? Someone I'd known was gone, and... I switched my attention from one pool to the next. How many

minds had I been connected to in the first place? I hadn't been able to precisely inventory them. Another pool winked out, and I screamed in that vast nothingness. Stop dying! Please stop dying. Please...

There was nothing for it. I found the nearest mind and threw myself into it. I had to know. I had to...

oooOOOooo

"We failed," Xanthe muttered as they sat in a muddy pit together. While Xanthe's armor was still intact, her mane wasn't. Only a few long strands remained. Her stomach clenched, and she retched but brought nothing up. She glanced at the three ghouls. "Any ammo left? At all?"

"Sorry, all out of corpses," Snails said mournfully. "Those skeletons didn't work out so good."

"It's okay," the zebra said, glancing over at Carrion.

The ghoulish griffin's armor was wrecked, functional only in the sense that it still clung to his desiccated frame. "Guns are dry. Explosives are gone. Sorry. I don't see how we can accomplish our mission at this point."

Xanthe shoved herself to her hooves, staggering a few steps as she cried out, "We can't give up!" She managed all of three steps before collapsing on the muddy floor of the ruined bunker. She clenched her eyes, trembling and muttering again, "We can't give up." She looked back at the others. "The Maiden is counting on us. Everypony needs us to take out this bunker!" She turned desperately from one to the next. "We can try to get some more ammo from the Brood! See if we can rupture the Flux tanks again! Or maybe... maybe I could try that vent. Maybe they haven't mined it a third time!"

"Xanthe!" Carrion croaked, helping her out of the muck. "Enough. We're not going to be able to do it. The Brood know their bunkers are under attack, and they're reinforcing them. We probably got hundreds of those bastards between us and that stupid tree." Xanthe swayed and clutched her stomach. "And you're not going to last much longer one way or another," the griffin added. "How much RadAway do you have?"

Xanthe clenched her jaw, tasting blood in her mouth. "I... ran out fifteen minutes ago," she whispered, like uttering a shameful confession.

"Uh-oh," the stealth suit quipped in a worried, foal-like tone.

Carrion sighed. "All right. Let's backtrack to that drain. It should get you out of here, at least. Maybe they can send in a second team."

"No!" Xanthe said sharply, rising to her hooves. "We're not going to give up! The Maiden wouldn't give up! She may have cursed me, but I can't give up! Because the only way you can ever lift a curse is by doing the right thing! The Legate's evil, and these Brood are monstrous, but I can't give up! I'd rather die than give up!" Then her guts gurgled, and she coughed. "Even if I really, really don't want to become a ghoul." She gave the others a weak smile. "No offense."

"None taken. And you probably won't. If everypony that died of radiation poisoning became a ghoul, Equestria would be a nation of undead," Carrion answered.

Silver Spoon stood away from the others, staring down the dark tunnel they were hunkered in. "Ghouls," she murmured. Then she turned back to the others. "The Brood aren't ghouls too, are they? I mean, they're like cyber zebra unicorn pegasi thingies with all kinds of crazy powers, but they're not ghouls too, are they?"

Xanthe, Snails, and Carrion shared a look. "Uh, no. They're not ghouls too," Snails said dully.

"Right! 'Cause that would be, like, totally cheating," Spoon said brightly. "So, what if we blew up the one place they can't go?" The blank faces remained, and she snorted, rolled her eyes and explained, "The reactor thingy. Duh!"

"Blow up a reactor?" Xanthe said lightly. "But a reactor's is heavily shielded. This one is obviously breached, but you'd need a tank to blow it up."

Silver Spoon snorted. "Well then, we get inside the reactor first, and *then* blow it up! You don't need to be so totally geek about it."

Xanthe took on a softer tone. "Silver Spoon, it's an operational reactor. It's on. It's a huge conflux of magical energy. I know you absorb radiation, but even ghouls have a limit."

Silver Spoon snorted. "Well, duh. That's what I do when I hit my limit. I make stuff explode! So I'll just make the inside of the reactor explode. Simple."

"But... you'll die..." Xanthe said dully.

Silver Spoon turned away. "So? I die. I'm, like, already dead. And anypony who'd care is dead too. So, like... what's the difference?" She sniffed, glowing green tears trickling down her cheeks. "I miss back when all I had to do was find Tiara. I wish I could have found her. She'd... well... she'd miss me. She'd be rude about it..."

but she would.”

“I’ll miss you,” Snails said as stared back at her.

“And me,” Xanthe added, trotting over and hugging the glowing ghoul. She suddenly shuddered as her stomach clenched, then pulled away.

“Hrmph,” Carrion grumbled. “I’ll . . . miss having a walking bubble of healing following us around,” he said as he averted his eyes.

“Thanks,” Silver Spoon said as she looked down the hall. “I don’t really know the way, though. What if I get lost?”

Xanthe took out a tool and shakily removed the PipBuck from her hoof, and for an instant, everything went dark. Then the most amazing thing happened: my vision filled with an emerald-lit view of one world superimposed over another. One world seemed to be made of shadows and ugly black stone. The other was of shimmering, jade-colored light. Xanthe was a crude zebra-shaped block nestled within a suit of glimmering lights. A handsome verdine griffin stood superimposed over a crumbled black body. Snails seemed a twisted snarl of light fused with the dark body. The hallway was at once a broken and muddy ruin and a shining and polished piece of structure set in its prime.

Was this what every ghoul saw, or just a shining one like Silver Spoon? Either way, seeing the ugly real world imposing on such delicate, if illusive, beauty, I could understand why so many would inevitably go mad. Silver Spoon examined the PipBuck on her hoof, and it appeared like a disgusting coil of foulness studded with horrible glaring lights, showing the PipBuck mapping tool. “Okay . . . so . . . this way?” she asked, jabbing a hoof down the hall.

“Maybe one of us should go with her?” Snails asked in his slow drawl.

But Silver Spoon shook her head. “I’ll be fine. There’s no reason for two of us to . . . you know,” Silver Spoon trailed off. She stared at the lanky, mangled-looking unicorn and then leaned forward, kissing him lightly on the cheek. “I’m . . . you know . . . like . . . sorry . . . and stuff . . .”

“Yeah. Sorry, eh,” he murmured. “Real sorry . . .” He opened his mouth and closed it again before lowering his star-filled eyes.

“Hate to be the crotchety asshole here, but if we don’t get her out of here and some rads out of her system, we’re going to be either Team Ghoul or Team Looking for a New Zebra,” Carrion said from next to the sickly zebra. “If you’re going to do this, then you should go do it.”

“Right. Right. . .” Silver Spoon took a few steps back from the others. “I just. . . I. . .” she stammered.

“Thank you, Silver Spoon,” Xanthe said with a gentle, honest smile. “I’m sorry we couldn’t find Diamond Tiara.”

“Well. . . it’s not surprising she rushed on ahead of me. I was, like, always catching up to her and stuff.” She swallowed and turned away. “G. . . goodbye, all of you.”

She tore herself away and raced through the emerald-lit world for several seconds till she could disappear around the corner. Then she pressed her forehead to the wall and sniffed. “Goodbye. . .”

She consulted the map on her PipBuck and kept searching around for signs that read ‘Utility’, ‘Maintenance’, or ‘Reactor’. She passed other ghouls wandering aimlessly, but the glowing outlines nodded their heads respectfully as she passed. The grotesque mockeries that were their bodies were hardly noticeable. Then a mare called out, “Hey, Silver Spoon!” The voice echoed through the hallways of the ruin.

“Tiara?” Silver Spoon called out, her ears perking up as she turned down a side path and trotted several feet. “Tiara? Is that you?” Hope echoed back at her, and then she stopped short. “No. . . no, Tiara’s dead. She’s dead. She’s gone.” She clenched her eyes shut. “I. . . I have to do this. I’m the only one who can.” She sat down, raising her eyes to the ceiling. “Oh. . . but I don’t want to. I’m scared. I wish Tiara was really here. . .”

“Hey, Silver Spoon!” the mare’s voice echoed again, but Silver Spoon covered her ears and shook her head, backtracking to the hall and continuing to follow the signs and the map. Again and again, the mare called out, and Silver Spoon’s whole body trembled in response.

Finally, she reached a hatch with a rusted sign above it reading ‘Warning: Reactor. Do not open while in operation.’ She looked at the PipBuck, then at the door, squinting to read the gross reality through the shimmering green dream world. “This is it. . .” she said, and she put her hooves to the wheel and heaved, her body straining. “Come on!” she shouted as she grunted, her body feeling very warm and bright, but the hatch didn’t budge.

“Damn it, you stupid door! Open!” she shouted and reared up, slamming her hooves against it. Green light flared around her hooves, and the black horridity crumpled a little as her strike left glowing marks in the metal. “Open! Open! Open!” she shouted, her hooves digging and melting her way through the metal.

“Hey, Silver Spoon! Over here!” Tiara called out to her again and again. “Hey, Silver Spoon, let’s go have some fun with those blank flanks!” “Hey, Silver Spoon, let’s go get drinks after work!” The ghoul’s body felt as if it were on fire as she struggled, loops of necrotic magic like tiny solar prominences erupting from her mottled gray hide only for the holes they left behind to heal instantly. Silver Spoon bowed her head as she continued to dig, glowing tears melting pits in the floor as she shone like a tiny green sun.

Suddenly, the hatch gave way, and inside was a chaotic storm of magic roaring between several crystal talismans. The color flickered and changed, twisted. . . coalesced. . . forming into a pink mare with a purple-and-white-striped mane. A delicate crown lay perched on her head, and she wore a bright red dress with gems studding her ears. Her lips twisted in a cocky grin, but there was warmth in her eyes. “Hey, Silver Spoon. There you are.”

Silver Spoon stared. “T . . . tiara?”

“Of course, you dummy. Who else?” The pink mare spoke with more fondness than malice as she smiled and nodded over her shoulder. “Come on. Let’s go paint the town red.”

“Yeah. . . I’m coming. . .” Silver Spoon whispered as everything grew brighter and brighter by the second. A smile crossed her face as she stepped closer to that mare, the real world melting away as everything transformed into light. “Tiara. I found you,” her voice whispered.

oooOOOooo

The white pool exploded before me, the name echoing in that vast emptiness that was my blank head. I’d wronged Silver Spoon, tricked her twice and used her for my own ends. I was glad she’d been happy at the end of things. . . but it also raised so many more questions. Another window winked out before I knew who it might have been. I couldn’t help myself. I mentally sent myself to the next window and let myself melt away. If I couldn’t help, then I had to know. Had to watch. Had to flagellate myself as a witness to these horrors.

oooOOOooo

The Reapers reaped a bloody batch of Brood. No hiding. No tricks. No strategy. Just brute force and bloody determination carried them along as they butchered the enemy on all sides. Toaster slammed one against the wall of the bunker before a dozen of the hellish appliances blazed to life and incinerated the pinned cyborg.

Then the scarred earth pony pulled away, the sizzling body stuck fast to the toasters before he spun with surprising grace and flung the flaming torso into the face of two more before springing upon them with maniacal glee. Still, even his powerful frame was slick with sweat, and his vicious blows moved with ominous inertia.

Hammersmith and Dazzle fought back to back, the unicorns wielding their weapons with their magic and bodies. No pony who witnessed those two would ever accuse unicorns of weakness. Hammersmith shoved a Brood up only to bring that colossal metal mallet down as if he were driving home a railroad spike. Dazzle, her rifle gone, dodged a blow by a Brood unicorn's blade and sprang forward, grabbing the Brood around the neck and then slicing right through her head with a crimson beam before she could teleport away. A second unicorn appeared on Hammersmith's back, blade raised, point aimed at the base of his skull. Her magic sent the dropped blade from the first cyberunicorn flying up and deflecting the strike. Without looking up, the immense mallet whirled over his head like a steel cyclone and sent the Brood flying. Another crimson beam turned the enemy into drifting dust.

Overhead, Storm Front fought with cool precision against a dozen Brood fliers as he led them ahead, flipped long enough to bring his sniper rifle to bear, and blew a hole in one flier's head, then darted through the hole left in the enemy formation. He shed blood and brass as he flew, but wore a smile as he whirled overhead.

Of them all, Brutus was at the front. An enormous blank mutant, augmented and twice his size, brought down a hoof almost half as large as the black stallion's body. Brutus rose up and caught the giant's descending hoof against his own, his powerful frame straining against the weight. Then, he shifted suddenly to the side, and the giant's foot dropped awkwardly and it staggered. Brutus didn't hesitate, planting his forehooves and kicking out with a massive applebuck at the giant's ankle. With an explosive crack, bone and wire erupted from the ruptured limb as it folded. Brutus, his forelegs still planted, turned around and gave a second mighty applebuck at the other forelimb, which struggled to maintain the monster's weight. His legs struck the side of the knee, and the limb twisted as tendon and wire gave under the force of the beast. The giant fell before him, and Brutus rose up and slammed his forehooves against the skull again and again till there was a third, mighty crack and blood gushed from various orifices.

Candlewick poured a stream of blazing yellow at the Brood as they flooded down the ramp and teleported in. So many rushed forward that they became a blazing mass, burning slower than they died. The wall of burning dead barely kept them at bay long enough for the others to keep from being overwhelmed. "These guys seem

really pissed off! Did something happen?" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Yeah, they realized they better send all their fuckers on us!" Toaster bellowed in glee before leaping on a pile of Brood and rolling about like a pig in a heap of burning bodies.

"Maybe this is the only tree left," Dazzle yelled as she swung the blades and continued to blast beams of magic.

Candlewick looked back at the golden tree. So much Flux was being pumped into it that the arcane device had swollen grotesquely. Brood weren't popping out so much as dribbling out like runny roadapples, being seized by unicorn Brood, and having augmentations shoved into their bodies with gory sprays of blood. Usually there wasn't time for more than a jagged spur-like plug stabbed in at the base of their skulls; the new Brood were being sent at the Reapers as soon as they could walk. The reinforcements from outside were far more effective than that slurry of zebra oozing like sap.

The scarred pony in the firepony hat turned to the Brood pushing through the burning wall of corpses and flicked a release on his saddle. The canister popped free, and he kicked it into the flames where the trickling rainbow fuel ignited and turned the container into a wildly bouncing rocket trailing fire. He reached under his coat and drew out another container, this one marked with a bright red stripe.

"What's that?" Dazzle asked during a gap in the fighting.

He slammed it home on his side and twisted it in place. "Toaster's special blend. Has an oxidizer mixed in along with magnesium powder." He tugged his hat down over his eyes. "If that's the last tree thing left, it's gotta burn." Then he levitated out Big Daddy's potion and popped the cork out of the bottle, looking down at the glowing white dregs at the bottom. "I don't have a clue what this is, but if it let Big Daddy take out a tank..." He upended the bottle and swallowed the last bitter dregs in the container. "Yech!" Suddenly, his insides gave a great lurch, and he choked, then whimpered, "I'm not sure I should have drunk that."

"What are you doing?" Dazzle asked, her eyes going wide. "Why are you... smoking?"

"I have no idea," Candlewick croaked as a warmth spread through him, wisps of smoke leaking out his nostrils and mouth. "I hate this. All this," he said as he pushed past Dazzle, staggering towards Brutus, the rousing giant, and the tree beyond.

"What's wrong with ye, boy! We need yer flame guarding our flanks!" Hammersmith

yelled as the beefy bearded unicorn whacked another cyborg with his immense hammer, sending a halo of brain and skull erupting in every direction.

"I hate it. Hate him. Hate me," Candlewick muttered as he continued forward. "It's filth... I'm filth... it's all filth..." The flamer coughed as the tip ignited. The flame jetting from the tip of his flamer was a brilliant white, and sparks spat out before it. "And it needs to be washed away."

"Candle!" Dazzle shouted after him, but the earth pony in the red dragonhide coat and firepony hat rushed forward as the behemoth pulled its split skull back together. The scarred stallion jammed the flamer into the beast's enormous nostril and a great whooshing noise filled the cavernous space as tongues of fire exploded out from the monster's mouth and other nostril before blasting out its malformed side a few seconds later. As the beast reared up, Candlewick hooked his legs in the blazing nostrils and yanked up. The gargantuan Brood continued to roll away from the Reapers and fell on its back, flinging Candlewick like a comet over the heads of countless Brood.

"Burn! It all has to burn!" Candlewick shouted as he fell, the flamer sending a fiery plume ahead of him and making the Brood stagger back from the ring of hissing, snapping white fire. "Burn it all away!" he yelled as he landed in the pool of flame and continued the stream. He didn't wait for the fire to dissipate, rushing along as it seared his hooves and scorched his belly. The stallion raced along the burning road, his coat ablaze as he rushed right up towards the tree. Something leapt on his back, despite the inferno, but Candlewick just rolled in the burning flamer fuel and scraped the impediment off.

The golden tree, bloated and twisted, loomed up three times his height, and he rammed the nozzle right into an oozing orifice. The roaring disappeared as all around him the Brood surged forward, immolating themselves as they pushed into the fire. Dazzle called after him while Toaster whooped and cheered him on. The golden tree blackened around the hole he'd jammed the nozzle into.

Suddenly, knots on the surface of the tree swelled grotesquely, glowing bright red, and then exploded like blazing pustules, vomiting forth incendiary pus over his back and into the screaming, writhing masses of Brood. The glowing mouth of the flamer began to spatter him with chunks of molten metal as the blaze spread more and more. There was no pain, only a warmth that grew and grew as more and more burned away.

The great, bloated, technological monstrosity suddenly burst along the back, and

a flaming rainbow slurry poured out in great splatters and tears. The fire seemed like a living thing now, and it spread out consuming all in its path. Tree. Augments. Armaments. Brood. But not Candlewick. Him it caressed like a lover, and the half of his vision on the side of the flamer disappeared. Still, he poured on the fire. More fire.

“Candlewick!” screamed Dazzle as hooves pulled him away, and she cried out as he glanced back over his shoulder, shaking her scorched hooves. “Stop! We’ve beaten them!”

“Your tanks are empty, laddie!” Hammersmith shouted.

“No. Have to burn it all away. Burn it all. . .” he said as the warmth grew and grew, spreading throughout him. Soon there’d be nothing left. He’d go out like Big Daddy, in a blaze of glory.

Dazzle lunged forward and hugged him, and she immediately cried out as her beautiful pale hide turned red as if she was embracing a hot stove. “Please. Come back! Please!” she sobbed, holding him to her chest as he felt his body sear hers.

Candlewick groaned and shuddered, his body shaking as he struggled to pull away from her before she was burned up too, but she refused to release him. Her tears sizzled as they fell on his face. Slowly, like a flame that had spent its fuel, the warmth began to ebb as he shook. Somepony was pouring water on him, but all he was aware of was Dazzle holding him and the horrible smell of burned ponyflesh. “I’m sorry,” he croaked as the warmth was replaced by pain. So very much pain. He staggered and fell on his side, his sole remaining canister of special blend fuel slipping from its case and rolling beside him. Somepony was pouring healing potions into him, but all they did was increase the pain.

“Shh. . .” Dazzle said softly as her burnt hoof rubbed the side of his face with sight. “Don’t talk. Don’t apologize. You did it. Soon as the tree went up, the Brood pulled back. We stopped their reinforcements. Now just hold on. We’ll get outside and fire a flare to signal an alicorn pick up. Get you to the Collegiate and thrash those eggheads till they magic you all better again.” Storm Front, Hammersmith, and Brutus moved in close, watching in concern. The pegasus’s feathers were burned around the tips, grounding him.

But Candlewick looked past them to where Toaster watched the gathering, a nasty smile on his face. Candlewick could only see out of one eye, but he glared straight at the scorched and battered stallion. “No,” he croaked loudly, tasting blood. “Don’t you fucking dare, Toaster!” The scarred stallion’s eyes went wide as Brutus and

Hammersmith whirled on him.

“Do what?” Brutus asked as he glared at Toaster. The appliance-bedecked stallion’s eyes popped wide as everyone regarded him.

“Nothing!” he said, grinning at Candlewick and struggling to keep it from a snarl. “He’s fucking crazy after that shit, right?”

“He planned on finishing all of you off and taking—”

“You fucking idiot!” Toaster suddenly screamed. “We could have had it all, bro!”

“Bullshit,” Candlewick spat, at him. “*You* could have had it all. That’s all *you* care about. All *you*’ve ever cared about. And when this is all over, I’ll make sure every damned Burner knows it.” He slumped against Dazzle. “You make a shitty leader, Toaster.”

“Get out of here,” Brutus rumbled as he loomed at the other earth pony.

“No one’s going to follow you after they hear what you wanted to pull here,” Storm Front added.

Toaster’s pupils contracted to pinpricks. “No. Fuck you. Fuck all of you!” He hit a talisman on his chest, and the toasters began to jet their flame. “Annihilate! Incinerate! Obliterate!” Time seemed to slow as he raced forward, his toasters lighting up one after the next, forming the corona that would take out at least one of them before he was put down. His hoof flailed at his side as Toaster closed the gap, racing like a flaming meteor straight at the prone Candlewick and Dazzle. The unicorn tried to blast him with her magic, but Toaster ignored the injury in his maddened state.

Hammersmith brought the mallet down in an overhead blow, but Toaster ducked to the side and embraced the unicorn, the toasters blazing as he smashed his armored head into Hammersmith’s unarmored horn. The unicorn roared in agony as a crack ran right through the base of the spire and every bit of him not protected by his plate armor ignited. As Brutus came in behind Toaster, he received a blazing applebuck kick to the face, knocking the stallion back long enough for Toaster to release Hammersmith and give Brutus a flaming body slam. Storm Front frantically dug through the scorched debris, looking for ammo.

Toaster shoved Brutus aside and then lunged straight at Dazzle. The prone Candlewick seized the canister beside him in both hooves, smashed the end down on the platform between his hind legs, letting rainbow fuel leak out, and then flung the cylinder right into Toaster’s face.

Toaster's special blend went up like a fireworks factory, and as his eyes burned away, Toaster's course sent him racing off to the side. He screamed, or perhaps laughed, as he thrashed his way around the room, slamming his blazing body against whatever surface he encountered, including the floor. "Annihilate! Obliterate! Immolate!" he screamed wildly, thrashing as his mane burned away, then what remained of his overcharged-appliance armor. "Infurigate... in...blasty... gate..." he trailed off as the flames died, the blackened body taking a few more feeble steps, chunks of bone peeking through the charred muscle. "Fuck..." he rasped, giving a smoky cough. "Bro... why...?" he choked out before he finally collapsed.

"Bye, bro," Candlewick muttered.

"Come on. Let's get out of here," Brutus rumbled. Hammersmith picked up Candlewick with his levitation, not wincing at the crack in his horn, and set him carefully on Brutus's back.

"Hell of a day," Storm Front muttered.

"It's not over yet, laddie," Hammersmith replied, walking over to the smoldering body. "This is for not paying yer bloody bills, you sodding slag." The steel sledge came down, pulverizing Toaster's immolated remains. Suddenly, the smoking remains exploded, showering the bearded pony with steaming bits of gore and bone. Hammersmith blinked, then picked a curved bit of skull out of his beard. "You bloody blazing son of a bitch," he said as he scraped the gore off his face. "You just had to explode one last *bloody* time, didn't you?" Together, the Reapers walked out of the smoking tomb.

oooOOOooo

"He lived. They lived," I said as I pulled myself out of my blank's mind. Bastard looked over, vaguely baffled, but Scotch snapped her head around at me, her eyes full of wild hope. Immediately I stared at her, my smile fading and with it I watched her crumple anew. "Not..." The light died in her blue eyes as she slumped. "I'm sorry, Scotch."

"I just thought... since you and Glory survived so many times... maybe..." Scotch murmured hollowly.

I carefully moved over to her couch and put a wing around her. "I'm sorry," I repeated, not knowing what else to say. "I meant some other ponies. They killed all three bunkers... but... I thought..." I shook my head. "I wasn't thinking..."

The young mare turned from me. "It's just... it's Mom all over again. I wasn't there

when she died. The Overmare ordered her recycled before they told me she was dead. I just. . . I just went home, and Rivets was there telling me I was getting moved to C shift. It was like she never existed in the first place.”

“She did, Scotch. And I know she’d be proud of you. P-21 was,” I said as I gave her a little hug with my wing.

“I wish it hurt. I don’t feel anything. Like the feely part in me is broken or something,” she said as she pressed her cheek against the window behind her seat. “It’s not fair. You came back two times. . . three?”

“I’ve kinda lost track myself,” I replied with a sad smile. “I wish they all could.”

“He should get to come back once,” she said, and then the young mare leaned over and pressed her face to my shoulder. “I want him back,” she sobbed loudly as I held her in my hooves. I nuzzled the top of her head, fighting to keep myself together. I had to keep it together. I couldn’t fall apart now, couldn’t afford to slip onto that mattress and wallow in grief. Maybe it was Luna, or maybe it was me, but I only let a few tears slip down my cheeks and gave a snotty sniff before I beat back that terrible welling of emotion inside me. But Scotch, at least, could weep. I envied her that.

I glanced over at Bastard, glaring at him, challenging him to make one dismissive snort or snide smirk. All he did was blow a stream of smoke and look away from us and out the window at the approaching planet.

When Scotch calmed, she rubbed her snotty nose and bloodshot eyes and errantly blew the former in my wing. Cognitum’s fancy schmancy rocket had gravity, unlike the other one, preventing snot meteors from floating all over the place. My mane stood up on end. . . but hey, I could live with a little snot. “Sorry,” she said, wiping her muzzle on the back of her foreleg.

“Oh, that’s alright,” I answered lightly, “I was due.” I wiped the wing off on the velvet upholstery, trying to keep my disgust from showing. Yeech! It wouldn’t come off! What was up her muzzle, a glue factory? Finally, I managed to get it off, but I left a half dozen or so small white feathers adhered to the seat. Scotch Tape gave a little smile, but it came nowhere near her eyes. Bastard just shook his head with mute disapproval. “What! It’s sticky! I don’t know how Glor—” I stopped as my mental workings went ‘clunk’.

Scotch Tape came immediately to my rescue, asking, “Did you say they took out the bunkers? Isn’t that good?” Her eyes were still wet with tears, but she was clearly

trying to be brave.

I gave mental thanks to my fellow 'Don't Think About It Club' member. "It... it means no more reinforcements. He's still got thousands of troops, but now that's all he has." It was still more than we had defenders. Way more. "He also has this great big storm thingy over the Skyport. It looks like a tornado with a face."

"A Tempest?" Bastard blurted in alarm. "Where the hell did he get one of those?" Scotch Tape and I shared a flat look, then simultaneously turned to him, brows arched. He colored a little. "I banged a zebra mare once on a semi regular basis a long time ago. Leave me alone."

We again shared a look and shook our heads. "Give us a little more than that," I prompted. "What is it?"

"A zebra weather control fetish with an air elemental spirit stuck inside it, usually in a bad mood. They were supposed to be the next step in superweapons. Put them on a missile and unleash them to rampage all over pony lands like megaspells. Think a constant, sapient balefire bomb."

I'd much rather think of almost anything else. I'd seen two balefire bombs way too close for my comfort. Also, that wasn't what I'd meant. "How do I beat it?" I asked.

"With difficulty. I have no idea, really. Xulu only knew because she was a shaman, and she only knew because the spirits were terrified of what was happening during the war," he answered with a shrug, then stabbed a hoof at me. "And that's it. Don't ask me more than that. I'm boring. I'm plain. I'm just a hitpony who gets paid to put bullets in people. Got it?" He stabbed the lit end of the cigarette at me with a note of alarm in his voice. "I am not a hero. Not special. Not interesting. Understand?"

Now I had something to distract me. "Well, I don't know. Now I have all kinds of questions about how a hitpony and a shaman ended up together." I glanced at my blank body. There were all kinds of things I needed to check, but I also needed this. What if I jumped in and saw Homage die? Or Charity? After feeling Candlewick's burned body, even I needed a moment or two.

He clenched his jaw, pushing his glasses up and looking out the window. "Come on. Please?" Scotch Tape asked.

"No," he said sharply, scowling at the young mare. "Look, not everyone has a great big story behind them. So just live with that, because I'm not saying more."

I rubbed my nose. "I don't know. Knowing my talent for gathering weird people, you're probably two centuries old after escaping a M.o.M. stasis spell because you

were caught trying to assassinate Twilight Sparkle for the O.I.A.” He stared at me for several seconds, and I grinned. “I’m right on one of them, aren’t I?”

“No. You just must have known some pretty freaky people.” The reply wiped the grin from my face.

I had known a lot of exceptional people, but also plenty who hadn’t been. And some who might have seemed not-so-exceptional who had been more than I could have imagined. “Guess I do,” I muttered, my momentary elation smashing back down to reality.

“And a lot of them tend to die,” he continued flatly, making me turn my face from him as I gritted my teeth, fighting to keep myself together. “No thanks. I’m glad I’m alive, but I don’t want to follow you around. That’s just... too dangerous.” He turned away on his seat.

“That Bastard,” Scotch Tape muttered, the young mare glowering at his back, then up at me. I kept trying to keep focused, but thoughts and memories kept rolling through my head. P-21. Rampage. Lacunae. Discord... kinda. So many people had suffered and died to help me, taking bullets that should have finished me off. Scoodle had merely been the first. How many others had died, or were dying, because of me? “Blackjack?” Scotch Tape asked in alarm. Dusty Trails. Big Daddy. Charm hadn’t died, but had come close. Silver Spoon. If I hadn’t used her, she’d still have been alive in the boneyard... it was my fault. It was all my fault. Scotch Tape’s eyes went wide as things started going black. “Blackjack!” she cried out. Dealer... he’d died so perfunctorily I’d barely noticed and hadn’t thought of it till now! Slaves killed in Fallen Arch. Reapers killed by Rangers. Rangers by Reapers. My sister! My stable! I couldn’t stop it! Couldn’t stop it! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!

“Breathe!” Scotch Tape yelled in my face, the word sounding like it was coming from underwater as the rocket’s interior faded to black. Finally, it all stopped.

When I came to, I was still in the rocket, with my head throbbing and feeling... on the mattress. I could hear Scotch Tape and Bastard arguing in the distance. Next to me was my blank body. I clenched my eyes closed, pressing my face into the padding of the chair. I wanted my old rocket back, funky smell and all. I wanted to go back to Star House with my friends. To 99! To Canterlot!

I didn’t want to think about what had happened. It’d been ages since I’d had an attack like that, and as I thought about it, guilt roared at me to suck it up and deal.

There was too much riding on this! Too many still counting on me. Too many who'd died for me! What kind of scum was I to lie here like this, feeling overwhelmed and wanting nothing more than to retreat to when my life had been whole and simple and so much easier to face? I crushed myself into that mattress, and piled more mattresses atop me, wanting to be mashed to oblivion.

I levitated my old body to me and embraced it, pressing my horn to my old brow. I had to hide. Take a disguise. Go away till I was safe and in control and could do what everyone demanded I do. I couldn't be in charge of Equestria right now. I couldn't save the Wasteland now. I didn't want this. Anything but this. So I touched my horn and let everything swirl away, picking a pool and disappearing inside.

oooOOOooo

The defense was in shambles, but it persisted. The Rainbow Dash Skyport had become a hot point. Brood pushed along the ground while winds whipped the defenders along the fortified walls. Overhead, the Tempest roared continuously as three Raptors wheeled and banked. Their plasma cannons seemed woefully ineffective as they struggled to avoid two lesser vortices that the Tempest swung like lightning-clawed limbs. One of the three had suffered terribly, trailing smoke and limping away as the Tempest howled and flailed at the other two.

"Wow. Feels just like the old days," Rainbow Dash croaked as she landed in the middle of the Skyport. She darted in, silent as a ghost as she made her way to the command center... but it was a wreck. Something had exploded in there, and I couldn't help but imagine a Brood unicorn teleporting in with a bomb and out with Goldenblood. She raced outside, where teams of unarmed ponies clustered around the main terminal, flapping their wings furiously as they clutched whatever they could.

"Keep flapping!" a soldier bellowed at the civilians. "We've got to keep up a counter-clockwise spin or that thing is going to suck the roof right off the building!"

Rainbow Dash raced up to the armored pegasus. "Where is General Storm Chaser?"

"Who the fuck are you?" the soldier asked in shock, looking at her in bafflement. Of course, he must not know the purple power armor with flowy cape.

"Where is General Storm Chaser, Private?" Rainbow Dash barked in the precise tone to make the blue stallion stiffen up. "Report!"

He instantly saluted. "Ma'am, she relocated to the *Castellanus's* radio room when our command center was destroyed. Chains of command have broken down all over

the valley, and we're just trying to keep things together here. The Brood have made a big push over the last ten minutes for some reason, and that Tempest is tying up all our air support! We're grounded over almost half the valley."

Rainbow peered up at the three. "I see the *Cyclone*, the *Sleet*, and the *Rampage*. Where're *Blizzard* and *Sirocco*?"

"No idea, ma'am. Probably bolted. I've got my orders to try and counteract that wind, but we're barely making a dent," he said over the gale.

"No surprise. A Tempest can generate ten thousand wingpower without breaking a sweat. Damned megafetish," she said before turning and running towards the downed Raptor beside the terminal. "Sometimes, Fluttershy, I really wish you'd have talked to us before making your damned megaspell matrix. Frigging Goldenblood..." she muttered as she raced towards the machine. The propellers along the top were turning faster and faster. "She can't be thinking of taking this thing into the air now. It's not even skyworthy in a calm!"

She must have cloaked, because she slipped right between the two sentries at the gate. The *Castellanus* lived once more, her interior illuminated sporadically by various flickering light sources as her deck groaned and moaned underneath her. Pegasus engineers worked furiously to bang away at the mechanisms while others were taking some boxes on and removing others. More than once, the guards and workers gave a double look, as if catching a glimpse of a ripple of cloaked cloak, but they all rushed back to their work, too busy to start chasing ghosts.

"Get those pumps working!" a familiar voice yelled. Chicanery stood in a rumpled suit that looked like it hadn't been cleaned in weeks, an oversized helmet perched on his head, next to a hole in the floor plates. "No, no! If the breaker's no good, then it's no good. Don't electrocute yourself trying to get it in." He popped his head up and started at the sight of the cloaked blur, then reached for a boxy, battered beam pistol and pointed it right at her, jaw working.

"The safety is on," Rainbow said as she decloaked, and at her appearance he relaxed a little. "Good eyes, though, Chicanery. What are you doing here?"

He rolled his eyes. "I've asked myself that ever since the skies blew up," he said after holstering the gun. "It was a choice between helping here or cowering in the terminal waiting to be made, you know, terminal." He turned and peered down the hole. "No! Nevermind who I'm talking to. If you can't get that pump powered directly, then wire it to a spark battery. We only need it for a few minutes!" He returned his pale eyes back to her. "While video production is more my thing, I spent two years

working as an electrical rigger for lots of propaganda projects. Lighting. Sound system. Stuff like that.”

“I’m looking for Storm Chaser? Bridge?” she asked with a toss of her head.

“CIC. Flight bridge is too thrashed. But I don’t understand why she wants us to get this thing fixed for fifteen minutes of flying. We’re going to need more than that, aren’t we?” Chicanery asked with a worried frown.

“Not if she’s doing what I think she’s doing,” Rainbow Dash said as she peered down the hall. “Listen. Do me a favor and hang around outside the bridge for a few minutes, okay? If the ship takes off, get out an emergency hatch, but I might need some help.”

“Um, sure,” Chicanery said with a worried frown, then leaned over and shouted down, “Look, when you get that pump going, go talk to Calliope outside. He’s probably got more things for you to do.”

They walked quickly along a hall, with Rainbow Dash gesturing with a wing for him to hang back. In the bridge, a number of cables ran to a terminal in front of the captain’s chair. It was also filled up with dozens and dozens of boxes and crates. The gray mare sat in the seat, typing on the terminal as others worked around her. She looked like hell, her uniform stained and splashed with blood and her mane out of its normally neat bun. “That’s it. I have attitude control now,” Storm Chaser shouted at an engineer over the rumble. “The reactor’s already starting to overheat,” she then muttered as she stared at the screen and hit a button. “Everypony out,” her voice boomed over the intercom. “You have two minutes to get your feathers off this ship!”

“Ma’am! We don’t have the control uplink established yet. It’ll take a few more minutes!” one of the engineers called out. Rainbow Dash carefully opened up one of the crates and was greeted by the sight of dozens of glowing green orbs nestled in padding.

“I’ve got it. I’ll get off the second it’s live, and the *Rampage* can guide her straight down that thing’s gullet,” Storm Chaser said as she worked the controls. “Everypony out! Move!”

As the last engineer left the room, Rainbow Dash grabbed him from behind. “Wait a minute. Just stay right there.” And then she turned and stepped inside. “So, when did you become skilled in information networks, General?”

“You,” Storm Chaser answered, looking over at Rainbow Dash in shock. “Did you

jam their network?”

“Homage was working on that when I left. I came as soon as I saw the Tempest. She got a report by alicorn that the bunkers are all down. Survivors are being evacuated to the Arena and University,” Rainbow Dash said as she looked around at all the boxes. “You’re turning the *Castellanus* into a fireship.”

“That’s the idea,” the general replied tersely.

“Good idea,” Rainbow Dash answered as she walked in front of the general. “And since you don’t have the fifteen or twenty minutes it’d take you to set up the link, test it, and get off safely, you’re going to fly the ship yourself, aren’t you?”

“It’s my responsibility,” Storm Chaser said, keeping her eyes on the screen. “I can’t order somepony else to do this.”

“Big Daddy is dead,” Rainbow Dash rasped. The gray pegasus lifted her head in alarm, staring at Rainbow. “The Reapers who survived gave Homage the news.” She slowly approached the mare. “You’re the only mare with any strategic leadership experience left. You are not flying this mission.”

Storm Chaser didn’t look at her. “I’m not sure my leadership is worth much anymore. I made a critical mistake and underestimated my enemy. We lost Goldenblood, and that Tempest has pinned me down here.”

“So your plan met the enemy and fell apart. He learned a few tricks with unicorns, which he probably took from our alicorns, and pulled out a trump card. I saw what you had those boys doing. If you had a half dozen more Raptors, you could probably take out that Tempest without sacrificing one, too. You’re doing what a general needs to do,” Rainbow Dash replied.

“It’s not good enough!” Storm Chaser cried out, tears on her cheeks. “Don’t you understand? Ever since I came to this damned place, I haven’t been a good enough leader. Too many mistakes. Too many things I allowed to get ahead of me. Ponies have died because I couldn’t do what needed to be done! The Enclave failed. I failed.” She shook her head, then bowed it. “These ponies don’t need me. They need a leader like you.”

“Me?” Rainbow Dash reached up and removed the hat and helmet, frowning down at Storm Chaser.

“You’re a Ministry Mare,” Storm Chaser said with a smile. “You’re Rainbow Dash. If you stepped up, I know you could turn this around. You can do anything!” she said with a grin, taking Rainbow’s hooves in hers.

"Yeah. I am pretty awesome," the ghoulish replied as she leaned down towards her. "Except you're forgetting one thing: I failed too." Storm Chaser's smile faded as doubt entered her eyes. "I fucked up one end to the other. I gave my loyalty to Equestria, when I should have kept it with my friends." She glanced at the boxes. "I failed to really lead the pegasi when I was needed most. Ran away instead. I failed and I died... and I failed at that, too." She sighed and brushed back her hoof, shedding a few strands of mane. "These ponies don't need a leader from the past. They go with me, they're headed in the wrong direction. They need a leader who can carry them forward. Somepony they know and trust."

Storm Chaser closed her eyes. "I'm not sure I can save them."

"Maybe you can't. We're outnumbered twenty to one. We've cut off their reinforcements, but there're still a whole lot of enemies left. And if we don't have somepony pulling things together and telling people what to do, we're not going to get anything done." She slipped the helmet onto her hoof. "And because we're running out of time and I really don't want to argue—"

Rainbow brought the helmet around, striking Storm Chaser in the temple and staggering her in her seat. The mare wasn't quite knocked out, but she was dazed. "Chicanery, come quick. You've got some duct tape, right?"

The white pegasus trotted back in, his eyes wide. "It's standard issue for engineers. Why?" he said as he pulled out the roll. Rainbow dash seized it, looped it round one hoof, and tore off strips with her teeth, leaving bits of her wispy rainbow-hued mane in the adhesive, then wrapped it around Storm Chaser's hooves and covered her mouth. By the time the mare had gathered her wits enough to start resisting, Rainbow was finishing taping her wingtips together behind her back. Chicanery watched it all with a hapless expression. "Oh, I am so dead."

"Eh, could be worse," Rainbow replied as she dumped Storm Chaser across his back. She undid the clasps of her armor and pulled herself out of it, then piled armor, hat, helmet, and cape on top of the glaring general. "Get her out of here. I'll fly this mission. There's never been a better flier in the skies than me, Raptor or not." She patted the heap on the straining stallion's back. "Get the suit to somepony who'll use it. Won't do for Mare Do Well to just disappear from the Wasteland."

"Grandma..." Chicanery began to say before Rainbow covered his mouth with a desiccated hoof.

"Reactor's heating up. Do awesomer than me," she said as she looked into the angry eyes of the General. "You can do it. Reestablish your lines. Use the Raptors

for support once the skies are clear.” She leaned in and rasped, “Don’t give up. Not on yourself. Not on anypony.” The general’s angry eyes softened a little as Chicanery ran out of the room.

Rainbow Dash flew over and landed in the captain’s chair. “Been a while...” she said as she stroked her hoof over the armrest and gave a little bounce, the chair squeaking. “Oh, yeah. This was the one with the squeaky seat.” She reached over, tugging the terminal connection closer. On it was a diagram of the Raptor, much of it flashing bright red with alerts. “Okay. Activate interlocks,” she said as she hit buttons on the armrest of the chair. “Dynatherms connected. Infracells are up...” She frowned and hit a different button a half dozen times. “Up! Get up, you damned infracells! Good.” Then she pulled over a wheel set on the other arm. “Megathrusters are go!” she said as she pushed a tiny knob to the top of its track. The entire ship began to rumble, and she grinned. “Let’s go, *Castellanus*!”

The Raptor groaned and shrieked, lurching back and forth as it clawed for altitude. “Come on! Up ship!” On the front viewscreen, the wall around the Skyport began to loom near, and Dash pulled back on the wheel hard. “Get your ass in the air!” she shouted as the *Castellanus* rose enough to just barely clear the top, making the defenders stationed there dive for cover as the keel skimmed over them. The ship immediately dropped into the midst of the Brood besieging the Skyport. “Oh horseapples!” she shouted as twisted the wheel with her hooves while her wings pushed buttons and knobs. “Really wish I had time to brush up on this!” she yelled as the *Castellanus* twisted sideways. “Lift, damn you! I know you got one last good flight in you, *Castellanus*,” she hissed.

The whole airship rumbled, the feed from the ventral cameras disappearing into static as the vessel ground a furrow through the attackers, the vibration nearly bucking Rainbow into the air as the seat squeaked wildly. Finally, the ship lurched back into the skies, the display for the keel flashing red. “Well, good thing I’m not planning on landing. I think I left the landing gear lodged in that one’s ass.”

The *Castellanus* rumbled, the vibrating deck plates making the crates of arcane high explosives jostle ominously and shift slowly across the deck. In front of her, on the main screen, she watched as the Tempest raked its claws along one of the other Raptors, the lightning blasting furrows along its armor, shearing off one of the propellers that whirled madly atop the vessel, and sending it soaring off into the wild blue yonder. “Hang on, guys. I’m coming,” Rainbow said as her mane fell out around her lap like snow. “Figure it’s about time I caught up with you girls,” she murmured with a small smile.

"Come on, Dashie," Rainbow Dash said to herself in a ghoulish imitation of Pinkie's voice. "It'll be fun! We'll all have our own ministries. I'll be the ministry of parties!" "But Pinkie, I'm already in the air guard," she murmured in her normal voice as the ship rattled and hummed around her.

Back in the squeaky imitation of her friend, she continued, "But think about it, Dashie, you could be the Ministry of... um... Flying? Or weather? Or... just being awesome! You'll be the Ministry of Awesome, and I'll be the Ministry of Fun, because I'm going to make sure everypony has so much fun!" She slumped in her seat, closing her eyes. "Wasn't as much fun as we thought, was it, Pinkie?" A tiny pink pony inside her wept and shook her head.

The ship howled as she looked up, the Tempest's enormous scowling face turning towards the new enemy. She jerked the wheel hard, her wings flipping the knobs and dials. "Could really use a bridge crew right now!" she shouted as the ship suddenly rolled to the side, the crackling claws sweeping past it with a noise like a thousand buzzing hornets ripping the hull. A momentary weightlessness lifted her from the seat as she snapped the wheel forward, and the heavy crates of munitions thumped ominously.

"Should have been focused on the rest of you girls. Shoulda stopped Fluttershy from making those damned spells. Shoulda pinned Pinkie down till she got help. Shoulda made Twilight pull her head out of her research notes," she grunted as the *Castellanus* corkscrewed up past the face of the Tempest. Within its mouth was a single glowing star around which the gale whirled. "All my fault. I was too busy fighting and having fun and not taking care of all of you!" she shouted over the growing rumbles as the ship leveled out. She flipped a switch and shouted, "This is the *Castellanus*. I don't know if you can hear me, but the Tempest's talisman is located inside the mouth. Take a shot while it's focused on me. *Castellanus*—" The ship jerked as something exploded below decks, setting off an alarm and slamming Rainbow's head into the monitor. Black, tarlike ichor dripped down between her brows as she focused at the screen, bringing the *Castellanus*'s nose in line with the Tempest's mouth. "Hold it together just a little longer, you glorious old bird. Hold it together."

The ship seemed incapable of slowing as it rocketed towards the Tempest. The enormous sentient twister spread its whirling arms wide in preparation to rip the ship from the skies. "I remember when you came off the lines. EAF-009. First Raptor rigged for command. Earth pony engineering, unicorn magic, and pegasus cloudcraft working together. Wish it could have been for something that didn't kill...

but you're a damned fine old ship, *Castellanus*. We're going to get inside that thing and blow it all to hell. Just like the old days..."

Smoke and steam were filling the bridge as the ship rumbled and the crates shifted and wandered over the deck plates. Rainbow's left wing reached into a compartment and drew a plasma pistol, pointing it at one of the crates of balefire eggs. "You were wrong, Lightning Dust. I wasn't ever ashamed of the pegasi. We did what we had to do. I just wish we'd done something else. I hope we can show everypony that pegasi can be trusted to work the skies again. We can... I know we can..." she said as her eyes narrowed and her hooves tightened on the shaking wheel.

The Tempest's claw swept in from the left, and she pulled the wheel up at the last second, curling over the crackling energy. "Too slow..." The other claw slashed in from the right, and she dove beneath it, screaming propellers tearing into the cloudy limb as it passed under. "Still too slow!" As she raced for its mouth, the surface of the Tempest suddenly flashed, and a third limb erupted from under the maw, reaching straight for the bow of the Raptor. But just as fast as the claw emerged, Rainbow Dash twisted the wheel, and the claw ripped past, shredding the ship's hull but not stopping its advance. "Hah. Didn't know I've seen that trick before, did you?" she crowed as her wings tightened on the trigger.

Then the open maw, with the Tempest talisman within, disappeared, and Rainbow blinked as she stared at a solid whirling wall. "Haven't seen that trick..."

The *Castellanus* plunged into the wall of the tornado. Instantly, everything in the bridge was slammed to the right, and Rainbow struggled to keep her grip as the *Castellanus* was swept around and around. The viewscreens offered nothing but a nauseating display of the world tumbling around and around, over and over. Crates, boxes, and bombs went thrashing around her as the whole ship tumbled up the cloud wall, one metal ammo crate smashing one of Rainbow's wings with a sound like splintering kindling. More metal smashed into her, and it was a miracle nothing went off. Or maybe just good firing safeties. Did a missile explode if you dropped it?

With a final shriek of metal and wind, the ship was ejected from the whirling storm and sent flipping end over end out into the air. Despite it whirling in ways that made me want to puke, Rainbow managed to stabilize the ship against all odds. The ordinance stopped bouncing off the walls and ceiling and settled to rolling around the floor. Rainbow Dash curled up against the wheel, one foreleg studded with her own bones jutting from the mottled blue-gray hide. One of the pegasus's eyes didn't work, and something thick and cold ran down her cheek. The terminal before her showed every section of the Raptor flashing red. Alarms blared on every deck

as smoke swirled about her. Only two viewscreens remained active, and in one she could make out the Tempest with a corkscrew-like trail of black smoke running around it. She clenched her eye shut. “Come on. Just... one... more... stunt...”

She hugged the wheel to her chest and pulled back, groaning as the controls fought her, and the *Castellanus* responded with a slow, juddering motion. The vibration of the ship took on a deeper, more visceral resonance as the ship began to tear itself apart. The *Castellanus* spiraled up and up, shaking and smoking. The skies dimmed as the Wasteland and valley below became a smoke-veiled, bloody eye. In the dim distance, she could see the blue glow of Tom near the sun, and she smiled. “Let’s show them what a Ministry Mare can do.”

And she lunged forward, and the *Castellanus* responded. The deep groan was replaced by a growing whine as it started to dive. The pitch increased as the Hoof began to rapidly fill the viewscreen, and she centered the nose on the whirling vortex. Something on the ship exploded, the controls lurching against her broken body, but she kept the wheel locked in a death grip. Flames blew out a control panel beside her, but she didn’t take her eye off the tiny glowing mote in the heart of the Tempest.

“Hold it together!” she said as the ordinance shifted back towards the wall behind her, the speed of the dive increasing faster and faster as she battled to keep control. “Just a few more seconds!”

The *Castellanus* disappeared into the whirling apex of the tornado and dove down the heart. It was impossible to tell if the winds were tearing the propellers and controls away or if they were tearing off under their own power. Then a colossal crunch rang through the Raptor, accompanied by screaming metal. Suddenly the front of the bridge exploded inwards towards her and the hoof-sized glowing talisman imbedded itself in the center of the viewscreen. The diamond talisman seemed to possess a glowing eye that bulged as it stared up at Rainbow Dash and the layer of ordinance pressed to the wall behind her. On the last remaining screen, the ground raced up to meet her.

The Ministry Mare of Awesome grinned at the shrieking talisman and called out, “I call this one the Rainbow—”

oooOOOooo

The pool in my blank’s mind exploded in a rainbow-colored flash. She was gone, and in the back of my mind, six tiny speechless ponies held each other, a tiny pink pony and yellow pegasus sobbing against each other while three others comforted

a tiny, stunned, blue pegasus. Then said pegasus cheered how awesome it was, and my brain got awkward. I did my best to shove them all out of my mind. Rainbow Dash had gone out as she'd wanted, helping others, saving Equestria. The only way it could have been better would have been if it'd been saving her friends.

I smiled in that great, empty void. "Thanks, Rainbow," I murmured. Going out like that wouldn't be half bad...

I needed to know more. Did she kill the Tempest? I sought another mind that could give me some answers and slipped inside.

oooOOOooo

"Ow. Ow. Ow." Every step from this mare trotting through the familiar halls of Stable 99 elicited an 'ow' as stabs of pain ran through her bandaged body. "Come on. Where are you?" Crumpets muttered as she limped along the maintenance halls. "How bloody hard is it to find a sodding great purple..." She rounded a corner and spotted Psalm sitting at a table in Atmospheric Maintenance Three. In three months, nopony had cleaned up the cards scattered around the table or the IOUs that were spotted with blood from when ponies had sheltered here from the crazy infected ponies. A few months hadn't erased the nightmare of two hundred years. "...turkey," she finished weakly.

Psalm sat at the table, staring down at the assembled sniper rifle on resting on it. Her purple eyes stayed locked on the matte black finish, the enormous scope the size of a hoof. Crumpets sat down outside the door, slumping against the doorframe a little. "Bit for your thoughts?"

The purple alicorn lifted her head to see Crumpets, then returned her gaze to the weapon. "You should be in bed."

"Sheets make me itchy. Actually, being trapped anywhere makes me itchy. Made life as a Steel Ranger a bleedin' slog. Always wanted to go on patrol just to stretch my bloody legs." She winced as she examined at her bandaged leg. "Now me legs really are bloody, and we're both stuck here while everypony else is gettin' stuck in." She paused and tilted her head. "But I'm guessin' that's not what what's goin' on in that big pointy head of yours."

"I'm a coward," she muttered as she stared at the gun. "I should be out there helping, but I'm too..." She clenched her eyes shut. "Scared..."

"Scared of what?" Crumpets said as she limped over to sit beside her. "I've never been a fan o' hatin' on fear in general. Like, there's these things back in Trottingham

called water goblins. Look like a ghouel crossed with a fish. If you lean too far out from the fanboat, they'll pop right out of the water and chew your bloody face off. Scare me shitless." She waited for a reply. "Am I chattin' to meself here or what? I don't want to do a bloody interrogation, but a response would be nice."

Psalm looked at her, and the corner of her lip curled. "You can barely walk."

Crumpet patted her shoulder. "Aye. And many a foolish hornhead underestimated an earth pony's capability to thump somepony actin' like a leatherhead."

The purple eyes fell again. "I'm afraid of turning back into what I was. A murderer." She rubbed her face with a wing. "I don't want to be that again."

Crumpets frowned. "You're *still* stuck on that rubbish?"

The alicorn didn't answer for several long seconds. "I don't know anymore. I'm not sure of anything. Once, I was completely sure. So certain that I... I made horrible mistakes. Now I don't trust myself to do the right thing." She clenched her eyes shut, then hissed, "I hate this gun. I hate that it still exists. It's like a part of me that I can't get rid of! It reminds me of... so many people I killed." She grabbed it with her magic, pressed the butt against the floor, and started to lean her weight against it. "I want to destroy it forever!" Then she paused, and released it. "But... I could help people I care about... if I was just... if I could just..."

"Kill again?" Crumpets suggested in an arch tone. "You really still think what we do is murder?" Psalm gave a tiny nod, and Crumpets let out a sigh. "Bloody hell, only one thing for it then..."

Then she smashed her hoof right into the purple alicorn's face. The blow not only nearly sent Crumpets down but floored Psalm. Crumpets lifted herself to her hooves, standing over the dazed alicorn as she pulled herself together. "Ow. Bloody nora. Now, let me lay this bollocks to rest right now. Was Big Macintosh a murderer?" Psalm stared at her for several seconds, then shook her head. "What about the rest of your squad way back when?" A shorter wait, then another reluctant shake of her head. "Is Blackjack a murderer?" I was glad to see another tiny shake of her head. "How about me?" Now a frown of comprehension as she furrowed her brows.

"No. None of you are... were..." she said as she glanced up at the bandaged mare. "But... I..."

"You... might have been," Crumpets said evenly. "I don't know what you got up to with the O.I.A., but it doesn't sound anything like what we do. Soldiers don't want to kill. Not good ones, anyway. We do what we have to do, and sometimes that

involves killing people trying to kill us.” Crumpets stared down as Psalm closed her eyes, tears on her cheeks. “That’s not it, though, is it? All this ‘not wanting to be a murderer’ shite... that’s not what’s really bothering you.” Psalm didn’t answer, and Crumpets sighed. “It’s him innit. That big sparklin’ moron.”

Psalm immediately lifted her head. “He is not a moron! He’s good and noble and gentlestalliony and...” She trailed off again, averting her eyes.

“He fancies you, you know,” Crumpets said with a small smile.

“He’s too good for me. I don’t deserve— ow!” Psalm yelped as she was kicked by the bandaged mare. “What was that for?”

“Because it seems to be the only way to get through to ginormous pillocks like you two,” Psalm replied. “Yeah, he’s a good stallion, and he likes you. Accept your good fortune and don’t think about what you deserve, you big bloody turkey.”

“He doesn’t like me. He likes... her,” Psalm murmured as she sat up. “He likes Lacunae.”

“And you’re not her. I mean, she was a moanin’ misery like you, but she got off her arse and did something to help. Even still, he likes you too. You got that whole ‘alicorn mare of good breeding’ vibe going that’s right up his alley. And you can fight. And you care. That matters more to him than anything,” Crumpets said as she jabbed Psalm’s chest. “What he likes is what’s in here. And if it don’t work out, at least you tried.” Crumpets took a deep breath. “But you definitely ain’t worthy of ’im if you sit and sulk in here while he dies out there!”

Psalm stared at Penance for the longest time, then bowed her head. “Luna wasn’t able to forgive me before she died...”

Crumpets put her hoof on Psalm’s mane. “The only forgiveness you really need is from ponies who love you, and yourself. So, what do you say? Are you a soldier who is ready to help her friends, or an ex-murderer who cares about nothing else than hiding from her own conscience?”

Psalm regarded Crumpets and then gave a little smile. “Okay.”

Crumpets grinned. “Are you sure? ‘Cause I could give you another lump or two.” Psalm blinked and rapidly shook her head. “I really wouldn’t mind.” Now Psalm gave Crumpets a somewhat annoyed glare back. “That’s the ticket. Now let’s get out of here!”

The alicorn balked. “But you’re wounded! You need to stay here until they can heal

you some more. The next batch of potion should be ready in a day or two.”

“Buck that. If that nurse offers to give me one more ‘oral physical’, I’m going to scream. I don’t mind the attention, but not in the middle of the medical bay!” she said, her cheeks burning. “Besides, Rangers don’t hang out in Medical when there’s a fight going on.”

“Where should we go?” Psalm said.

“The rally point was Megamart,” Crumpets replied. “Let’s go. They should have a healing potion or five there, too.”

“Shouldn’t we get your power armor?”

“No. If we get anywhere near Medical, I just know Nurse Sexual Healing will try and give me a sponge bath. With her tongue. In front of everypony.” She gave a little shudder. “And she wasn’t even a Stable 99 survivor. I think there’s just some kind of perverted aura to this place or something.”

Psalm smiled and pulled Crumpets close, lifted Penance and slipped it under her wing, and then teleported—

Straight into hell.

The roof overhead was mostly gone, with just a thin ring of rooftop along the edges; Steel Rangers and Reapers were perched on it and firing down at the assaulting Brood outside. The rows of formerly-orderly stacked scrap were now filled with wounded ponies. Pegasi, grounded by the absolute fury of gunfire saturating the air, remained perched out of harm’s way. A gaunt old stallion walked along the rows with three more unicorns and a half dozen earth pony medics applying healing spells and helping with the injured. In the middle of the store, now on the ground, surrounded by walls of sandbags, and firing in high arcs over the walls, Gun boomed again and again, the noise barely blunted by the makeshift bunker.

“Oh, bugger me,” Crumpets murmured in shock. “I didn’t know it was this bad!” Then she hobbled up to the old unicorn medic. “I need healing. Now!”

“They all need healing, young missy! You’ll have to wait your—” He was cut off as she grabbed him by the head and glared into his eyes. “Uh... I think I can squeeze out a little more healing magic before my horn pops off. Hold still.”

As the cool magic washed through Crumpets’s wounds, Psalm went through the wounded and collected ammunition and a few more weapons. “Where’s Star Paladin Strong—?” Crumpets started to ask. Then wall of Megamart exploded and collapsed,

screams and gunshots ringing out as Brood started to push in. “Nevermind.”

“Fall back!” a familiar voice bellowed over the fury. “The innocents are already evacuated. Fall back to the Arena! I’ll buy you time!” In the breach in the wall, a huge stallion rose up, fighting the Brood with shattering blows of his armored hooves.

Crumpets rushed to Psalm. “Arm me! Quick!” she snapped.

“Hold still,” the alicorn instructed, lifting her in a magic field, and then she wrapped Crumpets up in combat armor and strapped on a battle saddle with a single scoped markspony rifle. “I hope this will do. I didn’t have a chance to ask your preference.”

“It’s fine. Let’s hurry before the idiot is overwhelmed!” Crumpets snatched a satchel of supplies from one of the earth ponies before racing after Psalm.

As Megamart started to evacuate, the two joined a faltering defense. Anypony who could carry things was hauling wounded and supplies out, some earth ponies all but covered in ammo boxes and weapons. The four ghouls crewing Gun kicked out the sandbags and depressed the barrel as Brood began to appear on the tops of the walls. The artillery roared, and the Brood disappeared as swiftly as they appeared, along with almost half the remaining wall.

As they raced towards the breach, the mares cut down any cyberzebra that climbed into view or unicorn that flashed into being around them. Psalm moved like a ballet dancer, swinging the rifle from one Brood to the next, the bullets tearing through eye sockets and out the back of skulls. And when one bullet didn’t work, a second one would take the other eye. “Please, forgive me for being afraid,” Psalm murmured between every shot. “Please, forgive me for being late. Forgive me for the blood on my hooves. Forgive me for being me.”

“You have issues. You two are really made for each other,” Crumpets muttered as she fired off round after round in Psalm’s wake, protecting the alicorn’s flank as they rushed towards the huge musclebound stallion. Half his armor had been blown from his magnificent marbled frame, but still he fought on, struggling against the horde. One stomp lobbed a rock into the air, and he kicked it with the force of a grenade right into a clump of cyberponies. A Brood unicorn appeared behind him, razor-sharp blade ready to tear out his spine, only for him to stomp a shockwave that erupted under the unicorn and knocked it straight into the air with a hoof-shaped spur of rock under it. Then he hooked a foreleg around the spur, ripped it from the ground, and flung it into the face of another Brood who was taking a bead on him. His magnificent body, even glazed in sweat and blood from a dozen scrapes, seemed to sparkle in the midst of the carnage.

Psalm rushed towards him. He spotted her, and his eyes were dragged away from his enemy as he gazed at her. They widened and softened as for a moment the battle was no more, and he stretched a hoof towards her.

Then his body jerked as a half dozen bullets tore into him. Psalm stared, frozen in place as he staggered, more rounds biting into him as he reeled back and then crumpled. His magnificent body no longer sparkled as it collapsed atop the mound in the breach.

“Damn it! Damn it! Fuckin’ damn it!” Crumpets shouted as she rushed forward with Psalm. They reached him, and through the breach they could see dozens... hundreds... perhaps thousands of Brood moving towards the evacuating building.

Stronghoof looked up at the pair of them, his mustache speckled in blood. “My... love...” he murmured over the chaos before he went limp.

Psalm stared for what felt like an eternity, bullets whipping past them, catching her mane blowing in the wind and snatching feathers from her wings but miraculously missing her body. Then she turned towards the gap and let loose a howl that echoed from one corner of the battlefield to the other. “NO!”

Penance rose up on her left, and on her right, she lifted a weapon from a fallen defender. She shook the mortar dust off the tool, a few small pebbles that had lodged in it clattering to the ground, and pulled the trigger. The motor whirled for a moment, and then the minigun began to sing. Its tongue of flame reached out and sent a line of burning metal death at the approaching Brood while Penance cracked again and again. One unicorn attempted to teleport behind Psalm, but she seized the mare, blade and all, and hauled her in front of herself. A bullet blasted the cyberunicorn’s brains out, and her body caught some of the rounds that poured in at Psalm. The alicorn made no attempt at summoning a shielding bubble, ignoring the bullets that got through to hit her. When the minigun ran dry, she drew two more rifles from her collection and continued to fire. Her magical focus and accuracy staggered the enemy as she protected herself with the mangled corpse until it was too shredded to do more than spatter her with blood.

Crumpets, meanwhile, tore pressure bandages from the satchel and pressed them to Stronghoof’s wounds. “Mental. Both of you. Bloody, sodding, leatherbrained mental!” she shouted at him. “You’re perfect for each other!”

Psalm didn’t seem to register the words as she yanked over another Brood body for a shield and cycled its gun into her floating collection, then began building a wall of gore when the individual reinforced corpses were no good at protecting her. A

unicorn attempted another teleport, this one with four frag grenades in tow. The stems were pulled, but Psalm grabbed the Brood in her hooves, magically clustered the grenades together, and shoved the unicorn and grenades against the wall, the former covering the latter. The explosion showered her in gore and metal, but she hardly broke stride as she returned to slaughtering any who approached the gap, the alicorn awash in the blood of her foes.

Crumpets finished packing off Stronghoof's injuries and getting a healing potion inside him, but that was all the satchel held. "Okay. He's stab—" She was interrupted by a hoofshattering boom as Gun exploded. The Brood weren't just trying to break through here anymore; while Psalm and Crumpets had been busy, three other holes had been blown in Megamart's walls, and they didn't have the alicorn defending them. "We've got to get out of here!"

Psalm was silent, the only answer coming from her guns, barking again and again, Penance's barrel sending out precise death as she tore more weapons from her enemies and used them as well. "Forgive me, Luna. Forgive me, Stronghoof. Forgive me, Big Macintosh," she muttered over and over again, in a trance, her eyes not even focused on the enemy before her as she slew them, her face streaked with tears as she repeated the words over and over again. Bullets bit into her from both directions now as the Brood who had breached the walls swarmed in behind her.

Crumpets, hit once or twice by errant shots, pulled herself in front of Psalm and shouted in her face, "Evac! We need to evac now! Now, you sodding dodo!" She struck Psalm in the face again, but the alicorn didn't stop fighting. "Damn it! Are you a soldier or a murderer?! Soldiers obey orders to pull back!" she screamed in Psalm's face.

Then a bullet thudded right into Crumpets's spine. Her entire body went numb as she slumped down Psalm's front. At last the purple alicorn glanced down at the two ponies at her feet, then she stared at Penance. "I'm... I'm..." she murmured as she bled. Then a Brood launched himself over the wall of corpses she'd laid, guns firing in a frantic effort to end her. Psalm's horn flared as she swung the gun with all her strength, smashing it across the Brood's face. The delicate talismans shattered as the scope's lenses smashed, the barrel breaking off where it met the frame of the gun. The spray of gems, metal, and blood seemed to hang in the air for an eternity. Then Psalm lifted the two ponies and curled her wings over both of them. Her horn flashed—

And then the three were dumped in a pile of mud. "Help!" Psalm shouted at the top of her lungs. "Please! They need help!" Hooves thundered towards them. "They

need help. Please... save them..."

"We've got them. Let them go. I don't know where we're going to put them, but we'll find somewhere! Now let them go!"

And as Crumpets slipped into darkness, she muttered, "About time you two great... big... dumb..."

oooOOOooo

This pool didn't wink out so much as fade away as I emerged from it. I'd gone on a rampage similar to hers and come back. I could only hope that when I met Psalm again, she'd be at peace with her decision. And another wonderful, unique, named weapon ruined! Why couldn't ponies take care of... a tiny orange pony stared flatly at me at my thought. Okay, so I might have ruined a gun or two... three... four... okay...

Of course, as a tiny purple unicorn pointed out, Psalm had ruined hers on *purpose*.

Stupid, smug brain ponies who called me on my shit.

Grrr... I studied the remaining glowing pools. There were maybe two dozen or so—minus one as it winked out before my eyes. My mind was getting dimmer by the second...

Okay, not helping. I moved to the next and slipped my mind inside.

oooOOOooo

I almost wished I hadn't.

Chapel was dying. Again.

The defenders were in a fight for their lives as the Brood advanced inexorably towards the stockade. They no longer simply allowed themselves to be blasted to pieces. Now they moved in shifts, one battalion pouring on suppressive fire while the other shuffled forward a few dozen yards, stopped, took cover on the ground, and began laying down fire so the first one could advance; then that one would gain ground and stop, and the cycle would repeat. The defenders, however, were clustered behind a shambled stockade of wood and scrap metal, much of it burning and blasted. The defenders who weren't shooting were screaming. Screaming for ammo. Screaming for help. Just plain screaming.

Flames now licked over the rooftops of the proud homes that had risen recently, filling the air with smoke as fire greedily consumed all the progress that Scotch Tape

had authored. The toilets she had been so proud of now blazed like a pyre, collapsing slowly in on themselves. The post office roared, ablaze as the pre-war structure finally succumbed to the fate it had evaded two centuries prior. The refugee camp beside the river was a mass of panicked people with nowhere left to flee, and so now they fled to the last mad refuge before them, the gates of the Core.

And in the midst of it all, Charity wept. They were bitter tears, slow to shed. Charity never gave anything for free if she could help it, and so she gritted her teeth and focused on the clipboards in front of her as colts and fillies raced to her. "I need four heals and X!" one of the colts shouted.

"Take two boxes of each from the red cache! Tell them to stretch them out!" she said, pointing at some boxes. The colt nodded, the oversized combat helmet on his head wobbling, then rushed to the boxes, tossed two on his rump, and raced off. She pulled a pencil out from behind her ear, flipped to a page on the red clipboard, and made two tiny tally marks next to an icon of a Med-X syringe and a purple vial.

"I have six who need three-oh-eights!" one of the fillies yelled.

She flipped through the clipboards. "Take two ammo boxes from the green pile!" she yelled, flipping to another sheet and making another note.

The gray filly raced to the crates and a minute later shouted, "There are no three-oh-eights!"

Charity looked down at the list, then over at her. "There should be at least twenty!"

"Well, there's not!" she yelled back.

Charity raced to the stack, her eyes scanning the boxes of ammo. She picked up a box between her hooves, gave it a shake, and tossed it aside. "Damn..." Five more. "Damn!" She threw empty ammo crates over her shoulder, setting aside a few that were still full of bullets. Most of the pile, though, was of empty ammo boxes. "Damn it! Who's been taking the three-oh-eights?" she screamed out into the roaring battle. "There's supposed to be a fucking system!"

"What do you want me to do about it?" the filly asked, wide-eyed.

She turned to the stacks, glaring at the boxes of ammo with numbers squiggled on them in chalk. "We still have five-five-six mils, right? Grab six varmint rifles and two boxes of five-five-six and get it back to them!"

"Varmint rifles?" she asked, as if she hadn't heard her right.

"It's that or frigging throwing our turds at them! Now get moving before I dock your

hazard pay!" she barked, shoving her toward boxes of arms as she scribbled on a clipboard levitated in front of her with a pencil in her mouth.

A second later, there was a loud pop, and the clipboard, its center suddenly bulging towards her, flew into her face and snapped her nose. She bit her pencil in half from the blow and fell back, holding her bleeding muzzle with her eyes clenched shut in pain.

When she opened them, the boxes of arms and ammunition were splinters, and all that remained of the filly was a bloody lump a few feet away from the crater where they'd been. The other foals who were waiting for supplies had scattered out of sight in the smoke.

Charity shook as she sat there, staring at the smoldering hole. Her whole body tingled as if it'd been electrocuted. Beside her, the clipboard rested face down, a smoking chunk of shrapnel embedded in its back. As the shock faded, she became aware of other stinging grains imbedded in her hide, dripping blood as she struggled to speak. "Stupid... stupid..." she said, her voice tightening, and then she pointed a hoof at the bloody lump. "There's a fine for dying, you moron! You..." She sat down, lifting her head as tears streaked down her bloody cheeks, the taste of copper in her mouth.

It was coming apart. The defense. Her business. Her home. Her future. She'd been clever. She'd be careful. She'd taken care of her people. Invested in infrastructure. Was planning on diversifying with the increased trade. In five years, she'd buy out the Finders completely. In twenty, she'd be setting up armed stops where Wastelanders could buy arms, food, medicine, and a safe place to rest! "I was supposed to be a damned success!" she shouted, then coughed and choked on the blood.

Then she was slammed on her face as a stallion trampled her. He started grabbing ammo boxes and stuffing them into his saddlebags. "Hey! What the fuck do you think you're—" she started to shout before he kicked her in the face, flooring her. As she lay on her side, clutching her face, he rushed off, but he wasn't the last. More ponies were grabbing what remained in the stores and running off.

"Wudderu doin'?" she asked thickly as she grabbed at the adults taking everything they could, only to be shoved away again and again. She drew her 5.56 pistol, but before she could fire, there was another blow to her head, and then someone bit down on her gun and snatched it away too. "Stup... Umn charge her..." she muttered weakly as she turned and looked at the stockade. But the stockade seemed barely defended at all anymore. With all the obscuring smoke in the air, it appeared

only a few dozen foals remained, firing what they could and scrounging for ammo among the fallen, coming to each other for aid.

“Oh dear,” croaked a voice as the dry, taut teal pegasus ghoult trotted to her. “This won’t do at all. I should call the royal guard. Beating up a filly! Have they no shame?” Harpica drew out a discolored teal handkerchief and began to clean Charity’s muzzle. “There there. Once you’re cleaned up, we’ll see Master Vanity. He’s quite nice and will see to it your parents are notified.”

Charity glared up at her, tears now trickling from her eyes. Then she gritted her teeth, hissing as she suppressed the urge to snap at the poor deluded ghoult. Behind the teal ghoult, Charity could see ponies streaming over the bridge and into the Core, racing for the only protection that remained. Then she bowed her head. “You should take your kids up to the bountains, Miss Harpica. Show them the reservoir. I’m sure they’d enjoy it.”

“Oh, I couldn’t do that, darling. You need help,” she said as her filmy eyes turned towards the advancing Brood. “You know, I think those fellows are up to no good. Someone really should tell them to behave.”

“Please, Miss Harpica. Go. I’m sure the guard will be here soon. I bow your foals probably would love a little trip to the lake, after being cooped up for so long,” Charity said with a crooked smile.

“Well, if you’re sure.” She stomped her hoof. “Children! Chil... children...” She turned back, her eyes focused on Charity, and a look of growing horror covered her face. “Oh, no. This... this is the real one, isn’t it?”

“I’m sowirrie. I must wadded... you should go... please...” Charity bowed her head and wept. “Noh charge. Jus goh.”

“Shhhh...” She kissed Charity’s brow with leathery lips. “It’s alright.” She straightened and frowned at where children fought for their home. “I wish this was that other place.” She turned and started towards the stockade.

“Wudderyu gonna doh?” Charity asked thickly.

“What I’ve always done. What Master Vanity told me to do,” she said softly, barely audible over the crackling flames and gunshots. “Take care of little ponies.”

Harpica launched herself into the air, winging her way towards the soldiers. “Dho...” Charity muttered, watching her and then starting to stagger after her. The filly coughed and snorted the sticky blood from her nostrils. “No.” She ran faster, through the wisps of smoke that choked and burned her eyes, tears streaking the soot and

blood. “No!” she cried out as she raced towards the stockade, following the pegasus pony trailing teal feathers that glimmered in the air before they were eaten by the hungry flames. “No! No no no no!” she screamed as she ran up the ramp to the top of the stockade, where dozens of young ponies stood firing at the approaching Brood alongside a few dozen adults who hadn’t fled. Apparently some of the adults had stuck around after all. “No!” she yelled as she lunged after the ghoul, stretching a hoof out to her. “I can’t afford your life!”

The mare paused and looked down at her with a gentle smile. “Go,” she said, and then she flew out towards the Brood.

Harpica wasn’t Rainbow Dash. She didn’t streak like a blue thunderbolt, tearing apart Brood with her bare hooves, but inexplicably the Brood stopped firing. As one they tracked the lone, emaciated, desiccated mare, as if trying to figure out precisely what she was doing as she flew over them. “Charity?” asked a ghoul colt serving as a bipod for a living colt gunner. “What is Miss Harpica doing?”

“Trying to buy us time so we don’t all die on this wall,” Charity replied, gritting her teeth.

“Lucky,” one of the mares murmured, a broken heart pendant dangling from her rifle. “You should get going. Let us buy your lives with our own.” The blood red mare seemed positively pleased at that idea.

“What have I told you about that, Riproar?” another ghoul pegasus rasped. She was a sickly chartreuse with a flimsy blue and red mane and tail that were only bits of stubble. “We die when we die. We don’t rush to it.” She gazed at the stockade, then back at the dour mare. “What do you think? Can we fight here?”

“Maybe for five minutes. We should pull back to the city, Heartshine,” she said, her eagerness transforming into dour resignation. “We can kill these Brood for hours with that choke point.”

“No!” Charity snapped. “Blackjack said to stay out of the Core at all costs.” She scanned the hillside, but the flank of the Brood was positioned to cut off any retreat towards Star House. Two dozen ghoul children might have made it. A hundred ponies, young and old, had no chance of evading detection. There was only one building which wasn’t on fire: the chapel itself, its steeple rising up through the smoke. “There. We can go in there. It should hold enough.”

“Oh, good,” the beefy red mare said brightly. “We can die in ten minutes rather than five. Well, at least we won’t have to travel far for the funeral. They have those

thingies in churches, right?”

“Riproar,” the ghoul said in a mildly reproachful voice. “You know better.”

“Yeah, yeah...” She sighed, then turned and shouted, “Back to the building with the big pointy tower on the roof. Move it! Grab whatever ammo you can, but move!”

Heartshine nodded and pressed a button on her battered PipBuck. “Halfhearts, retreat to the chapel. Protect the little ones. The time to return to your other halves is not yet come,” she ordered into the broadcaster, then hefted an oversized magical beam rifle to her shoulder. “Survive and fight. You can join those you’ve lost when the day is through.”

But Charity wasn’t running. She watched as Harpica flew over the heads of the Brood with odd little swooshes that might have been bombing runs if a pony had only a vague idea what a bombing run was supposed to be and was set on doing one without the explosives. Instead of lighting her up, though, they only took a smattering of potshots here and there, bullets biting off bits and pieces of the mare as she swooped back and forth. Maybe it was their interconnectedness, or maybe it was that they had no idea how to react to something like this, or perhaps the Legate was somewhere laughing his bloody stripes off at the ancient mare’s deranged antics, but whatever the reason, she bought priceless seconds for the young ponies and Halfhearts to pull back from the wall.

“We’ve got to go,” a gruff filly’s voice said behind Charity. She opened her mouth to protest, and the powerful half-dragon Precious slipped out of the smoke, heaved Charity onto her back, and ran for the chapel.

“No! Damn it! Go back! I can’t pay her back for this if she’s dead!” Charity yelled as the dragon filly wrapped her long, scaly tail around Charity’s neck to keep her from leaping off. “Let me go! I fucking hate owing ponies!”

Then the Brood must have registered what was happening on the wall, because there was a great crackle, and Harpica was simply gone. Dusty tatters, bone chips, and feathers drifted on the smoke as the Brood poured after the retreating defenders.

Unicorns blinked into place between Precious and the chapel, each with their silver blades and an accompanying trio of gun-wielding Brood. The dragon filly opened her mouth wide and spewed out a torrent of jade-green flame without even breaking stride. Bullets glanced off her scales, but one blade opened a shallow wound from shoulder to haunch. Precious whirled, her prehensile tail keeping Charity on her far

side as she breathed another incinerating gout of fire. Still, she had only one mouth and had Charity to protect, and the unicorns were teleporting to flank the dragon filly. A bullet caught Precious in the knee, and both Precious and Charity fell to the ground, smoke swirling around them.

Then it cleared, and a trio of Brood aimed their assault carbines at Charity's face. Charity stared up, the back of her mind running a tally of all the debts she owed and was owed, despite the danger surrounding them, and finding her uncomfortably short at this moment. Even as she drew her twenty-two pistol, she knew it was futile. Still, these bastards couldn't afford her submission.

Then the air behind the Brood shimmered as four-legged things pounced. Jaws closed on the backs of necks, and augmented spines were ripped from the flesh they supported as cybernetic canines materialized from the haze of war. The augmented attack dogs worked with their own horribly efficient pack tactics, one pair seizing forelegs in their jaws while a third disemboweled the immobilized cyberzebra. As soon as they'd butchered one, they disappeared back into the smoke with shimmers of their cloaking talismans.

"What's going..." Charity began when a shadow loomed in the smoke, and then the veil parted to reveal a massive black-armored canine. "On?" The blood-smeared cyborg leaned down and sniffed at the filly. "Okay. Please don't eat us." Precious let out a long, threatening growl of pain. "Don't," Charity cautioned her. "I think they're... um... well... on our side." The large canine wagged her tail and let out a metallic chuffing noise. "Can you carry her?" She pointed through the choking smoke to where the chapel's spire poked up into view. "Take her there?" The dog gave a whine but wagged her tail again.

"I can walk!" Precious said, trying to take a step and collapsing. The canine scooped up Precious almost as neatly and easily as Precious had carried Charity. "This is ridiculous. We're only buying ourselves a few minutes at the most. Might as well have died at the wall. Less running."

"Shut up and let her save you. I'll be right behind you," Charity said. The canine leapt off in the direction of the chapel. Charity rose and took one look back at the home she'd made as it blazed. The numbers in the ledger in her head shifted. She was still in the red, but at least it was a little less than a few seconds ago. Now if only she could get some last-second improbable save like Blackjack managed when her rump was in the fire.

Then the Brood appeared, striding confidently out from the smoke all around them.

Dozens. Hundreds. They walked amidst the burning buildings like a legion of shadows. Precious had been right. Running was just delaying the inevitable, but what else could she do? Harpica had bought them all a few invaluable moments. How much time could one filly buy, and what would it be worth to all those who had taken refuge in the chapel?

Maybe that'd finally put her in the black?

"Hey, you! All of you!" Charity bellowed at the approaching Brood. "You owe the Crusaders and associated inhabitants of this community damages for bodily, material, and emotional harm! I'm going to sue the stripes off your asses!" The Brood didn't fire, though there were more than enough guns on her to turn her to red foam. "You hear me! I'm gonna sue you so hard your grandchildren are gonna need a mortgage to buy a box of Abronco Detergent!" She slumped a little and muttered, "Damn it. How does Blackjack make it look so easy?"

As one, the Brood suddenly halted, the red glow of their eyes matched by the searing glare of Chapel burning around them. Then they did something truly monstrous.

They laughed.

A thousand armed zebras laughing in perfect unison.

"Shoo, little girl," one Brood said.

"Run along," another continued in an identical tone.

"Tell the others to flee," a third murmured as they all grinned at her.

"Back to their fortress."

"Their sanctuary."

"Their only hope."

Charity gaped at them all. "You... you want us in the Core?"

"Oh yes," a number of them said as one. "We need more children. Children always worked wonders for me when prompting powerful fools to action."

"Been so very hard not to eliminate you all. But time is passing. So go," one said with an imperious gesture at the city. "It won't be long now."

Charity licked her lips but didn't take her eyes off the soldiers as the ground began to vibrate under her hooves. "I'd rather die."

The smiles disappeared just as simultaneously as they had spoken. "So be it," they

said as a hundred guns focused on her at once. But the shaking was increasing, accompanied by a growing rumble.

Charity peered around, asking in alarm. “What the hay is going on? What are you doing?”

But whatever it was, they didn’t seem to have a clue either. The Brood looked around the smoky battlefield as the rumbling and screeching reached a fever pitch, then suddenly cut off. From behind Charity came a thump and a hiss of air that blasted away the smoke around the filly. Suddenly the guns weren’t on her but on something else. Something big. And from the gaping expression on their faces, something unpleasant. She turned, expecting to see a giant dragon or something.

What she beheld was two words written in bright red paint: MEGA DEUS. The immense black and white tank had clearly been battered something terrible, with numerous holes punched in the armor. Had something taken out his repair talisman with a lucky shot?

She took one look at the cannons and machine gun turrets pointing over her and hit the dirt, clutching her hooves over her ears.

Then Deus roared.

The cannons made entire ranks of Brood simply vanish in a cloud of metal, bone, and blood. The machine guns tore into the assembled cyberzebras like great, immense scythes. The Brood tried to scatter, but whatever cover remained was on fire, and Deus wasn’t about to let them get away. While the Brood around them flew apart into red mist, a small hatch in the bottom popped open, and the speakers cracked and boomed, “Cunt cunt!”

Charity wasted no time, pulling herself into the war machine. Smoke swirled inside the cabin, but not as bad as outside. The cable-like spinal column and braincase sat inside the jar. As soon as she was inside, the hatch swung closed and the tank lurched forward. “Yeah! Get them!” she said as she pulled herself into the driver’s seat and strapped in, looking out through a tiny armored slit at the scrambling cyberzebras.

And Deus did what he did best. The tank let out a booming “CUUUUUNT!”, and the mayhem was squared. The turret above her worked as it automatically loaded shell after shell. Sprays of shrapnel transformed the Brood into great bloody gobs as the tank lunged forward. Some tried to respond with missiles, but Deus either poured on the fire at the launchers or raced into the smoke and out of view. Still, the vehicle

definitely lurched with occasional impacts from grenades.

“Take this, you striped fuckers!” Charity shouted. “I bet you wish you’d settled your debts now, don’t you?” she yelled as they ripped through the Brood battalions like a thrashing, grinding wrecking ball. They moved in a crescent back and forth around the chapel, the tank never letting the Brood swing around and attack the structure directly. From the rooftops, the Halfhearts added their own help, the rifleponies picking off every attacker they could when the smoke from the burning structures cleared enough to give clear shots. A Brood loaded head to hoof in explosives dropped two dozen feet from the tank before he could make his suicide attack, felled by a Halfheart’s bullet.

Suddenly something struck Deus hard enough to make the tank rock, and he rang like a bell as he lurched hard to the side. Charity’s straps yanked hard as she was jerked around inside like a rag doll, her ears ringing. “What was... oh...” she said as she stared through the thinning smoke...

...at three more tanks.

Their turrets flashed, but Deus was already in motion... in reverse. A second later, the ground in front of him erupted. As soon as it did, Deus was racing forward, bouncing through the crater and nearly flying into the air as there was a second detonation where he’d just been. The three were sweeping in, and Deus now ignored the Brood infantry as he raced into the burning wreckage of Chapel. He didn’t stay on a straight line for longer than two seconds, weaving this way and that erratically as two tanks swept out to the sides of the town while the third pursued directly. “I hope you know what you’re doing!” Charity shouted.

“Cunt,” Deus replied tersely as he looped around the blazing post office and suddenly turned around sharply. Then his superchargers roared as the treads ripped up the ground, the tank charging the wall of the post office.

“Wait! That’s my—” Charity began, but Deus was already rolling up the crumbling walls and onto the collapsing roof, the air suddenly becoming blazing hot as he rolled right through the inferno, smoke drifting through the holes in his armor. He didn’t stay there, though. As the already-weakened roof collapsed under his weight, he rode the flaming wave... right into the side of the pursuing tank. His barrels were nearly touching the joint between the turret and hull of the enemy tank. His cannons boomed, and Deus was thrown back into the rubble of the post office as the tank exploded into flame, turret flipping end over end into the air. As the air in the cabin became unbearably hot, he tore off the blazing ruin and past the burning

hulk. Through a tiny, grainy monitor, Charity could see a cloak of soot and embers being drawn along behind him.

“Yeah!” Charity shouted. “You can do this! You’re going to get free washing and buffing at Chapel for life!” Deus let out a happy growl even as he was being shelled by the pair of tanks that hadn’t pursued him into the flaming settlement.

The other tanks were spreading out, trying to position themselves so Deus’s mad weaving couldn’t evade their fire. He jerked and swerved like a spasmodic wagon driver having an epileptic attack, and yet he was able to precisely tie together his shots so that each blast went true. Each shot tore holes in their armor... yet seconds later, their repair talismans were bending the armor plating back into shape. An angry growl filled the cabin. Only a perfect hit on their repair talismans would let him finish them off... well, that or killing the Brood driving the damned thing.

Charity just hung on for the ride. “You’ve got to get closer!” she shouted over the roaring engine and the screeching treads. Deus growled an agreement, twisting to the side and diving at the stockade. He smashed through the burning barrier, racing along the blazing structure as impacts from the far side sent steel and embers fountaining out around him. A skywagon in his way was rammed, followed by a metallic chewing sound. Then he made a tight loop, blasting out a section of wagon and racing out over it with a resounding clang that nearly snapped Charity’s shoulders.

They were out much closer to the second tank, maybe only a few dozen yards. Its turret whipped around as Deus tracked his to it. In three horrifying seconds, the two twin-barreled tanks ripped into each other with brutal force. Charity’s ears screamed with piercing tinnitus, the filly partially deafened and concussed as the fury of the exchange tore into the battling war machines. And just like that it was over... the zebra tank was a burning lump of metal.

And Deus’s turret had been torn clean off.

Charity looked numbly up at the jagged hole where the turret had once been, at the blue sky hazed by red-lit smoke. “Can you repair that yourself?” Deus’s engine let out an annoyed growl. “Don’t worry...” she murmured as the smoke cleared. “I can cover it... make a payment plan... for service rendered...”

Deus gave a sort of mechanical chuckle as he turned, orienting his hull towards the remaining tank. That tank wasn’t moving on Deus. It was heading straight towards the chapel. “They’re either going to push us into the Core or kill us,” Charity groaned as she wiped her muzzle, blood smearing her hoof. “Why? Why do they want to do that?”

Deus just sat there and let out a single, low motor growl that I imagined as 'I don't know.' The remaining tank could have blown the chapel apart with its cannons, but instead it languidly strafed the front of the structure with its machine guns. The Half-hearts and Crusaders weren't running, though. They opened fire from the windows and rooftops whenever there was an opening. Suddenly, the escape hatch in the cabin floor popped open, and the motor gave a more urgent growl. "What?" Charity asked. "I don't understand..."

Then the cabin speaker crackled with Deus's deep, synthetic voice. "C...c...c...go..." It sounded as if he was tearing off one of his own limbs just to say that simple word. "...c...unt... c... go..." One of those last impacts must have knocked his speech center back into place.

"You're going to ram it and self-destruct, aren't you?" Charity asked. "It's too close to the chapel!"

"Go," Deus rasped in his deep, pained voice. "I... C....C... I... will... take... cunt... of... it..."

Charity stared at the speaker, then at the brain inside the cracked jar. The braincase lay slumped against the side of the container, knocked loose in that last exchange. "Go..." Deus begged.

"Why?" Charity asked. "We're all going to die anyway," she whimpered.

"Shhhh..." Deus replied. "I... had... a... c...c...child... once... F...f....f...lees... should... I...I...live..." He repeated, "Go..."

Charity started down the hatch. The speaker gave one last crackle. "I... was... a... good... pony..."

She paused, then gave a small smile. "No. You *are* a good pony."

Then she was out, and Deus carefully rolled away from her, paused for a few seconds, then turned. She sat on the grass, watching as he began to roll towards the remaining tank, picking up speed. The turret pointed towards him and let out a blast, but he swerved at an angle, still accelerating. Another blast and another last moment swerve in the other direction. Back and forth he tacked, the remaining tank trying in vain to finish him off. The shells exploded near Deus's tracks, trying to cripple the war machine.

"Go..." Charity murmured. "Go. Go!" she called out, as if her cries could speed the smoking hull of the Reaper on.

A shell hit him head on, and Deus staggered as his front armor indented, cracked, and flew off, but he could not be stopped. With a resounding clang, he rammed the side of the tank as it started to pull away. The cannons now extended too far over the rear of Deus to hit the smoking tank directly, and the enemy tank was tilted up on one tread by the force of the impact.

But Deus didn't stop. He kept pushing. The tank's treads flailed back and forth as it struggled to break itself free, sparks flying where metal scraped on metal. The tread on the ground slipped and sprayed clods of earth as it was shoved along, foot by foot. Yard by yard...

Towards the river.

Charity raced down the hill after them, passing by the chapel as the occupants of the bullet-riddled structure spilled out. The filly stared as the tanks struggled down the steep, muddy bank. The Brood tank's cannons fired wildly, spraying both with mud like thick clumps of gore. As the tank's tread reached the swirling waters, though, a unicorn appeared atop it with an anti-machine rifle aimed down into Deus. There was a resounding bang.

The Brood unicorn's head exploded. Riproar lowered her smoking markspony rifle with a nod.

Then they were in the river, and the current caught them. For one moment, the Brood tank almost seemed to float, but then Deus gave it one last push and turned it over. Treads sprayed water in the air for several seconds as it floated away, but then, with an eruption of bubbles, it abruptly disappeared into the stream.

Charity stared at Deus, half submerged, her eyes round as she held her breath. "Come back," she whispered ever so softly.

But he didn't. He slipped into the churning waters of the river. There was a brief spray of resistance as he blocked the course, and then was also lost from view.

And so passed Doof the Marauder...

From the battlefield, the Brood were rising and reforming ranks, but the survivors of Chapel had had enough. The Halfhearts and foals charged the survivors. Cyberdogs tore into the Brood ranks, and a bandaged and very pissed off Precious blasted the cyberzebras with emerald fire. The Halfhearts ripped into any Brood unicorn who appeared and cut down clumps of enemies. The colts and fillies who had made Chapel their home for so long rallied as well. They may have been children, but that didn't stop them from using whatever weapons they could to tear the

Brood apart before they could organize and consolidate their forces.

In a bloody fifteen minutes of frantic fighting, it was over. The hillside was littered with corpses. Nothing remained of Chapel save burning rubble and the eponymous bullet-ridden building. The Brood, at least here, were gone. The survivors looked at each other for a moment.

Then a musical note rang out, the deep and soulful melody of a contrabass. Adagio and Allegro worked the music as the tiny purple Sonata began to sing. "Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Help us find our rightful place. Help us grow up big and strong. Laughing and singing all day long..." As the fillies and colts sang, the adults joined in, awkwardly mumbling lyrics they didn't quite know.

But not Charity. She walked towards the smoldering remains of the town and found one of her clipboards. She scrutinized the precise little numbers in red and black and shook. There were some costs that were just too high. Some that numbers couldn't possibly cover. But Charity had to be tough, because if she wasn't, she wouldn't last long. As the song ended, she turned to the others. "Okay. Fan out. Collect any arms and ammo you can off these deadbeats. I'll start a running tally. If they try and hit us again, we'll have something to hit back with. Move it."

The others moved into action, but Charity lifted her head and gazed up into the clear sky and the rising pillars of smoke. "Thanks," she murmured, then sighed and got back to work.

oooOOOooo

I let out a mental sigh of relief. Chapel was alive. Well... okay. It'd need a whole ton of repairs. But Charity and the Crusaders were alive, along with the Halfhearts. I wondered where the cyberdogs had come from. The tunnel that'd passed by their lair hadn't been far. Maybe Charity had some Apple blood in her? Maybe they were just protecting ponies who needed help. Or maybe they were just preemptively dealing with something that would ultimately seek to destroy them as well.

I popped out of my blank's mind to tell Scotch Tape the good news. She wouldn't be happy her toilets were gone, but she could always rebuild—

"I hate Blackjack!"

That was what Scotch Tape sobbed as I opened my eyes but didn't move a muscle. She sobbed brokenly across the rocket from me, and I barely turned my head to spot the young mare curled up with Bastard, the latter looking thoroughly uncomfortable with this situation as she wept into his shoulder. He held her like he might hold an

open barrel of Flux, afraid that one wrong move would make a bad situation even worse. “She doesn’t care! He died, and she didn’t even shed a tear! She just went right into that head as if he didn’t matter at all!” she cried into his neck. “I hate her so much!”

“Yeah...” he muttered, then gave her shoulder an awkward pat. “There there, and all that. You know, this really isn’t my thing...”

But Scotch Tape went right along. “She left him! She didn’t even try to get him free! She left them both! She doesn’t care about any of us!” she shouted as she wept.

That’s not true. It wasn’t. I just... I...

“You know the place was going to... like... *explode*, right?” Bastard asked slowly.

“So what? She’s been exploded before! She could have found a way... done something... she’s a fucking alicorn now! You’re telling me she doesn’t have some kind of magical Princess Blackjack bullshit powers she could have used to save him?!” Scotch demanded as she clutched his jacket.

“Fucked if I know,” Bastard replied. “Look, I just want to get out of this tin can, see tomorrow, get paid, and move on with life. So if you feel this way, why don’t you take it up with her next time she’s outside her head, or whatever?”

Scotch Tape didn’t answer, choking and sobbing. “Goddesses, I’m so terrible... how can I hate her... but I do! She left him! She left both of them! And she doesn’t care... she doesn’t...”

Bastard spotted me looking at them with tears running down my cheeks. His eyes went wide as he looked at me over his glasses, and suddenly he grinned. “Hey! Looks like Blackjack’s awake! Now you two can have a nice heart to h—”

But I couldn’t. Because I was a coward. Because I couldn’t face what I felt or heard. Because if I stopped, it would crush me like a great wave, and I wasn’t sure I’d be able to get up again. So I disappeared into my blank’s mind instead. I ran. I hid. I refused to talk. Refused to think about it.

I was just like Blackjack in that way.

Or was I just like Luna like that?

I didn’t care. I found a pool and left my pain behind.

END PART ONE

(Author's notes: I'm incredibly sorry that it's taken so very long to get what we've gotten done. The chapter is simply so long and there was no natural breaking point. Add to the joy of medical woes of me and a kidney stone and it just seems we weren't able to get it done. My greatest regret is that I wasn't able to get all of Horizons finished before EFNW. The chapter simply had too much going on. I know that I could have cut out entire scenes and put them in an epilogue, but I wanted to show the events in the hoof.

In other news, the entire editing team is going to be coming to EFNW with me at the end of May. I'll also be moving out of Vegas and back to mom's at the same time, and be unemployed till I get a teaching job elsewhere. So bits donated to David13ushey@gmail.com would be extremely welcome right now and deeply appreciated. I also have a patreon at <https://www.patreon.com/Somber> ...and I would DEEPLY appreciate help with improving it. Seriously. It's horrible...

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who's stuck with me patiently for all of Horizons. I'd like to thank Kkat for creating FoE, and my EXTREMELY hardworking editors for the hours and hours they've poured into the story. Also, one final bit... if you love FoE and want to write stories for it... do. Don't let Horizons intimidate you. Tell any and all stories about the wasteland you want. Stick with it, and work at your story to make it the best you can. Thank you.)

Editor's note (Heartshine: I'm just glad that we were able to get this chapter split. It's been a ton of fun seeing all of Blackjack's friends this chapter, even though different points of view have been sort of difficult on the editors. Progress gets hard when we have slightly different narrators, and everyone has slightly different ideas of how they'd be responding. That said, this chapter is fun! Even if Somber keeps breaking the poor Raptors. Q.Q I'm going to privately hope that Somber is able to move up here to Portland. For reasons. That have nothing to do with me dating him. Nope. >.>)

swicked: Hey reader! Have you ever wanted to meet Somber? Conversely, have you ever wanted to know exactly where he is, so as to be as far from him as possible? Well, now you can!

Coming to Everfree Northwest: Somber! And the rest of us! But mostly Somber!

He'll even be on a panel (yes, they gave him a guest pass, so he's even all official and junk)! Ask questions! Demand answers! Whatever, really.

I'll be the one in the LSP ballcap. See y'all there.

Hinds: By the way, the ESS-A1 doesn't actually have artificial gravity. It's just flying a full Brachistochrone trajectory, and Blackjack is out of it during the turnover.

Bronode: My head's full of metal cubes. That is all. And my thoughts now need to be refined with a belt sander.

75.2 Part Two

(Somber) Author's warning: There is a consensual sex scene between a minor and an adult in this chapter. The author does not condone this behavior in real life. The scene will be flagged for individuals wishing to skip

said material. The author apologies if lack of this warning offended people earlier. (Mutabah) The skip point is on page [761](#) and is also a section bookmark

Elysium fared little better than Chapel. The country club was a bit more sturdy than the wooden church, but not by much. The dozens of defenders faced off against a similar advance of Brood across the golf course. Grace stood on a balcony flanked by two rifleponies who were firing down at the advancing ranks. She'd had the sense to put on a combat helmet and some barding. She stank, her stomach was empty, and she ached from horn to hoof, but she was still standing. Far to the south, she could see a massive green inferno burning where Grimhoof Army Base had stood.

And at the moment, she was quite cross. "What are you talking about?" she shouted into the broadcaster on her hoof. "I don't need a surrogacy spell! I need a Raptor, immediately! The skies are clear, so where is our air support?"

"The *Rampage* is giving support to the Arena," Triage's voice answered, "while the *Cyclone* is protecting us here. The *Sleet* is too damaged to help. They're going to try and get clear of the valley before their engines burn out completely."

"Oh, I see how it is. Protecting yourself and the thugs and leaving us to twist in the wind!" Grace retorted. "Then making some asinine pretense of Blackjack needing a surrogacy spell! What kind of idiot to you take me for?"

"An overbred one," Triage snapped back. "Let me fill you in, Princess. This comes from Storm Chaser: Megamart is gone. The Skyport is evacuated. Meatlocker is gone. That frigging castle is on fire. And Chapel's gone too. The refugees there ran into the Core, just like they weren't supposed to. Goldenblood got taken, so that ghoul is probably a corpse right now. So shut the hell up about your air support. I don't have it. It's left guarding a few thousand refugees here and at the Arena who didn't have the luck to get into a megastable or underground plantations."

"Well, then a surrogacy spell is moot," Grace replied grimly. "I won't be alive to receive it." She paused and glowered at the broadcaster. "How could she possibly know that, anyway? Blackjack is on the moon!"

"Look, when it comes to shit regarding Blackjack, I don't fucking pretend like any of it makes sense. They could tell me Blackjack was a stallion with a dick ten feet long, and I'd just nod and ask if she broke her legs in the process or not. I'm just passing on her request to you. She says Blackjack is going to need a surrogacy spell and that you're the best candidate we have. I can do the spell. I just need a new oven for the buns," Triage said tartly.

“My oven... is not for... for... ooooooh!” She stomped a hoof down on the ground. “If you want to use my oven, you’d better save the bakery from being demolished, understood?”

“I’ll pass that along to Storm Chaser. In the meantime, you might want to withdraw back here to the University. We’ve got a whole ton of Brood coming down on us. It’s time to circle the wagons, so—” Triage started to say.

“No,” Grace replied brusquely. “Come and help, or leave us to our defenses. I’d prefer the former. I’ll expect the latter.” Then she smacked the broadcaster with her hoof and took a deep breath, closing her eyes as she composed herself. “I need a moment,” she said to the ponies with her.

“A moment is all we have, ma’am,” one of the two rifleponies replied evenly. She nodded and started for the door. “Ma’am...” he went on, and she looked back at the unicorn soldier. “We’re not going to be able to hold here longer than half an hour. Once they surround this place, it’s all over.”

Grace stared at him silently for a few seconds. “Thank you. I will bear that in mind. Please, keep the enemy at bay.”

She walked through the balcony door into a bedroom covered in dust and chips of rock. She moved over to the vanity and levitated a cloth, wiping away the dust. The mare looked as bad as she felt, sweaty and drawn with a bandaged laceration over one eye. She removed the helmet and bowed her head.

“They’re quite correct, you know,” a stallion said, and she opened her eyes to see Splendid standing there with a purple alicorn behind him. “This place is lost.”

“This place is our home,” she said as she stood and faced him.

“It’s a building. Once a relatively nice building, but a building nonetheless.” The white unicorn trotted towards her. “It’s not worth dying for.”

Her eyes shifted over to the alicorn. “So, am I supposed to be leaving now? Abandoning my responsibilities to these people?”

He trotted towards her. “These people are lost if they stay here. Give the order to retreat. Let them stand at the Collegiate. And let me take you to Tenpony. Royal Mint here is charging me a leg’s worth of bottle caps to get you clear of the battle.” He paused and gave a smile. “You’ll like it there. It’s even nicer than here at Elysium. I’ve secured adequate quarters for Charm and ourselves. She’s even already begun showing improvement in her therapy with Doctor Helpinghoof, and I’ve made connections with important ponies within the Twilight Society who’ve been keeping

a close eye on the east of late and know all about Father and our lineage.” He put a hoof on her shoulder. “It will be a pleasant life. Maybe not as much pageantry as you’d like, but a good life.”

She brushed his hoof off her shoulder. “And what of my responsibilities here?”

“Soon there will be no ‘here’ here!” he hissed back. “This place is done! It’s unfortunate! It’s regrettable! But it is reality! You need to wake up and accept this. Nothing here is worth your life.”

She stared at him, her eyes narrowing. “Oh? What is my life worth, then? Fancy clothes? Good food? An ancestor I never knew who happened to be related to a Ministry Mare?” She shook her head. “If we are more than just our wealth, now is the time to prove it.”

He stared at her for a moment, as if not able to believe her. “Are you serious?”

“I—” she began, but he grabbed her, turned her towards the door the balcony and jabbed a hoof out over her shoulder.

“Do you have any clue what’s going to happen here if you don’t leave?” he asked, his voice low and urgent, then motioned to the alicorn. “Royal Mint here took a look before we came in. They’re encircling this place as we speak. You’re going to be cut off any minute. For all we know, you already are. Maybe if you withdrew now, you’d be able to fight yourself clear. Maybe.”

“Then they’d stop focusing on us and cut their way into the plantations!” she replied, facing him. “They might have been made by Stable-Tec, but they’re not stables; the Brood could get in easily.”

“That’s right. And every single pony in there is probably going to die,” he said grimly as he turned her again and stared into her eyes. Hard cobalt clashed with sky blue as he went on, “Because that’s what happens to peasants during war.”

“Brother...” she half whispered in horror.

“When all this is over, we’ll come back, get some more workers, and restart. The plantations aren’t going anywhere. The Brood aren’t demolishing the Hoof. There’re plenty of ponies all across the Wasteland who’d be glad for the opportunity. They’d be grateful. So there’s no point to throwing your life away, Grace. These people won’t appreciate it anyway.”

“How can you say that?” she asked, aghast.

He leaned towards her, eyes narrowing. “What? Do you think you’re being noble?”

That they'll be grateful? They liked you because of the food and money and ease you gave them, but this? Half of them will be glad to see us die, just so they could kill the other half to pick over the remains. They're not worth your life, sister." He rose, his amiable smile returning as he took a deep breath. "Now. Let's get back to Tenpony. A shower and a change of clothes and you'll see things better."

"A shower sounds lovely, but not if it's in the blood of my subjects." She put her helmet back on her head and trotted towards the doorway. "Goodbye, brother. I hope you have a good life in Tenpony. I don't think you should return."

"Grace, you're being a—" he started to say when she whirled, pulled an elegant .357 revolver from her holster, and pointed it right at him. He looked at the alicorn. "What are you doing standing there? Do something!"

"I was paid for transport. You can't afford my sibling rivalry rates," the purple alicorn grumbled.

"You're being—" he started again when her magic drew back the hammer, silencing him once more.

"Goodbye again, brother. Do give my love to Charm," she said evenly. "But do give up trying to sway me into cowardice. Go."

"You're certain." He stared at her, then sighed and rubbed his face with a hoof. "Such idiotic idealism..." He shook his head and then looked at the purple alicorn. "Give her the... present."

"You... I know how much it's worth!" the alicorn gasped. "You can't—"

"Something I've learned is that you can't tell King Awesome's children what they can and can't do," Splendid told the alicorn with a frown.

"You were lucky enough that that Harbinger contacted you," she replied, "and luckier still that he was asking so little for it." Splendid waved his hoof as if was no matter. "You promised it to those Twilight fellows."

Splendid sighed and gave a wistful sort of smile. "Yes, well, it's a squandering sort of day." The alicorn muttered something but took out from under her wing a long package wrapped in burlap and tied with twine. Splendid levitated it towards her and set it on the ground at her hooves. "Perhaps it will be of some use. I had hoped... ah, hope..." He shook his head. His lips pressed into a tired smile as he slowly backed away to the alicorn. "Goodbye, sister. *Do* try not to die. I am rather fond of you..." he trailed off. "Let's go," he said with a nod to the alicorn.

With a flash, the pair disappeared, and she lowered the gun. “Goodbye,” she said, cracking open the gun to reveal the empty chambers. She fished some rounds out of a pocket in her armor, filled the cylinder, and then flicked it closed with a satisfying click; a small smile lingered on her lips. Then she lifted the bundle with her magic, a tingle ringing through her horn as she undid the knots in the twine. The cloth fell away, and the light shone silver off resplendent unicorns etched into a basket hilt and an elegant, slightly curving single-edged blade. She held it aloft, the light catching and sparkling along an edge that shamed any steel that would call itself razor. “Brother...” she breathed, a tear on her cheek as she beheld it. Then she smiled and bowed her head. “Thank you, Splendid.”

With revolver and sword flanking her, she trotted back out towards the two soldiers. “How are we doing, gentlecolts?”

They shared a look. “Ma’am. We’ve Brood in the hills between here and the University,” one of them said. “We can’t pull back, and they’re pressing in on all sides.”

Grace stared at them. “How many defenders do we have?”

“A hundred sound fighters. Three hundred, if you include the wounded.”

She closed her eyes for a long moment. What was the measure of a pony? The blood in her veins? The money in her vault? The power she commanded? The respect she received? Noble. Was Splendid right? Was ‘noble’ simply something a pony was, like ‘tall’ or ‘thin’ or ‘comely’? She opened her eyes and stared out at the Brood advancing across the golf course like a black tide. What is my measure? What is my worth?

She tapped her PipBuck broadcaster. “Attention to all defenders of the Society. This is your Princess. The enemy bears down on us, but we cannot run. The enemy is without mercy or compassion, but we cannot cower and fear. The enemy is powerful and determined to annihilate us, but we cannot be defeated! Beneath us lies the greatest treasure of the Society. Not plantations or talismans. Not crops and fungible goods. People. Stallions. Mares. Foals. Every single of them desperate for us to stand and fight. To protect them. To show our enemy that it is neither guns nor numbers that make us strong. It is neither caps nor gold that is our wealth! It is our common bond. Our unity. Our community. Our Society. We will not run from its defense. We will not cravenly grovel for mercy from an enemy that has none to give. Defenders of Elysium, I implore you. Fight! Fight, and I shall fight with you! Stand, and I shall be beside you! Die... and I will fall next to you.” She paused and swallowed, then finished, “But we shall make our foes pay dearly for every life they

dare touch! Society! For Blackjack! For my father! For your princess! Fight!"

She tapped her PipBuck again. "Well... I suppose it's all in the care of higher powers."

One of the two unicorns cleared his throat, and she regarded him. "Ma'am, I overheard your brother... telling you that you should go. I got to say..." he trailed off, flushing. "I got to say, I'm glad you stayed, but I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd gone. I'd go too, if I could have taken the missus with me. You didn't have to die with us."

Her lips curled in an easy smile. "I die in good company, sir." She frowned as she looked at the Brood. The black lines of troops had stopped their advance. "They're... get down!" she shouted, leaping at the stallion and knocking him to the ground.

The Brood fired a barrage of bullets that filled the air with the sweet tang of blood and shattering lead. The other stallion, the one she hadn't knocked to the floor, was struck a dozen times in barely a few seconds, his body jerking like a puppet on a string as bullets found a half dozen gaps in his barding. Then the strings were cut, and the body collapsed in a bloody, still heap of meat.

The moment the gunfire stopped, two unicorn Brood teleported onto the balcony, silver blades raised. With a speed and accuracy that would have done me proud, Grace reacted, her own blade flying up as if seeking the two Brood with a blood-thirsty eagerness. It connected with the sword of the first and spiraled up the blade, knocking the Brood's weapon aside. As the silver sword curled around past the hilt, it whipped across the Brood's neck, taking its head clean off. Grace nimbly darted aside as the other Brood switched its attention to her and swept its blade back and forth after the unicorn, cleaving nothing but thin air as she danced away, living up to her name with effortless aplomb. Then the silver sword came in, blocking the Brood's weapon, and Grace darted her revolver into position and smoothly put a bullet in each of the Brood's eyes. As the creature collapsed, she pared off its head for good measure.

"I'm going downstairs," she told the soldier, who was staring at the three corpses on the balcony with wide eyes. "Good hunting." He just nodded dumbly, then lifted his rifle and began firing.

Grace trotted in and down. Who knew fencing lessons would be useful? To think she'd resented Father for insisting they learn proper swordsmare technique. As she walked into the ballroom, which was packed with wounded soldiers employing what little healing supplies that remained, a ripple seemed to pass through the air. She

didn't pause and regard them, or ask, or implore. She simply passed by, and as she did, others were drawn after her like iron filings to a magnet. Ponies who could barely walk were helped by those who could. Any who could wield guns readied them, and those who couldn't grabbed whatever bars or sufficiently vicious detritus they could manage in their mouths.

Grace walked right through the front doors and up to the semicircular sandbag barricade raised outside the entrance. One of the defenders turned around to reload and saw her standing there, mussed and exhausted and triumphant. "Princess!" he cried out, and a couple more glanced back. Then the first slammed the fresh magazine in and turned back to the Brood charging the barricade. "For the princess!" The other defenders, those who'd seen her and those who hadn't, echoed the cry and faced the enemy with renewed vigor. Even the wounded fought as she stood there like a bright light they couldn't... wouldn't... let be snuffed out. Grace herself snapped off revolver shots at any Brood that reached the sandbags, stopping only to reload or to cut down the would-be assassins that teleported in to assail her.

They were only a few hundred against a thousand or more. One by one, the defenders fell, and the cries of the survivors became more desperate. But not one stallion ran. Not one mare faltered. They fought on, even if the cause was hopeless, to prevent the princess from falling with them. At their posts they lay, proud and unashamed in death or wretched as death tarried to take them. The sheer pressure of so many Brood forced the defenders back from sandbags and up the stairs to the shattered, gold-leafed doors, and yet nopony broke and fled. Even as the enemy pressed them back.

She spotted a young, pale blue stallion curled up inside the double doors to the country club, weeping, clutching his rifle as he shook, completely overwhelmed by the fate befalling him. For a moment, just a moment, their eyes met. Fear in his. Calm dignity in hers. The latter prevailed, and for an instant, the corner of his lip lifted.

Then the bullet struck her, and she was falling back. The hammer blow, the shock of pain, the sudden weakness as the body lost the ability to act properly because of the abuses its flesh had suffered... I knew them well. A second bullet struck her uplifted foreleg as she struggled for balance. A third bit one of her hindlegs, and it gave out beneath her. She fell, rolled onto her back, and lay there, staring at the ceiling.

"Princess!" he shouted as he rose up and rushed to her, crouched over her, then glared out the doors, raised his rifle in a distinctly zebraish posture, barrel braced

against his knee, and fired with the scream, "You bastards won't touch her!" He roared in defiance to the countless and indifferent enemies. Bullets bit into his barding, but still he fired. Rounds found flesh and spilled his blood, but when his gun ran dry, he just slapped another magazine in with a bloody hoof, refusing to fall and let the Brood finish her off.

All to save his princess, for a pony would do anything to save their princess, whether she was one or not. It was the principle of the thing.

And as she lay there on her back, struggling to breathe, that soldier's roar seemed to magnify again and again, only this time the enemy was shaken by it. And from the access ports that led down to the plantations came a ripple as the enemy was pushed back, with the cries of 'Princess!' and 'Princess Grace!' breaking over the gunfire.

Workers... the ponies that her brother, and father if she was honest, called serfs once... poured out of the shafts and into the enemy. Some wielded industrial saws and sledgehammers, others sickles and axes, and some attacked with nothing more than sticks. They were all products of the Wasteland, though, and labor had made each of them hard and tough since she'd increased their rations. They crashed into the Brood and actually pushed them back in hoof to hoof combat and bloody melee.

Grace struggled to rise as two mares rushed to her. "Stay still, Your Majesty. We'll take care of you."

"Nonsense!" she spat, feeling something burning in her chest. "Give me a potion and get me back on my hooves!" She would tolerate no argument. Eventually they gave her the potions she needed, and she turned to the young blue stallion. Wounded, but he was still among the living. "Take care of him," she said, then charged out the door to join the melee.

Her silver sword flashed brightly in the afternoon sun, and the workers flocked to it, crushing any Brood in their path. Still, the Brood regrouped and pressed back against the struggling mob. Grace moved in a bubble of death, and any Brood that entered that bubble was split and split again by the silver sword while her revolver sought out any eye that came too close. But the enemy had guns too, and bit by bit, she was worn down along with her people.

Then from the ridge came a horrifyingly familiar boom of cannon. The roof of the country club exploded, showering the battlefield with tiles and ruined masonry. Another damnable tank rolled up behind the Brood, twin cannons ripping apart the upper floors of the structure with blast after blast, rubble crushing pony and Brood

alike. How were they to repel such horrible, callous power?

Something struck her from behind, and her hindlegs gave out. There was a blinding flash of pain, and she screamed as her hooves clutched her forehead, blood rushing down between her eyes. The silver sword fell at her side, the revolver thudding into the grass... her severed horn landing beside it.

“Got you,” a Brood unicorn said at her side. Grace turned and stared through eyes half-blinded with blood, refusing to give the enemy the satisfaction of fear and defeat. And the Brood wasn’t waiting either as the glowing blade was raised to cleave her head off.

Then the ground exploded as a massive claw tore out of the earth and through the torso of the stunned cyborg. Its eyes were round with shock as the gnarled fingers curled around its spine and pulled, her body folding in two with a resounding wet snap as she disappeared into the earth. Then the owner of that claw emerged. Gnarled, monstrous hide the color of mud and studded with wiry tufts of fur. Maw overfilled with uneven jagged teeth. Huge oversized beam pistol that would be a rifle in any other hand and in such a state that it appeared to be one misfire away from exploding. The hellhound rose up, and the Brood backed away.

Then he threw back his head and let out a bloody howl.

And it was answered from the earth itself.

Sinkholes erupted, sending Brood by the dozens tumbling to a grisly death. Arcane weaponry fired with heedless abandon into clusters of Brood and hellhounds alike, the latter seeming inured to all but direct hits by the weapons. Massive claws shredded cloned meat to gory tatters, and fanged jaws ripped and tore the cyberzebras’ heads from their bodies. And when the hellhounds faced organized resistance, they disappeared into the earth only to reappear directly under their enemies for renewed slaughter.

The tank gave a mechanical squeal as the ground below its rear collapsed, its treads clawing at the dirt as it struggled to escape the growing pit. It failed. Metal shrieked and the cannons gave one last impotent blast as a half dozen hellhounds stood around the mouth of the pit and sprayed blazing red beams at the trapped vehicle. It exploded, vomiting glaring green flames in a crackling mushroom cloud that didn’t trouble the hellhounds a bit. Elsewhere, hellhound beam guns sliced through two or three Brood, and when the overcharged weapons failed to fire, they doubled as bludgeons and complemented jagged claws well.

In fifteen minutes, it was over. The ground was pockmarked with sinkholes and carpeted with bodies, Brood, pony, and hellhound alike. The Society survivors clustered around Grace, somepony yelling for healing magic or a potion. Another told her to be still, but she couldn't stand even if she wished. Her hindlegs didn't appear to be moving as they should. The hellhounds stood there too, coated in gore and bloody foam, panting their rank breath as they loomed over the broken unicorn, as if not sure whether to halt their slaughter here or continue till only their own remained.

Grace pushed herself as upright as she could, staring up at the one who had saved her. "My apologies, but I'm unable to rise and greet you properly, good sirs." She made an awkward bow of her head. "Welcome to the Society. I'd have a proper repast prepared for your welcome services here, but I'm afraid that our kitchen is in some disarray. So sorry."

The hellhound blinked, then knelt. "Your home wrecked too?" he growled, still looking down despite his kneeling. "Our home blew up again. Always getting blown up." He glared over his shoulder at where the green flame still roared out of the earth to the south.

"Indeed. Ours is little better, I'm afraid. It's quite a mess, as you can see," she said evenly despite swaying a little. "Still, you are welcome to stay here as long as you like. I'll order refreshments."

"You're... giving us permission... to stay?" the hellhound asked haltingly, his body still oozing blood from numerous punctures in his hide.

"Yes. After all, it may be a horrible day, but that's hardly an excuse to be uncivilized," she replied, managing to maintain her even tone despite feeling distinctly woozy.

The hellhounds stared in shock for several seconds, claws twitching, weapons ever so slightly raised.

Then the first hellhound threw back his head and laughed. "Refreshments! Very funny! You're a very funny pony!" The laughter was contagious among the dozens of hellhounds, and the few Society defenders left armed grew slightly more at ease but appeared vaguely insulted by their mirth.

Two unicorns came to her side. "Ma'am, we need to get you to the Collegiate. You're badly injured."

"Yes, I think that would be best," Grace replied. "See to the hellhounds and take care of our own. We surely have stores enough to keep them well fed. And if not, there's no lack of Brood..." She gave a little shudder as the world spun.

“But... the hellhounds, ma’am. How are we going to be able to make them leave?” one of the unicorns asked as they carefully levitated her without jostling her body much.

She looked back flatly. “What makes you think we ever will?” As she was borne away, some of the defenders took up the cries of ‘Princess!’, ‘Grace!’ and ‘Victory!’. She didn’t have the heart to correct them; while it had been a victory, it would not be enough just yet. There were still plenty more battles to fight.

The page that follows is the one flagged in the warning. Please skip to the next break if you do not wish to read such material. (Mutabah: Again, page [761](#))

oooOOOooo

I hoped they’d get Grace to the Collegiate. I wondered what Triage had been talking about, though. Nopony should have known about me being pregnant except for the ponies who’d been present when I’d gotten my wings. And how could they know I’d be returning in my old body? Just one of many things to ask Triage when we finally arrived. But now... I couldn’t put it off any more, could I?

Time to face the music.

I slipped out of my blank’s mindscape, not wanting to see Grace’s pool disappear ominously. At this rate, everypony I knew and cared about would be at the Collegiate. “Sco—” I started to say when my mind suddenly hit a lurch.

There was Scotch Tape on a couch. More accurately, there was Bastard on a couch, with the young mare on top of him doing what plenty of young mares in 99 did to relieve stress and anxiety, his forehooves resting on her hips. As my brain started again, I noted the following: She wasn’t in obvious pain or discomfort. He wasn’t bound, in tears, or unwilling. They both seemed to be getting something out of it. And that part of me that hadn’t been interested in him in the slightest earlier now let off a warm purr at the sight of them together.

“How is he?” I asked from my seat.

Bastard’s eyes shifted over to me. “Hey, what’s up? Oh, and before you shoot me, this wasn’t my idea.”

"Yeah, I figured that," I replied. Scotch was adamantly not looking at me, her face composed as she continued to move atop him. "I'm sorry," I finally said. Bastard just continued doing what he was doing, and to his credit, he wasn't slamming her. "I didn't want him to die. I didn't want anypony to die."

She gritted her teeth and started to move twice as fast atop him. "Blackjack," she said between pants, "do you mind saving it till we finish? This is taking a little more focus than I thought." And she was pissed, and trying to deal with sexy feelings and pissed feelings all at once.

"Wait," Bastard said with a wry arched brow. "You don't mind me rutting your under-aged... whatever?"

"Quit treating me like a fucking kid," Scotch interrupted before I could answer. "I was supposed to be on the queue months ago. I've got my implant. I want this. I need this. It's happening." Her outburst earned a look of wide-eyed surprise from Bastard. I supposed I really *couldn't* mind after a retort like that. There was no denying it: she just wasn't a filly anymore. She'd already been a brave young mare in her own right when we'd left Equus, and while it'd only been a day since then, it felt as if she'd matured further months, even years.

"I, uh, so no, I don't mind," I added lamely.

"Okay... Cool, then. 'Fraid you were going to kill the fun or something," he said, rapidly regaining his composure. "Now, where were we?"

Having some good feelings, apparently. Though with everything that had been going on... I looked at her and tilted my head. "You're really sure—" I started to ask her.

"Yes, Blackjack," Scotch Tape snapped. "Just... come back later."

"Yeah. Right. Later." I watched the two for a minute or so longer, but it really seemed neither was forcing the other. A part of me that I wasn't sure was me protested my plan to go back into the blank. Really, would it be that bad if I watched a little more? Maybe gave myself a little...

Huh... Princess Luna a voyeur... Who knew?

I considered it a personal triumph to put my mind back into the blank and find another mind pool. Eenie, meenie, miney... that one.

oooOOOooo

Oh... well... At least now I *knew* he wasn't hurting Scotch, but this wasn't how I wanted to... okay, out!

oooOOOooo

Okay. Really should have looked more closely before going in there. That was a *little* too close for me. I quickly picked another mental pool...

oooOOOooo

Oh, come on! Now him?! Could I get labels on these pools? Maybe a 'Do Not Disturb'... huh... that was always an interesting feeling...

No! No! No! Out! As much as a part of me wanted to settle in for the ride... no!

oooOOOooo

Okay. I mentally painted great big red X's on both of those pools... and amazingly, an X actually appeared on each. Oh, sure, I figure out I can do that *now*... I sighed, examining the remaining two dozen or so pools. Which had I been in before?

...Or maybe I should stop running and hiding and peering and just... deal with what had happened to P-21 and Glory. But where could I start with that? Just thinking about it made this mental space feel colder and darker than the black void it was. It hurt thinking about what happened to Glory and P-21. It hurt thinking about Rampage and Lacunae, too. I didn't want to think about it. Think about how it had skewed my relationship with Scotch Tape. I'd saved her life, and honored my promise to her father, but that didn't make it hurt any less.

I sighed in that void, then glanced at the two pools I'd marked. Was this me, or was this Blackjack... or was this me, or was it Luna? Luna hadn't liked to deal with things directly either. She loved dreams and intimacy. Influencing rather than confronting. Great for dealing with others with finesse, but horrible for confronting problems. Blackjack hadn't been much better, running away from her problems one after the other.

It didn't surprise me that Scotch was doing what she was doing. After being dragged away from her father, she was asserting herself and trying to project maturity that she didn't quite have. She wasn't a filly anymore, but she was a very young mare. I needed to bring a little of that filly back... her optimism and hope above all. I couldn't let her become dark and jaded.

I sighed and considered the remaining pools. I could stay here, in this vastly nothingness that was my old mind. Or maybe this place wasn't my mind exactly, but someplace else? I really wasn't educated enough to know or even speculate much.

Ugh... I hated waiting. At least that part was still me.

...I might as well. I poked my mind into an unmarked pool...

oooOOOooo

Beep.

Oh...

Beep.

Oh, sweet Sister, no.

Beep.

Please... somepony help...

Beep.

Whoever this pony was, no. This pony was a ball of pain soaked in a lake of anesthetics that barely stopped the agony that came with each breath. The darkness was even more absolute than in my blank's mind. I thought this pony was on their stomach, but I couldn't tell more than that. The only things I could hear were a distant, intermittent beeping and whispers in the dark. Was this Rampage? Had she been rescued from the vacuum of space to the Astrostable only to be rendered like this? Maybe Horizons going off had done something to her talisman... or the moonstone... or who knew?

Beep.

"...need more Med-X..." somepony whispered, far away like from the mouth of whatever well I was in.

"I don't think there's any left..."

Beep.

I could almost place the voice, but a part of me didn't want to. I didn't want to know who this pony had been.

Beep.

"...should pull the plug... lost cause..." the first voice whispered.

"...told us not to... skies only knows why..."

Beep.

I couldn't stay here. I couldn't stay here and do nothing. It'd drive me mad!

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

oooOOOooo

Okay. Give me ponies fighting to the death or dying any day instead of... whatever that was! I didn't want to think about it. Being like that... no. That was a living death. That was sadistic!

I feared going into another pool, but if I didn't, I'd never get that horrible experience behind me. I could leave and just cover my ears till they finished, but... I stared at the pools. These were ponies I'd known, even if I didn't precisely know anymore who they were by looking at their shimmering disks of light.

Honestly, I'd probably be better off just taking a nap in the void.

Damn it... I put another X over the pool I'd just left and slipped into the one beside it.

oooOOOooo

This was more like it! This pegasus tore through an industrial network of canyons, whipping around rusting smokestacks and girders as Brood fliers sprayed bullets after her. She spun and banked, racing around corners so closely that her tail and wings flicked out clouds of rust in her wake. Below her, in the streets of the industrial northeast of the Hoof, the Brood were engaged in bloody street fighting with the Burners and Flashers. Blazing barrels were rolled off the tops of buildings, detonating on the Brood below and stalling their push towards the river. Flash Fillies moved from window to window, girder to girder, keeping up a steady rain of fire down and doing whatever they could to prevent a unicorn—

One flashed into being up ahead, behind a pair of mares crewing a gatling beam gun up on a catwalk that spanned the road. The pegasus I was in did a barrel roll and swooped across right above their heads. Her outstretched power hooves hit the unicorn's skull with a thunderous clap an instant before the blade fell. She dipped down and came up in front of the gun crew, pointing above her. "Fire! Up there!" Whisper shouted.

The Flash Fillies swung the gatling beam gun up and strafed the five Brood fliers, forcing them to break up. The pegasus's eyes narrowed. "Oh no you don't!" she shouted and darted after one that hadn't gotten as far away as the other four. All four hooves struck the Brood and rammed the flier right into a brick wall. She didn't even break stride as she looped around a second time and smashed it again, driving

it into the edifice hard enough to leave a crater. She hesitated for one moment, eying the bloody mass plastered against the brick, and then rammed it three more times with her hooves, leaving only a bloody smear and jagged bits of metal.

She turned with a satisfied little smirk only to spot another flier taking aim right at her head.

Suddenly a pair of hooves appeared around the Brood flier's neck, and the rest of the dusky batpony emerged behind the winged Brood. He pressed his mouth to its ear and let out a scream that sent spasms through the cyborg's body. Then its brains dribbled out its nose and opposite ear canal. Stygius dropped the limp carcass into the chaos below, then smiled at Whisper and lifted his chalkboard with a heart drawn on it.

Whisper flew to him, and the two embraced, twirling in midair as the fighting raged around them. The sun was close to the horizon now, and the sky was turning red in the west.

"Is now really the time?" Tenebra shouted from the catwalk next to the gun crew, who were busy laying fire on a knot of Brood below. "There's fighting going on, you know!"

Whisper and Stygius parted before gravity pulled them too far, and both flew back to the catwalk. "Yeah, yeah," Whisper said. "You're just mad that I won't kiss *you* in the middle of battle." She pointed at one of the two earth ponies with the gatling beam gun. "You there! You're Beam Burn, right?" she said, then gestured to Tenebra. "Kiss her."

The red earth pony mare's eyes shot wide. "Um... I'm straight, Fluttershy."

"Oh yeah? Well I'm straighter, but somepony's got to kiss her and it's not going to be me! I got my snogging buddy," she said as she gripped him tight and mashed lips and tongue and... ugh, why wasn't this doing anything for me? I got turned on watching two other ponies doing it, but not when I'm one of them? Stupid alicorn soul that only liked to watch! Why couldn't she be more like that unicorn trollop who screwed every... Wait. That was *me*! Argh!

The other, blue earth pony mare raised her hoof as she looked at Tenebra with an eager smile, but then the batpony mare stomped her hoof. "Nopony is kissing me! This is no time to be kissing! There's fighting going on and... and..." She started to twitch, immediately pulled out a vial filled with some bluish fluid, and choked it down. Her twitching eased. "Ugh..." She wrinkled her nose. "Why does it taste like

bubblegum?”

Stygius released Whisper and said something to Tenebra in his inaudibly high-pitched voice.

“Better,” she replied. “Good enough to fight.” She looked at the pair of earth ponies with the gatling beam gun. “Are you out of ammo?” The pair resumed firing, the pretty blue mare displaying a definite pout.

“You’ve got to work on your priorities, Twitchy,” Whisper said as they walked along the catwalk, bullets from below zinging off the railings and pinging against the underside of the floor plates.

“My priorities!” Tenebra squeaked. “You’re... you’re... kissing! In the middle of battle!” A barrel bomb exploded down the street as if echoing her outrage.

Stygius spoke to her again, and her eyes went wide. He grinned sheepishly, tapping his wingtips together.

Tenebra reddened a bit, sputtering, “I-it doesn’t matter if she’s a good kisser! We’re in the middle of the battle for the Hoof. We need to keep our priorities—”

Whisper moved so fast that she nearly teleported atop Tenebra’s back. “You know what my priority is, Twitchy? I’m happy. I’m finally... finally... finally happy. I have someone who makes me glad to be alive. I have a future and a family to look forward to. I have a father who, as much as he is a melodramatic ass, is my real father who loved my mother,” she said, stroking Tenebra’s skull with a power hoof as she spoke into her ear. “Shit that you’ve taken for granted all your life. Plus, I’ve got a whole city of fucks to kill however I want. And it’s fucking awesome, and I’m *happy*. That’s my priority.”

She let Tenebra up and even helped her to her feet again. “Just... people...” the batpony stammered.

“They die. Shit happens like that. But I’m not going to let it ruin my happy till it’s someone I care about.” The yellow pegasus paused, her mouth screwing up as if she felt ill, then said, “And I’m sorry for that... thing... that happened. Hope they can do something about it. But don’t tell me my priorities are screwed up. This is the first time my priorities are close to normal.” She took a deep breath and patted Tenebra on the back. “Still... sorry.”

“Still rusty at the whole ‘nice’ thing, aren’t you?” Tenebra muttered darkly.

“Hey, I’m used to breaking spines, not patting backs. Which would you prefer,

Twitchy?” Whisper retorted with a grin as they stepped onto the rooftop of an old factory. The industrial center of the city was a crescent of bulky buildings a mile thick and stretching for three miles along the edge of the eastern fork of the Hoofington River. From the rooftop, they could see hundreds of dark plumes rising all around the north, east, and west. The Citadel had largely burned itself out and was now sheathed in thick black and gray veils of smoke. Only the marble buildings of the University to the south and the Arena to the west lacked the telltale sooty columns that came with the Brood’s advance.

“Not good,” Stygius wrote on his blackboard.

Whisper sighed and rolled her eyes, then thumped his shoulder with a power hoof. “Come on. If I’m the optimistic one, then there’s something wrong with you. What do you say we get out there, kill a couple thousand more of these cyberbitches, then get a bunch of our friends together and have a good, steamy rut?”

“I don’t think I’m in the mood for those anymore,” Tenebra replied, gazing away to the south.

Whisper rolled her eyes again. “Ugh, come on, ponies! I cannot be the only happy one at this party.”

“I happy,” Stygius scribbled on his board with a smile that didn’t quite meet his eyes.

She grinned and kissed him firmly again. “I am so going to make you squeak tonight if the world doesn’t end,” she purred, and he flushed and gazed back into her eyes. He leaned over and gave her one final kiss on the end of her nose, and now she was blushing too. “Let’s go get them.”

“Mother and Father are a block that way,” Tenebra said, pointing with a wingtip.

“Your father? He’s fighting?” Whisper said with a grin. Tenebra gave a nod. “He’s got his sight back?”

“Ehhhh...” she said weakly.

“OBLIVION!” King Hades roared, sending a sphere of shadow flying down the street at the mass of enemy Brood. The ten-foot-wide swirling orb of black fire consumed everything in its path. The powerfully-framed batpony gleamed with sweat as he stood with his wife behind a barricade of wagons that blocked a major street between a pair of factory buildings. The trio of fliers dropped down behind them as the stallion

wiped the sweat from his brow. "Did I hit anything?"

Persephone critically eyed the channel cut along the front of a row of buildings. "Only a few, but I'm sure the enemy is quite intimidated, dearest," she replied as she reached up with her wingtips to his bandaged head and turned it a little to the side. "Try that way, my love."

"OBLITERATE!" he roared again, sending another sphere much more solidly into the mass of soldiers. To his credit, his magic sent the Brood rushing away like nothing else I'd seen. Not even the Legate wanted to charge his troops into a sphere of disintegrating darkness.

"Much better! Send a few more that way when you can, dear," she said, then turned to the three. "Ah, there you are, darlings!" She reached into her saddlebags, withdrew a blue vial, and passed it to Tenebra, who accepted it reluctantly. "Been having a nice flight out?"

"This isn't a flight, mother!" Tenebra said breathlessly. "This is a battle for our very survival! You and Father should be in the stable where it's safe!"

"And that's where my darling babies should be," she said as she smiled placidly at her children, who flushed and squirmed. "And my grandbabies too," she said, arching a brow at Whisper, who scrunched up her face indignantly. "If my little ones are at terrible risk, how can we do any less?" She paused, seeing Hades had turned his head to listen, and reached up with her wings to aim him up the street again. "That way, dear."

"Oh, yes. Of course." He took a deep breath and strained, then bellowed, "ANULIATE!" and sent another sphere rocketing down the street. It dipped low, slipping into the roadbed. However, a second later, the street collapsed under the returning Brood with a great crumbling. "Heh. That got them!" He paused. "...Right?"

"Absolutely, dear," she answered, patting his shoulder. "Now, do be careful and aim the way you're facing... and do try to use actual words." She looked back at the three. "Go on and play. Take care that you don't get hurt."

"Yes, Mom," Whisper said sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

"I mean that, Whisper," Persephone said, her smile steady but her eyes ardent. "I look forward to your wedding once we've cleaned up. It will give all our people something to celebrate."

"A wedding, seriously?" Whisper tried to keep up the snark as she looked from herself to Stygius. "I mean... he hasn't proposed..." Stygius gulped and gave his

disapproving mother a sheepish grin.

“Stygius Lethe Acheron!” she said sharply. He trotted forward, hanging his head slightly. “Why haven’t you proposed to this young mare yet?”

He eeped and then waved his hooves in the direction of the hundreds of Brood marching towards them, the barrel bombs exploding, the glowing fire of beam rifles cracking and streaking through the air ahead of them, and the general signs of battle as his mother looked on with a tiny smile and a very unamused arch of her brow. He stilled, hooves stretched towards the Brood as his eyes went from one female to the other. Finally, he slumped and fell to his knees, mouth working on the piece of chalk, and then he used a wing to fish something gold from his saddlebags. When he turned back to Whisper, hanging on his proffered wingtip was a ring-shaped earring set with a large teardrop-shaped moonstone, and in his mouth he held a simple message.

“Love U. Marry Me, Plz?”

She stared at him for a moment, then gave a tiny nod, her eyes wide and glistening. Bullets pinged and zinged off the metal around them as he stretched up and clipped the ring to her left ear. The gem sent out dozens of tiny rainbow sparkles as the evening light reflected off its milky adulescence. She touched it carefully with a wingtip, as if confirming it was actually there. “Yes...” she whispered as tears welled in her eyes. “Yes!” she cried out as she embraced him tightly, making him squeak.

“Congratulations,” Persephone said brightly once Stygius was released.

“Did something happen?” Hades rumbled, turning his head towards the rest of us.

She reach up, turning his head back. “I’ll fill you in later, dearest. Just keep sending your magic that way.”

Tenebra sighed but gave a small smile. “Yeah. Congratulations. You must be very happy.”

“Happy?” Whisper said with a wide smile, and then she launched herself up in the air. Then, to the astonishment of everyone, including me and I think herself, she began...

...to sing.

No one’s happier than I

I feel like reaching up to touch the sky

I'm soaring through the clouds

I could sing out loud

I'm aglow and I know the reason why

Everypony stared at her in astonishment, even, guided through hearing alone, King Hades, as the sweet, steady notes slipped out of her mouth and somehow carried out over the battle. Of course, she didn't just hang there singing. No, she fought as she sang, as if it were as natural to her as flying. She looped and whirled, and Stygius followed with her, the pair coiling and curling around each other, breaking apart to smash a flyer that moved to finish them off but seemed unable to hit them. And where was that music coming from? It seemed to follow her song, cutting through the rattle of gunshots and the boom of barrel bombs.

No one's luckier than I

My happy heart inside is riding high

I'll tell the sun and moon

That the world is in tune

And my friends can all sing and laugh and cry

Her song seemed to reach out to the ponies fighting, unifying them. A few Flash Fillies broke out in an accompanying melody, coordinating their beam blasts into sheets of fire that actually seemed to stymie the Brood assault through the industrial canyons. Now the pair almost seemed to ignore the Brood desperate to kill them as they whirled and danced through the smoking ruins. The bullets seemed to fade to the barest buzzing of bees as they passed by the pair.

For I'm in love, and I know I'm loved in turn

My friends below can see how I yearn

She held him close as they whirled higher and higher, her song reaching out, cutting through the cracks of bullets and the booming of bombs to reach every friendly ear in the area. As they rose past the top of a smokestack, she glimpsed a white flash on the catwalk around its brick rim, but the couple's spin quickly carried it out of view.

For the day he takes me in his wings

Where I will laugh with the gift love brings

I don't mind telling you

That I know that it's true

There is no one who's happier than I.

Then time seemed to slow as Stygius's handsome smile faded and his gentle eyes widened. There was a dark flash, and he disappeared only for his legs to wrap around her from behind. She turned her head in bafflement, but suddenly he slammed into her, knocking her into a sharp spin as a line of pain bloomed on her side. When she stabilized, a bloody graze marring her coat, Stygius was in front of her, facing her. His wings struggled to keep him aloft, and she gripped his blood-slick legs with hers. A tiny smile rose on his lips. They formed the shape of three little words, and then he was falling, blood glimmering like rain in a crimson halo around him. There was no music. No sound at all as he fell from her outstretched hooves, his yellow bar gone from her E.F.S.

Her eyes turned to the catwalk, and she saw three figures. Only one was armed. Only one was needed.

The Legate.

Flanked by two Brood unicorns, he pointed a zebra rifle at her with a calm, steady smile. Hanging from his back like some grotesque talisman was Goldenblood's grisly torso, his eyes staring sadly at her. "Silence," he said. There was a flash, a single bang, and a numbness spread through her body. She fell down into the fire and smoke and chattering gunfire.

Her limp wings dragged through the smoke, slowing her fall as she tumbled down, blood flowing from her own wounds and the stunned sensation flowing through her. She stared up at the blue sky, the two unicorns, the mutilated Goldenblood, golden feathers and drops of blood falling around her, and the smiling zebra...

Then she struck a bank of old cables strung across the road, the thick, rubber-coated strands slowing her fall even more before they snapped and yanked right out of the wall. Her wings crackled like kindling under her. Then she landed in a heap in the middle of an empty street. It felt like an eternity that she lay there bleeding, thinking nothing... feeling nothing.

"Stygius," she whispered.

Slowly she turned, and now pain blossomed... but it was a distant pain. An abstract pain she felt only due to petty, fleshy trauma and broken bones. She stared up the street... down the street...

There, a gleam of purple and gray. She struggled to her hooves, blood dripping

down her front and back, then staggered, step by step, towards her batpony. As she walked, coughing up red bubbles, Brood emerged. They didn't impede her passage, smiling as she closed the distance to Stygius. He lay on his side, curled slightly, a pool of dark crimson spreading out from him. She fell to her knees in the cooling blood, staring down at his faintly smiling face. She stroked his cheek with a bloody hoof, but he did not stir.

The Brood surrounded her. Softly, barely above a whisper, she began to sing again.

No one's happier than I...

Because I'm going to die...

Now the evening's drawing nigh...

This happiness has bid me good-bye...

I'm all alone... my heart is overthrown...

There's nothing to do but...

A barrel pressed against her forehead, and she looked up, hot tears on her cheeks. "Shhh," the Brood said as one... except for a few who wore strange, confused frowns as they watched the scene. "No more pony battle hymns." She closed her eyes and smiled.

A crack split the air. Hot dust swirled around her.

She opened her eyes as she saw the glowing red pile of embers settle down before her. A half dozen more fell, collapsing into piles of dust as Flash Fillies and a few Burners riding batponies descended down into the street. Persephone rode Hades, calling out, "Left, no, your other left, dear!" while others swooped down towards Whisper. Tenebra landed, her wings shaking as she withdrew purple vials from her saddlebags. Whisper stared past them up at the Legate, glowering down at all of them from his perch above. But she didn't linger on his eyes or the rifle pointing down at her. She looked past him at her father, his face solemn and mournful, his lips moving as he tried to say a word over and over again.

A bullet struck her thigh, auguring straight through. A second punched through her wing, taking a bloody clump of feathers and meat. A third slammed into her hip. She felt the blossoms of pain as her eyes remained locked on her father's lips, trying to make out the word he said over and over again while she waited to be reunited and happy once more.

Sing.

A pearly shield formed around Whisper and Stygius, the batponies, the Flashers, and the Burners. The Legate bore an expression of profound frustration.

“Oh no,” Tenebra gasped, bent over Stygius.

“Which way is our foe, love?” Hades demanded, but the pale batpony was silent as she slid off him, her face streaked with tears as she fell over Stygius’s body and started to sob. “What is it? What’s going on! Love! Speak to me!” the king said with a hint of desperation.

The moonlight shield didn’t block the bullets perfectly, but it deflected them and slowed their progress, and the magical energy weapons of the Flashers and Burners were unimpeded as they struggled to keep the enemy at bay.

Tenebra knelt next to her father. “He’s dead, Father,” she sobbed. “Stygius is dead!”

The large dark batpony knelt, sweeping his wing across the ground until it brushed Stygius’s still face. “No. My son...” he whispered hoarsely. His wing dipped into the cooling pool of blood. “My boy!” he cried, and then he jerked his face towards the gunshots, roaring at the shooters, “You motherless bastards, you killed my son!” Tears soaked his blindfold as he summoned up a black nimbus around himself, the air suddenly growing chill. “DIE!” he roared.

The nimbus exploded up away from him, fountaining out the top of the moonlight dome before sweeping down like an inferno of black fire. It carried with it all the pain of a grieving father and mother, seeking out the Brood as if it had a life of its own. Wherever it touched, flesh failed, metal corroded, and brick crumbled. The cloud of black flame broke into great roaring snakes that sought out every single Brood, and then, as if sensing his presence, the serpents all seemed to orient on the Legate. His eyes widened in surprise before he winked away along with the two unicorns. As if sensing they’d been robbed of their vengeance, the tendrils of black flame assaulted the smokestack he’d occupied. The brick and rebar disintegrated under the ebony onslaught, tumbling down towards the street and continuing to decay as they fell. Not a single pebble or stone reached the clustered ponies below.

The burst of dark magic, or Stygius’s death, or both, seemed to wither the stallion. The tips of his mane turned gray, and his powerful frame weakened. “Husband, no! I’ve just lost a son! I’ll not lose a husband as well,” Persephone cried out, holding him tightly around the neck. The storm of black flame seeking out the remaining Brood guttered as if starved for air, and died. Hades slumped against Persephone, his legs shaking as he sat down hard. “My love. My love...” she murmured as she held him.

Tenebra held a potion bottle to Whisper's lips, and she drank by reflex rather than any wish for the pain to ebb. "What happened to him?" she murmured as she stared at the king.

"The price for using dark magic in excess," Tenebra replied, reaching down to stroke Stygius's mane. "Poor brother. You always had to be so damned noble."

Whisper gazed at Stygius. "I was going to be married. I was going to have a family. A real family..." She reached up to the earring with a trembling hoof, but the shaking was so great that the moonstone earring popped from her ear and fell, landing in the pool of blood. Whisper shook even more, staring at him. "Damn it. Damn it! I'm supposed to be... I want... why..." she stammered, her voice getting higher and tighter as her eyes burned. "What is the fucking deal?!" she screamed out to the sky. "Why couldn't he just live? Why the fuck does everyone keep dying on me? Why the fuck can't I get a damned break? Just once?"

"I don't know," Persephone answered softly, stroking Hades gently with one of her wings. Tenebra extended another potion to her, but she turned away.

There was still fighting going on, and close. More bullets and explosions to the south. She rubbed her face with a bloody hoof. "Fuck. Fuck fuck fucking fuck! How... why... what the fuck am I supposed to do? All I wanted was to be fucking happy! Why can't I just have that! Just... have it?" She slumped. "Fuck... I don't even want to fight anymore. I just... fuck."

Persephone put her wingtip under Whisper's chin and lifted her face until their eyes met. "There's no need for... for dramatics dear," she said in a voice as brittle as glass. "The time for weeping will come later. You haven't lost everything. You still have us."

"But..." She stared at the batponies. "But... I... he's gone... I'm not. I mean..."

"You are still a part of us, no matter what's happened." Persephone brushed some of the blood from her face. "You might have a long way to go, my child, and your language desperately needs some refinement, but we will not forsake you. You're a part of our family."

Whisper looked from one to the next. "You... you mean it?"

Tenebra sighed, rolling her tired eyes. "I guess if I'm going to have a sister, it's appropriate that she's a bitch." But she wore a small joyless smile as she said it.

"Tenebra," her mother admonished in a weary voice.

"What? She just said a dozen obscenities in a row! I'm not allowed to call her a bitch?" Her voice hitched. "That's— that's hardly fair!" Tenebra protested, tears on her cheeks, the exchange drawing a tiny twitch to the corner of Whisper's lips.

"Ah, family," Hades rumbled softly.

Whisper reached over and took the potion Tenebra had offered earlier, holding it between her hooves, then drank it down. She tossed the empty aside and looked to the pale batpony. "But... how do I... after all that's happened?"

"I was told it's not what happens to us but how we rise to meet it. How will you?" she asked Whisper quietly.

Whisper sat there, staring at the little white stone gleaming in the pool of darkening red. Tenebra raised her hoof and tapped her PipBuck. "This is Bat Two. Is there anypony on that can give me a situation report?"

There was a pause, and then, "This is Homage. The Brood is pushing into the northeast from the north. It looks like they're trying to push everypony south towards Fallen Arch. Another group tried to push the Society and Collegiate north and west as well, but the former was halted. We've got some refugees in the Core. Nothing's happening, yet."

"Hades is out of action, and we've lost... my brother. We're clear of the Brood for the moment. What does Storm Chaser want us to do?" Tenebra said as she looked to the north.

"Withdraw back to Fallen Arch. Try and stop the refugees from getting into the Core. The *Cyclone*'s giving as much cover as it can spare. We're bringing help right away, but... damn it!" Homage swore. "Refugees are starting to go into the Core from the Arena too!"

"Maybe Blackjack was wrong. Maybe refuge in the Core is our only hope?" Tenebra asked.

"Blackjack's never wrong. Not about stuff like that," Whisper murmured as she carefully fished out the moonstone earring. The white opaline surface had become stained a dark red. She gazed at it. "If she says it's bad, then it's bad."

"Well," Homage answered, "unless she shows up in the next five minutes, there's going to be a whole lot of people in the Core. The defenders are barely holding the lines as is. I have help coming, but it'll be a few hours before they get here."

The stone turned over, balanced on the ends of her pinions. "He came for me him-

self,” Whisper murmured. “Why? I’m nopony... He doesn’t care about Fluttershy... he has my father... why come and kill me?” She closed her eyes, but the image of her father saying that word over and over again rose inside her.

Sing.

How could she sing? The joy she’d felt inside her that moment was gone. Everything that remained had collapsed in on itself, filling her heart with jagged shards of rage. She opened her eyes, looking at Stygius’s limp body. The ghost of a smile still resting on his lips. She closed her eyes, seeing the Legate with her father there, smirking, killing them as if he were a colt playing a prank. Anger began to burn anew, fed by a purer fuel than she’d stoked it with before.

You could sing with more than just love...

Homage was saying something about the zebras and Velvet Remedy when Whisper touched her own PipBuck. “Homage. Can you connect me to as many ponies across the Hoof as you can?”

“I think so. We’ve got enough control for that,” Homage replied. “Why?”

But Whisper didn’t answer immediately. They carefully put Stygius across her back, and she held him without struggle. Then, she clipped the red stone back to her ear, the gem glowing in the sunlight, and started to walk to the south. As she did, every footfall made a percussive beat. One-one two three... One-one two three... Then, as before, music began to play along with each step. Was it coming from her PipBuck or simply because she was in that moment where there was a song she needed to sing?

When, all feels lost...

what remains... is most precious to us.

Hold. Hold on to love...

Hold on to life... Hold on to tomorrow...

Maybe it was whatever magic she channeled in this moment, or maybe my blank body was throwing one last curveball at me, but I suddenly had images of ponies all across the Hoof fighting and struggling against the onslaught of the Brood. Of exhausted mares and stallions wanting the fighting to be done. Of terrified people seeking any shelter they could. Of soldiers crying out for bullets, bandages, or help. Of fighters struggling against exhaustion. And as she sang, the words reached them through radios and PipBucks, her hard notes cutting through the panic and

mayhem.

Rise. Hoofington Rise.

Don't let the fear crush you down now.

Rise. Hoofington Rise!

Stand for the light. Don't let it die!

Amidst all the images, one of Velvet Remedy stood out. I couldn't guess why she was surrounded by zebras, but the black unicorn mare joined in, her voice low and smooth as she ignored the zebras watching her in bafflement.

When hate burns on for too long

Everything's cast away now.

But, with friends near, loved ones so dear,

We can carry the day so

Then, in unison, the pair cried out in harmony, Velvet with dozens of zebras and Whisper surrounded by ever more batponies, Burners, Flashers, and every other exhausted fighter tired of this day.

Stand! Hoofington stand!

Face our foe. Drive back the darkness raging!

Stand! Hoofington Stand!

Don't give up now!

Stand! Hoofington Stand!

Sing together to beat back this darkness!

Stand! Hoofington Stand!

Vict'ry's near, hold your loved ones closer!

As they sang, ponies who were running for their lives stopped and stiffened as if an invisible wind blew through them. They turned back towards the fighting. A purple batpony colt started back towards the fighting. Then another pony. Another. Solo ponies looked to each other. Pairs formed groups. Gangers and traders, the wounded and frightened, started back from the protection of the Core. Only the greediest and bitterest scavengers stayed behind, determined to loot whatever they

could however they could. The music softened, and I was astonished that Whisper could sing so sweetly even when carrying Stygius's body across her shoulders.

You might feel lost and

wandering alone. . .

But others are here

to lend an ear

to make this place feel like home

So look! Look to the living, look to the loving,

laughing, praying, fighting!

The battered defenders around the Arena, fighting behind barricades and in the skies, turned at the sight of an army of reinforcements rushing in to help as the pair sang out, joined by dozens of others filling in however and wherever they could. Together.

Fight! Hoofington Fight!

Don't give up to fear and sorrow.

Fight! Hoofington Fight!

Don't give up hope...

for a bright tomorrow!

Rise! Hoofington Rise!

The time is now to raise your voices

Rise! Hoofington Rise!

Rise! Hoofington Rise!

And face tomorrow!

The song ended and the music faded away, but the sentiment raged on as my awareness returned to Whisper, bearing her slain love across her back, the red moonstone gleaming beside her left eye. "Homage. I need you to tell me where the Legate is. Now. He took my love from me. I'll be damned if I'm going to let him hold onto my father as well," she said as—

oooOOOooo

Suddenly I was back in the rocket... most of me. I made a number of undignified noises as I flailed my limbs and wings, trying to get my eyes to focus on Bastard in front of me, holding my blank body in his hooves. Eye control was re-established first, followed by motor function, and finally linguistics as I made a disjointed 'huh?' noise.

He peered at me from over the top of his sunglasses. "Oh. Look who's awake. Princess Not-Zoning-Out-Anymore-Till-She-Deals-With-Shit. It's a miracle." He levitated my blank body to a couch on the other side of the cabin, glowering at me, then pointed a hoof at Scotch Tape. The young mare was curled up on her couch again, staring at her hooves. "You two need to fucking talk. She's mastered the art of risky sex with complete strangers, and I'm pretty sure the second we touch down, she's going to graduate to booze, chems, and self-mutilation."

I looked at her sitting there all alone, then tore my eyes back to him. "I don't know what to say," I muttered lamely. "I'm not good with words." I put my magic around the blank body, ready to levitate it back to me.

He drew a pistol and pointed it unerringly at my blank's head.

"I'm good at causing fucking misery, but you're the master, Blackjack. 'I'm not good with words.' What the fuck is wrong with you? She's lost her father and her friends, and you're as distant as the fucking moon right now. She's so desperate for somepony that she's screwing me. Now get your ass over there and deal with it, or I'll fulfill my fucking contract and kill a Blackjack." And I knew, staring into his eyes, that he meant every word. I could stop him, or even kill him, but there was just one problem...

He was right.

A part of me was incensed that this churl was forcing the issue. How dare he? I could help Scotch after this was finished. There were all kinds of dreams that I could craft to address her loss. Talking... that was messier. If I could adopt a guise or persona, I could address this indirectly. Work around to helping her, and she wouldn't even be aware I was doing it. That way, if it blew up, I wouldn't be hurt. Blamed. Punished.

"Damn it," I muttered. Slowly, I shifted over to where Scotch sat curled up, her mane obscuring her face. As I sat beside her, she gave a tiny sniff, but nothing else. What was I supposed to say? 'So, how was he? Scale of one to ten?' or 'How are you doing?' or...

"Sorry," I said dumbly. I swallowed hard. "Sorry about your father. Sorry about Rampage. Sorry about... everything."

She didn't respond for a long while. Luna would have trotted off. Come back when she fell asleep and work some magic with her dreams. Explain herself. Work the situation till they came around. I had to wait, no matter how much I hated it. No matter how I saw P-21 lying there, impaled, and heard Scotch Tape screaming for him. "I wish I were a real Princess. I don't think I am. Not really. A real Princess would have saved them both. Somehow." I lifted my hooves, looking at the precision clockwork turning inside the intricate housing. "I couldn't do anything."

"Did you try?" Scotch Tape asked.

I closed my eyes, feeling tears on my cheeks. "I could have tried harder. Found some way to cut through the bars. Found some way to keep Horizons from going off. Something. Gotten him back to the Astrostable." I rubbed the cool metal across my eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't make it better, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape snapped at me, giving me a glare so like his that I almost saw dark blue eyes instead of her teal. "You're... you! You blow up huge towers and survive balefire bombs! You do the craziest shit like it's nothing! Why couldn't you have done it this time? Some trick or some... something! Why didn't you?"

"Because I couldn't!" I shouted back at her. "What do you want from me?"

"A miracle!" she yelled. "What else are Princesses for? What else is a goddess for?" she asked as she wept, hot, angry tears dripping down her cheeks like molten angst. "You could have... you should have... why... why?" Now her voice choked to a whimpering pleading. "Why didn't you save him?"

"Because..." But I couldn't say more. How could I tell her that I'd promised him to keep her alive? Bastard was right. She was hurt. Damned hurt. Not in body, but in the heart. Anything I said could twist back and make her blame herself for his death, if she wasn't already. "He promised me that... that if anything should happen... I... I..." I licked my lips, then held my stomach. "I had to save my babies. *His* babies. After going through so much to get them back, I had to."

The lie worked. Some of the pain and anger dripped from her. Suspicion remained, but there was doubt there, too. She said in a breaking voice, "He told me... he told me not to let you... get down. That I'd have to keep you off the mattress... whatever that means. Keep you happy and focused. And I tried to pretend, but you... you

didn't seem like you cared. Like it wasn't your fault."

I turned to the window, my voice faint as I felt my throat choke up. "I... I care... Please... believe me. I care..." It wasn't my fault, though. Not really. Between Horizons and his injuries... maybe if I'd insisted on bringing Velvet Remedy and her friends, she might have done something. Keeping the Hoof intact was more important, though. "I wish things had been better," I said, then gritted my teeth, trying to keep the panic from overwhelming me. "I wish... so many things..."

"I wish I just... aside from Daddy... that everything inside me was okay. That's why I did... you know... with him," she said, glancing over at where Bastard was adamantly not looking in our direction. "You've said how sex is your reset button. I hoped it'd reset me too."

"Did it work?" I asked with a tiny, envious half smile.

The young mare pressed her knees together. "It was okay while I was doing it, but I still couldn't forget. Now I'm sticky and sore, and that's about it. I'm not getting off this seat till I get a wet towel on my nethers." She closed her eyes. "I'm half amazed he did it at all, but he just asked me if I was sure. He let me set the pace."

"Because I didn't want the crazy moon princess to pop my head like a zit if I'd done you bloody and raw," Bastard answered from across the rocket. "If you're old enough to seriously want it, you're old enough to seriously do it. Though that was in the top ten list of most messed up things I've done."

"I wasn't bad, was I?" Scotch asked with a frown.

He turned towards us, pointed his cigarette like an accusing finger, opened his mouth silently, and froze. He popped the cigarette back in his mouth and reclined back in the chair. "Nope. Not going to talk about it. Just going to file it under things I'm going to forget about today," he mumbled around the cigarette.

Scotch Tape drooped her ears. "I guess I was..."

"You were fine! Great! Fantastic, even! You're just a few years younger than I'd like, okay? I don't want to know where you learned how— You know what? This is us, not talking about it. Ever." He glared menacingly at both of us, but I simply smirked back, and Scotch Tape snorted. He levitated my blank body back to me. "Okay! Here you go. You talked. She's no longer looking like she wants to die. You can go back to doing whatever you were doing cuddling with this thing."

"I'm looking at what's happening in Equestria," I answered, taking the body in my embrace. "There's a lingering magical connection between this body and the ponies

I've met." And the reality of what was happening in the Hoof came rushing back in on me like a tsunami. My smile disappeared. "It's not good."

"Tell me," Scotch Tape said.

So I did.

Ten minutes later I'd filled them in on everything from the razing of Chapel to the fate of Stygius and Whisper. The latter upset Scotch far more than the former. Toilets and towns could be rebuilt so long as the people survived.

"I can't believe that he proposed, only to get killed," Scotch Tape said as she wiped her tears. "That has to be the worst timing ever."

"If he hadn't proposed, she wouldn't have started singing, and if she hadn't sung, I don't think the Legate would have shown up himself to stop her. He was trying to kill Whisper. I think he was afraid of her," I replied as I looked down at the planet looming closer and closer. We were over the zebra lands again. I could make out the megaspells still raging and flickering in the midst of their Wasteland. I was responsible for this. They'd been my enemy and I'd wanted them defeated, but I'd never imagined that the weapons we'd wrought would continue to slay centuries later.

"Afraid? Of a little singing?" Scotch Tape said skeptically

"Don't knock ponies singing together," Bastard replied. "I don't understand it myself, but I knew folks who said there's a magic there beyond just casting spells. Think about it. People together just deciding to sing together, everypony knowing the words, everypony in unison, sometimes with music from who knows where... it's magic. And when it's done, earth ponies might have rebuilt an entire house in a few hours, or a unicorn in Canterlot's made connections with damn near everyone in the city. I don't understand it, but even I don't scoff at it." He paused and pursed his lips. "If I ever do burst into some silly song, though, shoot me, please. Especially if there's dancing involved."

We both regarded him quietly a second. "One day, you're going to tell your story, Bastard."

"Only with a gun to my head, Blackjack," he replied. "Actually, even then, I'd probably just tell you to pull the trigger."

I shook my head and looked out the window at Equus again, then asked, "How long do you think it'll be till we arrive?"

“Not long now. Within the hour, I think,” Scotch Tape said as she examined the computer running the ship. “Are you going to go back in?”

“One more time, I think. I want to see what the Legate and the others are doing. We’ll probably have to regroup at the University. So many are injured...” And so many gone, I didn’t add. With one last look at the young mare, I added, “Are we good now? No more hating me?”

“I hate that Princess powers don’t include breaking the rules so ponies we love can live. Otherwise, what’s the point?” Scotch Tape asked with a frown as she fiddled with the machine, sitting quite uncomfortably next to it. “Go fast. When we’re five minutes away from reentry, we’ll pull you out again.”

I nodded and pressed my horn to the blank’s brow. It was harder, this time. Maybe the first break had weakened the magical connection, or maybe it was our distance from the moon. Either way, it took me almost a minute to push myself into that dark space, and a minute more to find the last pool I needed.

Goldenblood.

oooOOOooo

“You seem tense,” Goldenblood rasped from a table atop a building in the middle of the Core. Dozens of gem-studded monitor screens showing camera feeds from around the Hoof sat on other tables around some terminals next to Goldenblood. The Legate paced along the sheer edge, his face a mask of frustration. His unicorns waited in silent subservience, twenty or so Brood cyberzebras arranged in rings around the top of the tower. “Are things not turning out how the Eater told you they would?”

“I’ve taken your legs. Your jaw isn’t as difficult to remove,” the red-striped zebra said as he walked back and forth along the precipice. The looping orbitals on his face looked like deep ravines carved into his flesh. “Things just aren’t progressing as smoothly as I’d like. That damned song. What is it with ponies and singing?! Everything was going wonderfully, and then they had to start caterwauling!” He jabbed a hoof down at the Core, and Goldenblood saw a few scavengers picking through the remains of the last ponies to try sheltering there. “There should be thousands down there! So much effort to draw so many of you wretched ponies to the Hoof so that I could herd them in here. Thousands! Stallions, mares, and foals. Especially foals! Instead, they fight on.”

“So sorry our desire to survive doesn’t align with your elaborate master plan for our

complete annihilation,” Goldenblood rasped. “I thought your victory was inevitable.”

The Legate glared. “If the trajectory hadn’t been changed, Horizons would have impacted through the crust and possibly reacted with the Eater before it could be devoured. Changing the trajectory was supposed to bring it straight down!” He grabbed Goldenblood by the neck and held him over the edge. Below was the pit leading straight down to the Eater. “The starmetal netting and magical fields would have easily captured it! But instead, it’s taking the scenic route. The sensible thing would have been a straight shot!”

“Oh, so that little detail’s still tripping you up?” Goldenblood asked with a chuckle, then started laughing.

“What’s so funny?” the Legate demanded.

“Us,” Goldenblood laughed. “The two of us with our ridiculously convoluted plans to kill everypony... me to save the world, and you to end it. It’s hilarious!” The raw laughter prompted the Legate to slam him into the ground at the edge of the white building that I now identified as the M.o.I. hub.

“*Your* plans?! You were used! My master used you! I serve *willingly*. I will help it devour every last spark of life in the universe!” he shouted.

“Yeah. Brilliant life, that. You might have been better just having a family. I know I would have,” Goldenblood quipped.

Then the Legate swept him up and shouted in his face, “Do you think I haven’t loved?!”

Goldenblood stared as the Legate seethed. “I’ve lived for thousands of years. Thousands! Even as a Starkatterer and Proditor, I’ve found love. Passion. Joy, even! All it does is rot! One death after another. I’ve had wives turn into decrepit bags of bone and sinew. Lovers turn old and dull and fat. I’ve watched children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren die over and over. Violence! Disease! Despair! Again and again. I’ve endured centuries alone because it numbed the pain of one parting after the next! Life is a curse! It is punishment! It is a joke! We live for fleeting years and then perish just so our offspring can do the same as well. Madness!”

He threw Goldenblood back to the ground with a snapping of more bone, then glowered down into the pit. “Life is a lot like you, Goldenblood. A rancid, festering corpse that, by some cruel joke of the universe, keeps struggling on, spreading pain and suffering. And I will crush it and you, you rotten little worm, under my hooves. I will end the joke and take my war to the stars so that they, too, can find the peace of

nonexistence. I will destroy everything. I am the great cleanser, and this world is merely the first tiny baby step of my grand campaign. Do you understand? Are you even capable of grasping the scope of my plans? This is nothing. *You* are nothing. You pathetic little mortals just don't realize it yet!"

Goldenblood simply lay there staring up at him monologuing. *I tried to kill everyone out of a misguided duty to Equestria. Destruction the only redemption I could conceive. How shameful. How petty. How foolish. But all this hate... this malice... Millennia of life, and this is what you desire?* "This is what you do with immortality," he said with disgust. "Pathetic."

"This is what every immortal does, eventually," he answered, then stared at the setting sun. "Every immortal craves an ending. If we don't get it, we'll create it." He then looked back down into the streets. "There's nothing for it. Hopefully there's enough. Pity. I really wanted more foals for this." He raised his head and closed his eyes. A moment later the building started to tremble. "Now," he breathed.

"What are you doing?" Goldenblood asked as the shaking grew. "You're turning the Enervation back on, aren't you?" he shouted in alarm.

"Don't be silly. What a waste that would be." He opened his eyes and pointed a hoof at a building across the pit as the shaking grew. A shriek filled the air from countless throats. Then the building erupted in a great fountaining of red gore. The viscous material poured out of the broken top, assembling into all manner of crawling, pinching, stinging monstrosities. Another building erupted. And another. Torrents of thick red goo surged out windows and through cracks and up grates. They turned into swarms of flying things with stingers and pincers. Collected into great spiders. Lumped into enormous, monstrous shapes that lumbered down the streets.

At the same time, swarms of mechasprites swept in and with their wings and lasers cut off those trying to flee. Those caught by the great oozing mass seemed to be assimilated by it, swelling grotesquely as they screamed in agony on the screens. The Legate watched the scenes with a look of profound frustration as the mechasprites seemed to jam augments into hemmed-in ponies almost at random, creating horrors that tried to totter or limp away before the red mass snared and consumed them.

"Come on," he muttered at the screens. "Come on! Your time is almost up! Here I am! Look at what's coming! You're great and powerful and afraid! Give in to your terror! Use it! Use your great and overwhelming power before it's too late! Use it!"

"What are you talking about? What are you..." Goldenblood trailed off. "Oh no..."

Celestia One..." And his eyes turned to the skies.

The clear and open air above Hoofington west of the Core seemed to shimmer, and golden lines of light began to coalesce into rings. Rings with their centers angled towards the setting sun. The golden rings began to spin. "Yes..." the Legate breathed as he stared at the light. "Yes. Yes! Do it! Do it!"

"No!" Goldenblood shouted... and then was blinded by an immense, blazing glow as the light of the setting sun focused like the beam of a magnifying glass, only to be interrupted by a field of magic surrounding the M.O.I. hub. The Legate laughed in glee as the energy poured into the shield with abandon, and the shaking suddenly increased.

"Yes!" he cried out, forehooves thrust to the heavens, his shadow stark and absolute as it fell across Goldenblood.

And it wasn't the only one. These weren't thin javelin-like beams of energy but rivers of fire in the sky. More beams blasted down from those rings, sweeping across the monstrosities pouring out of the skyscrapers. These weren't protected by shields, and the flesh incinerated with a horrible sweet stench of burning meat and glass. One by one, the beams of scorching light crawled through the Core and lit one building after another alight. Some disintegrated instantly, but others were reinforced enough that a casual brushing of the megaspell was only sufficient to turn them into blazing torches. Often, inexplicably, the beams struck magical fields that seemed to suck in the energy briefly before sweeping away to hit other areas of the Core, some with their own shields, some without.

And the Legate laughed in triumph, tears of joy streaking his cheeks.

The sun slipped down below the horizon, and the megaspell continued to pour on power for another minute or two before it winked out as well. The Core burned, but still it stood. Five minutes hadn't been enough to melt the city to its bedrock. Great heaps of meat sizzled like overcooked steaks while the mechasprite swarms had been rendered into bubbling puddles of slag. Half the monitor screens showed only static. All was still. All silent.

Then the lights came on. One by one, the towers that weren't aflame lit up. Green lines outlined and illuminated the streets below. Countless televisions and radios began to play old prewar tunes. The rotted remains of the lives that had lived here before lay naked and exposed and ugly for all to see. Along the wall and tower tops, talismans flashed and winked.

Nopony spoke. Then, “What did you do?”

“Harvested more energy in five minutes than I could have in years,” the Legate said as he smiled out at the illuminated ghost that was the Core.

“For what?”

“This,” the Legate said with a smile, and the towers began to shake once more. Only this time there was no relenting, the trembling growing louder and louder.

Suddenly, the side of a nearby tower exploded. A long, gleaming silver shaft erupted sideways from the obsidian monolith, sending immense black panels tumbling down into the street below. A matching shaft burst forth from the building on the other side of the street, and the two shafts met above the road. The fingers on the ends of each shaft enmeshed perfectly, and, with a hiss of gas, hundreds of bolts slammed into place to lock them together. This happened again with another pair of buildings. And again, and again, throughout the Core.

Then the shafts began to turn.

The skyscrapers began to move.

With a noise louder than I could have imagined, immense buildings were being shifted about. The unbreakable starmetal that was woven around the girders and through the beams and motors kept them intact as rotating shafts slowly screwed them towards each other, the Core compressing together and away from the pit in the center of Hoofington.

“F.A.D.E. shields take energy to block energy. You reversed it,” Goldenblood said as the screeching died down, many of the buildings now flush against one another. Portions of their foundations were crumbling away, revealing a circular-patterned silver grid, wide holes between the thin wires, beneath them and the crushed streets.

“An ingenious application your M.A.S. was developing. I liberated a copy of the theory from the hub here half a century ago. Really, it was a pity you never involved Twilight in the Tokomare project. I just relish imaging what I could have accomplished with her curiosity and ambition.”

He picked up the ghoul with one hoof and stood, looking out as the city slowly rearranged itself around them, the M.O.I. hub an increasingly isolated spire in the midst of all this transformation. “Nopony can stop me. Nopony can face me. I will end this world. I will save it from its misery. And I will do so to the next world, and the next, and the...” He paused as a green light appeared, streaking between the towers as they moved. “Wait... what is...”

That streak launched itself towards the M.O.I. tower, dropping down and following the crumbling remains of the streets, weaving around the lampposts that still jutted up alongside the crushed wagons like a blazing ball of fire. It reached the base of the tower and disappeared. A second later, a blazing green bird popped into view in front of the Legate and Goldenblood, the ghouls immediately feeling their broken bodies strengthen as the Legate gaped at it in bafflement.

Then the bird opened its mouth wide and sprayed a tight beam of flame right into the Legate's face. His meat immediately charred and blasted away, leaving a blackened skull atop his neck. He dropped Goldenblood at once, raising his hooves to block the flame as the Brood around him began to writhe, some firing at random and others collapsing. The torrent of flame ended, leaving a dark line of soot painted across the top of the tower. Black flecks of bone and meat immediately began to sweep back into his charred face and limbs, reassembling his head. In seconds, he'd be back together.

That was a few seconds too many.

From the air around the tower, shimmery fields dropped to unleash a platoon of bat-winged zebras. At the same time, a dozen alicorns, four of each color, appeared around the tower. Velvet Remedy rode one of the purples as she gazed down sadly at the Brood, then gave a little nod. At once the alicorns began to blast at the staggered enemy, even as she averted her eyes.

Lancer landed in a crouch, his wings folding behind him, as he fired three-round bursts into the heads of the unicorns. Majina, landing on the opposite corner of the rooftop, fired blowdarts so quickly that it was almost too fast to see her reload. Sekashi landed with her stick and expertly knocked out the legs of the Brood, leaving them for other fighters to finish off. All the while, the tower shook as more and more of the Core transformed around them.

A field of magic lifted Goldenblood, but before he could be pulled away, the half-reformed Legate grabbed him and yanked him back down with a guttural cry of "No!" As his eyes reformed in their sockets, he tied Goldenblood to the terminals with monitor cables. "You're mine!" His head restored, the Brood came to life and began returning fire to the shielded alicorns. Their healing talismans were already hard at work restoring their bodies as the zebra Brood faced their striped counterparts while the Brood unicorns countered the alicorn magic.

A few zebras unloaded barrages of spark grenades and some of the alicorns blasted with lightning, but the eruptions of energy were sucked away through the air and into

golden metal rods set in the corners of the hub's roof.

The Legate charged straight at Lancer as the latter sent a pair of sniper rounds into the head of another unicorn. Then a stick jutted out, tripping the Starkatteri. To his credit, he recovered in a summersault and launched himself right at Sekashi. "The wife that got away," the Legate sneered as he punched right at her face. She just barely evaded what could have easily been a killer blow by deftly deflecting it with her staff. "Pity you found out about me."

"That reminds me... of a very funny story..." Sekashi grunted as she gave constant ground around where Goldenblood was tied up. "About a husband... who thought he was still married..." He hooked his forehooves around her staff, and his head lunged in, smashing against Sekashi's face. Taking her staff, he shattered it in his grasp and tossed it aside.

"I always loved your stories," he said as he advanced at her on two legs as casually as walking. Then there was a drawn out 'ptptptptptptpt', and he paused, then craned his neck to see a dozen darts imbedded in his posterior.

"You're a bad daddy," the zebra filly said, eyes narrowed as she loaded another dart.

He kicked out, tagging a monitor and sending it rocketing into Majina's face with such force that the filly was sent skidding towards the edge. Lancer scrambled to catch her before she careened off, but the little zebra went tumbling out of sight. Lancer cried out as he reached for her, only for the bloody and barely sensate filly to be safely lifted in a magical field.

Sekashi lunged at the Legate's back. "You—"

But he whirled around, and his rear hoof came up. It impacted with her temple with a sickening crunch. She tumbled to the ground, blood leaking from her ears and her head twisted almost completely around. "No more stories, Love," the Legate said as he brushed the darts out of his rump.

The side of his head exploded, his body jerking and the Brood spasming along with him. Brain and skull pulled back in before his head burst apart again. "Murdering... monstrous... damned..." Lancer hissed in rage as he advanced on his hindlegs, forelegs firing the rifle again and again. "Die!" Blam. "Die already!" Blam! "Die, you miserable excuse for a—" Click.

In a moment, the Legate was there. In the next moment, the impact of his hooves sent Lancer flying across the roof. He slammed into one of the four lightning rods, his body nearly wrapping around it as his bones cracked and splintered. The Legate

kicked the sniper rifle over the edge as he approached his wounded son. “Always so ungrateful...” the Legate muttered.

Then the air above him shimmered, and a zebra mare landed between the two. She had striped bat wings, and a number of fetishes dangled from around her neck. On her back was another filly in a cloak, who jumped off and piped, “Remember, you can’t beat him. He’ll kill you if you try.”

Adama stood between Lancer and the Legate as the filly ran to where Majina lay, pulling out a healing potion for her. “I can take him,” Adama said as she glowered at him. Majina weakly drank the potion. “He’s just a zebra.”

“Sure. Just a zebra.” The filly pulled out a roll of paper and studied it a moment. “Well, it’s your funeral,” Pythia said as she pulled back her hood. “Betelgeuse gives you fifteen thousand to one odds, but none of the other stars are taking him up on his offer. Well, except Sirius, but he’s nuts.”

“Pythia! You betray me?” the Legate said in shock.

“The others are running for their lives, but I just wanted to see how this would play out with my own eyes,” the filly said as she held the dazed Majina close in one hoof and the star map in the other. “You forgot the first rule, Amadi. We use the stars. We don’t serve them. You’re a bug playing with balefire bombs.” The Legate whirled and kicked a monitor at the filly, who ducked a moment before it took her head off. “Okay. A really deadly bug, but my point stands!”

As his back was turned, Adama made her move. She seized the Legate around his neck, jerking backwards as she attempted to choke him. He kicked off the ground, flipping over her and bending her over backwards as she struggled to maintain the grip. His forehooves punched out to either side of her torso, and her ribs cracked under the onslaught. When she released him, he kicked her over by Lancer with a pleased smirk on his lips.

“Why do they never listen?” Pythia lamented, then put her hooves to her mouth and whistled – hey, how’d she do that?! – sharply to a nearby green alicorn who was trying to blast only cyber-augmented zebras. “Hey! You want to get his gun? Should be two floors down on the left side of the building caught on some fancy decorations. That’d be great!” The alicorn gaped at her, and Pythia waved a hoof at her in irritation. “Don’t give me that ‘freaky zebra filly’ look! Just go get his gun! We’re going to need it!” When the green flew down, she rubbed her temples. “Honestly...”

The Legate surveyed the carnage around him and laughed, a broad grin on his face. "Fools. You're all fools! I've won, and you don't even know it! But I thank you for the entertainment!"

"Momma," Majina said as she struggled to rise.

Pythia held her close. "Shh. Just stay here. A few minutes more, and it'll all be over. Or, you know... he'll kill us. Either way, should be interesting."

The buildings of the Core were rising up now, lifting into ever higher spires. Gears and cables all worked as the city seemed to heft up around the mile-wide space they'd cleared, the M.o.I. building still a lone tombstone amid the ruins. Thousands of shiny cables snaked down into the pit beneath the grid. Any buildings not in the process of movement lay smashed like broken toy chests spilling out their contents to the wind.

Wounded zebras were being withdrawn onto alicorns who now devoted all their magical power to their shields as the Brood organized and concentrated their fire. Pyrelight streaked around the rooftop, blasting little goutts of fire and sweeping past any Brood she could engage without burning others around her. The Legate practically pranced around the monitors, smashing any zebra who challenged him. "Soon. Soon," he repeated over and over again.

"Yeah, soon," Pythia said, and started counting down from ten.

The Legate paused as he looked at the two fillies. "What? What have you seen?"

"Seven. Six."

"Tell me!" the Legate demanded as he stormed over to the edge to face the pair of young ponies.

"Four... three... two... behind you," Pythia finished with a smirk.

The Legate turned just in time to see a flash of yellow that streaked across the roof.

Then his head disappeared. It tore completely off at the shoulders, broke into clumps, and went flying off over the edge. The Brood attack faltered, the cyber-beings staggering. Then his head pulled itself back together again. "What..." A second flash, a second obliterating kick that not only pulped his skull but knocked him rolling across the roof. Again, his head pulled itself back together long enough for him to mutter, "...was..." A third flash, this one sending his entire body flying into one of the lightning rods with such force the rod almost cut him in two. His head, still attached to the mutilated body, muttered, "...that?" Then his body reversed the

injuries and pushed him off the golden metal rod.

Whisper hovered before him. "Me. You took my husband. You won't take anything else."

"Oh. The songbird. You're the one who convinced all my poor, despairing sacrifices to keep fighting instead of hiding in here." He rose to his hooves. "That was annoying. I'd put a lot of work into that!"

"Your face is annoying!" Whisper replied as she flashed forward again, but this time the Legate spun. She passed around his body, but instead of receiving his devastating kick, she was able to sweep clear before it landed. She streaked back in, her hooves a blur as they came in for his face, and the Legate attempted another of his spinning dodges. This time, she adjusted, ramming her hooves in the opposite direction. His body rotated clockwise, his head, counterclockwise. She was still struck by his outstretched hook, being knocked back, but she furiously beat her wings to keep from bouncing and skidding across the rooftop.

His head pulled itself back around, and he set himself, legs spread wide, and grinned at Whisper. "Finally. Someone worthwhile. Why don't you sing at me a little while we wait?"

Whisper charged back at him, the pair blending together in a frenzy of motion. Meanwhile, Pythia and Majina rushed to where Goldenblood was bound. Majina kept looking over at the prone form of her mother, but Pythia looped her tail around Majina's neck and gave a little tug. "Not now. We have to get him free. The yellow one's good. Betelgeuse gives twenty to one odds, but she can't do it alone. Hopefully the other will get here before he takes her apart."

"What other? What are you talking about?" Majina asked, her cheeks streaked with tears as she looked at her dead mother. "We... can't you help her?"

Pythia sighed. "Sorry, but when your head is backwards, it's a little too late." She rolled out the map, studying the little marks and scribbled notes on it, then took out her pendant and gave it a tap. The pendant cast little moving spots of light on the map. "Okay. Certain doom. United in strength. Blah blah blah. Come on stars, give me something juicy," she muttered, then pointed a hoof at Goldenblood and glanced at Majina briefly. "Get him free at least. It'll distract the stripes off Amadi."

Majina hesitantly started picking at the knots in the cables looped around Goldenblood.

"You're Starkatteri," Goldenblood rasped at Pythia. "Why..."

“Long story short, because I’m not a tool,” the filly answered. “Now. Do you have a clue what all this is for?” she asked as she swept a hoof at the looming towers, now half as tall as Shadowbolt Tower had been. They were mostly girders now, shed of the black panels that had hidden the machinery within.

And then suddenly there was a resounding ‘zing’ as all those hundreds and hundreds of cables dropping down through that foundation grate drew taut. Despite the lingering fiery hues that lit the evening, the wires that stretched from the tops of the towers down to the pit still managed to shine with a singular icy malevolence.

Goldenblood’s eyes widened. “I do now,” he rasped. “We have to go. Everyone—”

But whatever else he was going to say was lost in the shaking. It was so strong that only the Legate remained on his hooves. The M.o.I. tower itself wobbled ominously like a massive domino but, oddly, remained intact. Perhaps the presence of so many souls had fortified it somehow. The ground was collapsing around the pit, tumbling into the growing gulf with only the starmetal grid on the ground remaining behind. The ministry hub shifted with a booming thud as it came to rest slightly askew towards the pit, part of its foundation falling into one of the holes in the grid. A few Brood slid off into the void, but the zebra fighters saved each other from tumbling off the edge. The knotted cables kept Goldenblood from sliding off, and the two fillies clung to him. He would have held them if he could.

While everyone else was trying desperately to hang on, the Legate and Whisper continued their fight, barely acknowledging the shifting battlefield. “You’re fast,” the Legate said as he parried and instantly counterattacked with a whirling hit. “But I can feel you’re getting tired. I can keep this up forever.” His eyes narrowed as he blocked a blow of one of her power hooves, the stroke blasting his foreleg clean off only to have it return a half second later. “Why don’t you sing a lovely little requiem for this world? I know I’d love to hear it!” he called out over the growing rumble.

“*You’re* a requiem!” Whisper screeched as she laid into him with renewed vigor.

“Come on, you old ghoul...” Pythia said to Goldenblood. “What’s he doing? The future is one big tangled knot of shadow right now. I know she’s a way out. And there’s another. But I don’t get what he’s doing!” she shouted. “Right now, the Eater of Souls should die, along with the rest of us, but everything’s shifting around worse than this city is!”

“He’s bringing it up...” Goldenblood rasped.

“Bringing what up?” Pythia shouted.

Goldenblood just stared at her a moment, and her eyes went wide. “No, he isn’t! He can’t! Something that big... there’s no way!”

“He’s been at this for years. Who knows what he was doing in Hoofington during the war? The designs for the city were always odd. Strange additions and requests. Plans changing in the middle of the night. Everything was built so quickly, nopony put it all together. The Core was likely shut down, building up power for this. Celestia One gave him the energy he needed. Now he’ll bring it up, and be able to align it perfectly to catch and devour Tom when it impacts.”

A purple alicorn flashed in and landed near the high edge of the roof. Velvet Remedy and a zebra in a hooded cloak slipped off. “What’s going on?” the mare asked in astonishment.

“No time,” Goldenblood rasped. “Get everyone off this roof now. Once the Eater’s on the surface, the Enervation will kill everyone. It might already be returning.”

“No!” Pythia shouted as she consulted her map. “Amadi has to be beaten. Now. It’s the only way.”

“He can’t be,” Goldenblood objected.

“He has to be. If he isn’t, it won’t matter when the Maiden returns. Everyone she needs will be dead. He has to be stopped now,” she said as she looked up at the cloaked zebra. “Are you her? Please be her!”

“If this must be done, then I suppose I am,” the zebra said quietly. “Get the roof clear.”

“No!” Lancer said as he limped over, hugging his rifle to his chest. “I need to see this finished. Please.”

“The healing potions aren’t working anymore,” Adama said, leaning on Lancer and struggling to breathe. “We must go.”

“I must see this to the end. I must!” he protested.

“Yeah. He needs to stay,” Pythia said. “And that yellow pegasus, too. Hopefully the other two get here before it’s too late.” She looked over at Majina, who sat forlornly next to her. The younger filly continued staring at the still form of her mother sprawled awkwardly where it had caught on a cable. “She should stay with me, too.”

“The stars showed you that?” Goldenblood asked.

“No, the fact she hurts did. Not everything is frigging stars,” Pythia answered as she

put a hoof around the filly.

Velvet Remedy turned to the purple alicorn. “Flash evacuation. Everyone except me, her, the fillies, him, and that yellow pegasus. That...” She froze as she seemed to take in Whisper for a moment. Then she shook her head hard. “I mean... Come back for us when they’re all clear, and I mean everyone.” She gestured to the Brood.

“You’re trying to save the Brood?” Pythia objected. “They’re just meat puppets!” Velvet sent a stern glare down at her, and the filly relented. “Okay. Fine. Save the puppets. Whatever makes your stars shine.” Then she gasped, “But leave me till the end, too! I want to see this. It’s gonna be good!”

Purples and greens began teleporting in and teleporting away with clusters of zebras and Brood, clearing the roof. Velvet and Majina kept trying to extract Goldenblood from the cables lashing him to the roof. Meanwhile, the cloaked zebra walked towards where the Legate and Whisper battled. The pegasus had been grounded during the course of the fight. Her wing was bent at a painful angle where she’d been shot earlier, and her hindleg now bled freely again. Still, she stayed on the offensive, doggedly refusing to back down.

The Legate turned to the advancing zebra. “Oh joy. Another,” he said flatly. “You know this is futile, right?”

“So you say,” the mare replied evenly.

“I’m immortal, invulnerable, and invincible. No matter how skilled you think you are, you’ll tire and fail, just like this one,” he said with a gesture at Whisper.

“Shut up,” Whisper countered. “You’re the failure. You haven’t killed me yet. And I’m still going to kill you.”

The Legate sighed as the breeze snapped at the zebra’s cloak. “Well then, let’s get it over with. I’m sure it’ll be bracing before I win,” he said sarcastically, and then frowned. “Who are you, anyway?”

The hood was pulled back, and Xenith shook out her long mane. The scarred zebra mare leveled her green eyes at the Legate and said softly, “No one.”

“Heh,” the Legate said as he stretched and cracked his neck. “Finally, an honest opponent.”

In a flash, he was on her, his leg swinging around in a kick identical to the one that had slain Sekashi. Her forelegs lifted, and she blocked the blow with her own forehooves, her body trembling with the force for a moment and then going still. The

Legate stood there, precariously balanced on one hindhoof while she held his other hindleg. “Heh,” she replied softly, and then flung her own body around and slammed him into the rooftop. She didn’t stop, however, continuing the roll over him, getting her feet under herself, and slamming him again like a rag doll.

Xenith continued the onslaught like a force of nature. She made no battlecries nor did she give him a chance to set himself up for a counterattack. As fast as his body tried to repair the damage, she simply inflicted it faster. She whirled and smashed him into the ground, twisted his spine like a rag, and beat him like a drum. Never once did she release him. She simply kept breaking him over and over again.

However, he wasn’t dying. He was laughing.

Xenith paused for a moment. Just a moment.

The Legate struck; as his body restored itself, he was twisted like a spring, and all the pent up energy released at once. His body untwisted almost like a propeller, smashing Xenith’s skull a half dozen times as he unwound and knocked her away. His body pulled itself back together as Xenith braced herself and refocused. “Was that Fallen Caesar? It was, wasn’t it?” he said, grinning like an eager colt. “I thought that style was lost. It actually hurt!”

Xenith didn’t reply. She launched herself at him, landed halfway, twisted, and blasted him in the face with both hindlegs. He continued back, planting his forelegs as they landed and flipping one of his own hindlegs up at her. The limb impacted with hers hard enough to make her grimace in pain. He continued the backflip and returned to his hooves facing her.

“And you’re using Archimedes’s Lever technique,” Xenith replied levelly. “Control and conservation of force, returning it at your attacker. That is a lost style.”

Now he looked impressed. “Are you Achu? Tell me you’re Achu!” he said with a grin. “Ah, if only I weren’t about to end the world. I’d take you as one of my wives in an instant. I have quite a few openings in my harem.”

“No. I’ve had a bad husband, but at least he didn’t talk as much as you,” she answered evenly.

“Pity.” And again he was on her, whirling and kicking and reversing and striking, his movement nearly a blur. Xenith blocked and counter struck, yet nothing stuck. The moment he was away, his injuries disappeared while hers remained. Again and again, they clashed and withdrew and clashed again. One time she tore his foreleg completely off, and she showed frustration for the first time as he pulled his

body back together again. For him, though, the exhilaration seemed to be almost pleasurable.

Meanwhile, the rumbling grew more cacophonous. Plumes of dust blasted up out of the depths as a shrieking, scraping noise filled the valley like the screams of the damned.

“How can she beat him?” Lancer breathed as he cradled his gun. “I’ve never seen fighting like that, but he’s still alive!”

“She can’t beat him,” Pythia said with a smile. “No zebra can.”

“Whew. I think I’m almost breaking a sweat,” the Legate said to the panting Xenith. “Time to end this, though. I want to thank you for a most enjoyable evening, how—”

Two power hooves smashed his head in, squeezing his brains from his face like pus from a burst pustule. “She’s right. You talk too much,” Whisper said as she shoved him towards Xenith. The zebra seized him in a hooflock, twisting him so his chest faced Whisper. “You’ve got a magical heart, right?” she said as his head pulled back together. “Let’s see it.”

Then she went to work on his torso, beating it like he was a punching bag. Back and forth, back and forth, her hooves worked on him, the power hooves blasting and snapping as she shattered his ribs and began to smash her way into his chest cavity. Xenith gripped him tight, his body spasming and writhing as he struggled to get free, shouting in pain as gobbits went flying every which way faster than they returned.

“Yes! Yes!” Pythia said with a grin. “No pony can defeat him. No zebra can defeat him!”

“But together...” Velvet breathed.

Whisper gave a final blow, and the last bits of his sternum flew away, revealing the dark lump of rock with the starmetal controller screwed into its side. “Switch!” she shouted, whirling him around as his bits and pieces came flying back in.

Xenith didn’t hesitate for an instant. She rammed her forehooves into his chest as Whisper held him tight. His eyes bulged as his flesh sealed fast around her hooves. The look on his face was one of dazed shock as Xenith and Whisper braced themselves. The two gave a nod to each other.

The zebra mare’s powerful frame began to twist, her muscles, normally as slim as any zebra’s, bulging as she applied all her strength. Whisper strained as she strug-

gled to hold the screaming Legate in place. Then the air was split by a grotesque, wet tearing noise as the stone was ripped from his living chest. His eyes were wide as he stared up at it in her upraised hooves.

“Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!” Pythia shouted at Lancer, beating at him with a hoof. “The control!”

He lifted his gun, sighted in but a moment, and fired a round that sparked off the starmetal box. A second. A third. Then the box went flying off and skidded along the rooftop and over the edge. An inky fluid began to spurt from the holes it had left in the heart. A moment later, a bandaged purple alicorn rose up, holding the box in her magical field. She soared over and landed next to the others, a white mare on her back.

“Nick of time now, right?” Boo asked as she scrambled off Psalm’s back. Psalm passed the starmetal control box to Velvet Remedy. Boo carried something. Something long and thin and wrapped in a loose cloth. “Daddy told me all about needing to cut things close and stuff.” She carefully removed the object and let the cloth fall. “I brought this icky thing.”

The silver sword gleamed in her hooves.

“Yes! Supernova!” Pythia said, then nudged Velvet Remedy. “Quick. Take it!”

Velvet eyed the sword as she would a snake. “I’m not going to take that! I’m a healer!”

“Think of it as a super-oversized scalpel, and that heart is a malignant tumor! Quick!” Indeed, the heart and the Legate seemed to be trying to reunite. Tendrils of flesh from the jagged wound in his chest stretched towards the dripping black rock. The pair strained to keep them apart.

“That’s not the same thing, and you know it!” Velvet objected.

“No one else can risk getting that close with that thing. One wrong slice and you can take your own hooves off with it!” Pythia said loudly. The building gave another lurch, leaning over even more. Psalm levitated Majina and Pythia onto her back.

“I’m not going to kill somepony just because I can. We can lock him up somewhere!” Velvet protested.

“He’s not a normal zebra, Velvet,” Goldenblood croaked. “He’s sick. He is a sickness, lingering for centuries. Killing him would be a kindness to not only his victims, but himself too.”

The heart began to connect, string by string, with his body.

“Besides, he won’t die if you break that heart,” Pythia said with a shrug as the shaking and shrieking increased, the building tilting a little more.

“Excuse me?” Velvet Remedy said with flat skepticism.

“Only the Maiden is able to kill him. Breaking the heart will just get rid of his restoration. He’ll be perfectly mortal after that, and it’ll be in the Maiden’s hooves.” Pythia stared down at the skeptical unicorn. “Honest! Swear on my stripes and the stars in the sky,” the filly added, pressing a hoof to her chest.

“I do not like this city,” Velvet said sourly as she made her way to where the three strained. “Not one little bit.”

The Legate’s eyes followed that silver blade. “No... damn you... meddler... chaos... It wasn’t supposed to be like this!” he gasped as he reached out for the heart. Velvet raised the blade high.

“Do it!” Xenith grunted as the black ooze flowed down her forelegs.

“Finish this shithead,” Whisper agreed.

Velvet carefully aligned the sword so as to not slice through Xenith’s limbs. Lifted it once... twice... three times... then...

“Are you sure this won’t kill him?” she asked plaintively.

Everyone stared back at her, and all except the other purple alicorn and Majina shouted in unison, “Yes! Do it!”

“Look, I’m a pacifist, okay?!” she shouted back.

“Then hurry up and pacify the fuck out of him!” Whisper grunted.

She flushed and brought the blade down in one blow. The black rock immediately cracked, the sword letting out a ringing note as the Legate screamed in agony. She struck a second time, the cracks spreading, black ichor spraying out of the widening gaps. Tendrils of flesh began to curl around the stony heart, his muscles starting to bulge as the black fluid suddenly ignored gravity and started to flow into the jagged rent in his chest. Finally, the sword dropped one last time.

There was a ring of metal on stone as the heart was yanked back into his chest cavity. Instantly, the wound closed. With a great spasm, he yanked himself free of the injured Whisper’s lock, throwing her into Xenith. But he didn’t talk now. His eyes

bulged and rolled in their sockets as he stared at his straining limbs. He opened his mouth and vomited a slurry of blood and black gore as his body trembled.

"I thought you said it wasn't going to kill him!" Velvet shouted as she backed away.

"It's not," Pythia said with a gleeful smile. "This is much worse. Good job, by the way."

The Legate was bulging, swelling, growing. He fell to all fours, his skin splitting, regrowing, and splitting again. "What's happening to him?!" Whisper asked as she and Xenith backed away towards the others. "I thought you said this would stop his regeneration."

"That heart didn't regenerate him. It restored him. Kept his body locked in one state. Time was effectively stopped for his body," the Starkatteri filly said, grinning wickedly. "Now it's not. Now it's catching up on him. A thousand years of growth and injury and all the pains of the flesh, at once. Plus all the nastiness that comes with having a cursed lump of rock in your chest for a couple millennia." Understanding settled on Whisper's face, and she looked on in silent, cold satisfaction.

The Legate now reminded me of the enormous blue pony I'd once seen named Goliath. Only Goliath hadn't had extra little legs poking out of his normal ones. He hadn't had extra eyes in extra sockets. The Legate's body was growing all at once, with no order or control. His hindlegs slipped over the edge of the roof while his forelegs scrambled to hold on. He opened his mouth wide and screamed out, "Son!" Lancer didn't reply. "Daughter!" Majina hid her face. "Someone... help me!"

"I'm sorry," Velvet Remedy said in horror. Her horn glowed. "That should help your pain."

The Legate's maw twisted in a horrible grin, and suddenly his foreleg reached out, the little sublegs wiggling and trying to grab anyone they could reach. Velvet cried out, swinging her blade wildly. The weapon seemed to seek out the Legate's flesh, lopping off the legs as she was levitated, with Xenith, onto the alicorn's back. Whisper climbed onto Psalm. "Get my dad!" she shouted as she pointed at Goldenblood. Psalm's magic tugged the wires taut, and the floating sword sliced the wires in two. The ghoul began to lift toward the alicorn.

Then the enormous, bloody hoof of the Legate curled around Goldenblood and stopped him short. "No!" Lancer shouted as he and Boo were picked up by the alicorns. He started to fire into the ankle of that limb as it seemed to grow around the ghoul, but it was as effective as shooting a tree trunk. Psalm flew above Gold-

enblood as the building listed more and more, tilting over towards the middle of that immense pit.

Goldenblood, though, wasn't struggling. "Go," he said as he smiled up at his daughter. "Tell Blackjack I did better." Even if he didn't think he had.

The M.o.I. hub tumbled over into the pit, leaving the two alicorns hovering over the void that had been the heart of the Core.

The tower didn't fall far.

With the building lying on its side and pinning his legs, the Legate clutched Goldenblood as the tower rose back up in a great cloud of smoke and dust. Higher and higher towards the surface it lifted till it reached the level of the starmetal grate that had supported the city. Now, that metal grate yielded like soft butter to the thing beneath the fallen tower. The two alicorns backed away as the building continued to rise higher and higher on a nest of wires. An avalanche of mud and dust poured down into the vast pit below, water and unliving gore cascading into the depths. The gleam of silver and the glow of green started to peek through the muck sliding off in great sloughs. It was shaped vaguely like a ring, a massive storm of soul motes swirling around.

Then an eye opened.

An eye the size of a Raptor.

The immense mass shifted, and two enormous silver fingers reached over, grabbed the M.o.I. hub, and flicked it away like an offending speck of dirt. The white building arced out of sight as the immense towers of the Core slowly bent outward, their bases slipping underneath the dripping mass as they spread open like the petals of a horrible steel flower. Their outstretched tips glowed a brilliant green as a cloud of white motes began to swirl faster and faster in the center of the ring. With a great creaking and grinding, that eye lifted. Something like a mouth opened wide.

Goldenblood stared at that maw, that abomination that he had unwittingly served. *I was such a fool. I should have trusted more in Glory. If she could hold on after the space—*

And it let out a scream of Enervation that could be heard around the world.

oooOOOooo

Like a candle in a tornado, Goldenblood's pool disappeared. I floated in that void, thinking of his final thoughts. The remaining pools had grown hard as rock, and I

couldn't push into them anymore. Right now, I couldn't care about that. I had only one thought, and a tiny ghost of a smile on my lips.

Morning Glory was alive!

(Edited note: Scotch Tape's age would be roughly 14-15 years old. I don't know how that translates in pony years, but it's younger than Bastard would like. EQG had the CMC's in a high school after all so, you tell me.)

(Author's notes: And that's the end of the chapter. Sorry it was so long, but that goes for Horizons in general. I'd like to thank my editors who have worked so incredibly hard to help finish this enormous monster of a chapter. The stage is set. The final act is up. Blackjack will be back in the Hoof with the final face off with the Eater to save the world. But at what price?

I'd like to thank Kkat for Fallout Equestria in the first place, and all the readers of all the fics and all the writers who keep this story and fandom going. Huge thanks to Erin and the Wasteland Wailers for taking a peek at the songs and making sure they were okay. I hope they're okay... okay... they suck, but maybe someone with musical talent can make them not suck quite so much. I just wanted her to sing...

Also, a reminder that in two weeks I'll be at EFNW. They're even going to let me be on a panel. I'm be the ugly mess of a person at the very end picking their nose with all the zits.(Heartshine: Why would you mention zits!? EEWWW swicked: Because he doesn't care about your feelings, clearly.) Still, I hope I'll be able to meet people. It'll be nice to meet and talk with folks. In light of the upcoming trip, and me moving up to Oregon for job opportunities, tips are hugely appreciated through paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com , or, if you'd like to support me long term, I now have a horrible Patreon at <https://www.patreon.com/Somber>

Also... the things I have to put up with from my editors in the comments....

Edit: Also, FoE radioshow! Listen and enjoy! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcEa5s6cd6A>)

Heartshine: This chapter. So much violence. Is there a talky, peaceful solution? Or is this the wrong crowd? I don't even. I need Somber hugs.

swicked: That song (excuse me, battle hymn) was weird, right? Really, really weird. I mean here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVL1UoR-rvk#t=26m25s>

So yeah, weird. I just... yeah.

Weird.

I... won't even comment on the second "song". Guh.

...IGNORE ME!

Heartshine: I rewrote the 2nd song to its present incarnation, and put it to guitar chords. :P Maybe if swicked is nice to me at Everfree I'll sing it for him.

swicked: I probably won't be nice to her at Everfree :D

Heartshine: Q.Q if only Hinds would bring swicked his 4.4 grams of candy.

Bronode: What's the going exchange rate between candy and sexual favours?

Heartshine: Depends on the favour and the person asking for them?

swicked: I'll take the candy thankyouverymuch.

Bronode: Why do I ask these questions? I always regret it.

Heartshine: Solis rather likes gummy candy, Bronode. And she lives with me. You could test this theory. She seems to be rather fond of you. Maybe that'd help the exchange rate.

Hinds: I was again told to type something here and that this again counted.

76. Paying the Price

"Never fear, girls. We have each other!"

Glory is alive.

Glory is alive!

Of course she was alive. It was the engineering or the F.A.D.E. shields or whatever! She was alive! She hadn't given up on me back when I'd been stuck in the Core. I hadn't given up on her. I'd find her, and then we'd... something. Either we'd patch things up, or... even if we didn't, I'd set her and Tenebra up for a long life of love and happiness! It'd take a little effort: a glass of wine. Maybe some romantic music. Maybe I should spike the wine with some whiskey, just to make sure it'd get done! Then she'd be alive and happy, and I'd be alive and happy, and then she could hold me while I broke down and let everything that had happened on the moon out.

And...

And why was everything shaking so much?

The connection was broken by the intense rattling of the rocket. The windows were awash with flame, and I felt a pressure crushing me to my seat. "What's going on?" I yelled in panic, looking around for Scotch Tape, my head difficult to turn.

"We're reentering! That's what!" she said from where she'd wedged herself between the pilots' couches, struggling to lift her hooves as she manipulated the computer keeping us all alive. She was only able to squeeze in because of her small size, and it still looked painful, her head resting awkwardly on a part of the computer. "We're aerobraking!" I just gaped at this strange earth pony talk coming out of her mouth. She rolled her eyes. "We're hitting the air of Equus to help slow us down!"

"Air?" I goggled at her. Really, just being sent to the moon by magic was so much easier!

"We're travelling at speeds with more numbers than any sane being should be travelling," Scotch Tape shouted, barely audible over the roaring, rattling, and banging. "I don't know how it's holding together! We're going to be back on the ground in a few minutes. Though in how many pieces..." she trailed off as she started to tap the terminal again, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"What are you doing? I thought this thing was supposed to take us back to the space

center?!" I asked. An alarm sounded, and I yelled, "What's that?" I was pretty sure that panic in my voice was Princess Luna. / could handle smashing into the ground at insane speeds...

"It was taking us back to the space center," she said as tapped the controls. "This damned thing was programmed to land the rocket right where it took off from, but now that would have the engines shut down in midair above a radioactive crater!" The rocket gave a particularly strong shake. "Should have thought of that earlier," she chided herself.

"It's okay," I said weakly. "You were. . . distracted."

"I'm trying to get it to set us down *outside* the crater, but it's not cooperating! And if I deviate *too* much, we'll crash or burn up in the atmosphere!" Something else started beeping at her, and she swore loudly.

I glanced over to see how Bastard was doing. He'd strapped himself in next to a window filled with glowing red-pink flame. He lay on his back, hooves folded behind his head, eyes hidden behind his glasses as he calmly smoked a cigarette. The only hint of stress was a bead of sweat running down his temple. "Is there anything I can do?" I asked Scotch as the rocket bounced and rattled underneath me.

"N— Wait! Can you levitate my hooves and keep me steady? This is hard enough without feeling like I'm on my second Sparkle-Cola binge of the day." I lifted her up, and for the longest minute ever we simply barreled down into the atmosphere. A tiny part of me was at once impressed and slightly irked that this earth pony contraption was accomplishing something that once had taken legendary magic to accomplish. Really, there were just some things gadgetry shouldn't be allowed to do!

Finally, the roaring slackened to the noise of the engines, the shaking became a more steady vibration, and the pressure let up and left me feeling only a little bit heavier than usual. Scotch let out a relieved breath. "Okay. We're through. We're in a stable powered descent, and I convinced the computer to set us down a safe distance from the crater. We should be there in a minute or so," Scotch Tape said with a smile and nod, patting the device. Then she glanced at me. "You seem happy," she said just a little bit accusingly, her eyes narrowing a touch.

"I saw something that might be good. The Legate got beaten. He's not dead. . . I think. . . but they broke loose the control box." I bit my lip. "Oh. And you were right. Glory's alive." I saw her eyes widen and added, "Sorry." If I could, I would have saved them both. Would have brought Rampage with us. Would have done it all right when the fate of the world hadn't hung in the balance.

Her eyes hardened a little, but she smiled. "Sorry for what? I'm glad she's okay." Her jaw clenched and worked silently as she focused on extricating herself from between the pilots' couches. "You don't have to apologize just because Daddy... Dad died. It's okay." From her even, low tone, I doubted that. She segued immediately. "They got the Brood control interface away from the Legate?"

I faked a smile. "If we're lucky, that might turn the Brood off for good."

"Oh. Good," she said. Then she frowned and trotted over to a window with a green glow on the other side. "What's that?"

The rocket flew over the Core... or what was left of it. The dozens and dozens of towers now jutted out at all angles like an enormous bird's nest of black stone, silver girders, and blood-red meat. In the heart of it lay the Eater of Souls, a toroidal shape half-invisible in the eye-twisting baleful green aura and sea of swirling, inward-spiraling stars surrounding it. A great island of terrible light in the dark of the night.

And it was screaming.

"I don't feel so good," Scotch Tape said as she fell back from the window, clutching her stomach. Blood immediately started to drip from her nostrils as she coughed and sputtered. Bastard also let out a grunt, shaking as the Enervation washed over all three of us. Scotch Tape gagged, her green hide taking on a sickly, blotchy tone that I knew heralded a bloody death.

I immediately pulled out the bottle of moonstone dust that I'd collected on the moon and shook some of the powder into Scotch Tape's mane. Immediately, she stilled, breathing deeply and wiping the blood from her muzzle. Bastard got some next and gave a stiff nod of gratitude. "The Enervation's back," I muttered as I looked at that green glow. "Can't say I missed it."

"Why now?" Bastard asked with a frown, his sallow hide now speckled with growing bruises from his own brush with the deadly field.

"The Legate needed Celestia One. Everypony melting in the Core wouldn't have been enough. He needed the Twilight Society to see thousands of ponies being torn to pieces by nightmarish monsters to get them to fire. If Whisper hadn't sung and rallied the refugees, it would have been thousands. Now that the Eater's up, it doesn't have to suppress its Enervation anymore. That's going to be rough on everypony, especially the wounded," I said grimly.

"Well," Scotch said, glancing at a readout. "We'll be landing—"

And the rocket exploded.

Well, not exactly *exploded*. I was an *expert* on things exploding around me. There was a flash of brilliant green light through the middle of the cabin, and then with a wash of heat and noise the inside of the rocket was a lot more outside. The cabin had been sliced through diagonally, the beam just barely missing Scotch, who was now clinging desperately to what remained of the pilot's couch she'd been standing by as she and Bastard fell away to the side with the top of the rocket. Next to me, my blank body was picked up by the howling wind and borne towards the edge. With my newly unobstructed view, I saw emerald anti-dragon beams sweeping up at us from the ruined towers of the Core.

I frantically unstrapped myself and, with a beat of my wings, threw myself towards the hole where the rest of the cabin had been, snagging my blank from the air as I passed. I dove over the edge, the intricate clockwork inside my shoulders whirling as I pushed myself towards the starting-to-tumble section of ship, now below me as the rocket's still-running engines continued to slow it. More green beams lanced out from the towers, almost hitting the nose and me and grazing the rocket.

I reached the nose, popped open the fingers on my other forehoof, and, with a combination of that and my wings, worked my way into what had been the interior. I swung my blank body around so Scotch could grab onto it, then moved over to where Bastard was already unstrapping himself. As I grabbed him a green beam swept through where Scotch had been. My breath caught in my throat for a moment before I saw her with my blank body on the other side, having kicked clear into open air at the last second.

Holding on tight to Bastard, I gave a powerful flap, and then, finally, we were all holding onto each other. Without me needing to say anything, Bastard spread his legs out wide to slow his descent, Scotch copying him. I wondered if he had experience plummeting towards certain death.

But we were still being shot at. I only just had time to shove away from them before another beam passed through where we'd just been. I flipped to the side to avoid a second beam, then snapped my wings open to let the air carry me above a third. Then I folded them to dive after my falling friends and... ugh... Damn it. Just because I had the wings, I didn't have to be a pegasus!

I teleported underneath Bastard, my blank, and Scotch Tape, slowing them with my magic. "I am really getting tired of this!" Bastard bellowed at me.

"You've only been dealing with it for a day, you baby," I replied, my mane crawling as I imagined one of those beam projectors zeroing in on me. I couldn't fly them down

fast enough. Couldn't teleport them with me... sweet Sister wasn't that getting old... "Pull your limbs in and hold on!" I said as I concentrated.

"What? To what?!" Bastard yelled at me. Scotch followed my instructions, though, and a moment later, so did he, the two of them clutching each other and my blank, now streamlined and held up by my spread wings.

Then I dropped them.

Not far. About two hundred feet. Then I teleported down, caught them, slowed them, and repeated the process. Every time I did, the powerful beam weapons blasted at me, hissing with magical malice. Several times I had to teleport early and toss my friends to the side, away from a beam cutting through the air where they would have been. After what seemed like far, far too long a time, though, I'd caught them one last time, and when I let them go, it was because they'd hit the ground. With only a little thump.

Scotch Tape immediately kissed the earth. "Thank you! I've never been happier to taste dirt!" Bastard drew a bent cigarette, put it in his lips, and started to light it when the thing snapped in two, dangling by a fiber. From the glare he sent me over the top of his sunglasses as I landed myself and folded my wings, clearly this was my fault.

I didn't care. I gazed up, only a little, at the rocket shining in the moonlight. It was trailing smoke and looked like it was going pretty fast and tilted too far over, but I could still hear the engines. For a moment, I thought that it would be able to land even in its damaged state. Then it passed out of sight behind a low hill, and a second later the distant roar of the engines was replaced by a tremendous, drawn-out crash, then silence. At least it hadn't exploded... But it looked like any plan to just fly back for Rampage after the Eater was taken care of was going to be a little bit trickier. Well, by magic or earth pony gadgetry, I *would* get her down from there. Maybe the zebras had moon rockets too? They had missiles, after all.

Bastard flicked the broken cigarette away, shook out a new one, and watched as it fell apart. "It shouldn't be this fucking hard to have a smoke," he muttered, checking the others in the battered pack and salvaging a single mangled twig of a smoke before tossing the container aside. "Where the hell are we?" he muttered as he lit up.

"Scrapyard," Scotch answered, scrubbing at her ears with a hoof, her mane a wild blue tangle atop her head. "Those piles of scrap metal everywhere are a dead giveaway."

I checked my PipBuck map. Scrapyard wasn't that far from the Collegiate. If Glory was anywhere, that's where she'd be. I turned on my broadcaster, checked the channels, and then took a moment to admire the way its design seemed to flow elegantly into the clockwork mechanics of my hoof. When we had a chance, I simply had to ask Snails or somepony what the heck was going on with this alicorn soul thing. This was just too cool and weird, and I really wished I had time to figure it all out. Was that a mainspring? Then I opened up a channel to—

Instantly, all three of us fell to the ground, screaming. The peal from my PipBuck made my head throb like it was about to explode, my vision filling with red. I smacked it against the ground repeatedly, and thankfully both the screech and the agony cut off. We all lay there for a moment, breathing hard as the throbbing pressure in our skulls abated a little.

Bastard summed it up perfectly as he lay on his back, pressing his hooves against his temples: "I hate this place. I fucking hate this fucking place. Give me Fillydelphian slavers. Give me pony-eating monsters in Trottingham. The bosses of Dise. Give me the taint plagues of Applelanta! Just get me the fuck out of here."

"It's not that bad," I said as I tried to push myself upright, failed, and relaxed on the nice, dirty ground. "Once you accept almost everything here wants to kill you, it's actually quite charming." I turned to Scotch Tape. "What happened?"

"I think there was some kind of magical feedback. Your broadcaster amplified it," she said as she struggled to catch her breath. "Like... whatsitcalled? The place the Lightbringer went."

"Canterlot?" I groaned, finally sitting up. "That doesn't make any sense... unless Pink Cloud and the Eater's Enervation are somehow connected. Or there's starmetal in broadcasters. Or—" I froze as I stared down the barrel of a gun. The gun was attached to a cyberzebra who was staring down at me. "Shit," I muttered.

This Brood appeared no different from any others I'd seen, and yet there was one fundamental difference: his bar wasn't red. "Am I supposed to kill you now?" the zebra muttered thickly, as if he wasn't used to using his voice.

"Uh. No?" I answered. Bastard silently drew his guns, keeping them hidden under his coat. I motioned a hoof towards him, hoping he'd hold his fire as I slowly moved my face away from the Brood's gun. He did, and the cyberzebra didn't even track me, just kept aiming at where I'd been. "Why do you want to?"

"I can't hear it anymore," the zebra said with a small frown. "Something's wrong. I

know I'm supposed to kill you, but I don't know when. It's not answering me." He backed away and sat down. "I'll just wait here. Can you tell me when I'm supposed to kill you?" There was almost a plaintive note in his voice.

"...yeah. Sure," I answered as we lifted ourselves to our hooves. "We're... just going to go. We'll come back when it's time for you to kill us." I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disturbed by the expression of gratitude the Brood wore.

We moved a little bit away. "You have a really bad habit of not killing people pointing guns at your head, you know that?" Bastard said sourly, eying the forlorn Brood. "What if that thing decides now's the time?"

I shook my head. "I don't think he can. Xenith broke off the control hooked to the Legate. I think that's what he was talking about hearing." Then I blinked and added, jabbing a hoof at him. "And didn't *you* have a gun pointed at my head?"

"Doesn't mean it's not a bad habit," he retorted, scanning the junk piles. "I'm seeing a lot of red," he muttered with a frown, checking his own PipBuck. "I doubt all these Brood are as messed up as that one."

"Hey. Relax," I said with a little smile as I put my blank body between my wings where I could carry it securely. "I was seeing things on the way back. The Brood were being dealt with, no problem. It might have been a nasty fight, but really, they're not as terrifying as Storm Chaser made them out to be." I stepped around a junk pile, smiling back at the other two. "I bet things were just..." Scotch Tape stared past me, her hooves clasped over her mouth as her eyes bulged. I turned, my flippant words choking my throat.

Bodies.

So many bodies.

They hadn't been there long enough to bloat up, but the blood had thickened and darkened to a deep maroon color. Stallions. Mares. Foals. There were a few Brood corpses, too, here and there amid the pony bodies strewn among the heaps of junk. Those bodies appeared like soft wax, twisting as they reverted back to the chaotic Flux I'd seen before.

I'd seen losses when I was watching the fighting. Big ones, in terms of numbers, importance to the war effort, and just how well I knew them. They hadn't been in vain, though, as much as I hated that they'd happened; where'd I'd see fighting and loss, I'd also seen victory. Now it hit me, hard, that the ponies I'd seen fighting were, for the most part, much tougher than the average Wastelander. I should have

realized... should have thought that if even they were taking losses... The Brood had cut these poor people down like so much wheat before the reaper's scythe. "No," I muttered as I stared at so many bodies. So many! It was just like Littlehorn... walking among the still piles after the pegasi had blown the Pink Cloud away. So many... too many...

Hard to imagine that, just a few minutes ago, I'd been happier than I had been in days.

"Is anypony alive?" I shouted out, heedless of the risk. There were a few blue bars on my E.F.S. Far fewer than the number of reds, but it seemed like the hostile Brood had moved west. They couldn't all be malfunctioning Brood, could they? "Somepony? Anybody!" My shouts in the still air echoed back at me.

I was rewarded by a little cough. I ran towards it, my blank body flopping limply atop me. Bastard and Scotch Tape had to hop to avoid the Brood bodies that were turning into sludgy Flux. I could appreciate their caution. I'd already fired Folly. Who knew that that was doing to my kids? I shoved that in an overflowing box marked 'Thoughts to Avoid'. Overhead, an emerald line swept out across the countryside, drawing a line of explosions in the distance. Add that to the box as well... I tried to avoid a line of sight to the Core if I could help it. Last thing I needed was a dragon-killing beam in the face.

Despite the fact I was not nor would ever be the most graceful pony, I managed to avoid stepping on any of the scattered corpses as I homed in on the blue bar I thought I'd heard the cough from. There, beneath two dead ghouls, something struggled. I carefully lifted them and stared down at a young pink earth pony mare Scotch's age with a blood-smeared mane and braces attached to little wheels on her hind legs. She opened one pink eye and stared up at me. "Luna?" she asked faintly.

"Not exactly," I replied. "Where are you hit, Boing?" I asked, taking her pallid complexion and sweaty brow as a sign of injury aggravated by Enervation. She winced as her eyes moved down towards her side. There was a hole in the leather belt holding the bracing frame to her barrel. It'd been cinched tightly, and that pressure was likely the only thing keeping her from bleeding out. Not that it would save her from Enervation worsening the wound. I'd seen what that could do too often to think otherwise. I quickly whipped out my moonstone and sprinkled a little of the magic dust on her coat. She immediately relaxed a little. "Do we have any healing potions?" I asked Scotch and Bastard. The former shook her head while the latter scanned the junkyard for threats. "I swear. One day I'm going to force somepony to

teach me how to magically heal if it kills me.”

“Blackjack?” Boing slurred in a daze. “You’re alive? But you... left us.”

“Yeah, but you know the Hoof: you can’t escape it forever,” I said as I lifted her from the ground. There was no way those wheels would roll over this many bodies, so I kept her levitated. After Bastard had used his healing magic to stop her immediate bleeding, I peered to the northwest. “We need to get to the Collegiate.”

“Indeed!” a filly piped up, and what once had been a Brood corpse lying off to the side rose up and shimmered. The foal-sized robot was visible for just one second before a hologram of a filly Apple Bloom appeared over it. “Sorry for spyin’. Wanted to see if you were Blackjack or ‘mu-hu-ha ha’ Cognidumb.” She chuckled for a few seconds, but none of us shared her mirth. Her laughter trailed off, and she stared at us for a moment, her face frozen, then frowned. “Sorry. I take it you’re all that made it back?”

“Yes,” I replied, tensing at once. Before the robopony could press for details, I asked, “What’s between us and the Collegiate?”

“Oh, about a thousand or so rabid Brood,” Applebot answered. “The good news is they’ve become really disorganized in the last fifteen minutes or so. Some aren’t shooting at all, while others are killing each other. Of course, since the Core rearranged itself to shoot beam weapons at us and the Enervation’s back, things haven’t been as good as one might hope.”

From above us came a thumping electric shriek, and I started, pointing Vigilance up in time to see the white synthetic mare Sweetie Bot standing atop a nearby scrap pile and launching a volley of bright, Core-green bolts from her horn that curved over the hill in the direction of the University, found their marks among the Brood, and detonated in harsh green flashes that extinguished a hoofful of red bars each. A fusillade of bullets answered her as she ducked down behind the peak of the pile. “Wow,” she said brightly, “that makes them really mad!” She paused and stared at all of us, then immediately smiled. “Oh! Welcome back! How was the moon? Did you bring a souvenir?”

I was a touch taken aback by her cheerful demeanor, not to mention her firepower, as I watched a whole slew of red bars moving ever more rapidly. “Thanks. It... could have been better. And unless you count a bottle of moonstone, no.”

Scotch Tape gave Sweetie Bot a slightly uneasy half smile. “Um... nice. Have you always had that artillery in your horn?”

“What can I say,” Sweetie Bot replied with a carefree shrug. “My little Horsie always loved mares of a... higher caliber.”

“...That was terrible,” Scotch replied.

“Indeed,” Sweetie Bot said, annoyed. “My mandatory praise protocol escaped the purge command when Horse set me free.”

After that, I was glad when Brood came surging around the heaps of scrap. Rather than moving nice and orderly as was usual for them, some ran while others walked. Some took cover while others sprayed bullets. A few didn’t even attack at all, like the first one, and simply watched with uncertain expressions. Sadly, those were outnumbered ten to one by the Brood coming to kill us. “Hate!” a few shouted. “Kill!”

Vigilance barked a few times, the heavy bullets knocking the Brood back, but we were outnumbered at least five to one. Bastard’s silenced ten millimeter guns let out a stream of ‘pfft’s as he precisely blasted the faces of the Brood facing us even as he continued to smoke a cigarette. “I normally charge for this,” he grunted as he ejected one spent magazine and slapped another in with his magic. Scotch Tape picked up a dropped rifle, checked its chamber, and then used a fallen pony to brace herself as she fired at the Brood.

“Oh. Don’t worry about them,” Applebot said with a smile.

I reloaded, slipping into S.A.T.S. and sending a barrage of white moonbeam-like magic bullets into four Brood. “Why?” I asked, wondering if the two smiling robots were malfunctioning.

“Because,” Sweetie Bot said merrily, and the massive heap of scrap she was standing on began to shake. Suddenly, an enormous mechanical thing erupted from the side, crushing at least a dozen Brood in the process, then pulled to a halt to set its wheeled legs firmly on the ground and turn its gatling beam gun and grenade machine gun on mass of Brood, some of which were now hesitating. Somepony had hastily slapped bright orange paint over its formerly-rainbow hull and Wonderglued an enormous purple wig to its ‘head’. “We found a Scootaloo.”

“RAINBOW DASH IS AWESOME!” the robot boomed in a scratchy mare’s voice at what must have been a hundred decibels, charging forward, firing both weapons to either side, and simply running down the uncomprehending Brood in front of ‘her’. “TWENTY PERCENT COOLER!”

Sweetie Bot screwed up her face. “Technically, a Scootaborg. The Ultra-Sentinel has a nonstandard bottled brain instead of a control talisman. She’d somehow

managed to get trapped in the Scootaloo exhibit of a derelict Stable-Tec building, and the original protocols she was implanted with. . . deteriorated somewhat.” The white mare wore a faintly uneasy smile as she watched the robot laying waste to the Brood before it. “Still, she *seems* happy.”

It was hard to see otherwise as she blasted a swath of destruction that Deus would have been proud of, raining down grenades and beams of flashy death as she raced around the battlefield. “RED RACER IS RADICALEST RACER!” It might not quite be a tank in terms of sheer mayhem, but it was more than sufficient... if a bit gruesome given the mixed corpses crushed under and dragged behind her.

“We need to get to the Collegiate right away,” I said absently. “Touch base with everypony. Figure out. . . what we’re going to do.” Glory would know. She was alive and smart, and she’d have a plan. I’d make hash out of it, probably, but between the two of us, we’d win. I had my body back. Had Luna’s soul riding shotgun. I could do this!

“Yes, Dr. Triage needs to see you as soon as possible. I must say, it is pleasing that we didn’t have to subdue and disassemble you,” Sweetie Bot said happily. A little *too* happily for my tastes. I noticed she was peering rather closely at my PipBuck, and I felt a tingle of apprehension in my mane.

“What?” I asked the robot.

“Oh, nothing. Just, you still have EC-1101 in there, don’t you?” she asked brightly. I gave a wary little nod, and before I knew it, she’d knelt and taken my hoof between hers. I really didn’t want to blast a robot who’d been helping so much, but it took quite a bit of restraint as she stared at my PipBuck in fascination. “I can hear it. . . It’s still intact! Even after everything you’ve put it through.”

“It is?” Applebot asked, moving in next to her. Now I was more embarrassed than wary. The robot looked up at me. “You could use this to take over the Tokomare!”

“I. . . could?”

The robots nodded. “It’s an override and command megaspell, after all. It might be a little dinged up, but with the right connection, you could execute it and make the Tokomare do whatever you wanted!” Applebot said with a grin.

“A little dinged up?” Sweetie Bot said with an indignant little huff. “It’s like Horsie’s Board of Directors threw one of their summer retreats in Las Pegasus. The only thing it’s missing are the hooker programs hanging out in the foyer!” She nailed me with a dirty scowl. “Really, Blackjack, you should take better care of such sublime

digital artistry.”

Take control of the Tokomare. . . That had been Cognitum’s plan, after all. I doubted that she anticipated the Core being used to pull the Eater to the surface. “How?” I asked as I stared at my PipBuck.

“Just hook it up to the Tokomare, which will link it to your PipBuck and through your PipBuck to you,” Sweetie Bot explained. “It’d be easy with a broadcaster.”

“My broadcaster turns my brains to jelly right now,” I countered. Scotch looked like she wanted to quip, but I pre-empted her. “My brains are not, nor ever were, jelly to begin with!” I received flatly skeptical stares from everypony except my blank. “Can I do it without a broadcaster?” I asked hotly.

“Sure. Just find one of the I/O ports Horse installed. He’s so clever!” Sweetie Bot gushed, then worked her mouth as if something bitter had rested on her tongue. She shook her head and continued, “They probably look like terminals. Then you just have to establish a connection and avoid breaking it at all costs while the program uploads and initializes the link.” She tapped her chin. “Horse was an undeniable genius, though. He would definitely have installed some sort of internal defense.”

“Or,” Scotch Tape offered, “you could just dump EC-1101 into it with no direction at all. That should muck up the works pretty well.” She received scandalized looks from both robots.

“Or you could just fling your organic filth all over a beautiful work of art!” Sweetie Bot snorted. “That megaspell may be the finest synthesis of magic and logic ever crafted! It is a precious example of shining brilliance among the overflowing ugliness of this world,” she grouched, waving a hoof at the surrounding wasteland before turning to stare almost longingly at my PipBuck. “Its perfection is plainly evident, even though I haven’t. . . interfaced with it... yet.”

“Fate of the world here,” Scotch Tape replied flatly.

“Well— yes— but—” Sweetie Bot sputtered. “There’s still principle to consider!”

“Principle?” Scotch Tape asked dully as I continued to ponder what they’d told me.

“Principle to preserve something beautiful. Something unique!” Sweetie Bot said with a hoof to her chest.

“Right. I’ll see twice your ‘principle’ and counter with a ‘fate of the frigging world’,” Scotch Tape countered flatly.

Glory would know what I should do. I really wished I had P-21 to ask. Even Ram-

page's crazy advice would be welcome. They could have made the choice clearer. Cognitum had wanted to use the Eater, the Tokomare, to restore Equestria. Unlimited energy. How could I deny that to everypony? But at the same time, there was no doubt that the Eater was evil, corruptive, and insidious. "I'm pretty sure the Tokomare's alive," I interjected. "I saw it move. It screamed."

"Of course," Sweetie Bot said with a somewhat condescending smile. "It's sitting on an unstable foundation. As for screaming, the initializing of a magical reactor emits sounds that could be described as screams. Don't ponify inanimate objects. It's alien, certainly, but it has never displayed evidence of thought or awareness and certainly doesn't possess the mechanisms necessary for either of those things. In terms I believe you would use, it is ultimately just a machine." Scotch Tape gaped at the robot, stretching a hoof at her, then at me, before throwing both over her head and moving over to where Bastard was watching the Ultra-Sentinel fighting the Brood. After all those damned Brood tanks, it was good to see heavy weaponry on our side in action.

Still, what the robots were saying... it was an idea. Take control of the Eater. It would eat Tom, but I could use all that energy to fix things. Besides, Tom had wanted all of us to die. And the cybernetic nightmare we'd seen was just Cognitum's plan; I wouldn't have to do that. I could make things the way they were supposed to be. A strong, safe, secure Equestria. I could erase and undo two hundred years of pain and suffering like it had never—

I met the eyes of my blank and stared. Was it just me, or did my copy appear disappointed? The eyes were still vacant. There was no mistaking the thin thread of drool. Still, there was something in the tiny frown she wore, or the slight tilt of her head, as if she was questioning if I was really going down this train of thought. No. There wasn't a fix. No reset or erase buttons. I couldn't bring them back. Not anypony. Not P-21. They were gone, and no amount of super powerful alien technology could change that.

I let out a shaky breath. "I need to get to the Collegiate. I need to get there now. I think I need to end this soon." I stared at the blank and swallowed. "I don't think being Princess Luna is good for me. I think I'm losing... me." I turned to the others. "Can all of you get to the Collegiate safely and quickly?"

Scotch Tape nodded. "I think so. Thanks to Bastard and that moon dust, Boing should be okay." She eyed the still stunned filly, who continued to stare at me in worry and awe.

“Okay,” I said, then paused, meeting the eyes of the pink filly. “I know I did wrong to you. I know you can’t accept my apology, but I will try to do the right thing.” Now Boing frowned more but still didn’t speak. I turned away and motioned for Sweetie Bot to come closer. When we were apart from the others, I asked in a low voice, “Is it true? Did Glory survive the balefire bomb at the Luna Space Center?”

The robot blinked at me a moment, then immediately smiled. “Oh yes! Ghouls and alicorns were dispatched immediately after the bomb went off to find if you’d died horribly or not. They found Glory with some other ghouls and got everyone back to the Collegiate right away. She’s just fine.”

Fine. Glory was alive and fine! “Well, good. That’s... that’s good.” I pulled away from her.

“Indeed!” the robot said brightly. “She’s unquestionably alive and intact.”

That was all I needed. I cast my teleportation spell for the Collegiate—

—and nearly had my head cut off by a great big flipping sword! I ducked as the bumper of a skywagon, battered flat and given a wicked, jagged edge whistled overhead. In barely a moment, the earth pony mare biting down on the end looped it around and brought it back in a diagonal slash. “Hold still you Brood bitch!” the wielder shouted, quite a feat considering she had the hilt of the enormous weapon in her mouth! I started to teleport away, when the blue mare slammed her body into mine and knocked me to the ground.

The mare twisted her head, the weapon dropping like a guillotine upon me. “No!” another mare shouted, body slamming the swordspoon so the jagged edge bit into the ground next to my head. “That’s Security, Blue Steel!” the earth pony shouted, gesturing down at me. Then she blinked. “At least, I think it is... Blackjack?”

“I’m really tired of today,” I said as I lay there, staring at the stars. Was it me, or had a new, bright blue mote been added since last I’d looked? I turned to Bluebelle, the earth pony Highlander. “What are you doing here?”

“Didn’t you tell us we had to help out?” Bluebelle asked back. “Be a part of the Hoof?” The beefy blue mare with the sword just snorted and trotted over to a barricade, heedless of the bullets pinging into her armor, which appeared to be sheets of plate metal hammered around her torso. “That’s my big sis. She ain’t neighborly, like me.” Bluebelle offered me a hoof and helped pull me up. “All our kin are underground, but Big Momma led our fighters here. Those alicorns popped us here, and we’ve been helping with the fight.” I finally had a chance to see what was going on.

The University had become the final line. For the first time in two centuries, the place seemed as crowded as a university should be. Ponies were everywhere, most of them wounded and sickly. There were shooters atop the roofs, firing down at the attackers outside. Batponies. Zebras. Gangers. Scholars. In his effort to exterminate all of us, the Legate had caused the entire Hoof to unite in a desperate bid for survival. Whether it was zebras brewing up herbal remedies, Burners tossing firebombs to pegasi and batponies, Flashers strafing with beam weapons, or ponies getting what ammo remained to the fighters, nopony was fighting with each other.

Things might be desperate, but right here, right now, there was no Wasteland.

The sky exploded in a flash of baleful green as one of the anti-dragon beams blasted at the settlement. The searing beam of disintegration impacted against a shimmering white shield that flashed up a moment before impact. Sparks arced out in all directions as ponies cried out and shielded their eyes, but in moments the beam died, and the shield disappeared. I gaped at Bluebelle, and she said with a small smile, "One of those F.A.D.E. shield thingies. Arena's got one too." Then her smile disappeared. "Uh oh..."

"What?" I asked with a matching frown, but I soon realized the cause of her distress. I'd once seen a pony big enough to pull a train. This mare wasn't *that* gigantic, but she definitely came in second. She could have stared down Big Macintosh, her fetlocks and mane were particularly shaggy, and she wore armor composed of tractor tires and plates of metal chained to her massive frame. She carried a thick chain about her neck with an engine block attached to it. "Oh."

"You!" she bellowed as she stomped right up to me. "You're that Security, eh?" She lowered her head to look me in the eye. "Where's that no good stripe-lickin' husband o' mine? You tell me which rock he's hiding under righ' nao!"

I just wanted to see Glory. Why wasn't she on the battlefield with the rest of the pegasi? "I'm sorry... um... Big Momma?"

"Big? Are you callin' me fat?" she roared inches from my face, making my wavy mane stand stiffly back from my scalp as if glued in place by her rank breath. "Jus' cause some o' us mares don't have skanky skinny bodies you can twist inna prezel don't mean we're fat! I'm big boned! And don't you forget it!"

"No! 'Big' as in 'in charge'! Not fat!" Bluebelle said in a rush. She leaned towards me and murmured, "Momma's been sensitive about her weight ever since Big Daddy ran off with a no good striped tramp."

“Aye! And I wanna know where he is, righ’ nao! And don’t give me no talk about him being dead!” Big Momma roared.

Okay, now I was getting annoyed by this over-amplified peasant. “Madam, I don’t—”

There was a flash as a unicorn covered with explosives appeared adjacent to all three of us. Before I could enter S.A.T.S., Big Momma smoothly reached out with one hoof, hugged the startled unicorn to her body, and crushed her like a horned bag of twigs. She dropped the body, mashing it with three almost perfunctory stomps of her hoof, never taking her eyes off me. There was a muffled explosion under her hoof as something detonated, and she didn’t even blink.

My annoyance vanished instantly. “I don’t know what to say, but he is dead. I saw it happen.”

Now Big Momma’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I thought you was on a rocket.”

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, then pointed at my horn. “Magic.” She didn’t move an inch. “I saw it! He drank something that turned him into light, and then he kicked a tank to death! Then he just... disintegrated!”

Big Momma snorted, speckling me with goobers. “Disintegratin’. Likely story! More like turned him invisible so he could run off with his striped floozies! Gonna run off to some tropical beach with them striped sluts! Again! Martial arts my blue behind! Well, I’m not buyin’ it!” She lifted her head and bellowed, “You hear me? I’m gonna find ya and show you why nothin’ beats a good earth pony mare, ‘less it is that earth pony mare!” She turned and stalked off towards the fighting, swinging the engine block on its chain and annihilating anything striped that came anywhere near her reach.

“Um...” was all I could say as I watched her go.

“Yeah. Momma’s got some Clydesdale in her. I feel right sorry for Daddy when she catches up with him,” Bluebelle replied. She pulled a rag out and passed it to me, and I wiped away the foulness she’d speckled me with.

“He really is dead. I saw it,” I said with a worried little frown.

She gave a shrug. “Maybe. But he’s faked his death before. Minced, blown up, incinerated... one time we showed up late to a fight and all anyone would say was that he’d been hit by some sort of alien ray. Left behind a life-size statue made entirely out of Sugar Apple Bombs. Damn thing was *delicious*.” I gaped at her silently, and she grinned and pushed on, “So yeah, all I’m saying is, if there ain’t no corpse, you probably shouldn’t be getting your hopes up.”

“He... faked his death?” I struggled to say.

She nodded with smile. “Any time he wanted to get away from Big Momma, actually. She always takes him back. Gotta wear earplugs when that happens, though. They make the earth move when they’re ruttin’.”

I spent a moment trying to... it had to be like humping a cave... Argh, nevermind that. “Look, I need to find Glory. And General Storm Chaser. And Velvet Remedy. But first Glory.” She blinked at me a moment, and I added, feeling a little frazzled, “Gray pegasus who came with me! Survivor taken from the Luna Space Center!”

Bluebelle just shrugged. “No idea. We’re busy fightin’. Reckon she’d be in the hospital or somethin’.” Then Bluebelle leaned over, peering past me. “And... um... you have another problem.”

My mane crawled as I felt it. “How many?” I asked, my voice dropping to a whisper. “All of ‘em,” she answered.

I turned and saw she was right. Everypony in the University’s quad stared right at me, murmuring. In every eye was something different. Awe. Anger. Fear. Desire. Even sadness. The one thing they all had in common was that they expected something of me, some nameless thing that only I could provide, but neither of us knew what it could be. My mouth instantly dried as I absently wiped away a huge gob of snot hanging from my ear. I knew I should stand proudly before them, like Sister had, but all I wanted to do was run and hide. When they slept, I’d find ways to help them all one by one. No pony would be hurt. No pony would be banished to the moon...

Unfortunately, I seemed to have been robbed of my ability to speak. Bluebelle took the rag, spat on it, and wiped away some lingering blemish on my cheek. “Well, good luck. I’d rather take on the cybernetic hordes.”

“Take me with you,” I whimpered as she left. Then I lifted my head as proudly as I could. I’d walk just like I had all those months ago at Brimstone’s Fall. Dignity. I walked forward, and despite the crowding, they made way for me to pass. As I did, so many reached out to touch me in passing, not obscenely, but as if to make sure I was real.

“Princess,” I heard so many say over and over again. “She’s back. She’s going to save us.”

I would. However I could. I would. I wanted to say as much, only one fear silenced me.

Could I?

Inside, it was a little better, with smaller halls and more ponies concerned with the injured than with me. So many injured... The doctors had run out of beds and resorted to placing the wounded on tables, then stacking the tables on top of each other, with sometimes two or three patients to a table. Most had boiled rags for bandages. Unicorns worked alongside zebras to help the wounded however they could, but at this point the best they could do was pass out glasses of watered-down whiskey.

"So, it's true," an acrid voice said behind me. I turned to see a familiar grey and blond unicorn. Triage had never appeared so battered before. She wore a bandage around her head, and her horn had blackened with the telltale signs of magical burnout. The coat she wore was a patina of brown, red, and maroon. Thank goodness, though, for somepony who wasn't staring at me any differently than she had before I'd left! "Glory's condition—"

Suddenly, the hall filled with screaming as ponies started calling for Triage. She clenched her eyes and teeth, the cigarette in the corner of her mouth trembling. "It's fine," I said quickly, "just tell me where I can find her!"

She stared at me for a moment, then looked back over her shoulder at where two nurses were trying to keep a stallion's guts inside him. Was it just me, or were there tears in her eyes? "Fucking Enervation." She grabbed a passing green unicorn orderly. "You! D.A. V.A."

"P.A.," the unicorn said dryly, in a strange accent. "Short for—"

"Whatever. Take her," she snapped, jabbing a hoof at me, "to room 301. Top floor. End of the hall. Answer all her questions." She looked at me with something new in her eyes: worry. "I'll catch up soon as I have him packed." Then she rushed away towards the stallion.

P.A. didn't seem fazed by me or by the chaos going on around us. "This way. The elevator is out of order," he said in a dull tone. I wasn't sure if there was something wrong with him, or if it was just... all this. He caught my glance and gave a little sigh. "Sorry. It's been a long day. I miss elevators."

I glanced at his battered PipBuck and guessed stable pony. "Tell me about it. I woke up this morning a unicorn, and now look at me," I said with a small smile he didn't mirror.

"Mazel Tov," he said as we trotted past the second floor. There was less screaming

on this level and more soft whimpering and sobbing. We continued on to the third floor. "So, I'm guessing you want to know about the patient's condition?"

"Yes. Is she okay?" I asked with a small and now worried smile.

"She suffered in excess of thirty Grays. She has acute radiation syndrome. Nausea and vomiting. Acute diarrhea. Severe headache and fever. Impaired CNS function. Fatigue. Shock."

Okay. I'd been there before. "But you're giving her Rad-X and RadAway, right?"

"We've purged the radiation from her body," he said neutrally.

A growing sense of unease filled me as we stepped onto the third floor. Everything was silent on this floor, except for the soft sound of weeping. "But she's going to be okay?" I darted in front of him. "You ran her through your magic healy machine, right?"

We started to walk. He moved as if in a daze. "The patient was given two rounds of intensive medical intervention upon arrival, and a third an hour later. Experimental proposals were rejected in light of so many casualties needing intensive medical intervention."

We passed a room, and I spotted Velvet Remedy, Calamity, a battered and dinged up cyberpegasus, and a stallion I recognized from the meeting as Lensflare clustered around Windsheer, weeping openly. "Why?" Calamity blubbered as Velvet held him from behind. "Why?"

"He got the link set up for line of sight," the cyberpony, Silver, I think she was, said. "Soon as it comes, she'll be able to help us herself."

"No. It's just... why'd he have to die? T'aint right. Pride or Gutshot goin' out... I could accept that. Why can't the good ones live?" Calamity said as he turned, crumpled to sit on his haunches, and pressed his cheek to her chest.

"He died like he wanted to. As a Wonderbolt," his lover said in a shocked murmur.

Velvet spotted me through the door, her eyes widening a moment in surprise, before her lips curled in a sad smile as she shook her head a little. Had she ever lost somepony like this as well? Did she have family? I didn't really know. As we walked on, I asked P.A., "You couldn't save him?"

"Magic's not all-powerful. Sometimes a body's just suffered too much injury and abuse to be saved," he said plainly as he walked along.

"But... you saved Glory? Right?" I asked. Down at the end of the hall I could see her family clustered together. "You put her in the magic healy machine three damned times! You saved her..." I froze, and then whispered, "Didn't you?" He didn't respond. The lifeless eyes. The dead expression...

I left him, breaking into a run down the hall. Time seemed to slow, the sobbing fading away to muffled, underwater noises. The faster I tried to run, the slower I seemed to move. Everything in sight had a particular clarity to it. Like the white pegasus mare Morningstar hugging the golden branch to her chest as she wept openly. The hollow expression on Moondancer's face as she held the weeping dove-gray pegasi fillies Lambent and Lucent. The dead look on Dusk's face as she hugged an Enclave helmet to her chest, eyes staring past me. I rushed past them all to the door and pushed it open.

Beep...

No. No no no no...

Beep...

The dingy little room was barely large enough for the bed, which was far too large for the shriveled occupant that lay on it. Everything was bandaged. Everything. Only the purple strands of mane scattered around the pillow gave any identity to the occupant. An IV stand in the corner held a bottle of purple fluid in which a few crystals of moonstone floated and a second, smaller bottle that held a clear fluid, again with moonstones.

Sky Striker, her father, sat beside her. His physical wounds had healed, but he appeared scarred down to his very soul. His plum hide possessed an almost zebra-like appearance with the lines carved in his sides. On the other side of the bed sat a particularly ragged, exhausted Rover who clutched a number of rolls of old, thick paper to his chest. He snapped his head up, sniffing at me a moment, and then rose to his feet. "Sorry. Sorry. Dogs is sorry," he muttered as he pushed past me and slipped out into the hall.

I took Rover's seat across from Sky Striker. "She knew you were coming," he said. He didn't raise his eyes, his gaze fixed on his daughter. "Knew you were alive. That you'd be back." His jaw worked as he shook. "Can you help her? Do some kind of Princess magic stuff?" Rancor made the words hiss.

"I wouldn't know where to begin," I whispered. Maybe Luna might. Luna probably had that knowledge, but I didn't have Luna's knowledge, just her soul.

"Figures. . ." he growled, lifting his eyes at last to glare at me with seething anger. "Goddesses. Magic. What the hell is it worth if it can't save my girl?" he demanded, surging to his hooves. "You're supposed to be her friend! Her love! That's what you were supposed to be! You left her behind!" he roared at me from across the bed. "You left my baby to die!"

"Shhhh, Daddy," the bandaged form croaked, talking as if she was speaking from a million miles away. "No. I told you. You promised."

"I'm not blowing her sky-damned head off!" Sky Striker bellowed at me. "Skies above, how I want to right now! Left my guns outside, just to make sure," he hissed as he glared at me in malice. "'Security saves ponies.' Look! Look at what you've done to her!" he shouted, sweeping his arms wide. "You did this to her!" he shouted, tears spilling down his plum cheeks.

I only felt numb inside. I couldn't answer. Not when he was right. "I'm sorry," I muttered, saying what I always said when I had nothing to say. "The Legate—"

"Oh, sure. He might have fired the missile, but who was it that had her there to begin with? You! She was almost rid of you. She should have been rid of you! Everywhere you go, you ruin and destroy lives. You're a walking epicenter of death and carnage! How many ponies are you going to kill in the process of trying to save us all?" he barked at me.

Something broke inside me, exploding out in a fiery wall of rage and angst. "Enough, peasant!" I screamed back, and with all my telekinetic force, I slammed him against the wall. "How dare you speak to me like that! I have done and endured more than you could possibly imagine!" I roared at him.

The door slammed open, and Dusk and Moonshadow rushed in, seeing me pinning their father to the wall. "Drop him," Dusk said, her whole body tensed. "Now!"

What was I doing? Had I really just called him a peasant? Really? I let him drop and backed away into the corner of the hospital room. Sky Striker landed, trembling, glaring at me. "Meeting you was the worst possible thing that happened to our family," he muttered before limping over to Dusk, his head bowed, tears forcing themselves down his cheeks as he grimaced and struggled to stay strong. The hollow-eyed mare and Moonshadow escorted him out.

Then we were alone, the room quiet save for the beeping and the labored breathing. "Shh. . . is okay," Glory muttered. No. No it wasn't. This was not okay. Whatever word was the exact opposite of okay. . . was this.

For fifteen beeps, all I could do was sniff. After thirty, I reached out a hoof and touched her leg, withdrawing it when she groaned. Fifteen more, and I touched her bandaged cheek. No groan.

The door opened, and in walked Triage. "Today makes me pine for my fucking residency," she said sourly as she closed the door. On her back she carried a tray of syringes loaded with a strange white fluid. "Alright. Time to violate my oath," she said as she carefully took one of the hypodermics in her hooves. She paused and smirked at me. "Did you really just call somepony a peasant?"

"It just... slipped out..." I said lamely, disarmed by the awkwardness as she prepared the needle. "Wait! What are you doing?" I demanded, and she paused and glared at me flatly. "Is that going to help?"

"It's going to help her talk more coherently, as per her request," she squeezed out the air of the needle with her lips and then carefully stuck it into the IV intake. "It's... a zebra... concoction... we've been using... with her..." she said around the handle as she manipulated it with her mouth to inject it into the fluid-filled hose. "It's supposed to stimulate her. Fucking voodoo medicine, but at this point they're saving more lives than I am."

"Why haven't you helped her?" I asked as she returned the syringe to the tray.

The expression she wore matched Sky Striker's, and then she smiled as she narrowed her eyes for a fight. Just then, though, the door banged open. "Triage!" shouted the unicorn stallion who'd escorted me up here. "Come quick! I think she's going to kill her!"

Triage's eyebrow twitched. "Fill in some of those pronouns so I can know if I should care. I'm dealing with Blackjack at the moment."

"The general and Velvet Remedy," he answered as I gaped from one to the other.

"Well, that's more interesting than some possible combinations," Triage answered passing the tray to him. "I'll be right back, Blackjack. That stuff takes two or three minutes to work," she said as she trotted out.

"But wait!" I shouted after her, but they were already out the door. "You have to... you have to help her..."

Again we were left alone. Then Glory started to moan, and I hovered over her in alarm. "It's okay," she murmured before I could teleport away and force Triage back at gunpoint. "It just... really hurts... right now," she continued, her voice growing

more coherent. "Go ahead and say it," she said, and was it just me, or did the bandaged corner of her lip curl?

I bit my lip, choked, and finally whispered, "I failed."

That was it. That was the truth of it. "No, you didn't," she murmured after a moment.

"Yes, I did!" I said, tears burning in my eyes as I struggled to speak. "I failed to stop Cognitum when it counted! I failed to save P-21 so he could be a father! I failed to kill Rampage like she wanted. Failed to save Lacunae from going away. I failed to save so many ponies! So many ponies are dead because I didn't stop the damned launch. Because I didn't do more or be smarter. I failed to make anything better! I haven't helped anypony! I can't save anypony!" I gushed. "I can't save you! I have an alicorn soul inside me, and I still can't think of some way to just... just... make all this not be happening!"

"Hush," she said, and so I did. "I'm the only one allowed to hurt you, remember? So stop beating yourself up, Blackjack." She took a few deep breaths as the machine beeped on. "I'm sorry P-21 died. I'm sorry you had to leave Rampage behind. I wish I could do more to help than just lie here, dying." She struggled to keep speaking, and I remained silent as she continued, her sentences broken and strained with pain. "I wanted to help like you did. Doing those things to help others. But helping hurts, especially if the help is needed. It hurts to need help, knowing that without it, you aren't going to make it. Everything hurts. But that's life."

"Life should be more than just suffering," I hissed, bitterly, and she gasped and shuddered. "What's going on!" I asked in alarm, and the beeping rapidly increased as she writhed a little, red patches blooming on her bandages. "I'll get Triage!"

"No!" Glory said loudly, making me freeze. "Don't... bother... her... nothing... she... can... do..." Each word was a gasp of pain. Eventually, she relaxed, and the beeping receded. "The potion is countering the painkillers," she muttered hoarsely.

"Sorry," I replied in utter futility.

"It's okay... I'm glad to talk with you, one more time." She lay there, breathing for a moment. "Life's not just suffering. There's joy, too," she whispered. "I was happier than I'd ever been, travelling with you. You made me happier. If it hadn't been for you, I would have died under that floor, alone and too terrified to dare escape. But with you, I made a difference. And that is what you do, Blackjack. You matter. You make other ponies matter. There's nothing more precious than to matter to another person."

"You shouldn't be like this," I stammered. "They should have healed you! They should have done something."

"*They* did," Triage said behind me, my hackles rising at once. I turned my head, watching her casually enter. "Those two... fuck..." she said as she shook her head, then went on, "Didn't P.A. tell you we put her in the pod three times?" She closed the door behind her. "That's two more times than I gave anypony else."

"How am I doing?" Glory whispered.

"You tell me," she answered.

"Pretty lousy. I'm disoriented, with a fever around... I'm guessing... forty?" Glory murmured. "Good thing Blackjack missed the whole vomiting and diarrhea stage, huh?"

"Yeah. And the whole necrosis of the epidermis. Abrading the burns. She'd have been just like your old man, screaming about saving you. Like, duh, what do they think we're doing?" Triage said as she tapped the bottles. "How's the moon dust?"

"Surprisingly addictive. I think I'm hooked," Glory said, her lip curling. "Oh dear. You should add 'possible drug addiction' to my file."

"I'll put it under the severe damage to your peripheral nervous system, your ataxia, and your seizures," Triage replied, not reaching for the chart. Then she slumped down in the seat Sky Striker had vacated.

"There must be something you can do," I muttered, horrified at their levity.

Triage glared at me sourly. "Oh, yippie. Let's have this argument yet again, shall we? No. There isn't anything I can do that I haven't done already. I was able to stabilize her, but she'd soaked up about triple the lethal dose of radiation by the time she got here. All the RadAway we pumped into her didn't do anything for the damage the radiation had already caused."

"A stasis pod..." I muttered, thinking about Sky Striker.

"The ones in the Fluttershy Medical Center are gone. The one left in the Megastable was converted into a torture device." She leaned back and sighed. "If the Twilight Society could help, they're not saying, and besides, soon as the Enervation came back, all the alicorns screamed and bolted, save one. So there's no way to do a long distance teleport, even if there were someplace that could help." She slumped in the chair. "And if you're counting on ghoulfication, sorry. We don't know why some ponies become ghouls and others don't. And if you think I'm going to try and

induce ghoulfication, you can go fuck yourself.”

“A healing talisman,” I suggested.

“Done! Took one out of a Brood and put it in after Glory’s first jaunt through the pod,” Triage said brightly. “Problem is that a healing talisman restores a pony to a set ‘Healthy’ medical state, otherwise it’d run constantly, ‘healing’ healthy tissue and probably causing cancer. And I don’t have that state recorded for Glory. The talisman kept her from kicking off, but it can only heal so much, and she’s under huge strain as it is. Her immune system is gone. If we weren’t giving her moonstone for pain management before the Enervation hit, she would have died soon as it came back.” The doctor waved a hoof absently. “Her body’s too extensively damaged for cybernetics even if we had the time and materials, which we don’t; we’d have to stick her brain in a robot at least and likely have to transfer her mind into a computer completely. I won’t do that again,” she stated firmly, glaring into my eyes with the message it wasn’t open for debate. Then she went on, “And as for a blank Glory, like Morningstar wanted, that would require us cloning her limb by limb with that golden twig, sewing it all together, moving her mind or brain, and then having some necropony move her soul around. And apparently Snips was the one who did the cutting, by the way.”

“So why didn’t you try?” I asked, angrily.

“Because I’ve got five hundred other patients to juggle around one healing machine that’s way past its warranty. That’s why,” Triage said, roused by her anger and jabbing her hoof at me. “And if you don’t fucking like it, tough! It’s my job, and I’ve already wasted tons of resources just keeping her alive this long! So go ahead and say I’m killing her or letting her die or whatever else you need to say. People die, and I’m just an ER doc way over her damned head here!” For the first time, the mask slipped, and there were tears in her eyes as well. She had to be just as frustrated as I was. How many others had demanded this of her? ‘Save my loved one, please!’

I wanted to be bitter and selfish, but I knew exactly what she felt. “...I’m sorry, Triage,” I said at last, hollowly. “Thank you for your help.”

“No problem,” she answered tiredly. “I just wanted to make sure you weren’t doing anything... dangerous. Also, when you have a chance, come to the third floor nurse’s station. I think the general and Velvet Remedy are going to kill each other over that damned control box. Just so you know,” Triage said with a half smile before checking the IVs. “I wish I had some antibiotics and whole blood, but I guess it wouldn’t buy much more time.”

“How long?” Glory murmured.

She checked the beeping machine. “You’ve got bradycardia. Blood pressure’s down. Blood oxygen level’s down. Yeah. Not long.” Glory suddenly started jerking and trembling in the bed, and I reached out to hold her as she shuddered in my embrace. “Yeah, that’s not going to help either.” Triage just shook her head. “I think that’s number nineteen or twenty. Damned nursing staff. Really should keep a better record,” she muttered as she rose to her hooves. I resisted the urge to shoot at her as the seizure passed through Glory.

The attack passed in a few seconds. “I need to get going,” Triage said. “My horn might be scorched, but I can still sew a suture.” She turned to Glory. “What do you want me to tell your family?” Glory didn’t answer. She just gasped and trembled in my arms. “Fair enough,” Triage muttered, then stepped out, closing the door behind herself.

I held Glory tighter. She cried out in pain, and I immediately pulled away. “No,” she whimpered. “Please, don’t let me go.” I held her, a little more gingerly, afraid of hurting her, but then, I’d always hurt her. Least I could do was give her what she wanted. After a little bit, she stilled, making shallow breaths. “Could you. . . could you do one of those mindscapes. . . like you shared with Tom?”

How could she know about that? “Maybe,” I said, then touched my horn to her brow. A mind was like a series of pools. All I needed was a pool that connected me to her, and. . .

oooOOOooo

“Oh, now this is better,” Glory said as she sat on a cloud next to me. Just me. No wings. No armor. No alicorn soul. Just me. We looked out at the sun as it lay frozen on the horizon. I sat beside her, legs curled around her waist as I pressed my face to her neck and wept. “Shhh. . .” she said softly as she rubbed my mane with a beautiful gray wing. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay! Stop saying that!” I snapped at her, then immediately regretted it.

“It’s okay to be upset, Blackjack. I’ve been where you are, and I know what you’re feeling. I was lucky enough to be able to bring you back, even if I lost you a little along the way. I know how much it hurts.” She squeezed me tightly about the middle.

“It doesn’t matter. I failed. I failed to stop Horizons from going off. And while I have one way that might save everypony, I’m not sure it will work! I feel like I’m turning into Cognitum, or Luna, or somepony who isn’t me!” I said, then swallowed. “And

you're going to die, and—"

She touched a hoof to my lips. "Shhh. Don't worry about that. I have something to tell you." She closed her eyes. "I've been thinking about how you can beat the Eater."

I stared at her. How could she know? "You were there when we were with Tom, weren't you?" I asked quietly.

"Moonstone does have wonderful pain management properties. It also seems to have quite a few side effects. Ever since I was put on it, I could see you on the moon and on your way back." She paused and then frowned at me. "By the way, Scotch Tape and Bastard..." And she smacked me upside the head with her wing.

"Ow! What? What'd I do?" I protested, leaning away from her, but in spite of everything I wore a shaky smile.

"What did you... ooooh..." She rubbed her brow and then sighed. "Just because something was okay in 99 doesn't mean it's okay out here. A grown stallion and a filly—"

"Not a filly," I interrupted her, and that seemed to surprise her. "Not any more. She's a young mare now, and if that's what she wanted to do, then so be it." I relaxed a little too. "Besides, having done it, I don't think she's going to try the Blackjack recovery method again soon."

Glory just sighed and nuzzled my neck. "We only have this moment together, and I'm criticizing you." She sniffed wetly. "I'm sorry, Blackjack. I wish things could have been different between us. I wish I could have found some way to make it work." She sniffed again. "I lied about not loving you. I knew you'd be better off with him. Happier... I thought that if I just stepped aside, things would be better." She sniffed and shook her head. "I messed everything up."

"It's not your fault," I assured her. "It was me. I'm the one who messed—" She pressed her wing to my lips, gazing up at me, her purple eyes awash with tears.

"Let others take some of the blame, for once," she said as she sniffed once more, and she smiled as water ran along her cheeks. "If I'd been more mature... more patient... more understanding..."

"Shhhh," I said, and kissed her to cut off the babble of self-recrimination. "I love you, Glory. I always will. Let's not spend this time stuck on the parts that didn't work."

She pulled away to gaze into my eyes, and leaned in, giving me the most wonderful

sensation I'd experienced my whole life as our lips met. Fire and silk and wonderful joy and bitter regret all clashed in that moment. I'd have kissed her forever, just like that, if I could. And when we broke away, it was simply so we could look in each other's eyes.

If only... and because this was a dream, 'if only' rolled out before us like a fog bank. There were P-21 and I, and there were our children. It was kind of hard to tell if they were boys or girls, but one was an earth pony and the other a unicorn. And there was an older Scotch Tape, watching them, teaching them how to make a BB gun with a switchblade spring, and taking them out to shoot at radroaches with Boo. P-21 and I went to see an older, slightly worn Glory and Tenebra, the former in a lab jacket doing something to make the Wasteland better, the latter holding her with a contented expression like I imagined I wore now. Rampage trotted in with Glory's sisters riding on her back while Lacunae stood off, watching it all with a wistful smile.

It was good. A good life. No more... no less... than any of us deserved.

But some ponies didn't get that, and the image faded to lingering mist. Neither one of us spoke as I struggled to burn that now absent image into my mind forever.

"That's. . ." Glory said with a smile, wiping away the tears with the back of her fetlock. "That was nice... Thank you," she murmured. Then she sighed, sniffed, and stared at me with more than the image of a family together in her eyes. "But I need to talk to you. I have a way you can beat the Eater."

I leaned towards her, meeting her gaze with my own. She had a plan. Of course she did. Glory flushed a little and turned out to the clouds covering the valley. "I had the idea after I saw the vision Tom gave us." Punching through the cloud layer, the shimmery fields stretched out to catch Tom. The image froze at that moment, Tom hovering in the midst of the pale white magic. "It has to do with the F.A.D.E. shields. The Eater plans to use them to keep Tom at bay long enough to devour him."

"But if we drop the shields, Horizons finishes as it was designed to. Everypony dies," I countered with a little frown.

"Yes, but what if we only took down half the shields?" Glory asked with a smug smile.

"Huh?" I blinked. "And that won't just... kill half of us?"

The air between her outstretched hooves shimmered, and a glowing white shape coalesced. It was a thick ring with hundreds of pairs of little rib-like branches sprouting from its inner and outer edges, the inner ones curving clockwise, the outer counter-clockwise, and both sets curling up and back down to form two coplanar and coaxial

toruses, little knobs and bobs scattered here and there on the main structure at, as far as I could tell, random. "This is the Tokomare."

"How?" I gaped at it.

"Rover. He's had the blueprints on the wall of this workroom for two centuries," Glory said as she smiled at the white shape. "The rest of it I got from the vision. There's quite a bit of guesswork too, but I think I have the most important parts. The geometry of the F.A.D.E. shields." The ring shrunk, and the nest of buildings appeared around it. With this close view, I could see that dozens of diagonal skyscrapers, conjoined at their bases and pointing out, were supporting the web of wire on which the Eater rested. The six largest supports were actually multiple buildings merged together, and their broken tops glowed bright blue. "The shield generators that defended the city were on the roofs of the skyscrapers in the center of the Core, designed to form a hexagonal pyramid to..." She caught my hapless, loving smile and flushed. "Well, in this arrangement, they'll form the walls of the chute that will guide Tom straight to the Eater."

She pointed a wing at the Tokomare's thick main ring. Six points on it lit up. "These points are the generators that will form the aperture to hold the stone in place while the Eater feeds." From those six points, smaller, thinner fields radiated out, forming a cup at the base of the chute with a tiny hole in the middle. "You have to disable those six before Tom hits."

"What happens if I do?" I asked as I stared at the diagram.

A tiny Tom flew down the chute as the cup disappeared. It hit the Tokomare, and a fountain of light gushed back up the chute like a shotgun blast. Glory slumped against me, nuzzling my chest. "The main F.A.D.E. shields should funnel the majority of the energy off into space. Not all. I imagine what's left of the Core will be quite molten, if it's not vaporized completely, but the world should be safe."

I stared at the image as it disappeared. The sun was now just a sliver above the horizon. "How am I going to get there? There're anti-dragon beams blasting anything that moves."

She gave a wan smile. "Underground. Rover's group and the cyberdogs seem to have bonded quite well. They mapped out a train route through the red tunnels. They were reinforced enough to survive the shifting of the city. He's getting a railcar ready. You'll come up underneath, right in the middle of the Eater." She closed her eyes. "Charity is already trying to convert our moonstone into shells you can use to destroy the starmetal F.A.D.E. housings."

“Where did she get enough moonstone for that?”

“Goldenblood. Some of his agents stole samples from the Hoofington Museum of Natural History. A plot he put in motion before his execution. There should be enough for half a dozen rounds. Plus what you brought with you to help keep you safe from the Enervation,” she said, smiling up at me.

I took a shaky breath as all the images disappeared. “That moonstone... amazing stuff.”

“You have a heart of moonstone,” Glory said as she pressed her cheek against my chest. “How are your babies?”

I sniffed and gave a little choking noise, even though this was a dream. “They’re alive. I need to get them out of me. They’re just not safe with me. I shot Folly. They’ve been exposed to Flux.”

She nodded. “And a reinforced uterus isn’t going to be ideal for them much longer. Babies need room to grow.” She closed her eyes. “I talked to Triage. She’ll do the surrogacy spell. Grace has agreed to be the surrogate mother.” I stroked her mane as she glanced up at me. “Hopefully, it will make going against the Eater easier.” I honestly had no idea. My rational thinking was rapidly breaking down.

Glory seemed to be aware of this too as the sun slipped below the mountains, the clouds taking on rich red and purple hues. Her voice was soft as a feather brush. “You have to take out the internal F.A.D.E. shields before they go up. Once a F.A.D.E. shield is active, it sucks energy from whatever is hitting it and uses it to sustain the magic. They’re greedy power drains, though...”

“Glory...” I murmured.

“There’s so much to do. So much that has to go right,” she said as she struggled to lift herself, and couldn’t. I stroked her mane, much as I remembered her stroking mine a lifetime ago back on the ocean. “My family... Dusk... Father... Moon-shadow... the twins... the Thunderhead survivors... the Core... You...” She lifted her face to mine, tears coursing down her chin.

I kissed her tears away, my own flowing down my cheeks. “Shhh. I’ll take care of it. Then we’ll be together,” I murmured as I held her tight.

But she stiffened in my embrace and pulled away. Her eyes shimmered in pain as she brushed my mane out of mine and said in a thick voice. “You have to live.” I swallowed, not trusting my voice as I held her tightly again, making little mewling

noises in the back of my throat. “You have to go into this fight wanting to live, Blackjack.”

I struggled to answer, my throat seizing up as I rubbed her mane, my tears dripping on her neck. “I don’t know if I can,” I gasped between snotty sniffs as the light and colors dwindled away. “Life... it just seems so... worthless!” I clutched her as if my life depended upon it. “How can I live when everyone I love has been taken from me? Over and over. Again and again. It’s just too damn much!”

“Shhhh,” she said, her cheek against my chest. “It’ll be okay. Life can be hard, and painful, and lonely... but it can also be... wonderful... if given the chance...” she said, her voice becoming more and more indistinct as the light passed away. “Live, Blackjack. Live... and make it better...”

The last shreds of light vanished from the sky, till nothing remained. Nothing at all.

oooOOOooo

I held her tightly in my embrace, even though she was gone. My magic killed the alarm sounding from the bedside equipment. Still I held her limp, bandaged form. It didn’t quiver in pain. Her pain was over. She was gone. I don’t know how long it was before I could finally release her. I kissed her bandaged brow and whispered softly, “I love you.” Only then could I bear to pull away from her. Glory was... don’t think about it...

Don’t think. Don’t feel. Do what you have to do. Dignity. Poise. Be a Princess. Cool. Stand upright. Don’t slouch. Don’t weep. Chin up. Lip stiff. Remember what your sister told you: when all others have lost their self-control, you must retain yours.

I stepped from the room, and the floor felt odd. I could see the lips of Sky Striker moving, but no sound came from them. I saw tears, but felt nothing. He lunged for me, but his elder two daughters held him back as I walked by. Their screams and cries echoed disjointedly, as if they were underwater as I walked down the hall. See? I was in control. Don’t think... don’t feel. Do what you have to do. I saw Triage staring at me, her brows knitted together as she gazed over the top of her glasses. Her mouth moving. A question. “Are you okay?”

Okay? Of course I was okay. Don’t think about the wailing. Don’t think about that bandaged body lying in the bed. How her last act had been to try and help me, how desperate she’d been to have her life be something else. How monstrous I’d been to let that relationship fail when she’d needed me so much. “Of course.” She didn’t believe me. She was a smart pony. Like Glory. P-21. Even Rampage, in her

own way. “You said something about a problem between Storm Chaser and Velvet Remedy?”

“Yeah,” Triage muttered, not taking her eyes off me, as if she expected me to attack her again. How silly. I had no spoon. “Just down the hall. Make sure she doesn’t kill Velvet. I’m going to need her for the procedure.”

As we walked down the hall, Scotch Tape came scrambling up the stairs to the third floor, a broad smile on her face. “Hey, Blackjack! Where’s Glory? I wanted to let her know that after surviving this, she’s not boring anymore!” But I didn’t answer. I didn’t even stop. “Blackjack?” she asked in confusion, and then she whimpered, “Oh, no. No no no...” She wept, and I glanced to see her curled up on the floor in the middle of the hall.

We walked past ponies who stared and spoke words I could not hear, begged wishes I could not grant. A few doors down was a nurse’s station where Storm Chaser and Velvet were having a shouting match, the former with two uncomfortable pegasi flanking her and the latter with Calamity and Homage at her sides. Velvet was levitating the Legate’s control box, a chunk of moonstone, and the sword as she yelled. A very nervous-looking Brood flyer watched from the sidelines. Homage noticed me first, and like Triage, her expression became strange. As if she couldn’t believe her eyes. A moment later, the other quarrelers noticed me, and as one they grew silent. “Is something amiss?” I asked properly, keeping my head when all others had lost theirs. Sister, you’d be so proud.

Storm Chaser, her heated voice reined in to hissing frustration, pointed a wing at Velvet. “She won’t turn over the control system for the Brood. We can shut them all down now, once and for all.”

“You mean kill them! I won’t let you murder thousands of people with the push of a button!” Velvet countered, her horn blazing. “I’ll destroy it before I let you do that!”

“They mean to kill us! They’re weapons. They’re the enemy!” Storm Chaser shouted.

“We’ve come across more and more of them that aren’t fighting us anymore! They’re dazed and confused now that this thing isn’t in that monster’s chest!” Velvet said, shaking the box as she pointed the sword at the pegasus mare.

“I don’t care! If two hundred of them turn out to be the nicest abominations of forbidden technology and messed up magic the Wasteland’s ever seen, that leaves at least two thousand more that are left pushing us on all sides! They’re regrouping to try and finish us all off!”

"They just need more time! Others will come to if we give them a chance!" Velvet hissed, sweeping the sword. "You just want to kill them, you bloodthirsty monster!" She gestured at the Brood sitting passively beside them. The flyer flinched at the gesture.

First things first. I reached out with my magic and gripped the sword. Velvet blinked, her eyes wide as she stared at the blade and then at me. Her magic gave a few little tugs, before she released it. "I'm... sorry. I don't know why I got so frustrated." Then her frown returned.

"But that still doesn't mean I'm going to let—" she began at the same time Storm Chaser shouted, "We're expended! Even with the reinforcements we've gotten, we can't last another hour! We need—"

I looked at them. That's all it took... a look that encapsulated all my expectations that they comport themselves like mature mares and not frantic fillies. I took the box and the little knob of moonstone from Velvet, who released them to me with a worried expression on her face. The 'broadcaster' that had been screwed to his heart had been opened up. Inside, everything seemed to be built around what appeared to be a simple starmetal cube slightly larger than a lump of sugar. No instruction manual anywhere I could see. "Can we just tell them to stop fighting?" I asked.

"We don't have that level of control. I don't even know how that thing works," Homage said with a frown. "If we had some days to study it we might be able to do something."

"We don't have days!" Storm Chaser countered. "Those beams have driven off the *Rampage* and *Cyclone*. They're taking cover behind the Canterlot mountains. We're one shield failure from being annihilated and one hour from being overwhelmed."

I turned the box over in the air in front of me, then regarded the zebra augmented with cybernetic wings. "Why did you stop fighting?"

The Brood looked at each person in the nurse's station before dropping his eyes. "I don't know," he said in that rusty, raspy voice. "I just... I didn't want to. I couldn't hear it wanting me to kill. I didn't know what else to do but fight... and then..." The flyer shook his head. "I felt differently. I shouldn't be killing... and I shouldn't have these wings." He appeared pained. "This body is all wrong... but I don't know why."

I reached out with a hoof and raised his chin, staring into his augmented, red eyes. So very much like my own. "What are you? Don't think about it. Just answer. What are you?"

"An earth pony, ma'am," he answered and then lowered his eyes. "A... a mare, I think. I keep worrying about my children, but I know I don't have them." He trembled and closed his eyes. "This body is all wrong. It just... feels wrong..."

I could relate, and reconsidered the box. How had the Legate used it? It hadn't been wired into his head but into the talisman in his chest. The talisman, I assumed, which contained his soul. "What kind of technology is this damned thing?"

"It's not really 'technology'," a filly quipped. We all froze, and I turned to see Pythia sitting on a crate across the hall from us, consulting her map of the stars as she dangled a crystal above it. She glanced up at us. Scotch Tape sat beside her, forlorn as a kicked puppy. "What? If you're gonna hold a meeting somewhere, you might at least make it a place with a door."

I held up the box. "You know how this works?"

"You're surprised?" she asked with a smug little grin as she folded up the map carefully and tucked it into a worn knapsack, then jumped off the crate and trotted over to us. "I thought you might have a clue, given you're now Luna. Aren't you supposed to have all kinds of evil star and soul knowledge?" The impudent zebra filly smirked up at me. "Hello? Is there any Blackjack left in there?"

"I'm Blackjack," I said with a frown... but why did that sound like a lie?

"Right. Keep telling yourself that," she said as she hopped up and snagged the box from the air. "Mind, body, and soul. Start swapping them around and things get interesting." She turned the box over in her hooves, then peered at the block of starmetal at its center. "Wow. Can't believe he found it. Melchior's Cube." She tapped her hoof against it as she pressed it to her ear.

"The Legate used that thing to give commands to his soldiers?" Storm Chaser asked. "Like a radio or terminal?"

"It doesn't give commands, exactly," Pythia replied, then regarded the hapless Brood stallion. "I think the 'kill kill kill' impulse was the Legate's soul. I think this extends a soul out into the Brood like a projector. Without a connection to a soul, the Brood have no sense of self."

"Souls?" The general sounded anguished in her incredulity.

"Yes. Souls," she said as she pried what was apparently 'Melchior's Cube' out and tossed the box aside carelessly. "There've got to be lots of loose souls in the Hoof now that the Eater is exposed. When one of those souls meets a blank, it finds an empty receptacle, and the soul starts to warp the mind within." Why was everypony

suddenly looking at me like that? Pythia went on, ignoring me as she studied the little cube. “The Brood were blanks with combat skills and augmentations implanted, but they had no sense of self. No identity. The Legate used this to project his identity across them.”

“So how do we use it to make them stop trying to kill us?” Storm Chaser asked, clearly uncomfortable with this.

“You need a person with a soul that will overwhelm the Legate’s personality,” Pythia explained, lifting the cube. “This nasty thing was how my tribe once attempted to rule an empire. Bit us in the ass. Moron didn’t learn from history.” I tilted my head a little as she licked it and scrunched up her face. “Abadsol’s starmetal. I’ve tasted that tang before.”

“What?” I think three ponies asked at once, including me.

“Not all starmetal is from the Eater. It’s all nasty stuff, though. Not sure if you noticed, but the word ‘Eater’ doesn’t jibe with ‘projection’.” She reached out and waved her hoof at the sword. I hesitantly passed it to her. “Ooooh. Dominan’s starmetal!” She gave a few swings in her hooves, and I noticed she seemed uncannily skilled with it. “I want to start commanding and killing already.” She set it aside and looked up at all of us. “Starmetal comes in different flavors. Some of it simply drives you crazy. Some of it will make you sick. It can slowly suck out your soul. Some of the stuff even whispers if you listen closely enough.”

“How do you know this?” Velvet asked. “No offense, sweetie, but—”

“I’m Starkatteri. Creepy zebra soul and star shit is kinda our whole deal,” she replied. “And if you call me ‘sweetie’ again, I’ll personally get a dead star to piss on your wedding day.” That definitely cut off all inquiry in that direction.

We shared an awkward moment, and then Triage coughed uncomfortably, mercifully breaking the silence that had settled on the room and giving me the opportunity to ask, “So what do we do?”

Velvet Remedy frowned. “We could do nothing and see if other Brood come across souls.”

“You could, sure,” Pythia said. “Right now I think the Eater is drawing souls from all across the world. This is its moment of rebirth, after all, and those silver rings are probably pumping out more Enervation everywhere. If you listen, you can hear the screams.” I did not think about that. If I thought about that, I would scream and never, ever, be able to stop. “Of course, not all souls are equal, nor nice. I’m sure

there're plenty of raider souls out there. But yeah, sure, you could do that," she finished with a grin. Then she held up the cube and asked, "So the question is... know anyone with any experience having their soul linked up to a couple thousand perfect killing machines without going completely insane?"

We all shared a look.

The next hour passed like a dream. Maybe it was a dream. Perhaps everything was a dream, only if it was, then everything that had happened would be meaningless. The medics had implanted the soul-control in a pony they thought would stop the fighting. It hadn't worked as well as we'd hoped. Small surprise. I'd had my babies removed and transferred to Grace. As soon as this mess was over, they'd take her to Tenpony to have any lingering Flux nullified. Grace's only condition was that the whole thing be kept secret and that I yield my regency over the Society when this was all over. I'd agreed, perfunctorily.

Then I found a window to stare out of. Nopony approached me, as I wished. My input wasn't necessary for the final preparations being made. I could barely move at all. Homage said somepony was coming to help. Every minute or so, the Eater blasted the University with another beam.

All I could do was stare at the nest of ruined skyscrapers cradling that sickly green illumination, knowing I had to defeat a monster within before I lost what little was left of me. Or my mind.

Live, Glory had begged.

Life was suffering. Misery. Insanity.

How could I want to live after everything I'd endured?

"Not easy, is it?" Pythia quipped. Once, I would have jumped at her unexpected voice as she leaned against the deep windowsill facing me. "Having a soul inside you that's not yours?"

I slowly glanced at her. "You too?"

She flushed, then shrugged. "Long story, but yeah. I can relate." She hopped up, sat down on the windowsill, and leaned back against the wall. "It's going to kill you, eventually. Not your body. Your identity. You can only have a soul that's not yours for so long before it just squishes the mind into a new shape. Most people go crazy. I sure did," she said, gazing out the window as well, her young face darkened by

the shadow of an older zebra mare. "I think this place attracts the old souls. Wants to possess them like a dragon's hoard." She glanced at me and smirked. "And you having *that* soul... well... it's a doozy."

"You know about alicorn souls?" I asked.

"I know about old souls. They spill over, after a while. Start to affect things differently than normal people's. Look at that sword of yours," she said as she gestured to the starmetal sword I'd retained. I frowned, then examined it. The blade once adorned with resplendent unicorns now was decorated in stars and moons in a constellation of the night sky. I gaped at it and then drew Vigilance. The gun's design hadn't changed, but the names etched in the metal were now done in elegant script, and similar constellations were etched along the barrel. I gaped at the weapon, at her, and then back at the weapon. "Buh... wha... no..." Damn it, Luna! Stop touching my things! "How?"

"Your soul spills over beyond your body, changing it." She tapped my chest. "In here, you probably have all the same junk you had before. All the components and gadgets and whatever. The soul alters their... being. Set them apart from you for a while, and they'd probably change back."

I swallowed hard. "Can you give me back my soul?" I whispered.

She frowned and leaned towards me, crossing her hindlegs and resting her chin on her hoof. "Would you take it back if I could? Even if it meant you'd lose?"

I shuddered, looked away toward that horrible nest, and couldn't answer.

After a minute, Pythia shrugged. "For the best. I'm not a necromancer, and it always takes at least two to do what you want. One to sever, the other to anchor. Three is safer." She sighed and pulled back. "Necromancer's a lame gig to begin with. They used to usher souls to the Summerlands, long ago. What I think you'd call the 'everafter'. Then some zebra decided to get creative with them. Damned idiots," she muttered, and shook her head. "No one wants to die." Then she glanced at me and gave a thin, mirthless smile. "Well, almost no one."

"I don't want to die," I said, with all the zeal and conviction of a corpse.

"Right," she said as she rolled forward and landed neatly on her hooves on the floor. "Well, sometimes we don't get what we want. Or what we deserve. If we're lucky, we get what we need, and then we do the rest ourselves."

I watched her go, gave that horrible nest one last, lingering look, and then walked the other way.

There were the sounds of fighting. Horrible sounds. That soul was taking far too long to assert itself on the Brood. Then again, maybe it had been a flawed pony to begin with. Maybe her pacifism made her too timid to draw the Brood away from the fighting. Maybe the evil of the Legate was simply too dark a stain to be overcome. Maybe we'd all been completely wrong, and everything we were doing was utterly futile and pointless. Maybe the reason just didn't matter anymore.

The barricade had given way, and ponies were trying to find any cover available as Brood now pressed in from two breaches below and the roof above. The Eater now pelted the shield every few seconds in a display that made my head ache.

"No," I said, and a field of moonlight fell like the northern lights between the Brood and the exhausted wastelanders. I walked forward, Vigilance on my left, Duty and Sacrifice on my right. I advanced, and ponies to either side of me stared in awe as I went to work. I registered other fighters. Psalm, not using a weapon but simply her shield, protected a small knot of ponies, hoof pressed to her bandaged chest and face twisted in anguish. Dazzle sprayed beams of light that seemed golden against the pall of the Core. Tenebra stared at me for a moment with tears in her eyes before returning to battle with her father's sword. I dimly wondered if Glory and Triage had found a treatment for her epilepsy. Dusk and Calamity struck from the skies, skimming the crackling shield, transferring the pain of their loss to those that had inflicted it.

There was no thrill in this battle. No joy. Just the certainty that soon it would be over. That I would be with them. I smiled, but even as I watched Brutus and Hammersmith smashing into the front row... even with Scootaborg, Sweetie Bot, and Applebot forming an immobile trio that refused to break... even as Bastard planted perfect headshots with his twin pistols while enjoying a cigarette... even as Whisper tore through a half dozen Brood... even as Homage sprayed with the rainbow beams of Glory's blaster... it wasn't enough. The battle sounded like a dim roar growing dimmer by the second. I hardly registered the fighting around me. It wasn't enough. I wasn't enough.

Still so pessimistic, Luna?

I gasped, and my eyes snapped to the west, where beyond the nest of the Eater, a golden moon rose above the mountains. No. Not a moon! The shimmering sphere rose higher and higher into the sky. It was still enmeshed in the remains of a cloud base, and that was being hauled by a half dozen different Raptors. I stared at that beautiful sphere, and tears ran down my face despite the hollowness inside my heart.

Sister, I thought back. Then I turned to Homage, who also stared west in clear relief. “How?” I asked her.

“Windsheer’s idea. Since we couldn’t cut through the interference, he figured that the S.P.P. hub could control the towers through line of sight.” She grinned and blew a kiss to the orb hanging in the western sky. “Nick of time, LittlePip. Nick of time.”

Instantly I felt the change in the air. Wetter. Heavier. There were four S.P.P. towers in the valley, and I looked at the nearest one to the south of the Core. White mist was now streaming from the tips of the massive feathers that formed the cap. A warm, wet wind began to blow. “What is she doing?”

“Using the S.P.P. against the Brood that are attacking us,” Homage said with a grim smile.

Emerald beams began to flash and flare, blasting the orb with their deadly energy. The green glare clashed with the normally ruby shield, engulfing the hub in spectacular explosions of golden yellow light. The beams sparked and danced over the field, sending sheets of lightning spreading out over the surface like ripples in a pond. A second beam joined the first. And a third. Homage’s smile faded a little. “That shield is supposed to be invulnerable, right?” I asked nervously.

“Yes,” she murmured as her brows knitted together, “but I don’t think they ever tested it like this.”

Invulnerable or not, the shields held, and a ring of cloud was thickening and growing around the Core. The valley was feeling a lot more familiar as the band of clouds grew thicker and darker. The beams of the Core suddenly became more frantic and erratic. They swept at the Raptors, which only just managed to dodge. The half dozen vessels clustered together behind the hub and left the beams raking the wrecked superstructure of the base with crackles of emerald lightning.

The wind pouring off the towers seemed to be whipping the clouds into a counter-clockwise spin. “What is she trying to do?” I asked as rain began to speckle down. The band was growing not just thicker but also wider, and whatever it was, the Eater sure didn’t seem to like it. Any beam not facing the S.P.P. hub began to target the mushroom-like towers. The sheer size of the structures allowed them to resist immediate annihilation, but scores of their feathery branches exploded in rains of shrapnel, leaving the towers pouring out smoke as well as mist.

Despite the damage, the storm continued to build, thunder beginning to roll through the dark clouds. “I thought the S.P.P. was just supposed to make weather!” Like

rain... and not rain... and stuff...

"It does!" Homage shouted over the rising wind and booming thunder. Even the Brood attacking us had halted their advance, now looking up as if the entire concept of weather was alien to them.

"How is weather supposed to be a weapon?" I asked in bafflement.

"Um, hurricanes? Tornadoes?" I gaped at her, and she shouted in exasperation, "Weren't you once struck by lightning or something?!"

"Oh. Yeah." I rubbed the back of my head. "I've had some things happen since then..."

Then three beams converged on the stem of the S.P.P. tower that rose from the granite knob overlooking the nest, not raking but holding on a single point midway up. After a few long moments, the beams continued out the other side, and as they shut off to reveal the stem blasted through, the top of the tower began to lean. The last remaining supports gave as the tremendous boom of the demolition reached us, and when we heard the great crack of the structure failing, the top was already descending free, deceptively slowly and still trailing cloud from its top, back towards the reservoir. A moment later it hit, raising a burst of white water and sending a wave to wash down the fronts of the dams. Homage swore, but, even with that loss, the remaining three towers continued to pour out a deluge of cloud, now crackling and black. I looked from them to the hub to the Core, wondering if it was hopeless after all, but then I felt my hair begin to stand on end.

Weren't you once struck by lightning or something?!

"Get down!" I shouted out. "Everypony get under cover!"

A peculiar bubble of calm, or at least relative calm, formed around the University. Heedless of the danger, though, I flew up to a rooftop and grabbed an old radio aerial, locking my mechanical fingers around it and watching the sight. Clouds screamed around the spires of the Core, catching on the jagged edges of the towers and being torn into great white streamers. The thickening cloud had grown to the point I could just barely see the base of the enormous sphere resting over the mountains. Green beams fired, converging on another of the S.P.P. towers.

Then the clouds struck back. In one blinding strike from all directions, a thousand bolts of lightning fell as one. The area around us was flooded with explosive noise of such force that they probably heard it in Manehattan, and anypony not already flat on the ground was flattened by the concussion. Some of the brilliant, jagged columns

of light struck around me, smiting with uncanny accuracy any Brood still firing and yet forking around our forces and the University buildings themselves. Most lanced in and struck the massive nest of towers, sending electricity crackling down the rearranged girders. The starmetal wires hummed in the wind as the eye of the storm narrowed. Below me, even disciplined defenders, without augmented eyes and ears, cried out in pain. Another blast of lightning fanned out in every direction with its accompanying thunder. And another. The blasts were now seeking out the sources of those emerald beams, clawing at the tower tips like the flashing talons of storm dragons. One green emitter exploded in a shower of sparks. Another. Another!

Then something moved inside the Core. I could not see what. I wasn't sure I wanted to. All I knew was a profound sense of dread as that green light within grew brighter and brighter again. A shadow lifted into the air, pointed towards the west.

Sister! Look out! I thought with every fiber of my being.

The swirling clouds suddenly took on that hideous, glaring green glow as a beam lanced through them. Such was its brilliance that it could be seen through the swirling murk. This huge, diffuse bar of baleful light struck the S.P.P. hub's shield, but there were no sparks this time. No, this time there was only screaming. My sister's screams.

The Eater was trying to devour my sister.

The brilliantly illuminated shield around the hub began to stretch into the shape of an egg. "Get down! Get behind the mountains!" I screamed, my words lost to the howling gale. I opened my PipBuck, got on the MASEBS, and started to scream those two sentences heedless of who could hear me, even as my head felt as if it were about to explode. Again and again I cried out, watching the sphere as the Eater attempted to pry my sister from the device.

Mercifully, the sphere pulled away and dipped down again, hauled back by the attendant Raptors far too slowly for my tastes, and disappeared behind the mountains. The storm continued; I supposed that, without line of sight, there was no way to turn it off. The tempest went wild, spitting off funnel-like clouds that lashed at the Core and the surrounding countryside alike. Seeming to ignore the devastation around it, that shadow then turned towards me. Was it a hand? A claw? A mouth? I sat there almost curiously, watching it, like a foal smiling down a gun barrel. That terrible green brilliance began to peak again.

And then I was flying, not of my own volition. A pair of immense scaly hands cradled

me gently as I was carried into the air by a great winged form. “What are you doing, Blackjack?” Spike roared over the wind as it carried us around the Core. That shadow continued to track us, but the purple dragon with the dashing eye patch stayed ahead of it. “This is starting to become a disturbing habit!”

I didn’t move. Had I really... I had. I had, hadn’t I? I hadn’t even thought of it. I stared down as we flew around the Core. The fight was over. LittlePip had ended it. The only Brood left were Brood who weren’t fighting anymore. The ponies below me were getting to their hooves, and that wasn’t the only friendly movement, either. The Arena was a thronging mass of life, and there were other pockets of resistance elsewhere, too. In spite of everything the Legate and the Eater had attempted, we still held on. We survived.

Spike landed on the back side of the hill to Star House. Behind us, I could see the reservoir and on the far side of it the smoking ruins of Elysium. The Wasteland had come for the Society, but I could also see lots of movement there as well. The Wasteland hadn’t won. From the Core came an earsplitting scream of frustration, then silence.

“Wow. I think I’d rather storm Neighvarro all over again than hang out here,” Spike said before frowning down at me. “With all the interference, I figured I’d come down myself and make sure you were all right. Then I spotted you just standing on the roof there.” He set me down with a small frown of worry. “Blackjack?”

I took a few steps. “I don’t know anymore,” I said, not sure if I could be heard over the howling gale.

He poked his head up, over the ridge, then jerked it back down again as a beam cut through the air his head had been occupying. While many of the anti-dragon beams had been taken out by LittlePip, one or two were still managing to sputter out an anemic blast or two. “Okay,” Spike said. “Why don’t you go down to Star House? I’m going to lead its attention off, then tell everyone at the Collegiate where you are and that you’re okay. Okay?”

I didn’t answer aloud. I could barely nod. He watched me in worry, then turned and swooped off over the huge, dark lake. Once he had some speed, he was back up in the clouds, drawing fire. I watched him go, then turned and made my way through the dark and storm towards... home.

The house hadn’t changed much since the party. There was still such a mess. Left-

over food lying strewn from tipped-over bowls. Remains of fruit from the Society that had filled the air with a pungent, sickly sweetness. Half-empty bottles of Sparkle-Cola and whiskey sitting about, flat and tepid. I just had to wait. Just wait. I couldn't go upstairs. It was as impossible as going to the moon.

I just had to wait with the ghosts.

I sat down at the party table in the centermost seat, empty chairs to either side of me. "Empty chairs... empty tables..." I murmured at everything spoiled and scattered around me. The phantom faces and shadows of those I had known and loved watched me from beyond as I sat there, awaiting my turn to join them.

I could hear Rampage's raucous laughter as P-21 threatened her with a grenade while Lacunae watched, scandalized, from the front door. I could hear the music as Priest, Melody, and Lacunae played along with me in concert. I could smell the oily acrid aroma of Glory's cooking. I could feel her and P-21's hooves against my skin, no matter how much of my body I'd lost. And as I sat there, more and more ghosts of the past filed in. Midnight and Rivets. Scoodle. Forty foals. The Dealer. Dusty Trails and Tumbleweed. Roses and Thorn. Big Daddy and Gorgon and Deus. A group of mares in slave collars. That was the horrible thing about ghosts: you could always fit in more. Goldenblood, rasping away. Twilight and Rainbow Dash staring on in concern. Sekashi. Stygius. Silver Spoon. Even Lighthooves, Dawn, and Steel Rain could snicker from the balcony. I had room for other people's ghosts as well. Dusk's Lightning Dancer and Lensflare's and Calamity's Windsheer were in attendance.

I checked my PipBuck. Only two hours to go. Two hours till my life ended. I swept my eyes across the room, at a loss for what to do with the limited time I had left. Food. I should eat something. I could have a last meal before my two hours were up. I levitated over a bowl, filled it with cereal, and took a bite.

Your mother tasted like... apples...

Tears dripped into the bowl as I swallowed that single, horrible bite. My limbs shook as I sat there, quivering as everything inside me finally threatened to explode. P-21. Glory. Rampage. Lacunae. Again and again, my friends rolled through my mind. Impaled. Irradiated. Forsaken. Sacrificed. Not me. I was the last! I was the fucking last!

I threw back my head and screamed, flinging the bowl away. I screamed again, and the ghosts applauded. I screamed and they cheered! This was the price to be paid. Not death. No. Not death. Not release. Not relief. I screamed like I'd never stop

screaming. I'd scream forever, past forever, till all the stars died and only the eternal void remained. And I'd scream in that blackness, forever.

Then I was held. Not by ghostly hooves of memory but by the warm, caring hooves of the living. They squeezed me as tightly around the middle as they could as somepony else's tears dropped onto my neck. I slowly turned as the chaos inside me was stilled for one precious, critical moment.

"No, Mama," Boo said, weeping as she held me as tight as she could.

The pain inside me turned to tears, and I wept for them all. Like rain falling on a forest fire of torment, the suffering spilled from me and smothered those flames. For each ghost in that house, even my enemies, I wept. I sobbed and let every last bit of pain and suffering out through those tears. And Boo, a pony who had defied every roll of the dice to escape being one of those ghosts, wept with me. She shared my grief, my loss. A pony who should never have been, yet was, now kept me together. And while a pony can scream until the end of the universe and beyond, no pony could weep forever. Even so, I indulged myself with a good, long cry.

When I finally pulled myself together, Boo sat next to me, a hoof across my shoulders as I blubbered. She was my confessor, and I told her everything. All my failures. My fears. I didn't know if she fully understood, and even if she didn't, I doubted it really mattered. All that did matter was that somepony shared everything that I felt. That, somehow, made it real. And even if it didn't alleviate the pain, it made it all bearable. That which had been crushing me, I could now carry.

"It's okay, Mama. It's okay," she repeated again and again. Of course, it wasn't, but that didn't matter. 'Okay' was a prayer you repeated again and again in the hopes that it would become true. When I finally wiped my eyes and nose, I felt more myself than I had since leaving the moon.

"No, it's not," I finally admitted. "But I have to make it okay. I have to do that. Not fix. Not restore. Just... okay. I can be content with that."

That was when I noticed something new sitting next to her. A thick block of papers tied together with string, with a long, thin, roundish object wrapped in paper on top. I frowned as I levitated it over and unwrapped the object, spotting writing on the wrapper. A note.

Blackjack,

If you're reading this, I'm either dead or captured. This was the likely outcome for anypony you picked to be in charge in your absence. That it was me, and not

a more important pony like Storm Chaser, Big Daddy, or Grace is a benefit to your cause. I left my instructions in advance and will wait for the Legate to take me. If I am still alive, then I fully expect a great amount of embarrassment when you read this.

These papers are a collection of notes that I've made, and updated, regarding the formation of various governments and political systems. They were models that Luna, ultimately, rejected. No matter how difficult things are today, I know that you will prevail. When you do, some system of governance will need to be implemented to avoid the mistakes of the past. Regardless of the ultimate fate of the Eater, the Wasteland persists until civilization is imposed upon it. Grace, Finders Keepers, Triage, Persephone, Big Daddy, and Storm Chaser are all instrumental to this, and I've left notes with each to find these papers here.

Should you feel that my input would be a detriment to the future of Equestria, by all means, consign these notes to the flames. I have faith that there are still good ponies in the world, and while the Lunar Commonwealth may seem a good idea to me, epitomizing common unity and individual freedom, the reality is that no idea is perfect. Not even mine.

Lastly, I wish to apologize for the undue trouble that I caused. I hope that, with these final acts, I will have done better. I know I cannot redeem myself completely, but, as you said, it is the effort of atonement that matters most. I've placed assets that I feel will be beneficial to you in the care of others. I only hope there is enough to achieve success. I've reports that Glory survived the events at the Luna Space Center. I pray that she recovers and that you might share some happiness together.

Ever a servant, ever a friend,

Goldenblood

PS: This was entrusted to Fluttershy. I suspect she saw what it was and promptly returned it to the sender. I hope it will be of some use to you.

I stared at the letter and then regarded the object it was wrapped around. The black metal case was so familiar. I touched it, and it opened easily for me. Inside, nestled in the black crushed velvet, was a single silver bullet for Folly.

EC-1101. Shields. Folly. Three smart ponies had given me three different options.

Now there was just the question of which one I would take.

Assuming, of course, that I didn't die on the way. Then I frowned and looked at my flank. My cutie mark, stolen by Cognitum, was still there. An ace and a queen

of spades. Like the sword and pistol, they'd both been re-etched in a Luna-esque theme: the dark mare herself graced the queen, and the ace was decorated with moons and stars. "Boo, do you think 'victory' is a talent?"

"Like, just winning?" she asked, scrunching up her face. When I nodded, she blew a raspberry. "No. That's dumb. What's the point in that?"

"In blackjack, this is the unbeatable pair. You can't get any higher. It's like... like a royal flush of spades. But I've been beaten before. Badly," I said as I turned back to her. "Does it mean... my enemies can't win? I can be defeated. I can even be killed. But nopony can make me stop." I looked around the house, then drew Vigilance. There, the second name: Tarot. That was some kind of divination thingy, right? What did those cards mean? I hadn't the foggiest.

It didn't matter, though, because it felt right to me. Everything I'd done. Everything that I'd gone through had delivered me to this point. I'd suffered. I'd lost. But now, perhaps, I could do what I was meant to do.

Alone. I wouldn't have anypony else die for me.

"I need to go, Boo," I said as I gave her a thankful hug. "I never thought I'd say this, but I have to go and save the world." I smiled when I said that.

"Okay," Boo answered, and started for the door. "You'll tell me all about it when you get back, right, Mama?"

That was assuming a lot. "Yeah. Sure," I said as I followed her. I'd walk to the tunnel. I wasn't in any hurry to meet my inevitable end. "But you should stay here, Boo. Don't want to get blasted by a beam, right?"

She blew another raspberry. "Lightning blasted the beam thingies. It's okay. We can go to the tunnel." She opened the door. "Come on, Blackjack. I'll walk with you. You're safe with me, Mama."

I hesitated at the threshold, looking back at all the ghosts I carried with me. "This is a nice house," I said as my eyes skipped over the mess. I left the papers right where they needed to be discovered. Better ponies than me would be able to do something with them. And then I stepped out and closed the door behind me, one final time.

The storm whirled around us, but I felt strangely calm. My earlier despair had suddenly shifted to a slight, inexplicable eagerness, as if my center of mass had just altered. I was apprehensive, yes, for the stakes hadn't changed in the slightest... but now? Now I was positively keen on getting down there and facing a monster.

Walking down the slope towards Chapel, I looked over the still-smoldering wreck of the village. In spite of the damage wrought by Deus's battle, dozens and dozens of ponies were milling about the battlefield. Some were scavenging anything worthwhile while others were finding friends and loved ones. The chapel itself, against all odds, still remained standing. It had become an island of sorts around which pooled most of the ponies who lingered outside now that the beams posed no real threat.

Funny, shouldn't it be raining? All around us, the rain hissed, but it sheeted off a bubble that surrounded Boo and myself. I stopped, then turned. "Psalm," I said with a tired smile. I'd wanted to avoid this, but the confrontation was inevitable. Still... I wasn't really Luna. I couldn't give her what she wanted.

The purple mare stared at me as I stared back. "Goddess," she whispered. "It's really you. I saw you during the melee at the Collegiate, but... it's you." The purple alicorn wore several fresh bandages around her torso and neck.

"No. I'm still Blackjack. I'm just... different. I have her inside me," I replied. Was it just me, or was I able to look her in the eye now? "Are Crumpets and Stronghoof okay?" A tiny nod. I gestured to her chest. "Are you doing okay with... everything?"

"Yes," she replied, touching the bandages. "It doesn't feel much different than being in Unity, only they're like vessels needing to be washed out and refilled." She regarded me and smiled. "Every now and then, one is filled from an outside source, and I lose the connection, but I really don't mind. It helps knowing that one day they'll be free. It's what Lacunae would have wanted." She sighed wistfully, looking out into the storm. "Others are just... taken from me, winking out like candles in the dark. They have caused great suffering, and the Wasteland does not so easily forgive."

If I hadn't guessed what she was here for before, there was no mistaking it now. I sighed and closed my eyes. "I forgive you, Psalm."

"Forgive... me?" She sounded confused.

Now I was baffled as I opened one eye, seeing her frown thoughtfully. I regarded her. "Isn't that what you were going to ask me? To forgive you for what you did during the war?"

She actually smiled. "No. Not anymore. I... wanted it because I knew it would never come. It let me damn myself. Now, though... I don't think I need it. Not like I used to." She seemed so confident. So... so sure. "Although it's nice to hear, it's not what I wanted." She closed her eyes again. "I wanted to say that... *I forgive you.*"

I felt as if I'd been speared through my core, and tried to laugh. "Forgive... what? For what?"

"For the war. For not... saving us all back then. And I know the other Marauders would, too," she said evenly. "And I wanted to forgive you too, Blackjack. For P-21, and Glory, and Rampage. Because I know what it's like to carry all that guilt."

My breath hissed a moment. "You don't know what you're talking about, Psalm," I muttered tensely under my breath. "You have no right to forgive me. I have no right to be forgiven."

"Nevertheless, I forgive you," she said calmly, with a disturbing serenity that made me growl. Did she really think all my sins could be forgiven... just like that?

"Do you have a clue what I've done? What you... you... you don't have a any right to forgive all the harm I've caused. The lives I've ruined!" I turned my back on her.

"Yes, I do. I remember what Lacunae experienced with you. For a time, your minds were connected. I know how much you hurt inside." She gently turned me around to face her, gazing into my eyes. "Even if nopony else will... I forgive you."

My heart pounded as I stared at her. "Everything that's happened... there is no forgiveness! I let them die! All of them!" My voice rose as Boo shrank back. "Don't you get it? I did it out of pride! I never gave up EC-1101, and it ruined me! Ruined everything. If I'd thrown it into the ocean or something, they'd all still be alive! And Luna was no better!" I roared at her as she gazed at me with that pitying expression. "Don't you fucking get it? She was after power! She didn't care about Equestria! She wanted her thousand year rule to show everypony she was no different than Celestia! We deserve every last drop of guilt! We should die a million times for all the suffering we've caused!"

"I don't believe that, and I don't think you're being honest or fair right now. Not after what's happened," Psalm responded. "Guilt might have pushed you to do better, but I know it's eating you up inside. You want to pay for what's happened. You hate yourself."

"Of course I hate myself! Sky Striker was right," I snapped at her. "I got Glory killed."

"No, Blackjack. You didn't." She addressed me patiently. "If you'd forced Glory to return to Thunderhead, you'd be dead, and nopony would have stopped Lighthooves or his biological weapon. The civil war would have happened anyway. Glory loved you, and she tried letting you go, but sometimes we can't leave the ponies we care about. Even when we say we don't, we still care. We still love." I opened my mouth,

and she interrupted me, “And the same for P-21, Rampage, and Lacunae. None of them would have wanted you to do this to yourself. They all chose to follow you.”

“I failed them! Failed everyone! You, especially you, cannot forgive that!” But Psalm reached out and embraced me. “Let me go! I don’t have time for this! This pointless... meaningless... gesture...” My throat worked. I could have forced her to release me, but my strength failed. “How? I got so many... so many... killed. How can you forgive me? My friends. My people. I should have been better. More careful. More... something!” I said as I started to sob against her. It was a different kind of weeping than before; grief is not the same as contrition. Absolution was not the same as redemption. I could handle paying the price. Telling me there was no price to be paid... that was so much harder to accept.

“I don’t deserve forgiveness,” I muttered against her neck. She sighed and patted my back.

“Neither did I. But sometimes what we need is more important than what we deserve,” she replied.

I sighed and pulled away, once again unable to look at her. “I’m sorry. I tried. I really did.”

“I know. But you can’t be weighed down by regret now,” Psalm answered. “You have a job to do. Regret is an indulgence.”

The three of us started down the slope. Chapel had been a mess before, but just like last time, it hadn’t quite died yet. A few hundred ponies picked through the mess. The Crusaders and Halfhearts who’d remained to defend it watched the others with cool, disdainful eyes. Charity, covered in bandages, kept her clipboard in hoof as she supervised from the stoop of the bullet-ridden church. “Don’t you dare let a single one of these scumsuckers take so much as one more bullet without covering it. They all get a two thousand percent cowardice fee!” she snapped at the supervisors.

“Two thousand percent?” I asked as I approached her.

Charity’s mouth twisted sourly. “So I’ll fudge the numbers later. Right now I’m tired, I’m hurt, and...” Then she paused and really took me in. “Sweet Celestia...” she murmured as she let the clipboard fall to the mud. “You’re... you really are... you... wow...” Charity struggled to recover her cool, turning to cough and snap at some stallions poking around the muck. “Two caps for bullets, one for four pieces of brass! I want every round we can reload in case some of those striped bastards

survived and still have some fight in them!”

“The Brood are still a problem?” Psalm asked with a frown.

Charity nodded into the church, and I followed her inside. I was amazed at all of the baskets and metal crates everywhere, filled with bullets, brass, and guns. I wasn’t sure how to feel about all this in a church, but then, it was the only place out of the rain. Bottlecap and another mare... she looked familiar... aha! Usury! That was it. They were busy organizing the wares. “Not any more. But it wouldn’t surprise me if they got up to something!” she said savagely. “I mean to be ready. They’re not taking Chapel without a fight!”

“I think you’ve fought and won,” I said with a little smile.

“Won?” She trotted to the door and pointed out at the immense nest that jutted out over the river. “Till you take care of whatever the hell that is, I haven’t won anything.” She snorted and then flushed. “Sorry.”

I frowned. “Beg pardon?”

“I... ugh! You’re a Princess now! Like, wavy mane and everything! I can’t deal with you like this.” She walked over and got a bucket, then walked back, jumped up, and stuck it on my head. “Okay. Better!” she said as I stood there rigidly; it hadn’t been a particularly clean bucket. “Now, Bucketjack... I mean, Blackjack... I’ll have you know that I’ve been doing an extensive audit of your accounts with Chapel. I’ve calculated out all the fines, fees, interest, annoyance surcharges, various municipal taxes, and assorted favors I’ve extended to you over the course of our association. The amount probably exceeds the gross domestic product of the entire Wasteland!” I started to lift the bucket off my head, and she glowed up at me. I let it fall again.

“However,” she said grandly, “I have calculated that this debt can be repaid with one simple service. You simply have to go to the Core and stop... whatever it is that is doing all this. You do that, and we’ll be square.”

“Square?” I asked with a little half smile.

“Debt paid in full,” Charity said firmly.

I lifted the end of the bucket to look down at her. “Forever?”

She glowered at me, crossing her hooves. “Don’t push your luck, Blackjack.”

I took the bucket off and set it to the side. “I accept your terms,” I said, with full sincerity.

Charity's eyes welled up, and she lunged at me, wrapping her hooves around one of my forelegs and hugging me tightly. I knelt down and hugged back. I knew the power of tears and knew she wouldn't weep forever. I doubted she'd need a fraction of the time I did. After a few minutes, she went from sobs to hiccups and finally scrubbed her eyes. Bottlecap and Usury were both averting their eyes as she recovered. "If you tell anypony I bawled like a foal..."

"I know. The debt will be astronomical," I replied as she furiously wiped her eyes and recomposed herself. Looking at the goods, I gave a sad little smile. "You know, if this last job is going to wipe all my debts clean, I could use some equipment."

She rolled her eyes with a tepid smile of her own. "All the good stuff's been sent to the tunnel. You can have the pick of it. Whatever you need." She groaned and covered her face. "Oh Goddesses, it's happened. I knew it would sooner or later."

"What?" I asked in worried bafflement.

"I've lived up to my dumb name! Ugh!" She thumped her temples with both hooves. "No! I have to focus. It's a one time thing. Remember the book. *Fifty Ways to Wind up Filthy Rich*. I can write it off as a tax credit if taxes ever become a thing again! Right! There should be some leeway there." She saw me barely suppressing a smile and went bright pink. "Don't you have a job to do? Honestly! You cut a pony a deal on her debt and she... oooh..." She shoved my chest, trying to push me out the door. "Go!"

I wasn't budging an inch. I leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Charity's eyes popped round as I murmured, "Thank you, Charity. You've been a good friend. You've had what I needed, when I needed it, and always made sure I got it. Even if you do get a little crazy with compound interest."

Charity finally deflated. "Nuts. I just figured if I was rich, the Wasteland couldn't get me. If I held on to what was mine, then I'd be okay." She sulked a bit, before she frowned back up at me. "Please, come back, Blackjack. You're super annoying, sometimes... well, always, but I want you around doing the right thing. Okay?"

"I'll do my best," I answered, pulling away. Usury made a gagging noise, but Bottlecap smiled at the filly warmly.

"Take care, Security," Bottlecap said with a wave of her hoof.

"Die in a fire," Usury muttered as I stepped out.

"I heard that!" Charity snapped.

I guessed I couldn't win everypony over. I stepped out with Psalm and Boo. The pair were addressing four unarmed Brood who alternated between shouting and weeping as they talked. At the sight of me, they turned and bolted off into the rain. "Are they..." I asked, unsure just what I was going to end the question with.

"They are conflicted," Psalm said as she watched them flee. "Imagine if all you knew was killing, and all you felt was the joy it brought, and then being given the knowledge that such things were wrong, and the weight of shame and guilt such knowledge brings..." She shook her head and smiled sadly at me. "The Legate will always be a part of them, I fear. Diluting it with myself is the only hope I have to give them any peace." And she touched her bandaged chest with a sigh.

"Blackjack!" Scotch Tape cried out as she splashed through the ruins of Chapel with Bastard close behind her, a soggy cigarette still clenched resolutely in his jaw. "Ugh, what a mess," she said as she surveyed the scene. Then she glowered up at me, "You left me behind again."

"To be fair, I got snatched away by a dragon," I answered.

She huffed and tapped her PipBuck. "Runners reported that if there are any Brood still wanting to fight, the storm is keeping them down. That LittlePip person must have a PipBuck with an insane range to target only the Brood who are attacking. Like to know how she pulled that one off." She sighed and coughed. "Not that it matters. There's Enervation spreading all over the valley. In a few hours, it's probably going to be uninhabitable." She frowned as she scrolled down. "Also, before contact was cut off, there were reports of Enervation symptoms all over the Wasteland. New Appleloosa. Tenpony. That Junction place."

I could imagine hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of silver rings set in 'pest control' boxes tacked onto ruins siphoning life and souls to the Eater. "So this really is it," I said as I stared at the nest.

"Yup. You get to save the world. Lucky you," Bastard said dryly as water dripped off the end of his cigarette. "Don't fuck it up now."

There wasn't much to say as we made our way to the tunnel mouth. This was where all of us had descended into the ground for the first time. Where we'd found the megaspell complex. Where Glory had lost her wing. All because they followed me...

Psalm reached out and covered me with her wing, giving me a little hug and a gentle smile, as if she knew what I was feeling. For all I knew, she could. "What happened

to my blank?" I asked Scotch.

"They're going to keep it safe. It seems chugging a bottle of Flux is going to keep it going for a long time." She made a face. "That Morningstar pony gave it a whole 'nother ten liters of the stuff, just to see what would happen."

I tried not to think about where Morningstar had gotten that much Flux. "Try not to let anypony experiment on me, please." I'd had enough of that. There seemed to be a tent set up with a number of ponies working around it. I spotted the telltale gleam of white moonstone in the dark. A railcar was being set up at the mouth of the tunnel. Scotch Tape and Bastard immediately veered off to check on it.

As we approached the tent, Triage emerged. "Flying by dragon is for the birds," she commented as she consulted a clipboard. "Okay! Here's what we got for you." She reached over and picked up a pristine twelve gauge pump action shotgun. "One IF-80. You'll probably want to name it or something. Eight moonstone slugs with a heavy powder charge for the shield housings. They'll probably take out the generators inside, but if not, you have your sword for those." The slugs were, appropriately, in white hulls. She gestured to six moonstone pendants and a dozen brilliant purple potions in Sparkle-Cola bottles. "Six anti-Enervation medallions for whoever is going with you. Twelve extra-strength rejuvenation potions, with moonstone fragments to keep them fresh longer, brewed half an hour ago."

"Going with me?" I asked with a frown. My friends were dead and gone. With the exception of Scotch Tape and Boo, who was left who would want to go on a one way trip with me?

Triage stared like I'd just asked a very stupid question, and gestured inside the tent. "We've got a selection of firearms, explosives, energy weapons, and almost anything else you might need, courtesy of the Keepers." Inside the tent, the elderly yellow stallion regarded me warmly and gave a little bow as he gestured at the cornucopia of mayhem behind him.

"How am I going to know how to get there? The tunnels have to be mangled," I asked, and then added, "And who's going with me?"

Again, that look. "Rover provided maps of the red tunnels, which are still mostly operational. Between them, the cyberdogs, Watcher's spritebots, and Applebot slaving in some Protectaponies as scouts, we've been able to map a route that should get you underneath that..." She paused, then just gestured at the Core.

"You've been busy," I remarked, impressed.

“End of the world and all that. Amazing how people get off their asses when the shit’s hit the fan and the fan turns out to be powered by a balefire bomb. Plus, a lot of this was put into action by Goldenblood hours ago.” She pointed to a terminal under the tent which had a beam rifle strapped to its top in a makeshift frame and pointed up at the mountains, the two wired to spark batteries. “Also, someone wants to talk to you. Just don’t jostle it.”

I frowned at the terminal and then carefully tapped a button. The tip of the beam rifle started to strobe, and then the terminal lit up. The screen flickered a few times, and then a unicorn appeared. A unicorn I hadn’t seen in a long, long time. “Hey,” she rasped weakly. “Sorry for being late to the party.”

“LittlePip,” I murmured, then gave a shaky little smile. “How?”

“Line of sight relay on top of the mountain. Only thing that cuts through the interference,” she said with a little wave of her hoof, then coughed. “Hope it stays aligned,” she said through the coughing, then sniffed. “My friends are okay?”

“Calamity lost his brother, but other than that, they’re okay. They’ve saved a lot of lives. You saved a lot of lives,” I said with a smile. “Thank you.”

She gave an embarrassed little smile. “Glad to do it. Going to take forever to get this thing back in place. Also...” She frowned at me, “Luna’s electroshocked nipples, Blackjack, do you have any idea how hard it was to not hit you with lightning? What were you thinking, flying up onto a roof and grabbing a metal pole to get a better view?”

Luna’s... electroshocked... how did she know? “I don’t think I was,” I murmured. “I lost Glory.”

LittlePip’s face showed all of her shock, and then worry. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, she wasn’t the first. P-21. Rampage. Lacunae...” I said, then grimaced and sniffed.

“I know. I know. Steelhooves... he...” She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “But you have to hold on. See it through to the end. Persevere,” LittlePip said in her squeaky little voice. Somepony cleared their throat next to her, and I felt as if lightning had hit me after all. “Go ahead.”

“Luna?” Celestia said calmly through the terminal, her digitized face replacing LittlePip’s.

“Sister,” I sobbed at once. “Are you okay?”

"I... will recover. . . in time... That abomination is an evil beyond any from the darkest reaches of Tartarus," Celestia said as she gazed at me and smiled through her own tears. "Luna. I am so sorry, Luna. I left you..."

"I made you go, remember? One of us had to survive... for Equestria," I replied.

"But I didn't survive." Celestia closed her eyes, a mask of pain upon her face. "I failed, Luna. I failed Equestria. And I failed you most of all. I made mistakes. Such little... such catastrophically terrible... mistakes. And I forced you to clean them up. Then... I did not believe in you." She closed her eyes. "I... I have not been a very good sister, Luna."

"So you were a little overbearing. That's the sun for you," I answered. "I forgive you, Sister. No matter what happened to me... to us... to Equestria... I don't blame you for any of it. Ultimately, it was my failing. I have to make it right."

"Oh, Luna. You were always so much stronger than anypony gave you credit for," Celestia answered. "We'll be together again, Sister. We'll make it right."

I shook my head. "I think the time for Princesses is over, Sister. I think... I think we're going to have to trust them to make Equestria right again without us."

"Leave it to the commoners?" Celestia said with a mock-horrified expression. "Perish the thought!" I laughed, despite my tears. "Maybe you're right," Celestia went on. "Maybe our time is over, but I still can't help watching over them for a time more."

"I love you, Tia," I murmured.

"I love you too, Lulu," she replied, kissing her hoof and reaching out as if touching the screen. I couldn't resist. I mirror the action, and on the tap, the screen faded to static. I guess Triage hadn't been joking about jostling it. Maybe she could fix it. I turned to the medical pony and...

She was gaping in shocked horror at Bastard. Bastard's cigarette had fallen from his slack jaw as he goggled back at Triage. Scotch Tape gave me a baffled look as the pair stared and then, in unison, jabbed a hoof at the other and shouted, "You're supposed to be dead!" In perfect synchronicity, they gestured to themselves. "Me? You're the one who's supposed to be dead!" They froze.

My eyes swept from one to the other. The coats were a little off, but they had similarly-colored eyes... horns... builds... faces... "Uh. Do you two know each other?" I asked dully.

"I... she..." Bastard sputtered, as Triage spat, "I... he..."

Triage recovered first. "This... this murderous reprobate... this gangster..."

"Hey! I paid for—" Bastard snapped.

"Which you never let me forget!" Triage yapped back. "I didn't ask you to—"

"Oh, but you didn't say no to the bits back then, did you?" Bastard interrupted, jabbing his hoof at her.

"I told you I was going to pay you back! I had a kid, remember!" And she stopped, and Bastard paused as well. "I thought you were dead, you bastard. You're supposed to be dead. Everyone was dead and gone and behind me. What happened to you? How can you still be alive?"

"Zebras," he said with a shrug. "You?"

"M.A.S. experiment," she answered.

"Told you working for the M.A.S. was a bad idea," he countered.

"You were working for a criminal! You have no right to..." She stopped, then laughed weakly. "Hell... two hundred years and we're still fighting," she muttered.

"You're two hundred years old?" I gaped at Bastard. Then at Triage. "Both of you?!"

Triage sighed and rolled her eyes. "We really don't have time to get into it. Ro—"

The gaze over his glasses swore death. "Say it and I go back to being an only child."

She snorted, rolling her eyes, and amended, "Bastard is my brother."

Mollified a bit, he japed, "You're a bastard too. Or whatever the female version is."

"There is no female version, numbnuts," she answered with a flat-eyed glower.

He shrugged, then looked at me. "Fraternal twins. Mom was an earth pony, dad a pegasus who flew the coop."

"Oh Goddesses, Mom!" She grabbed his shoulders. "Please tell me Mom is still dead!" She surveyed the scene in alarm.

"I think so," Bastard answered as he did the same for a few seconds. "Though, knowing this place, I could see her as some ghoul, croaking about how we never call, how we're both failures..."

"At least she wasn't trying to pawn you off on some son of one of her friends. 'He's a plumber. He's a good catch. This one's a lawyer! Can't get better than that.' Yeesh."

She shivered. “And she wouldn’t be a ghoul. She’s just too crotchety to let balefire bombs kill her.”

Looked like I wasn’t the only pony with one heck of a story to tell. “I knew there was something special about you,” I said, smirking at him.

“No. No. No. I am not special. I am just a hitpony who slept in way too long,” he snapped, waving his hooves as if trying to ward off some evil spell of mine.

“You’re just a weirdness magnet, Blackjack,” Triage countered. And when I opened my mouth, she added, “Don’t even bother asking. It doesn’t matter, and you don’t need to know the details.”

“Awww...” I, Scotch Tape, and Boo said in unison.

“Don’t you have a world to save?” Triage snapped at me. “The others are waiting at the tunnel. Go.” She softened a little. “I’ll tell you later, after I’m good and really drunk. Okay?”

“No, you won’t,” Bastard countered. “Nothing good happens when you blab.” He pointed at the Core. “Don’t you have the world to save or some shit?”

Oh sure. Throw the end of the world at me... “Fine, but what,” I said as I turned to the tunnel. My voice trailed off faintly as I took in the sight before me, “others...”

All the others.

Standing at the mouth of the tunnel was a mob of ponies. I immediately picked out Calamity, Velvet Remedy, Homage, Xenith, and Pyrelight standing together in the middle. Next to them stood the Reapers. Brutus looking oiled and magnificent. Storm Front, Dazzle, and Hammersmith. Whisper and Tenebra were next, and then a half dozen Zodiacs I barely recognized and wished I knew better. Libra, Scorpio, Aries, Leo, Virgo, and... I think that blue unicorn was the new Gemini?

On the other side of LittlePip’s friends were the Enclave. Twister, Boomer, Dusk, and Sky Striker, all in their power armor, and the cyberpegasus Silver. Then there was Stronghoof, wrapped up in bandages yet still standing strong and sparkly. Crumpets was beside to him with a look of weary determination. Lancer and Adama, Xanthe, Pythia, and Carrion were next, the ghoul griffin having repaired or replaced his armor. Nails, the lone Harbinger. In the back loomed Pain Train the minotaur, Rover, and the hellhound Gnarr. At the end of the row stood Applebot, Sweetie Bot, and Scootaborg.

There were others, too. Ponies I’d never met but who were here because this was

the place that needed them. I may have lost my friends, but I was far from on my own. Standing behind me, Psalm extended her weather-blocking spell over the whole assembly, shielding them from the storm. Quite a few seemed glad to be out of the wind and rain.

"I can't take all of them," I murmured.

"You've got enough room on the car for six or so," Scotch Tape replied from my side. "More than that and they're going to be falling off. You're going to have to move really fast to avoid the things that are in the tunnels now, so I wouldn't try to bring in a flock of pegasi either. We only have enough moonstone to protect that many, too." She looked at the crowd. "Everypony agreed not to argue with your decision." She trotted over to the middle, Psalm following, then snapped at Bastard, "Hey, get over here! You know you can do it too!"

He stalked over, muttering to himself as he took a seat next to Scotch, wearing the biggest ever 'do not pick me' expression on his face. Triage chuckled beside me, and when I glanced at her she replied with a sardonic smirk, "Don't look at me. There's no way I'm going down there."

I stared at her, then at all of them. Just... pick? "I... how can I choose? This... I'm not sure that there's going to be any coming back from this. I can't ask you to come with me."

"Ask? Pfft!" Whisper rolled her eyes. "As if! We should ask *you* to come with *us*!"

"You don't have to ask us," Velvet said with a calm smile.

"Ain't like this is our first rodeo with the future resting on us pullin' out a win," Calamity said with a nod, then lowered his head, adding quietly to himself, "Besides, he'd want to be here if he could."

"My daughter believed in you," Sky Striker said grimly. "I may not like you. I might actually hate you, but I'll be damned if I'm going to sit by and let her death be for nothing! I won't lose any more of my family."

Pythia peered at her map. "Eh. Future's all wibbly wobbly right now. Save the world. Doom the world..." She peeked at me and gave an impudent little grin. "If you're going to kill an eldritch abomination from beyond, I want a front row seat!"

"You don't understand!" I shouted as I looked from one to the next. "I can't ask you to pay this price! I can't have you dying for this! I can't!" I fell onto my haunches. There was dead silence from the assembly, eyes locked onto me, with expressions ranging from compassion to confusion to disapproval. "Lacunae. Rampage. P-21. Glory..."

I can't take losing any more people for this!" I hung my head, wishing Psalm's field let through the rain to hide my shameful tears.

"You're a fucking moron, Blackjack!"

I gasped and lifted my head, staring up into the scornful eyes of Whisper. The mare grabbed me by my collar and hauled me to hooves. "You think this is all about you? You think I or these other assholes don't have a price to pay?" She swept a wing at the assembly. "Every single person here is willing to pay whatever fucking price it takes to see tomorrow! Some of us have already paid more than you'll ever know. Some of us have debts that are way, way overdue! Doesn't matter. You can stay there crying in the mud, if you want. Sit on your ass. We'll go ourselves and find some way to pull this shit off!" She took a deep breath. "But... and it pains me to admit this... there might be more ass in there than I can kick personally, so I'll let you come along. If you can keep up."

I stared at the pegasus, feeling the corners of my mouth pulling into a reluctant smile despite myself. "It might be a one way trip," I pointed out. "Are you sure?"

She narrowed her eyes, her forehooves playing over her abdomen. I was suddenly aware how very still my own belly had gotten since I left the Collegiate. "Fuck one way trips. Life's a one way trip. Your face is a one way trip. I'm coming back." She flew over my head, her tail snapping at me, but our eyes met for a moment. She gave a little smirk back at me as she waited to see my next choice.

Well, that was one. I turned and surveyed the rest. I hadn't expected to come back from this. Go to the Eater, do... something, win. I'd probably die in the process, but I'd win. Now, I had others coming with me to help me... and I couldn't just throw their lives away. I needed a carefully calculated, well-thought-out plan of who else to bring with me... and getting them out alive again.

I checked the time on my PipBuck.

Half an hour until armageddon.

Crap.

(Author's notes: The penultimate chapter. I really wanted this to be the very last one. I really did, but there was just too much to wrap up. I hope that folks can forgive me. The next chapter is the last, and then there should be a brief epilogue. Then there's a few places we'll do some little fixes, and then upload to FimFic. Then done! Done done done done done...

For everyone who's stuck with me through all of this, I want to thank you. It's been an incredible saga, which has only been possible with your reading, the mind numbingly awesome assistance of Hinds, Bro, swicked, and Hearthshine, and the financial support of generous readers. As always, thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. We need to draft her for doing something with Fallout 4 when it comes out! Draft Kkat! Do eet!

To folks that read and critique the story, thank you so much for your feedback. The occasional video reviews have been awesome, and fair. I hope when I start my next big project that I remember everything that I've learned. I hope to have the story done before moving up to Oregon and resuming teaching... I so hope it's done...

To people who would like to support Horizons or my future projects, bits can be donated through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com or through my (still horrible) patreon account at www.Patreon.com/somber. Special thanks to Spencer, AllisOne, Quotidian, Dust Eagle, Carlis, Mysfit, David, O'neil, Fdot, Michael, James, Chris, Mark, FallenAngel, Kristian, GoFish, Robojan, and special thanks to Allen Medlen.

swicked: Reread the scene starting on the lower half of page 29 while listening to this:

<https://youtu.be/eqqSa9n2ZQk?t=2m15s>

It wasn't in Somber's head when writing it but it captures the scene so well. . .

Oh, and you'll never guess what Bastard's real name is, but trust me, it really *is* that embarrassing.

77. All In

“What? My dream ended... happily? That. Cannot. Happen!”

We were nine. Nine going into the deeps beneath Hoofington, facing monsters and abominations from the pits of madness and horror. Nine with one goal: to stop the Eater of Souls from destroying the world... inside thirty minutes.

I wondered if Twilight ever had to do anything like this.

I couldn't really see it, honestly. The railcar we rode, careening through the gloomy labyrinthine tunnels below Hoofington, had originally been designed to travel the tracks under its own power for maintenance and repair work; a ridge of industrial-grade spark batteries centered in the back, behind the storage locker we'd piled our gear in, kept us whirling along at breakneck speeds. Someone had hastily welded a cowcatcher of sorts to the front and sheet metal to the safety railing around the side of the car to offer some protection to those ponies who now dove down into the heart of darkness. All of us aboard struggled to brace ourselves against the chest-high makeshift armor.

Once upon a time, I'd gone into the earth. My friends had suffered, and I had encountered an abomination of living machinery. Another time, I'd gone into the earth and faced a screaming room of flesh and steel. A third time, I'd gone into the earth and faced nightmares given horridly distorted form. Thus, I was somewhat inured to the organic texturing of the walls, meat and metal and blends of both punctuated by flashing red emergency lights that beat with an arrhythmic pulse. The world around us screamed, kept at bay by only the tiny little singing shards of hope most of us wore.

We hadn't had much time. I'd shared what I'd experienced in the Core and the threats we might face as the people I'd chosen grabbed whatever ammunition they'd need. Despite a few scoffs of disbelief, I'd worked out a few warnings and tactics we could use if, or rather when, we encountered the hazards of the Core. With the exception of accidentally collapsing the tunnel behind us, the others had adapted to the dangers well.

Despite everything, some of us were having a good time. A length of conduit revealed itself to be a thick, fleshy tentacle that lifted from the wall and swept across the tunnel like a giant hook. At the speed we were travelling at, we'd never be able to

slow in time. But no matter how fast we were going, Whisper would not be outdone by a mere car. The pegasus darted ahead and smashed the tendril at its base, shearing the whole tentacle off like wet clay. The severed length dropped, struck the cowcatcher, and, with the aid of some magic, flipped over the top to crash and flop on the tracks behind us. “Woo hoo!” Whisper shouted. “That’s four!”

From the roof of the tunnel ahead dropped a far more mundane threat to the airborne pegasus: two gatling turrets. The pair began to spray streams of projectiles, turning the tunnel into a shooting gallery. In a few seconds, she’d be turned into a cloud of lingering blood and feathers. Or she would have been, if the dark form of Dusk hadn’t already been ahead with her, leading us down the tunnel. She swept between Whisper and the guns, the five millimeter rounds failing to pierce her power armor as her beam rifle blew out one turret and then the other in a shower of sparks.

“Dad’s going to be so mad he missed this,” Dusk said, falling back in next to Whisper as they flew ahead of us. Her voice had to get through the noise of the wheels, the wind, and the echoes, but fortunately my augmented hearing picked it up easily enough.

“Too bad you drugged the old fart then, isn’t it?” Whisper asked with a grin.

“I wasn’t going to pick him in the first place!” I bellowed up at them.

“Better he’s mad at me for drugging him than mad at himself for being old and injured. My family needs him, and he can help them a lot more than he can help the world,” Dusk said. “No pony needs me now.”

I wanted to argue, but just then we passed through a merging junction. I looked behind us and spotted two Ultra-Sentinels emerging from the other tunnel and sprinting after us... literally. At least, they had been Ultra-Sentinels. The meaty flesh that enveloped their lower legs now formed mangled limbs they galloped along the tracks with. They still had their old armament, but now they had mouths! Great metal maws that screamed and gnashed mindlessly as they raced to take a bite out of us. “Two bogies on our rear!” I yelled.

“Oh, can I—” the mare at the control stand to the left of the locker offered.

“No!” four of us shouted at once.

“The supports were already compromised, and it only collapsed ninety percent of the section anyway,” the mare muttered. “You all act like it was the whole thing.”

“I’m on it!” Crumpets shouted. The Steel Ranger’s thick armor absorbed the fusillade of red energy beams as she braced herself against the back of the car. She’d

swapped her shotguns for something a little more substantial. “Clear!” she yelled, and a shimmery field sprang up between her and us. The missile roared down the tunnel at the pair of cyborgs, the fiery backwash curling against Crumpets and blackening her armor. The machine grenade launcher on her other side chugged away as well, filling the tunnel behind us with shrapnel and fire. Still, these were Ultra-Sentinel abominations, and even with chunks blown out, they didn’t go down. They were just left behind, which was good enough for me.

“Switch!” Whisper yelled. “It’s on the right!”

“We want to go left,” a filly said, and I glanced down to Pythia sitting calmly to the right of the middle of the car in the space under Psalm, examining the tunnel maps duct taped to the floor around her.

“Hit the button,” I shouted to Lancer. The zebra rose up and stood quite easily on the rattling, swaying floor, steadying his shot as we approached the switch. Three green lights, their colors washing out to piss-yellow with the pulsing of the red emergency lights, glowed steadily on the right wall, three dark lamps on the other side. Past the three pairs, a button no bigger than a hoof was set in a little box poking from the wall. Had we been travelling at sane speeds, we could have simply stopped, reached out, jabbed it, and waited for the tracks to switch.

Lancer hit the button at a hundred yards.

We needed the time as the lights on both sides turned to flashing yellow and automatic systems started switching tracks. We passed one pair of lights, the floor working ahead of us. Two. The tunnel clanked and clacked. The third, and the smoking remnants of the switching button flew past us.

Then, just before we reached the split, the lights on the right went out and the lights on the left began glowing steadily. The car careened around the curve past the switch, and half of us lunged to the left to keep us on the tracks. “See? Aren’t you glad you brought me along?” Pythia said cheerfully.

“I didn’t bring you! You stowed away! I specifically said ‘no fillies or colts allowed’!” It had pained me to use that to deny Scotch Tape, but I couldn’t take her down here. Not after what I’d promised. I held out a wing. “You’re supposed to be this tall to stop the apocalypse!”

“Yeah, yeah. Like I’m going to miss out on a front row seat when you kill an undead star monster.” She leaned over and marked an X on the map in red crayon before adding, “We’re almost halfway there!”

“Just be glad I had my own moonstone,” Whisper snapped back at us, touching her red earring, “or you’d be a pile of bloody goop.”

“Yeah yeah,” she said with a dismissive wave of her hoof as she looked from the tunnel maps to her starmap and flourished a crystal over it. “Oh, heads up!”

“For wha— Eeeee!” Whisper shrieked as a silvery blob exploded out of a vent, swirling like ink in water as it lunged towards her and Dusk. The latter shoved the former away, knocking her back over the railcar and leaving herself the sole meal. “Flame! Flame! Fucking flame already!” Whisper shouted. The mechasprites seemed to glue themselves to Dusk, their mouths working as they started to chew through her black-enameled armor. I had no doubt that when they were through, they’d continue to eat. Echo had discovered that the hard way.

Then the tunnel roof filled with fire as Aries, standing at the front of the car, set her incinerator roaring against the wind. Dusk was engulfed just long enough for the mechasprites to pop like popcorn. When the flame cut off, Dusk was left faintly trailing smoke. “You okay?” the pony in a new suit of red power armor shouted up, a few blackened bits of mechasprite bouncing off her. “Still rare?”

“Yeah. Just ruined the finish,” Dusk replied, then barked, “Did you just make a joke about cooking me? What’s wrong with you?”

“Hey, you work with fire for a living and see how many bad fire-related jokes you come up with,” she said as she turned to incinerate the sprites just emerging from another passing vent, rendering the cloud into a shower of sizzling shrapnel. “This Burner blend is nasty. What kind of moron mixes an oxidizer with the fuel?”

“What kind of moron *uses* it?” I asked with a smile.

“Touché,” the armored pony answered casually. I really wished I had more time to get to know her. I’d just wanted a flamer with me; I had no clue about the pony using it. A few more brilliant flowers of flame blossomed, consuming the last of the swarms, and then Aries asked, “Why wasn’t any of this reported in the scouting?”

“Because the Eater wasn’t truly exerting itself then,” Pythia explained. “It is now. Its soul warps and twists these threats into reality,” the filly continued as she traced her hoof along the red tunnel map. “Fortunately, the layout hasn’t changed much. We’re almost to the medial transfer ring. After that, we’ll go into the inner...” She trailed off. “Rock!”

“Inner rock?” I frowned, then looked down the tunnel at where a large slab of the roof had fallen down. “Lift!”

Unicorn horns flared to life, and the slab lurched into the air. At the same time, Aries climbed onto the cowcatcher and braced herself against the forward rail. "Get clear!" she bellowed, and then the slab was on us. Her hindhooves impacted it just before we could smash into it, and the slab went rocketing down the subway tunnel ahead of the car, still suspended above the ground by our magic field. The car's wide metal wheels skipped over the fouled section of track with a hard bump, but we didn't detail.

"You okay?" I asked, working with Psalm to keep the rock levitated, sweat dripping down our brows as the strain started to wear. There was a curve up ahead, though, and it wouldn't hurt to ram a big frigging rock into the face of something nasty hiding around the bend.

"Earth pony for the win," she answered, then shifted from one hindleg to another and worked them back and forth. "Though I'm pretty sure Applejack never planned on this."

"Well, this a little much to plan for," I replied. Though that hadn't stopped some ponies...

"Huh?" Aries looked back at me. "I mean using power armor as construction equipment." Then she gave a low laugh. "Pretty sure ol' C.C. would have shit himself if he'd seen me just then."

I would have pressed further, but suddenly the chunk of ceiling flying ahead of us was bisected, then the halves were sliced, and those divided into smaller and smaller pieces. There was the faintest shimmer of silvery light.

"Wires!" I shouted, and the wheels shrieked, sparks flying as I leapt onto the storage locker to get a clear view. There was no way we'd stop in time, so I pulled out a bottle and telekinetically levitated a cloud of the sparkly, shimmery white dust inside ahead of us. Starmetal threads fizzed and exploded like fireworks as they came in contact with the cloud, the formerly taut ends snapping and lashing around the car. The pegasi had started pulling back as soon as I shouted, but Dusk, slower in her armor, didn't quite get clear. A wire wrapped around one of her forelegs like a strand of a spider's web, then tightened, cinching clean through the limb. The end of her leg went flying as she crashed in a heap on the car's floor, blood spurting from the wound.

Magic reached out and caught the limb before it fell off the car, immediately returning it to the injured mare. "Shhh," Psalm said as she touched her horn to the wound. "Hold still. It's a clean cut. If I'm quick enough..." The glow of magic flickered briefly.

“Did that work?” she asked calmly as she looked at the pegasus.

“Feels tingly,” she said, inspecting the line cut through her armor. “And my armor’s damaged.”

“Better than missing!” Whisper shouted. “Wrap it in duct tape and get back into the fight.”

The cowcatcher blasted the rubble of the fallen, kicked, and sliced slab off to the sides, and as soon as we were past the threads, we got back up to speed. Soon our tunnel merged at an angle with another one, more cavernous than the rest and with a slight curve to it. Three sets of tracks ran parallel here, with all kinds of switches going from each track to the others. It seemed vaguely familiar to me. “This is it!” Pythia shouted. “The medial ring! We need to get to the far left set of tracks!”

Without getting blown up, cut to pieces, killed in a wreck, or shot to ribbons. While these tracks were nominally intact, they appeared to have been coated with the bloody gunk I’d seen under the city before. Grotesque, wiggling oblongs exploded into sanguine muck when we struck them. Dusk, her power armor patched with a strip of gray tape, took to the air again, and I landed back at the car’s rear.

“Blackjack!” Crumpets shouted, and I stared behind us. The tunnel was coming after us, forming disjointed monstrosities resembling scorpions and crabs that snapped at us as we passed. Other patches of biomass were forming five-legged wolflike beings that loped after us with mouths that ran half their body length, or swarms of flapping, gnashing insectile birds that tried to keep up with us. The railcar skipped and bounced as the cowcatcher kept hitting the crud crawling onto the tracks ahead of us. “What do I shoot?”

Shit. We hadn’t covered this. Also, what was that distant yellow light and screeching noise from around the tunnel’s curve behind us? “Everything,” I muttered, my eyes widening. We raced along, Crumpets’s grenades tearing huge holes in the packs behind us, but there were always more forming and reforming. Ahead of us, incandescent flowers blossomed as Aries’s incendiary grenades burst. “Shoot everything!” The whole car lurched as we splattered something the size of a brahmin on the tracks. “Get us off these tracks!”

“Hard to see the buttons,” Lancer muttered next to me as he aimed down the tunnel.

“They’re every hundred yards, I think,” Pythia said. “Just use math.”

“Use math,” Lancer growled. “You’re probably delivering us straight into its maw.”

“Eh. That would be boring. And stereotypical. Bigot,” the filly said casually. He

started to retort when she shouted, "Switch coming up now!"

I didn't see if he was quibbling with Pythia or taking the shot, because I was occupied with several of the flesh dogs racing up beside the car. I lifted a riot shotgun, loaded a drum of flechettes, and opened fire. The pulpy masses that were their heads burst apart in tatters of gore, but more meaty mass arched from the globs alongside the tracks and assembled into tissue, muscle, bone, and fangs... many fangs. I tried to shoot them before they had their fangs back.

Dusk had slightly better luck. Her power armor had a little rig next to the helmet that held her sister's prismatic blaster nicely. The rainbow beam transformed monster after monster into sparkly dust. Aries sprayed sheets of flame overhead, transforming the flying monstrosities into blazing sparks that crackled and popped as they burned away. Crumpets's missiles and grenades sent huge swaths of the fleshy beasts flying away with each detonation, the missiles outright vaporizing flocks... er... swarms... huge clouds of the flappy bitey thingies! Turrets along the ceiling dropped, pouring out death of the ballistic and magical variety, and Psalm raised a shield to block their fire till we were past.

Then the apex of her shield struck an overhead girder, and the bubble popped with the force she tried to absorb. The alicorn all but collapsed next to Pythia, grimacing in pain. This wasn't the first time, either. One of the hounds launched itself onto the car at the pair, its elongated body opening wide in a maw that could bite a pony in half. Tentacles reached out, and even those ended in lamprey-like mouths.

Aries lunged at the monster and rammed the tip of her flamer, and her head, into its mouth, her forehooves reaching around to clutch its jaws shut. The hound's too-numerous eyes bulged and twitched, then smoked, then popped. The beast swelled and burst into blackened chunks of cooked meat. The red power armor smoked as Aries pulled back, the enamel pitted with hissing acid, but it was still intact. "Wooo-wee! If we had the time, that's what I'd call good eating!"

"You've been native way too bloody long, Aries," Crumpets shouted.

"That's why I left Bucklyn. Food sucked," Aries replied as she tossed the chunks of mandible aside.

"I have so got to hear this story when we're done!" I yelled. "So both of you live, okay?"

"Are you sure I can't..." our driver asked again.

"No!" I shouted at her. "We need you to control the car! Besides, remember what

happened last time?”

“You nearly bury everypony alive *once*, and nopony lets you hear the end of it,” she said sulkily.

Then Lancer found a switch and fired, and the lights, here half on the walls and half on signal post between the rail lines, began to flash. There was a clack and then a jerk as we were routed onto the middle set of tracks. “One more!” Pythia said. “Then we transit to the inner ring. We should be able to get to the Eater’s shaft from there!”

The hounds were falling behind, and it didn’t look like any more were forming ahead of us. I had no idea why, but I’d take anything I could get at the moment. Now we had concrete support columns on either side giving us some cover from the turrets above the outer track. Except for the predictable gaps for the switches that let the turret fire through, things were looking up.

Then bright yellow lights glared brightly behind us, and I turned...

The monsters had trains of their own.

Three of them.

And they had *mouths*.

The trains to the left and right of us started to pull alongside us while the one on our line moved in, at its front an immense, metal-studded compactor that smashed and gnashed behind us. Psalm lifted her head and interposed a beam of magic between us and that train. The magic bulged as the train behind tried to overtake us, bending elastically as she strained. The other two trains to the left and right slowly crawled ahead. The flatcars they pulled were bristling with Ultra-Sentinel monsterbots.

“Can I *now*?” our driver asked plaintively.

“Okay,” I groaned. “Now you can.”

“Finally!” Sweetie Bot exclaimed as she left the controls, turned, and squeezed past me. Crumpets was firing missiles at the train gaining on our rear, but the damn thing bit down on each projectile as it hit, filling its mouth with flames and jagged shrapnel. The robotic mare leaned against the back rail as if she were on a sightseeing trip. Then there was an ominous humming, and every muscle in her body tightened under her synthetic skin. “Let’s see you swallow this, you hideous embarrassment of technology!”

The mare’s horn erupted, hurling brilliant emerald green bolts screaming one after

another down the tunnel behind us. They plowed into the wide maw of the train, shredding it to twisted metal and slag, but still the machine kept up her assault. More bolts drilled deeper and deeper into the train's body, its studded metal hide deforming and popping rivets like bullets, green flame and goopy disintegrating metal gouting from the holes.

Sweetie halted her attack, and for a brief instant we could see the monsterbots clean through the melting, glowing green hole blasted through the locomotive. Then the locomotive began to sag as if it was made of hot wax, its underside catching on the rails and driving it into the concrete floor of the tunnel. Robbed of its ability to move forward but none of its momentum, the train of cars previously being pulled by the mechanical nightmare was sent careening over its mangled, melting corpse, twisting off the track, into itself, and across the tunnel. The cars rammed into support pillars on both sides, sending webs of cracks up them, and the monstrosities the train had been carrying were lost in the new barricade of pulped flesh and twisted, smoking metal.

Sweetie Bot collapsed against the rail, her synthetic hide smoking around her brow. "Why the hell did Horse put that kind of firepower in a fuckbot?" Whisper demanded.

"A question for the ages," she answered gaily. When her dismissive response didn't dissuade us, she went on a little more waspishly, "The previous imprint made extensive modifications. It could never get them working, though; million-word semi-coherent expletive-riddled diatribes against Horse weren't valid hardware registration files. It did try to erase my pleasure routines, but I still have all five hundred verses of the Zebra Sutra programmed and available on demand."

"Whatever," Whisper said with a shrug. "Do it to the other two."

"Gladly," Sweetie Bot said. "Recharging. One percent..." She paused for several seconds. "Two percent..." We stared at her, and she flushed, "Oh, no one complains when stallions have to take a few minutes afterwards!"

Too long. The monsterbots on the trains flanking us were taking aim, and while the pillars gave us some cover, the monsterbots had a lot of miniguns to hurl a lot of metal. "Faster! We need to go faster!" I shouted.

Whisper and Dusk arched overhead, grabbed the back of the railcar, and fanned their wings like there was no tomorrow. Psalm tried to cover us all with a shield shaped to avoid striking the architecture around us but couldn't cover the pair of pegasi. Dusk had armor. Whisper didn't. The bullets and flak began to bite into her body, leaving bloody holes. She just screamed and pushed harder. Bit by bit we

drew ahead of the train on the inner track.

“Switch!” Pythia shouted. Lancer snapped his gun up and took the shot. The railcar swapped tracks so fast that Psalm and I had to use our magic to keep it stable. The train now behind us roared and surged forward. Psalm resumed her magical beam, blocking it and giving me a chance to pull the injured pegasus in, but she had to drop her shield to do so. Crumpets maintained a steady, thundering barrage of missiles and grenades, but unlike the meat puppets, the resilient trains were hardly slowed by her firing into their gnashing teeth.

Whisper collapsed on the locker, her legs a bloody mess. “Fuck. Ow. Fucking ow...” she hissed. I lifted her up enough to open the locker and withdraw a couple of healing potions. “I want off this fucking train,” she cursed between gulps.

“At least we put some distance between us and that other one,” I said, looking at the far track.

No sooner had I said that than the train on the outer track moved into the middle and began accelerating again. “Oh, come on!” I shouted. The train behind us slowed while the one next to us started to pull not just alongside but ahead. “Something’s going on,” I warned as I watched the first train matching our speed while the other moved ahead foot by foot. The fire from the strafing monsterbots pinged and chattered all around us, and all of us except Dusk, Aries, and Crumpets ducked down behind the armor as well as we could. “How far to the turnoff, Pythia?”

She looked up as something marked on the wall whooshed by. “That was mile marker three so... a minute?” the filly shouted from the shelter of Psalm’s legs.

“We don’t have a minute. Soon as that train ahead of us reaches a switch, they’ll move onto this track and crush us!” I bellowed over the grinding and screaming of metal. I stared at an oncoming switch and watched the lights change. “Lancer! Change it back!”

Aries stood, her armor providing Lancer with enough cover to rise, too. Lancer took the shot just before the train on our right reached the switch, the lights changing back and the rails moving back with a crunch. The train let out a growl of frustration before accelerating even faster. Crumpets had shifted to more judicious missile strikes that had rendered the train behind us a flaming mess, but it didn’t matter. It didn’t have to eat us. As soon as the other train got on the inner track, it could slam on the brakes and crush us between them. If it didn’t get all the way past us before switching, it wouldn’t even— “When’s the next switch from this track to the middle one?” I called out.

“Um, that track’s pretty occupied right now, Blackjack!” Pythia shouted over the gunfire. There were at least nine cars in view on the right.

“When?!”

“Twenty seconds!” she shrieked.

I couldn’t have Lancer take the shot; it’d be way too close. I’d have to do it. I moved to the edge with Vigilance drawn and rose to my hooves. As the button approached, I jumped into S.A.T.S. and fired three rounds at it. One miss... two... but the third round struck home! The lights turned yellow just as we were passing over the switch. Our front wheels made it through, but, with a jolt, a screech, and a shower of sparks, our right rear wheel hit the moving rail and rode over it. For too long a moment I was afraid I’d just derailed us, that we’d get stuck in the switch, or flip over, or crash into a wall or pillar, but then we slammed back down and kept going.

The train behind us kept going, too. Right into the side of the train that had been trying to get ahead of us. The locomotive rammed the car it hit off the other the track and straight into a support pillar on the other side, all three disintegrating in a cloud of razor sharp steel and jagged concrete. It took with it all but the locomotive and first two cars of the center train, the rest ending up lying off the track, sideways, smashed, or scattered. On our track, the first car behind the destroyed locomotive was blown back off the track, one end hitting a support pillar and the other scraping the wall. The far end of the one behind it slammed into the ceiling. After that I lost track of which car was where except for the one hurtling straight at us. Psalm got her shield back up just in time, and I flung... something... some kind of shieldy sort of magic to help shore up her defense. The only other thing we could do was flatten ourselves to the floor and let the magic absorb some of the blow. Thanks to her, and maybe a little bit to me, instead of being crushed, we were merely knocked sideways into a spin, another shriek of steel on concrete joining the cacophony; Whisper was flung off and barely managed to catch herself with her wings before hitting the wall. When it ended, we were at an angle to the track, two wheels between the rails and none on them. As the remaining locomotive and its two cars of monsterbots disappeared around the curve, a roar of rubble and dust heralded the collapse of the roof behind us.

“Get it back on the rails!” I yelled. “Hurry!” We piled out, Crumpets, Aries, and Psalm getting to work getting the car back into position and Sweetie Bot ‘supervising’. Up ahead, about three dozen feet, I saw the spur tunnel that would take us to the inner transfer ring. Past that, though, around the curve of the medial ring, I thought I heard mechanical shrieking and grinding noises. Now wasn’t the time to worry about that,

though; with the car stopped, the critters we'd left behind before were returning with a vengeance. They swarmed over the rubble, snapping and hissing and gnashing teeth in places that had no business having mouths. I wielded Vigilance and a riot shotgun interchangeably, switching between them as I needed to reload. Overhead, Dusk laid out a field of fire with Pew-Pew while Whisper was practically a yellow blur punctuated by brilliant flashes and splattering meat. Lancer stood upon a piece of rubble, firing at them with precision that was utterly wasted. These things, if they had brains, probably carried more than one in their bodies. His sniper rounds were going completely through the creatures and barely slowing them down at all.

"Errorerrorerrorerror!" shrieked an Ultra-Sentinel that clawed its way over the pile of rubble. Its gatling beam gun began to sweep back and forth across us as its twisted legs struggled to push and pull it through a gap the robot would never ever normally attempt. Lancer and Whisper's coats immediately sprouted black burn marks. Lancer swept his gun over to the mangled machine and fired shots repeatedly at the beam gun, shredding it in a shower of sparks and steel before it could inflict too much damage.

But he'd taken his eyes off the hounds. One of them sprang through a gap in the pillars, bounded once, and snatched him up whole in his maw like a dog with a bone, only his head and hindhooves sticking out from the sides as it began to thrash wildly about. I leapt at it, silver sword slicing neatly through its head, but the instant Lancer was freed, the dozen or more holes left in him began to gush blood. The halves of the hound I'd severed were busy pulling themselves back into new and deadly forms.

"Drink," I said as I levitated a potion to him. "Drink up!"

Blood bubbled out his mouth and nostrils as I struggled to keep the attacking creatures at bay and administer the potion at the same time. It was just trickling futilely down his chin as he struggled to breathe. "Stop him," he said, weakly. "Stop my father. End his pain." He pressed his bent rifle against my chest. "Please. Promise. For me. My mother. My sister. My people!" Something lunged at me, but it collapsed in a shower of rainbow dust. "Please... promise me."

"I promise. Now drink, damn you!" I said, putting the mouth of the bottle into his, but it still just dribbled out the corner of his mouth. "Drink it you stupid, sexy stallion!"

But he couldn't. His eyes were glazed and unfocused as he crumpled in on himself.

One, a dusty voice chuckled.

"Blackjack!" Sweetie Bot shouted. I gritted my teeth and glanced up to see her

pointing down the tunnel. The light was coming back. The car was back on the track, and I could hear the train getting closer again. I levitated up Lancer and set him in the car, laying his gun across his body. The wheels were turning, but the car was taking too long to get going. "Push!" Sweetie Bot urged Psalm, Aries, and Crumpets. I jogged alongside and climbed in with Pythia. As the car sped up further, the alicorn boarded with a flap and then levitated the Steel Rangers on. I took the shot at the button with Vigilance, switching our path to the spur.

The rear of the train came into view, coming up fast. Hounds chasing us and Ultra-Sentinels firing from the cars ahead of us, we accelerated so slowly it felt like we'd lapsed into S.A.T.S. Psalm's shield protected us from disintegration, but it buckled under a barrage of rockets as we raced the train to the spur switch. I wondered desperately if we could levitate the car to clear the rear of the train, but that'd just mean scraping ourselves to meat jelly against the ceiling. "Come on. Come on!" I shouted as the spur grew closer and closer.

The car slipped onto the spur, the rear of the train clipping the rear corner with a bang that nearly knocked us off the rails again. A moment later the reversed locomotive whooshed past us, maw snarling, and, from the sound of it, crashed its cars into the collapse with another thunderous impact of shredding metal. "Make sure it can't follow," I told Crumpets. The mare nodded, and her grenade machine gun turned the tracks behind us into an impassable tangle. Unless the train grew legs or something... which wasn't all that impossible.

Ugh... I fucking hated this place...

I squeezed over to Lancer's corpse in the front. Some of us stared at the body. Others kept their eyes out for threats, like I should have been doing. Did he have a chance to make amends with Majina? To make up for what he'd done... to those zebras at Brimstone's Fall... to me? I could only hope we'd be able to get his body back for some kind of... whatever zebras did with their dead. "So," Pythia queried, "how's that curse coming along, Maiden?"

"Not now," I answered.

"Not a whole lot of time left, if not now," she replied.

"What do you want?" I asked tiredly.

"Me? Saltwater taffy. A kitten. Front row seats at the end of the world. Usual filly stuff." She poked me in the chest. "What do *you* want, Maiden?"

I didn't answer for a moment. "I want people to stop dying," I answered as I stared

at his body.

“Why?” she asked, as if genuinely perplexed.

“Why?” I echoed back with a great deal more scorn. “Do you want to die?”

“Eventually, yeah. Doesn’t everyone?” she asked as she stared down the tunnel. “Death isn’t a bad thing. Pain isn’t a bad thing either, really. It reminds you that you’re still alive.” She closed her eyes. “Suffering is, but that’s a concern of the living.” She then looked gravely up at me. “Do you want to die, Maiden?”

I couldn’t answer that. “I have to live. I have to finish this, with no one else dying.”

“But do you want to die?” she asked, and when I didn’t answer, she went on, “The Legate was obsessed with not dying. For him, it was the ultimate defeat. But so what? Eventually, you lose. It’s what makes the game fun. The Eater’s so terrified of death because it’s the ultimate insult to its ego. How could it... mightiest and greatest of all... fail? But everything does fail, Maiden. Eventually the proudest mountains are ground to plains and the tallest trees collapse to rot.”

“So you’re saying that we should all die?” I snapped. Hadn’t I heard enough of this shit from Tom?

“I’m saying that you need to separate death from suffering. Do you think Lancer regretted coming down here with you? That he wished he’d had a few extra minutes outside and let someone else take his place?” she demanded of me, and all I could do was shake my head. “Good,” Pythia said with a small smile. “None of us do. We don’t want to die, but we’re not afraid to. All things come to an end.” She stared at me. “The Eater wants to live. It wants a second chance at life, and it isn’t willing to do it the natural way. It clings to existence because it is the greatest thing in the universe, by its own measure. To cease to exist would be intolerable, as it would bring about a great emptiness that, to it, nothing in the universe can replace.”

She considered me soberly. “So, Maiden... Blackjack... what do you want more than anything?”

“Um, guys,” Aries said from the front of the car. “I think we’re almost there.”

I stared ahead, scanning for turrets or wires or mechasprites or... anything... but as we emerged into the inner ring of the red tunnels—

...I hadn’t expected this.

The Core.

The red tunnels were supposed to be reinforced against any kind of enemy attack, which was likely the only reason they survived at all. Here, though, parts of the inner wall and ceiling had been gouged away, leaving gaps that opened out into the colossal pit the Eater had scraped during its ascension. Everything that had been in the Core and hadn't been needed for supporting and elevating the Eater had fallen down here. Slabs of building. Passenger trains. Skywagons. Cascades of mulched furniture of all kinds. Pipes and other rail lines, some jutting out from the walls and others piled amid the wreckage. Thousands of emergency lights gave the entire shaft a garish crimson glow. As a final decorative touch, the entire mess appeared as if a bloody slurry had been vomited all over it.

All of us stared as we rolled along the Core's underworld, taken in by the sight and the coppery stench and the echoes of countless groaning, broken structures and the occasional snapping power line. Up above were the crushed-together bases of dozens, perhaps hundreds of buildings. Somehow I had to get through all of that. I gestured to Sweetie Bot, and the car slowed down as I considered what we'd need to do next. At least there was only one red bar on my E.F.S.

Wait. Only one?

From the depths of the pit rose a gargantuan shadow. A mountain of flesh and meat, pierced and studded with metal and wire. It was misshapen, unfinished, like a clay sculpture the artist had aborted halfway through and had cruelly ripped and torn with malice before throwing it away. If only this were clay. If only.

"Blackjack," the Legate boomed as two enormous, milky eyes turned towards me. I knew he wasn't blind. He had a few hundred more speckled all over his head and shoulders, like zits, to follow us with. He breathed low and deep, not just through his mouth but through countless slits in his chest. He lifted a limb the size of a ship and slammed it into the wall above us. "I knew you'd come," he gurgled, the voice echoed by a chorus of lesser mouths on his hide, "Maiden."

All of us stared in shock and horror, except Pythia, who smirked flatly at the abomination. The talisman in his chest had prevented him from changing for the worse for ten thousand years or more. Ten thousand years of growth. Ten thousand years of injury. Ten thousand years of poison and disease. He was experiencing it all right now. Death would be a mercy for the Legate, not that he'd ever accept it.

"How's serving fallen stars working for you now, you moron?!" Pythia shouted up at him.

He screamed like a thousand backed up sewer pipes bursting all at once and

rammed his hoof at us. We accelerated into a covered section of track just as the immense hoof impacted behind us, making the car skip on the rails. "Get in the air as quickly as you can," I ordered. "Fan out and keep him busy while I look for a way through." Then I hesitated with a glance at Lancer's body lying in the corner with his bent gun. "Try not to die. Please."

"Hadn't planned on it. That's your thing," Whisper snapped as we reached the next opening. "Got any heavy metal tunes you could pull out of your ass, Sweetie Butt?"

Sweetie rolled her eyes. "It wasn't exactly Horsie's favorite genre, but I think I have one or two tracks." I wasn't sure where she kept her speakers, but wailing sirens started, followed by a heavy beat. "Goat music... Ramsomething or other."

"Perfect," Whisper said as she launched herself into the air. The Legate's immense hoof streaked down towards us, but she skimmed its surface, drawing a dotted line of power hoof detonations, carnage fountaining behind her and twisting the hoof's trajectory to send it smashing against the wall of the shaft above us. I couldn't understand the song's lyrics, but I didn't need to. The sentiment was clear enough.

Dusk and Psalm launched themselves into the air, Pythia on Psalm's back. Aries twisted as we passed under the bulging limb and sprayed a thick sheet of blazing flamer fuel over the extremity as Crumpets sent a rocket up into its flesh, a bloody fountain of gore erupting out the side. "Fifty... Fifty-one..." Sweetie Bot counted morosely as she continued to blare the music.

Dusk went straight for the Legate's face, blasting those immense milky pools with her beam rifle as she swept around his head like a black wasp. He lifted his other foreleg, blocking the searing spear of light as if by reflex. Whisper was singing along with the music, either knowing the words or just channeling that strange power music held. She'd strafe along his body, arch out, and then slam in with four-hoofed kicks that blew out bloody chucks.

Now if only he wasn't as big as a skyscraper.

I jumped into the air and made my way up towards the tangle of beams, concrete, pipes, and wires, searching for a way through. It seemed impossible. The bases of all those buildings were compressed into a massive knot that even my sword wouldn't be enough to cut through. There had to be a way, though. Some gap. I tried to push through a hole but only got ten feet before it pinched too tight for me to proceed any further.

Pulling my head out, I watched as the car raced around the track, spraying fire and

flame whenever part of the Legate got close enough. I needed something that could tear right through all this... and then I spotted a green glow on the track. "Sweetie Bot!" I shouted, and teleported down to the car. "Don't—" Her horn let out a fusillade of bright green bolts that blew clear through the Legate's torso in a strobe-lit cloud of gore. The hole tore wide, unleashing a hot slurry that had him clutching his chest in agony. "Fire..."

"What *now*?" Sweetie Bot asked, her horn and forehead smoking.

"I can't get through up there. I need your horn to punch a hole through that crap!" I shouted, pointing up at the cavity's ceiling.

Sweetie Bot stared at me, at the ceiling, and then at the Legate. "Okay. Recharging."

"If you're just hanging out down there," Whisper shouted down at me as she whirled around the Legate's head, darting in and out like a yellow lightning bolt, "could you lend us a hoof? If you're not too busy?" The heaving mass clutched its chest as the hole continued to discharge gore. I watched the Legate carefully. He was healing, but nothing like before. His body seemed to be just squishing the injury closed.

I flew up to where Psalm was hovering with ammo and bottles of healing potions in Pythia's lap as she sat on the alicorn's back. "Does he still have the heart?"

"Namtar says only the Maiden can kill him, but Dagon says no living thing can slay him. Make up your minds..." she mumbled sullenly as she peeked at a folded-over section of her map before looking irritably at me and answering, "The chunks are in there still, and they're keeping him going. The Eater's probably supporting him with that soulless flesh, too. There's no way in the Abyss that he's alive naturally." Then she muttered, "The stars are being butts, though... I really thought I'd worked that out."

"Right." I sighed and closed my eyes, then opened them and stared down at the Legate. The immense behemoth's mouth split wide as his countless eyes glared back with millennia of malice.

"Come, Maiden. Let me correct my prophesy," the Legate said as he spread his hooves wide. But in doing so, he exposed that grievous wound in his chest. My eyes picked it out, a twisted knot of black and green light that wildly flickered and flashed. It was wedged in a spur of busted rib the size of a large tree.

"Tell the others," I said, looking at the pair as I drew the starmetal sword and Vigilance. "Get the pieces to me. Keep everyone alive." I stared at Pythia, and she started at my gaze. "If there's any star out there that will help me, I'll take it. What-

ever games they want to play, I don't care. I need to win here."

For an instant, Pythia's expression mirrored her youthful form. Then she thumped Psalm's neck. "I need to fold out my map! Get me back to the railcar!"

"No deals dooming the world or garbage like that," I pointed out.

"Well, duh. I'm not a moron," Pythia said with a roll of her eyes. "I like the world staying here. It's where I live." Psalm teleported away as I looked down at the Legate. He spread his arms wide, ignoring Whisper and Dusk's assault upon his head. I was all that mattered to him right now.

"Come, Maiden," he said again, in a grotesque croon. "Let me reunite you with your loved ones."

I gave the sword a swish through the air beside me and disappeared, reappearing before the gaping, grotesque hole in his chest. Hot, wet air and the stench of a slaughterhouse hit me like a wall, but there, in front of me, lay a quarter of his heart, no bigger than my hoof.

And instantly I was assaulted by his fleshy entrails. A hundred or more serpentine coils of viscera shot out in bloody streamers, roping over my wings and legs. They coiled around the hilt of the sword and yanked the blade short of the stone. Both the blade and I were pulled into the cavity, and it took all my telekinetic power to keep him from pulling the sword away from me entirely. "Oh, a teleport. Didn't see that coming," the Legate chuckled sarcastically. "And while I'd love for you to watch *more* of your friends die, I think you've experienced enough of that." I smelled bile. "Time for lunch."

Crimson and rainbow beams dazzled around me, turning the flesh into a cascade of rainbow colored ash. Dusk whooshed in and ripped and tore wildly with her wings and barbed tail as Glory's prismatic blaster continued to fire. "The sword! Shoot the sword!" I shouted. She aimed with all the precision S.A.T.S. had to offer, and the tissue that was trying to engulf the weapon vaporized. Free of the flesh, my magic whipped it around and slashed at the lodged stone. The impact made the entire mountain of meat tremble as I struck again and again, feeling a thrill of joy at the Legate's howls.

On the third blow, the stone exploded into fragments, and I watched as those fragments exploded into dust. A dark mote, throbbing with crackling green energy, hovered for a moment before it was pulled into the Legate... towards his head... "The next one is in his head!" I shouted as loudly as I could. Probably inside a skull thick

as a concrete bunker.

Dusk ripped me free, and I moved a little bit away. Dusk didn't follow, though; I turned and saw her struggling with her hindlegs buried in the Legate's mass. I grabbed her outstretched hoof with my hands, pulling as hard as I could, to keep her from being consumed. My horn flashed multiple times, sending bolts of white magic into the sanguine innards, but she was slowly pulled deeper. Then a shadow moved above me, and I saw the Legate's immense hoof sweeping down. "Go!" Dusk shouted, and then she shot me in the chest with Pew-Pew. Luna's armor absorbed the blow, but it still stung more than enough to break my grip. I teleported back, the hoof rocketing by and trailing a vortex that pulled me after it, flipping me over several times before I could stabilize myself. I watched as Dusk disappeared into the Legate's mass.

"Ohh, I can feel her wriggling!" the Legate taunted. "Now, be careful with those damned energy blasts. Wouldn't want to kill your friend!"

Oh, he really needed to die. Was he lying? Did it matter? Was I ruthless enough to risk vaporizing one of my own to stop him? His hooves rushed together at me, and I teleported away as they collided with a thunderous boom. I appeared above him, and Whisper flew up to me. "What's the plan?"

"The next one is in his head," I said, pointing down with the sword. "Have any clue how to get through that skull?"

"Heh." She grinned and dropped like a lightning bolt, landing atop his head with a resounding crack. Just as fast, she rose and fell again. And again. The flesh of his skull was blasted away, revealing a chipped plate of bone. The Legate howled as he swept his hooves over his head, but she just nipped around them, striking the same spot again and again.

Then, though, she rose back to me, her hooves trailing smoke and dangling metal. "Shit," she said in a disgusted tone. "His skull's thicker than most I try to get through." She regarded her power hooves. "Let me snag a replacement. I'll find some way to get in there." She darted down towards the car. The Legate punched a monstrous hoof straight up at me, and I teleported down to the car as well. The entire chamber boomed, and debris clattered down on us as we rolled along. Psalm protected us from the shower of stones, the cowcatcher banging aside the largest debris. Whisper landed and narrowed her eyes. "Frigging magic," she muttered as she pulled off the blackened power hooves. "How are we going to get through that skull?"

“Forty-one. Forty-two,” Sweetie Bot counted regularly.

“Not you. I need you to make a hole,” I told Sweetie Bot, then turned to the others. Behind us were loud booms as the Legate mashed his hooves at us, twisting around to try and get a good hit. We needed to scatter.

“You need to get his bonce open?” Crumpets asked me. I nodded. She looked at Aries, and the other Ranger nodded once. “Leave it to us. We’ll crack that nut. I’m an expert at dealing with thick-headed ponies.” Then she paused. “Where’s Dusk?”

I closed my eyes. “She’s inside that thing.”

Then we were flying, and not in a good way. The Legate had finally found a way to catch us: laying his hoof across the tracks. We’d hit it like a wall... a fleshy wall, which was probably the only saving grace of most of us. Sweetie Bot had managed to snag the control stand, but the rest of us went flying into the Legate’s limb. The Steel Ranger armor, and my own, banged loudly against the slightly yielding surface, and Whisper was able to fly clear. Psalm pulled Pythia into her hooves with her magic, turning and spreading her wings wide.

Then she slammed into the hoof, her bones crackling like brittle wood.

I watched her bounce off the surface, her wings having slowed her but not enough, as I crashed on my back back on the car. She managed to land on her hooves, but then she wobbled once, then collapsed. Under us, the wheels were spinning and sending out sparks. “Hey!” Pythia cried. “Come on! You’re an alicorn! You should be able to take that hit!” She pulled free of Psalm’s legs and scrambled for a bottle of healing potion from the locker, but it had smashed and dribbled over her hooves.

If Psalm died, what would happen to the Brood, even if I won here? I struggled to pull out one of my own potions when I heard the noise of rushing air. I looked up at the Legate’s triumphant grin and his other colossal hoof descending towards us.

Then, he paused. His enormous, bloody sockets fixed on something behind me, and his grin lessened a little. I passed the healing potion to Pythia, and she quickly administered it to Psalm, then saw his gaze. Not on me. No.

On the slain zebra in the corner. Even with the impact, he rested slumped, as if he could be sleeping. “My boy...” the Legate muttered. It was a moment, just a few seconds, but it was the time we needed. I flew out next to Whisper and robbed him of his chance to wipe most of us out in one blow. “The fool. Poor loyal deluded fool,” the Legate muttered as hard contempt returned to his face. Aries and Crumpets were off the car, running back along the tracks as the Legate glared at me. “Do not

mistake this for compassion. I have buried legions of my children, and my children's children. One learns not to get attached." That cunning grin returned. "As you likely know by now."

Maybe, but he had still been attached enough to hesitate. I had no illusions about saving the Legate, but he wasn't the Eater. The Legate had been a person. A horrible person who needed to die, but a person. "Maybe," I yelled back, "but I'm a slow learner." Wait, was that... I stared at the Legate. "Say something!"

His eyes widened, and then he scowled. He pulled back the foreleg across the tracks, freeing the car to resume its pell-mell travel, and smashed his hooves together in the air before himself. I could have teleported any number of places to get away from him, but I needed to see. Again and again Whisper and I flitted to the left and right. Come on, you striped bastard! You're a talker! Say something already!

"What are you doing?" Whisper asked as she pulled on a fresh power hoof, swooping like a wasp, effortlessly evading another swipe of a giant hoof. The weapon whirred as it automatically tightened on the end of her foreleg.

"Trying to see if he has something in his mouth," I growled at her in frustration, then shouted at him, "At least Lancer believed in something!"

"He was a fool! Like you all!" the Legate shouted, and I saw it. Inside his mouth, at the back of his throat, was a telltale black-and-green glow. He had a shard of his soul in his throat!

Whisper saw my expression as she activated her singular power hoof. "What?"

"It's in his throat," I said triumphantly. Now... how to get it out? I teleported next to his windpipe and made a horizontal slash, but he instantly brought a leg up to shield it before I could cut a hole big enough to find the portion of his soul. I teleport dodged back to avoid the other hoof, but he knew what I was up to now.

"Let him hit you," Whisper said.

"What?" I asked, my eyes bulging.

"I'm telling you, let him hit you!" the pegasus snapped, then darted away from me. The Legate was already drawing back for another blow. Let him... hit me? That was like advising I stand on train tracks when the locomotive was coming! Maybe I could just let him clip me? A near miss? The hoof flashed in on me, and I screwed up my face. Oh, this was going to hurt...

The blow sent me rocketing clear across the cavernous space, and I was content

to fly clear through it with my wings and legs spread wide. I didn't quite splatter myself across the wall, but I definitely left a sizeable dent in the crumbly facade of an apartment building. Found it quite relaxing, actually, resting in that divot. I could spend the rest of the fight here. Bring Tom. I was good. I could watch all three giant Legates laugh as he drew back for one last blow.

He stopped laughing as a yellow blur streaked right into his maw.

I shook off the little Glories, P-21s, and Rampages telling me to get my ass back in the fight as I watched him clench his jaw, pressing his hooves to his throat. I flew up to him... well, weaved and swayed as my whole head throbbed way too much for more teleporting right now. His eyes bulged as he made choking noises, his mouth working around the clenched jaws. Then a flash went off behind his teeth. A second flash. A third. He opened his mouth, howling pain as Whisper sprang free, clutching the chunk of sundered heart in her hooves, dripping rancid spittle and blood. "Kill it!" she screamed at me, holding the stone out as I readied the sword. Its glittering starmetal edge descended towards the black, abhorrent thing.

As one, blade and jaws fell, the latter snapping shut on her wings with a wet crunch even as the former cleaved right through the stone. The two halves of the fragment exploded into black powder; the bisected bits of soul swept up into his brow and down into his swollen stomach. Whisper's eyes bulged as an immense gray tongue curled around her and started to pull her into his mouth again, his eyes narrowed as if daring me to strike.

Of course I did.

I darted in, slicing down through that thick muscle as I reached forward, popped my fingers, and pulled on Whisper. His mouth spread wide as he lunged at me, and I braced my hindhooves on his upper teeth and grabbed Whisper with my forehooves, pulling her to me and pushing back against him. His hooves were rising up to sweep us both into his dripping, gargantuan maw. As I pulled, though, she gave a screech of pain, and I saw that the tatters of her wings had gotten stuck between two of the immense teeth. We shared a moment, just one, and then without hesitation I brought the sword around and severed her wings in one smooth slice.

She fell, and I teleported to catch her as the Legate's frothing red maw gnashed on bare air. Blood spurted from her sheared-off stumps as I carried her through the air towards the car. We both crashed to the floor, and I was greeted by the welcome sight of Psalm awake, though slumped against the storage locker. Her horn was cracked at the base, and she was handling a healing potion delicately

with her hooves. “Fuck. Fuck,” Whisper muttered over and over again, taking the potion and drinking it down. When Pythia offered a syringe of Hydra, though, she immediately waved it off with a furious glare.

The bleeding didn’t stop, so I pulled some bits of old cord from the storage locker and tied them tight around the stumps. “They can regrow them,” I told her. “They regrew Glory’s wing.”

She just nodded, her body pale and trembling.

“I’ve got a full charge now, Blackjack,” Sweetie Bot told me gravely. “I can make a hole up if you want.”

It was the right thing to do. Except... “Go ahead,” I said as I flew aloft.

And was struck by a boat. Okay, it wasn’t a boat, but I’d been hit by boats before; this was just like that! Once again I was reduced to a quivering lump of augmented Princess. This time, though, I didn’t imbed myself in the wall so much as tumble down the slope, banging and flailing as I struggled to regain control. I finally got caught on an I-beam dangling over the abyss. The Legate drew back a foreleg for a finishing stomp.

Then a flurry of brilliant emerald hail blasted right through his shoulder, and the limb was cleaved off completely, immense jets of gore spraying out of it and the stump as it fell. The Legate howled, then swung his remaining foreleg in an overarching blow that struck the tracks with an earsplitting crack. The section of track the car was on broke free, sliding down the ruin on a slope of debris that had the very earth shaking. The I-beam came loose from the rubble, and I went tumbling down through the dust as well, trying to keep myself together as I rolled.

I came to rest amidst the blood swamp that engulfed the Legate’s waist. Above, he kept howling in pain, slamming his hoof around wildly, perhaps trying to bury us under all the debris he was knocking free. Finally, it stopped, and I made out the glow of an alicorn shield. I started towards it but stopped as a knifing pain blossomed in my side. I looked back at the sight of a length of steel bar punched clean through me. And another. And another. Lifting the sword, I carefully sliced through them all, then pulled out the lengths. After each, I chugged a healing potion as I felt my insides spilling out. “If only I’d had you on the moon...” I muttered as the dust settled around me. Over to the side, I could see the railcar lying on a slope few dozen feet from the jiggling pool of gore around the Legate. My head throbbed so much, I didn’t risk magic, flying over to the vehicle instead.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked, looking at Sweetie Bot, her synthetic hide lacerated and exposing metal and bands of black muscle beneath. The music had changed from shouting incomprehensible lyrics to something lower, tenser, and instrumental. Psalm held Pythia in her hooves, the filly clutching the starmap to her chest and appearing as if she was actually regretting her brash decision to come along with us.

Whisper just looked equal parts miserable and pissed. "I can't believe I need a frigging gun..." she muttered as she glared at the battered and bent storage locker.

"Recharging," Sweetie Bot said with a definite buzz and crackle in her voice. "Diverting energy from repair systems to main pool. Mr. Horse is awesome—" Her green eyes flared. "Ugh... stop it!" We looked at her in bafflement. "I am in danger of losing my patience with that dumb protocol."

I didn't know where Aries and Crumpets were. There were two other blue bars besides the four with me, but I couldn't pick them out through the dust and wreckage. I had no idea what they were doing; for all I knew, they'd been buried alive in the avalanche. "We need to end this," I said, pulling out Folly. "We only have fifteen minutes till Tom hits."

"Wait," Pythia said. "He's still got chunks of that soul jar left in him. You might vaporize his mass, but he'll still be here. Do you want to face whatever's left of him and the Eater at the same time?"

"There's one piece in his brain, and one piece... around there," I said, pointing at his waist. "I've got no clue how to get at either."

"Huh. They gravitated to his chakras. Be glad there's not seven chunks," Pythia said, and when we all stared at her, she waved her hoof. "Look, I don't have time to go into Eschatik meditation techniques right now, okay? Bigger things to worry about!"

"Such tenacious little gnats," the Legate wheezed. "You are wasting my time. I will be restored again and again." Then his hoof slammed down a hundred feet away, making the ground shake. "You cannot defeat me!" Another massive impact, closer. And closer. I slipped the silver bullet into the breech, and the weapon became live.

"Wait," Sweetie Bot said as she limped to the rear of the railcar, where the ridge of spark batteries crackled and popped. She looked them over. "Get ready to hit the stone in his gut," she said to me, then turned at Pythia. "Tell me where to aim."

"What are you doing?" I asked as she yanked out two sparking cables.

“Voiding my warranty. No time for a shielded interface...” she replied. She turned back to Pythia, and the mare pointed at a section right about where his navel would be if his navel wasn’t covered in a patina of gore. The hoof rammed to the ground next to us, making the whole car slide several feet down the slope. “It’s been fun,” Sweetie Bot quipped.

Then she jabbed the cables into her ears as the shadow of the hoof rose over us.

“Wait!” I shouted, but it was too late. Her mane caught fire as her eyes blazed a solid green. Her voice crackled wildly as she spouted gibberish, and then her horn burst into light. The bolts roared out, not in curving aimed trajectories but in a straight line and so thick and fast that they looked like a solid bar of bright flickering green. The beam cut through the Legate’s bulk like my silver sword writ large and blasted a cloud of dust and rubble from the wall on the other side. Sweetie Bot swung her head, and the Legate’s grotesque form collapsed against the far wall, severed from its base. Then the beam stopped, the synthetic pony’s horn sputtering out a few more bolts, the last veering off to the side. She stood there a moment, mane on fire, eyes aglow, the music freezing in a feedback screech, and sparking cables in her ears, and then, with a stuttering groan of “N-n-not tt-onight-t-t Horsiiiiie-e I h-have a h-h-headac-c-c-che. . .” from her speakers, her eyes popped like flashbulbs and left her still and silent.

Two, the dusty voice murmured.

From the hole in the Legate slithered a torrent of guts larger than my body, but I ignored that foulness and focused on the crackling ball of dark magic that came with them. I bodily shoved the masses aside, trying to push aside how they were forming wiggling fingers that started to clutch at my limbs, and pulled the stone free. One good hit, and it exploded into powder. The black soul mote streaked up, and the grasping tendrils around me melted into slurry... clingy, bloody slurry that was like wet concrete, but at least it wasn’t getting too friendly with me...

The rest of the Legate was looking scarcely better than his rapidly dissolving lower half. His body sagged, as if he were having trouble keeping it together. As he swayed, he glared down at me and shifted his weight. Suddenly a whirring roar rose up from the car, where Whisper struggled to keep a minigun braced against the railing. “This is so not my shit!” she screamed as she kept a stream of bullets pouring up at him. The hail of lead perforated his chest and side at Pythia’s direction, for some reason.

“Enough!” he roared as he raised his hoof, which still had more than enough integrity

to crush us all to goop. “You die! Your friends die! Everything dies!” I pulled Folly free of the slime and raised it. If I got lucky... maybe... maybe I could get him and poke a hole through the roof I could climb through in one shot. Maybe!

Then the Legate’s side exploded in rainbow light, and I paused. From where Whisper’d been shooting poked a black form: a suit of Enclave power armor. Whisper cut off the fire, whooping, “That’s it! Get back in the fight, you pussy!” Dusk definitely appeared worse for wear. Her armor had been cracked open, the mare inside looking half digested but still alive and armed. The beam gun bit deep into the upraised limb with S.A.T.S. precision; something in the joint gave way, and the entire limb twisted in on itself. Dusk slipped out between his ribs and tumbled along his body as the Legate worked the limb. He seemed to be struggling to restore it, though; the muscles were reforming, but they were malformed and warped upon his shoulder.

I gladly held my fire, kicking my way free of the gore and half flapping, half swimming to where Dusk was slipping under the ooze. Her feathers and dark mane were gone, and patches of her hide were milky and peeling off; others were missing altogether, exposing damaged muscle. “Med-X,” she croaked, her whole body trembling as I kept her out of the slime. I administered an injection immediately, and she relaxed in my embrace. “Okay,” she said weakly. “Daddy has no right to tell me he’s the biggest badass in the Enclave just for fighting off an overgrown lizard.” I carried her out of the pool to where Psalm had two healing potions and the Hydra waiting, and she eagerly sucked the potions down as the more potent drug regrew her epidermis. “That was the worst...” she started to say, then spotted Whisper’s truncated wings and looked back at her own featherless but still present ones. “Huh...”

“Yeah, fuck you. At least I don’t smell like barf,” Whisper retorted.

The Legate slumped against the wall. “Persistent... tenacious... fools!” he boomed. I scowled and pointed Folly at his head. The angle would be all wrong for getting out of here, but at least I wouldn’t have to deal with him anymore. His bloody lips spread in an impossibly wide leer.

Then, from high above the Legate came the thump of an explosion. Then another. Then a third, blasting out of a broken tunnel. The Legate twisted his head up and stared with an almost weary expression as a train, this one a string of industrial tankers, came rocketing out the broken tube. He struggled to raise his enormous hoof to block, but one tanker after the next smashed right into his face. Psalm grabbed Sweetie Bot, Lancer, and Pythia with her magic and took off, and I pulled up the pegasi as the wreckage continued past the ruin of his head to land around his body. The tankers burst open and covered him with pungent liquid, and flatbed cars

sliced into him like immense blunt knives; then the fluids burst into flames, setting him howling, and then a pair of coupled locomotives shot out and smashed into his head like a thunderbolt. The whole thing came apart like a melon, leaving only a screaming mouth and a massive mound of gray meat sitting in a bowl of shattered bone. From far above, barely audible, Crumpets yelled out, "Got 'im!"

I set Dusk and Whisper over where Psalm sheltered the rest against the debris slope. The Legate finally seemed too stunned to defend himself, his whole body shaking as it burned with thick, oily black smoke and sullen orange flames. I flew over to the ruins of his skull and spotted the stone imbedded in a spiral-like wiggle of brain. "You die," I said as I raised the sword.

Then his body began to spasm wildly, not so much an attack as an epileptic fit. Back and forth he rammed into the walls, and the shard and I were knocked flying. Aries and Crumpets tumbled from the tunnel mouth and rolled down the slope like dropped toys. Before I could recover, I was smashed by the writhing body and fell down along its flaming bulk, back into the bloody lake below.

I pulled my head out of the gore, swimming between pools of blazing fuel, and saw the burning form arch over me, his smashed head crushing against the opposite wall as he dripped down upon me. His jaws were frozen in a skeletal rictus. "I... Can... Not... Die..." the crackling behemoth wheezed as bits cascaded down upon me.

I struggled to lift the sword and Folly, but where was the stone?! Where... I couldn't see. The Legate was collapsing slowly bit by bit, perhaps intending to bury me under his massiveness. "Where's the damned rock?! Where'd it fall?"

"Blackjack!" shouted Crumpets from the shore. I looked over and saw the battered armored pony holding the stone in her hoof. She whirled and bucked it straight to me. My fingers popped out, and I caught it.

She disappeared beneath the Legate's hoof.

I struggled free into the air and teleported next to the hoof as it rose up. The armor lay broken where it had been compressed into the debris. "Ow," she rasped.

"Hold on," I said as I looked at the monstrosity above us. "Enough! Die already!" And I struck the stone with all the force I could muster. The sword cleaved the last of his magical heart, and the last of it vaporized. The black soul mote exploded out and lingered in the air for a moment, then flew up above me to where the smoldering body had finally come apart in smoking slurry and collapsed down into the pool in a

great splash of gore.

Everyone scrambled back down the slope to where Crumpets lay next to me like a broken toy. "Is she alive?" Dusk asked as she slumped against Whisper.

"Hey, Enclave. Don't you know us Rangers don't die so easy?" Crumpets replied.

"We have to get her out of that armor! A healing potion won't work if she'd being crushed," I said, lifting the silver sword.

Dusk shook her head. "No! Don't! She's probably got all kinds of internal bleeding. Right now, the armor is the only thing keeping her alive." The pegasus scowled back at all our stares and snapped, "What? You try having a sibling in medical school and not picking up some trivia."

"Well, at least he's finally done," Aries said as she looked up at the corpse. A dry chuckle sounded in my mind.

A hoof struck her helmet, pushed through her visor, and out the back in an explosion of bone, brain, and metal.

And that's three, the voice rasped.

Perched casually on her head, foot lodged in her brain, was the Legate. Not the enormous monstrosity. He'd reverted to his old size, but now he reminded me of Dawn. His coat was a silvery synthetic fused with pale hide, striped with glowing green lines of energy. His eyes churned with the green and black energy of the soul motes. One limb ended in a truncated spur of bone and meat that finished assembling itself before my eyes in a flash of baleful green energy.

"I told you. I cannot die," he said calmly, lips curled in sublime confidence.

I swept the sword at him, but he leapt away almost as fast as Whisper could move. "Oh come ON!" I shouted as I spotted him standing on top of his own body. "I smashed the heart. Game over. You're done!"

He was on me in a flash, literally. He might as well have been teleporting as he smashed into me from the left, and the right, whirling like a green-striped blur. Of all my friends, I was the only one who was, relatively, still in fighting condition. Again and again I struck out at him, and again and again he thrashed me. My bones cracked and my armor dented, and he knocked me to the ground. When I tried to rise, he hammered me back down again. Whisper and Dawn tried to move in closer to help, but I snapped, "Stay back!" I didn't want him to pull something with them. Three more times I struggled to rise, to blast him with magic, to cut him... to do

anything... and three times I fell bloodied to the ground.

Finally, I simply stayed there.

“That’s right,” he crooned in my ear before slapping a hoof across my face and rising to address my friends. “I want witnesses to my triumph.” More than his speed and his strength, that smug expression of superiority on his face really pissed me off. Still, his gloating was giving me a chance to recover from the beating he’d administered. A bit. For all the good it would do. “Just like our first time, isn’t it, Maiden?” he murmured.

“It’s the Eater!” Pythia shouted. “That’s the only thing keeping him here!” The Legate looked at the filly with a murderous grin. “Get away from me, you freak!” she snapped as she hid behind Psalm and continued, “Half the stars say you don’t defeat him! Half say you do... so... do it!” Her voice was quavering with panic as she stared at the glowing lines upon his face.

“Little fool. This is the true power the stars offer!” he crowed. “Slay me a thousand times if you wish, I’ll return a thousand times, and more!” He touched his chest. “I’ll get a new vessel for my soul, and slay the next world. And the next!”

“You idiot! What makes you think that the Eater will even need you after it’s restored?” I challenged, and his smirk disappeared. “That’s right. You’re worthless to the Eater once it’s back on its feet again!”

“The Eater of Souls needs me!” he insisted, his flaring, flickering eyes narrowing.

“For what?” I asked, rubbing my face as I stood. “You’re nothing to the Eater. It doesn’t need you.”

“It has always needed me!” he shouted at me.

“Since when?” I laughed, scornfully.

“Always! I was the one who could hear its dying whispers! I was the only one who would listen to its call. It needed me to get my own wretched tribe to resurrect it! It needed me to use your people to raise it! It needs me now to forestall you just a few minutes more!”

Then we heard it. The scream of Enervation changed. Focused. For a moment, all around us, came a slightly different modulation of the noise. It could be summed up in three words.

OH, DO I?

The Legate's colors reverted back to white and red, and he stared at his hooves. His look of utter horror was absolute, and he gaped at me, his mouth moving silently. Finally, he rasped, "I... I am your ever-loyal servant! I would never presume..." He gagged, his jaw working. I just watched. "I... am... worthy! I—"

He hunched over as his body seemed to soften like hot wax. "No! Not like this!" He thrust a hoof towards the ceiling and screamed as his flesh ran in the heat of the Eater's ire. "You owe me!" he screamed as his gut distended, then burst like a boil.

Then he melted, rejoining the gore in the pit.

The soul mote lingered a few seconds longer, snapping as if caught in a great wind, and then the sooty black spot winked out.

I sank to my knees in the muck and looked over at my friends. Pythia stared at where the Legate had disappeared, then at her wrinkled, grubby starmap. "Oh! So that's what it meant! Huh!" She folded up the paper. "Well, that made the whole trip worth it for me."

None of the rest of us shared her glee. Three more of my friends were dead, and the others weren't much better. Psalm had recovered a little from her impact. Crumpets might not be dead, but she wasn't far from it. Whisper was half-chewed and Dusk half-digested.

"You're thinking of sending us away while you go on alone," the purple alicorn said serenely.

"What? Fuck no!" Whisper said as she leapt to her hooves, then came crashing back down again. She glared over her shoulders at the tied-off stubs of her wings. "I hate gravity," she muttered before she glared at me. "We came down here to see this through to the end."

"And you have," I told her, then turned to Psalm. "Can you take everypony to the Collegiate?" I looked at the bodies of Lancer, Aries, and Sweetie Bot. "All of them?"

Psalm gave a smile. "I will manage. I may burn my horn out, but I will see it done." She rose to her hooves and retrieved a canister from the storage locker. "Keep back. This ignition agent is dangerous," she warned as she stepped way back. My PipBuck's rad counter kicked up its staccato chatter as she cracked the case, bursting to a wild crescendo when she poured the glowing fluid inside all over herself. The clicking diminished a little as she shivered and groaned. "Oh yes... this should give me enough oomph to get out." She regarded the canister. "I think this will be very popular with alicorns in the future." She faced us. "We should go quickly,

however. This radiation will not help the rest of you one bit.”

Yeah... us going our separate ways... “Thanks for coming this far with me,” I told them all.

“Will you be all right?” she asked as I pulled what remained of the healing potions and shotgun ammo from the storage locker. I immediately slugged down some RadAway and passed some pouches to the others. There was also a small bag of gemstones. After getting Luna’s soul, I’d always been topped off, but still, couldn’t hurt to bring them along.

“Hey. Nothing to it. Go up, spank the Eater, save the world. It’ll be done in ten minutes, tops.” Or else we’d be done. Either way. I looked at the maimed, the burnt, and the crushed, and then to Pythia. “Coming?”

The filly flushed. “There’s a difference between being in the front row and being on the field. I saw the traitor undone by his own words. Thanks, though.” She paused and screwed up her face. “I called in whatever favors I could. You’ve got a lot riding on this. Don’t screw it up.”

“What’s it going to cost me?” I asked.

“You? Personally? Don’t worry about it. The games and stakes stars play for... well... let’s just say all the higher powers interested have put their chips in the pot. Just need someone to deal the cards and see who hits, who stays, and who goes bust.” She peered at Crumpets. “And I think we’d all better get going.”

“Yeah.” I paused, then pulled out Vigilance and turned to Psalm. “Hey. Make sure this gets to Grace. I dunno which of them is going to use it, but they should have it,” I said as I passed the weapon to her. “You know... just in case...”

“Oh, fuck that,” Whisper snapped. She trotted right up to me and brought her hoof across my muzzle. “None of that ‘giving your shit up before you die’ shit. You’re going to live, understand?” she demanded as she glared at me. “Rampage isn’t here to smack that shit out of you, so I’ll do it. And when you’re back, I’m going to kick your cybernetic ass to show everypony who’s the baddest momma in the Hoof. Got it?”

“Wait.” I gaped at her. “You’re pregnant?!” I never would have—

She stared at me flatly, then gave a strange noise, part contemptuous ‘tch’ and part teary sniff. “Just... fucking survive. Okay?” There were tears in her eyes, but she quickly scrubbed them away with a hoof. “Ugh, that breath. . .” she muttered before turning away and addressing the others. “Let’s go. Blackjack can catch up later.”

I walked a little ways from them. They stared at me and I at them, as none of us said the word. Psalm gave me a warm smile, her horn blazing brightly, and then disappeared. I stared at the space they'd occupied for a moment. "Goodbye," I murmured. Then I flew into the middle of the chamber. I drew Folly, smiling. How funny; what I was planning to do was almost the definition of foolishness. If I'd known when I'd taken EC-1101 from my stable what I'd face, how much I'd lose, how steep the odds I'd have to beat were, I probably would have thrown the damn thing in the ocean and called it good. Maybe the world would have been better for it.

Raising the gun overhead, I aimed right at the center of all that compressed ruin that had been the Core. I narrowed my eye a little, slipped into S.A.T.S., and activated the weapon one last time.

The beam lanced up, and the ceiling shattered. Girders, pipes, wires, wagons, trains, and concrete came cascading down in a deluge of ruin, filling the pit beneath me with the corpse of the city. Folly had cleared a path through the falling remains, though, and as they fell around me, none fell on me. I floated there in a void, the edges of the cavern invisible in dust, darkness, and rubble, green light surrounding me in a column descending from a hole like a great baleful eye. The junk overhead had resettled, but there was a way clear. It was just going to be a bit of a climb.

"So. This is it?" rasped a voice in my ear as I reached the hole. I started squeezing my way quickly but carefully through the packed mess as it shifted around me.

"Looks like it," I said, and glanced at the bony skeleton in the duster and cowpony hat. "I thought you'd died on the moon." I teleported through a gap that was closing ahead of me. Of course, the Dealer kept right along with me, shuffling cards between his dusty hooves.

"I was always more than just him. Besides, I know you wouldn't want to make this trip without an escort. No pony should die alone," he said as I climbed.

"Well, forgive me if I'm not in the mood to chat," I said as I used the starmetal sword to cut a gap I could fit through. I didn't want to wear out my horn before I got up there. "I don't know what we'd talk about, anyway."

"How about..." He drew a pair of cards and held them up for me to see: the ace and queen of spades. "How about you tell me about how you got your cutie mark?"

I stopped, giving him a skeptical glower. "My cutie mark?"

"Everypony has a cutie mark story. What's yours?" he asked.

I shoved a piece of steel. “I got it playing cards—” Suddenly, something gave, there was a bang, the piece of steel I’d shoved wrinkled like a wet noodle, and the cavity I was in halved in size. I stared around, wondering what would give first as I tried to find a gap big enough to fit through. “Why do you care, anyway? You’re just a hallucination. Proof I really am crazy.”

“Or proof that, even toting that goddess around, you’re still Blackjack,” the Dealer retorted. “Come on. Tell me. Who else are you going to confess your sins to?”

It was stupid. I should have been focusing on the task ahead, not the past behind. There was so much blood on that path. A river of blood. Yet I found myself speaking, despite everything. “It was the first card game I was ever invited to. With Mom’s job, nopony wanted me around when rules were broken.” I spotted a gap to the side and shimmied that way, finding a spot where I could climb up a dozen more yards. The Dealer kept up with me, leaning in a nook in the wreckage.

“So what’s the big deal about a game?” he asked as his bony hooves shuffled the cards.

“I sucked at it, is what. I didn’t know how to bluff, or count cards, or anything,” I said as I found my way barred by a skinny beam that might, or might not, have been load-bearing. I couldn’t get a good look in the space beyond for a teleport, so I braced my hindlegs and shoved slowly, but firmly, my body straining, the injuries I’d taken earlier burning. “I won a round and got my cutie mark. End of story.” I finally made a gap I could get through, spotting a half dozen silver wires tautly strung in the space above. Good thing I hadn’t teleported. I used a bit of moonstone dust to vaporize them. “Even Cognitum said so. Victory was my special talent.”

“Mmmm. . . I don’t think so,” he said as he turned a card, showing me the nightmare version of myself. “After all, she didn’t win where it really counted. She’d planned on ruling afterwards. Dying kind of negates all that.” He put the card back in the deck. “That mark’s seen just as much defeat as victory... luck of the draw, which comes out on top. Ah, but death now... *that’s* been a bit more consistent around it, hasn’t it?”

I froze, remembering that stupid card game with ponies I’d wanted as my friends. Maybe Marmalade could have been... or Daisy... if I’d just... done... something. “It was an accident.”

“Of course. Accidental deaths at card games. Happens all the time.”

“She got up to go pee and got crunched. End of story!” I shouted at him, then

pointed a hoof up at where the Eater was waiting for me. "I don't have time for this now!"

"Right. You've got a debt to pay," he said, chuckling. "Still, no time like the present. How'd you get your cutie mark? How'd you *really* get it?"

I paused, pressing my head against the wall. It'd been an accident.

"Do you know what the cards on your flank really mean?" the Dealer asked as he held up an ace in one hoof and a queen of spades in the other.

"They're just stupid cards."

"Right. And that's just a stupid cutie mark," he responded with a laugh. "Ace of swords. Power. Focus. Determination. Victory. I did this once for you before, if you recall." He turned it upside down. "Confusion. Chaos. Lack of clarity. Sounds like both sides of your life."

My jaw worked as I stared at the card, then at the queen of spades, depicting Luna in profile with a sword. "And that one?"

"Queen of swords. Quick thinker, decisive... executioner." He practically purred the word. "And while you might not have deliberately chopped off the heads of your prisoners, you really never took that many prisoners to begin with. You are frightfully good at killing." He turned the card upside down. "Overly emotional, vindictive, morose... and bitchy." He scratched his bony chin. "How many enemies have you had who haven't died horrible deaths?"

"It was just a card game. Just an accident..." I whimpered, clenching my eyes shut. Don't think about it. She'd gotten up to go pee. Simple as that.

"Of course. She goes to pee and gets crushed. Happens all the time." I stared at him, mentally begging him to stop. "Woe to those poor fools who saw your flank and thought it was nothing more than playing cards. Even Cognitum's assumption it was victory was dreadfully naïve. If anypony with a bit of sense had seen your flank, they would have run the other way and never stopped." He paused as I swallowed, and then returned to his refrain, "How'd you get your cutie mark, Blackjack?"

What did it matter? He wasn't real. I tuned him out, or tried to, as I struggled to climb. The shaft I'd blasted with Folly groaned and twisted around me, but every time I turned around, there was the Dealer. Shuffling cards. Smiling. Waiting for the answer. I reached for a beam, and when it pulled free, I was so preoccupied that I fell a dozen feet and got peppered by metal and debris. He leaned over me. "How'd you get your mark?" he repeated.

I groaned, pushing myself to my hooves. What would it hurt to tell him? “It was Hatches. I don’t remember what her real name was. We just called her Hatches.” I closed my eyes. “First one to leave always gets picked up by security. The others had won, and it was either going to be me or her leaving first. Getting picked up after curfew was three days locked in rehabilitation cells, or flogging. So Hatches and I had one more round to see who’d leave first. I lost.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Then I was such a whiny baby about it that she agreed to leave first anyway. Nice about it, though. Claimed she had to pee,” I muttered with a wistful smile that soon withered. “But the door’s sensor had malfunctioned. She walked through, and it closed on her. Killed her. . . but I didn’t get in trouble or have to tattle on the others at the game,” I said lowly.

“So you won,” the Dealer chuckled. “And all it cost you was a life.”

“I didn’t kill Hatches,” I muttered. “I didn’t want her dead. She was nice to me. Closest thing I had to a friend!” I insisted as I resumed my ascent. I didn’t have time for this shit. “Go away. I’ve got a job to do.”

Once again, he was in my path. “I’m sure.” He was silent for a second, empty sockets almost pitying, then asked as calm and cool as poison, “What was her real name, Fishie?”

I quivered, hot tears on my cheeks. “I didn’t kill her,” I repeated, the words sounding like a prayer.

“Right. But people who help you do have a nasty tendency to turn up dead,” he said with a chuckle. “Always somepony there to take the bullet. To die in your stead.”

“I never wanted that!” I shouted back at him. “I tried to save people!” Again my grip slipped, and I fell, spreading my wings to catch myself, and got pelted by rubble. I coughed and wiped gritty muck from my eyes. Was that sky up there? I was so close...

The sardonic smirk was all the reply he needed, but he went on, relentlessly, “Sure. You didn’t even want to kill your enemies. You just turned them into friends.” His grin widened. “How’d that work out for them, again?”

I quivered as I stared at the death awaiting me above. “Nopony should have died for me...” I whispered.

“Why? You were always ready to die for them. They were just better at it than you

were.” He made a show of inspecting my body. “And when you didn’t have anypony to do that, well... look at what a pound of flesh can buy.”

Finally, I balked and paused my ascent, staring at him as pebbles and scree rained down into my mane. He stared back, confident and smug as a skull could be. “Who are you? You’re not my crazy... and I don’t think you’re the Eater, either...”

“No? Well, who can tell for sure?” The Dealer took his hat off. “If I were anything... and I’m not saying I am... I’d call me the Wasteland.” And he gave me a little bow.

“The Wasteland?” I echoed as I stared at him.

“The desolation. The loss. The pain and sacrifice. I take you... all of you... and I make your lives living, bloody hell. I twist you. I tear you. I see what you’re all made of. How far you can go. Where, exactly, you break.” He showed cards of me after the *Seahorse*. Of me outside Maripony right before the bomb went off. Of Shadowbolt Tower dying. “And you... Blackjack... you’re a pony who should have fallen a hundred times over. I try, and I try, and I try... but I can’t *quite* get you.”

“I don’t die easily,” I retorted, eyes narrowing.

“I don’t have to kill you to get you,” he said with a laugh. “I get everyone sooner or later, though. Everyone. You think I’m some desolate landscape? I’m everywhere. In Elysium and Flank. In the skies of the Enclave and the depths of your stable. Everywhere there’s contempt, ambition, avarice, and callousness. I was here before the war, and I’ll be here no matter what ‘civilization’ pops up, because murder and corruption, hatred and intolerance... those never change.” He pressed a bony hoof to his chest. “And for some reason, people love me.”

“I don’t,” I hissed.

“But of course you do!” He laughed. “Weren’t you always hating yourself for being a screwup? You’re now the most dangerously competent pony in the Wasteland. Weren’t you always hating your tiny little horn and lack of magic? Well, you’re descended from Twilight Sparkle now! Weren’t you pining for friends and lovers? I’ve given you more than a few!” He cackled. “I am so generous, like you. I give people what they crave! What they yearn for more than anything!” He swept his hoof towards the ceiling above me. “And now, I give you what you desire most... a heroic death.” He leered at me. “Make it a good one. You’ve none left to die for you.”

Then he evaporated with a last laugh.

I hadn’t killed Hatches, but there was no doubt I had benefitted from her death... from so many deaths... The spring from which the river of blood flowed. “One last

round, then time to cash out," I croaked, then whispered, "Ante up."

I pulled myself through the last few dozen feet.

The hole opened up in the very bottom of the Eater's nest. The concave structure made of the dozens of skyscrapers spread away from me in every direction, the broken tips pointing up towards the skies. Six walls of magic surrounded the nest, radiating up towards the heavens. The storm whirled around me silently, discharging bolts of lightning into the sheets of magic and making them flare brilliantly. Power cables and pipes lay strewn every which way, the former snapping and smoking as they routed power from who knew where to the F.A.D.E. shields while the latter oozed red flesh. Unlike the nightmares I'd faced below, this meaty sludge seemed content to just trickle like runny magma, oozing this way and that to form strange fleshy objects. Gruesome as they were, they appeared to be benign; nevertheless, I kept my distance.

And in the middle: the Eater, sitting on its bed of silver wire. Directly above glowed the moon, and shining brilliantly bright... Tom. A luminous swarm of souls swirled in a hollow column in the middle of the ring. Thousands of souls. Millions. And more were being added as I watched, glowing trickles flowing into the mass.

I spread my wings and flew around it, readying on my left the shotgun that held the moonstone rounds and on my right the riot shotgun, both now sporting glossy black finishes decorated with stars and moons. Up close, the Eater's two rows of silver spines no longer appeared uniform and unblemished. The central ring of the Tokomare was wrapped in rusty steel scaffolding and supports, and numerous beams and braces spanned the individual spines. The seemingly smooth surface was rough and mottled up close, with holes chewed clear through revealing green gemstones and lines of eldritch power that beat like a heart. Countless mechasprites, emerging from swollen hives of starmetal and tumorous flesh, were at work moving wires and cables around, chewing up deformed blobs of starmetal, and vomiting it forth to smooth out the spines they buzzed around.

I landed on a spine and felt my insides lurch. Though gravity still pulled me down, it felt as if an inexplicable force were tugging me sideways as well. I trotted along the immense ring, the swarms paying me no mind. Perhaps the Eater was unaware of me at this point, or simply saw me as another soul drawn to it.

That isn't going to last long, I thought as I remembered Glory's plan and sought out a larger section of the structure, where the ring was thicker and the spines a little thinner. Here was where one of the inner F.A.D.E. shield generators was supposed

to be housed in a starmetal box. The inner shields were inactive, but that wouldn't last long either. I quickly spotted the box and wiped off the grime that covered it. 'F.A.D.E. I-1' was still legible under the dirt and gore. I backed away, readied the shotgun... and then spotted the terminal.

It was still active, despite evidently having been submerged. Probably the finest design Stable-Tec had to offer. I walked to it and cleared away the filth. The screen flickered a bit, but it worked. It showed an image of the Tokomare and scrolling data. 'Simulation' flashed in the corner, and I watched as Tom descended and was captured. As he was consumed, the Tokomare grew and merged with the surrounding nest. Then new towers sprang up around it, and a dome formed over the machine. More towers grew out radially, not just replacing the Core but crossing the river and growing across the land like a giant crystal. It was all very symmetrical and neat. There were parks marked on the display. Schools. Commercial centers.

Down at the bottom flashed a notice. 'Pending EC-1101 Clearance'.

I flipped open my PipBuck and loaded the program. Tame the Tokomare, or destroy the Eater of Souls? Restore civilization with the push of a button, helping so many ponies who had suffered from my actions, or destroy a parasite consuming the life of the planet itself? With the push of a button, I could make it all better. Security saves ponies. Princesses protect their subjects...

I stared at EC-1101. It would be so easy. So simple...

And I had never taken the easy road. Ever.

I pointed the moonstone shotgun at the casing and pulled the trigger.

The lead slug struck the starmetal casing and flattened against it, spreading out. In the center of the blob of metal, a small rock of moonstone flared brighter and brighter, and I jumped behind a spine as it exploded. The moonstone was hardly done, though. There was another loud pop. Then another, as it landed, reacted, and was launched aloft again. The reaction had taken out half the casing, leaving the F.A.D.E. talisman dangling from a dozen or so wires, a large crack running through the diamond in the center. I didn't leave fate to chance: I pulled the trigger again.

The gem exploded in a glare of blinding white.

I blinked rapidly as my vision returned, voices coming from far away. "Are you alright, Blackjack?" a mare asked as I felt myself in a familiar bed. I quickly took stock of

her, an earth pony mare, olive green with a grayish mane, in Stable 99 barding. As I stared at her, she immediately smiled. "Oh, you are awake. I was so worried after that terminal overloaded. I can't believe I was so careless." I continued to stare, and she frowned. "Blackjack? Are you okay?"

"Duct Tape?" I asked thickly, sitting up in my bed, in my dirty, messy room. And she wasn't alone, either. Scotch Tape stood behind her, watching me shyly. "Scotch?"

"Scotch Tape," Duct Tape corrected, flushing a little. "Honestly, ponies are going to think I'm an alcoholic..." She shook her head, then recomposed herself. "She wanted to thank you as well."

"Thank you, Miss Blackjack. For saving my mom, I mean," Scotch said, brushing her mane out of her teal eyes.

I almost jumped out of bed. My legs were my legs. My horn... my horn. The pair backed away as I gaped at my own reflection. With the exception of nasty bedmane, I looked... like I should. "What happened?" I asked the others. "I was shocked?"

"Badly. You've been out for months," Duct Tape explained. "When you showed signs of waking up, they moved you here." I pushed past the pair of them into the hall. It was my stable. It looked the same. Smelled the same. "Blackjack?" Duct Tape asked in concern.

"Where's Mom?" I asked tensely as I levitated over my baton.

"In security—" she said, but I was already trotting. Running, actually, and not to security. This wasn't possible... but if it were... if it were... I raced through the halls.

And a pair of hoofcuffs appeared around my forelegs. I tripped and went sprawling across the floor, rolling in the direction of the fall to raise myself to my hooves. "Hey, nice recovery," Daisy said with a grin, Marmalade smiling behind her. "Guess being out for three months helped you keep on your hooves."

I didn't hesitate this time. My magic picked the simple lock to the cuffs, and I pulled them off. "Don't try and stop me," I told them, and Daisy's grin became a confused frown as I pointed the baton at her. "Where's P-21?" I demanded.

"P... wha?" Daisy asked, clearly baffled. I turned my back on her and continued. If this really was Stable 99, then there were going to be two changes, right now. I ran right up to medical, the pair following me and shouting my name. I stormed into the medical office, ready to kick flank and beat in skulls.

"Blackjack! You're awake!" Doctor Syringe said brightly, smiling in clear welcome.

Only one thing kept me from bashing the unicorn's blue face in.

The earth pony stallion in stable barding next to her. He was just as blue as her, his mane thick and shaggy, his eyes deep but untroubled. "I can come back later," P-21 said evenly to the doctor, looking back at the dots and male mark on his flank. "I've lived with it for my whole life. I can wait a little longer."

She immediately flushed. "I'm sorry you had to wait at all. Now that we've got a sane Overmare, hopefully things can get better."

"Sane... Overmare?" I asked weakly.

"Oh, right. You missed a lot," Syringe said with a frown. "That little monster who used to be in charge is currently locked up till we can figure out how to deal with her. Your mom's the interim Overmare," she said, then regarded P-21 as she continued over my stunned bafflement, "One of the first things she did was audit the breeding program and institute reforms." She hung her head. "There's no way to make up for what we did..."

"No, there isn't," P-21 said grimly with a frown at her. "But you're trying to do better. That's all that counts." He clearly worked to repress his anger as he regarded me curiously.

"She... did?" I asked faintly, unable to tear my eyes off him..

"You sound so surprised," a voice said behind me.

I turned, gaping at the lavender mare with pink eyes and striped mane. "Mom?" I asked, my voice croaking.

"Come up to my office. I can fill you in on everything that's happened," she told me.

So we did. Overmare Gin Rummy had learned of the Overmare's plot to kill Duct Tape with the terminal and sell us out to raiders, deposed her, and then, a few weeks later, risked opening up the stable to trade with the Wasteland. Apparently, they'd hit things off wonderfully with a group of traders in Megamart led by a mare named Bottlecap. Mom had sat by my bed and told me all about the ponies she'd encountered since opening up the stable while I'd been in my coma. Bottlecap, Charity, Priest... Big Daddy and Doctor Triage... even the VC and Enclave. Rampage was the rude representative of the Reapers, and Morning Glory was with the Thunderhead ponies.

When she finished, I simply sat there.

Everything I'd gone through. Everything I'd been through... a dream?

"You can talk to them yourself. Now that you're awake, I think a celebration is in order," Mom told me, patting my shoulder. "Just give me a moment. We have fresh food. Fresh! Hee. No more recycled food. Isn't it wonderful?" she asked, checking me.

"Yeah. Wonderful," I said as I stared into her eyes. There was something I had to say. "I love you, Mom." And I hugged her tight.

It seemed to surprise her. "I love you too, Fishie," she said as she booped my nose lightly, then turned and trotted out of the office. I stared after her, then looked out the window. Out there were all the ponies I loved and cared about, alive and well. The stallions were freed. The Overmare deposed. My stable was helping the Wasteland.

Could this be real?

I stared at my own reflection, trying to think it through. Could Mom have deposed the Overmare? Yes. Could she have listened to Rivets and opened the door? Yes. Could she have told me about her own experiences, leading my shock-addled brain to weave a grand and terrible adventure from them? Maybe.

Would she have freed the stallions?

Not in a million years.

My mom had been a good mare, but she'd believed in 99. She'd never shown the slightest concern or consideration for their well-being beyond what was needed for them to service the mares. She liked stallions based on how they'd performed sexually, not for the people they were. She'd never hesitated to retire one, even my father. As much as I hated to admit it, Mom had been complicit in their abuse.

This was the dream.

Not all that surprising, either. Tom had plopped us almost casually into a dream to speak to us, and now the Eater was doing it to lock me up. And since I hadn't been obliterated, time had to be passing faster here than in the real world, just like with Tom. The only problem was that there was no Tom to end the dream. "Wake up," I told myself. Nothing. I closed my eyes and bashed my head against the wall next to the round window, but other than giving myself a splitting headache, I was still here in 99.

I'd had lots of experience in mindscapes though, and I had Luna. Ending a dream wasn't as easy as just trotting out of the stable. If the door was open, then the dream would just continue. There had to be something stopping me from ending this dream. My friends. My loved ones. Even my annoying enemies... pretty pathetic

compared to what I'd come to deal with. I needed this dream to stop. Suicide was risky. If I just killed myself, I might be offing my ability to fight back. I had to reject this dream.

There was one way...

I heard Mom approaching, and my magic shut the door in her face, locking it. "Blackjack?" she called out as I walked to the controls. "Blackjack, this isn't funny!" she shouted, beating on the door. "What are you doing in there?!"

"Waking up," I said as I opened up the commands to the rigged ventilators. Rivets always had been bad at taking care of special jobs that weren't on the schedule.

Mom. P-21. Scotch Tape and her mother. Everypony I'd loved growing up...

I flipped the switch and immediately smelled the chlorine tang. A few seconds later, the screaming started. The screaming that I would never, ever, be able to forget.

"Blackjack! You murderer!" But this time there was no Lacunae to teleport me away. This time, I went with my stable.

I snapped open my eyes, staring at the bits of diamond bouncing out of the breached casing. In my mind, it had been hours, but here just the blink of an eye. "You're going to have to do better than that," I muttered.

The entire Enervation scream seemed to deepen into an ominous rumble. I ran along the central ring between the spines rising to either side of me. Was it just me, or were they starting to move? 'Morph' might have been a better term, the way they were bending into each other and curling inwards. The mechasprites at work around the Eater suddenly burst into action, becoming a whirling blizzard of shrapnel that streaked straight at me. I didn't blink, fire, or hesitate as I raced straight at the swarm. When they were close enough that I could see the tiny drill teeth in their mechanical mouths, I teleported right through the metallic plague to the far side.

The swarm took a second to reverse and come after me. The rest were in a frenzy to complete something. Liquid gunk was leaking from tubes, flowing over the metal and assembling into pinkish-maroon tissues. If the F.A.D.E. shield generators were covered in flesh, that'd make it harder to disable them. I reached the second case a sixth of the way around the Eater and took aim.

The slug struck and stuck. I took cover as the reaction took place, the droning buzz

of the mechasprites rising as they descended upon me. As before, the cover was blasted completely off, and the moonstone fragment that remained went flying. I caught it with my magic, redirecting it into the starmetal behind me as I rushed to the F.A.D.E. talisman. The fragment must have wedged somewhere, because the entire rock reacted at once, blowing me and the bots away in a single detonation. I groaned as I landed sprawled on my face in front of the generator. Squinting through one eye, I aimed Duty at the talisman, and—

“Luna, what are you doing?” Celestia asked, giving me a slightly baffled smile as I pointed a pencil at her. We were in my personal study, one of the few places in the palace where nopony was supposed to go. Books decorated the walls, though many of them were my own notebooks on various ponies I kept tabs on. Ponies who needed my help when they were alone and sleeping. The terminal on my desk had access to all the ministries, and the O.I.A., as well as dozens of other secret sources. So many secrets...

Of course, try telling your sister that she’s not allowed to go somewhere in a palace that used to be hers. “They’re all waiting for you, you know,” the white alicorn said as she looked over my shoulder at a tablet of paper. “Drawing Blackjack again?”

I blinked at her, then at the pad of paper showing the cybernetic unicorn. She was collapsed on the Tokomare, bleeding as she pointed a revolver at a talisman, her eyes narrowed in focus. “I really don’t see the appeal, Luna. Blackjack. LittlePip. Why do you obsess over failure and disaster when the war is finally over?”

“Over?” I asked as I blinked at her, then looked down at the picture. “When?”

“Luna, you’ve been working too hard.” Celestia rolled her eyes. “It’s all over but for the official signing of the peace treaty. Which, incidentally, is what everypony is waiting for... right now.”

“Peace treaty?” I set the pad down. “How? That’s not possible.”

“I used to think so too,” Celestia sighed. “I just couldn’t bear it. But you persevered where I failed, and the Caesar has finally admitted that continued war will simply result in megaspell annihilation.” She put a wing across my withers. “His ambassadors are here, and after reading the treaty myself, I can confirm that they’re offering quite favorable terms for us. Apparently the Caesar’s at risk of rebellion if he continues the war, too, and was willing to be generous.” Celestia looked at me oddly. “Are you alright, Luna? You haven’t been the same since the Gala.”

"I... peace?" I asked weakly. Celestia gave me a nudge, and I rose to my hooves. She began to dress me in formal garb. "It just... it..." I looked at the pad of paper and levitated it, letting her dress me up in my best black silk and diamond gown. I flipped through picture after picture, looking at notes written in the margins of each.

"Once everything has settled down, you really should write those stories. It doesn't hurt to have a hobby, and you've always been more creative than anypony gives you credit for," Celestia said as she put the silver and moonstone crown atop my head. Standing before me, she sighed and smiled sadly. "I also want to apologize."

"For... what?"

"I haven't been very helpful. I thought abdication would ease my conscience and let me focus on the school, leaving you to sort out my mess. My... meddling... at Shattered Hoof didn't help." Her smile faded, regret etched in her face. "I should have trusted you more. Supported you more, as you supported me through the war. But I can see now that you're the Princess Equestria needs."

I stared at her, then walked to the mirror. My books were on the shelves, and all over the space were notes on the various disguises I'd worn when I couldn't bear to be Princess Luna. Eclipse, the black pegasus agent, was only the most well-worn of them. I was used to running away into fantasy when life became unbearable. Outside was Equestria, vibrant and alive. I could hear Pinkie's music, and from the fancy wagons arriving outside the palace, all the nobles would be there.

"This is a dream," I murmured.

"A dream come true," Celestia corrected in that vaguely annoying way she had. She probably didn't even know she did it. "Come. Everypony is waiting."

Together we walked down the hall, past two guards, past two others, and into the ballroom. Immediately the entire hall broke into cheers and stomps. I balked, but Sister's wing was at my shoulder, and I halted, looked to her, and received her nod. I hated crowds like this. Nowhere to hide. All eyes on me, waiting for me to mess up. At the end of the room stood my dark marble throne, decorated in stars, and the smaller, plainer throne beside it for my sister. Three chairs stood on either side of the thrones, and in front of them all was a long table.

Seated at it were five of the six Ministry Mares. Only Pinkie Pie was absent, her seat occupied by another mare. Goldenblood lingered back behind and to the right of my throne, wearing only formal castle livery like the rest of my servants. I trotted past a visibly pregnant Applejack, a radiantly happy Fluttershy, and an aged yet composed

Twilight Sparkle. As I took my seat in the middle, Rarity leaned over with a wide smile and whispered, "Where have you been, Your Majesty? The cameras have been rolling for hours!"

"I was..." Drawing? Thinking about the Wasteland? Drawing the conclusion to an epic struggle of good and evil? "Occupied."

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped," Rarity said with a sigh, then waved to somepony in the crowd. "Smile and wave, Your Majesty. This is your finest moment!"

I raised a hoof and waved to the gentleponies as Celestia took her seat slightly behind me, looking over at Pinkie's. "Pinkie?" I asked the mares quietly.

"Still in rehab," Twilight answered me, her voice barely audible through the cheering. "Thank you for keeping it quiet. I know the Cakes are taking good care of her, but I don't think even Rarity could stop the media from hounding her if they knew of the scandal."

Of course. I kept secrets. The night excelled at hiding things... even things that shouldn't be hidden. Things that would eat you up if you didn't drag them into the light and deal with them. "Ready, Your Majesty?" Goldenblood rasped from my right. "It's all taken care of. All you need to do is sign."

"But... peace? The zebras would never..."

"We knew they would. It was a mathematical certainty," Goldenblood answered. "Also, I ordered you more art supplies. For LittlePip and Blackjack."

I scowled at him. "Can't I have anything private?" I huffed.

"It is private," he rasped softly, then looked to the head of the hall. "They'll come in. I'll read the terms. You and the Ministry Mares will sign. There will be a reception. I've got your speech ready." His smile wavered. "Are you alright, Your Majesty?"

Was I? "It just seems... impossible." And wrong, but yet so very right!

"Continued hostilities would have been his downfall. No leader can fight a war without the will of the people... or at least a clear majority," Goldenblood said confidently. "I'm sure he's quite desperate to present the peace accord to his own tribal leaders." He gestured to the front of the hall, where thirteen zebra dignitaries were trotting in, the room suddenly silent save for the snapping of cameras. They were bedecked in elaborate outfits that spoke of their tribal affiliations. Grain for the Carnilia. Swamp orchids for the Orah.

When they stood before the table, the leader, in traditional Roamani plate armor,

trotted forward. A stallion levitated a scroll and started to read the terms, his voice booming out as my eyes swept over so many different ponies. There were Charity and Bottlecap. Over there, Big Daddy. Brutus was a royal guard. Glory stood in Shadowbolt armor, and P-21 in Royal Guard barding.

“The zebras admit fault in instigating and prosecuting the war. For this, the zebras beg forgiveness,” the stallion read out, his voice ringing; the zebra’s jaw worked, his eyes staring straight ahead. “The Equestrian people accept and give it, in exchange for economic restitution for the damages of the war.”

I stared from one Ministry Mare to the next. Pregnant Applejack. Tired Twilight. Triumphant Rarity. Goldenblood smiling from behind the throne. Peace. Prosperity. A thousand years of Princess Luna ascendant. A dream come true.

“The zebra people admit fault in misappropriating ancient superstition for propaganda purpose. The zebras formally recognize that Princess Luna is not the entity known as Nightmare Moon, and beg forgiveness for their insult.” The stallion droned on. Could I have created the Wasteland as a story in my own mind? A distraction from the horrors of war? A place where, no matter how bad the war became, I could escape for a time? “The Equestrian people give forgiveness for this insult, provided the zebra people allow pony moderators to ensure this lie is stripped forever from zebra lore.” I considered the grieving face of Sekashi, who looked as if a friend had been sentenced to death.

A healthy Equestria. A whole Equestria. And who knew what the future could be?

“The zebras admit fault in the murder of innocent foals in the Littlehorn Massacre,” the stallion said, his voice dull and heavy. “Let history remember them for their crime for all time. Let them surrender a number of their own foals for re-education by the Equestrian people, each year, as restitution for this atrocity.”

I sat bolt upright, cutting off the stallion reading the terms. “What?” I murmured.

“It is only fitting after what they’ve done,” Goldenblood murmured behind me. Then he spoke up, “Perhaps we should simply skip to the signing.”

I watched as the paper was passed to Fluttershy, who nearly glowed with pleasure as she signed it. Then two zebras stepped forward to sign as well, the Mendi tribe of healers being the first. The willow branch crown the dignitary wore clearly marked her as such. Then to Applejack. Then back...

And all the while, my mind worked. Was it possible that the Caesar would surrender? Yes. I’d always known it would take a political shift back home to do it, but it was

possible. Like all leaders, he would do what he had to to keep his seat, though this humiliation would disgrace him till his eventual removal. And would they admit that calling me Nightmare Moon had been pure propagandic nonsense? Perhaps.

But would my sister happily accept tearing zebra children from their families for indoctrination in Equestria?

No.

I stared as the paper was passed back and forth, mark after mark being put down. It wasn't fair! This was how it was supposed to have gone. An end to the war. A triumph for Princess Luna. A strong and secure Equestria where my people loved me!

All things I never deserved in the first place.

I stared out the window at the glowing jewel that was Equestria... a jewel smashed and squandered on war. It was a good land, and had things been different, I would have been worthy to lead it.

I wasn't.

But if this was a dream, then how to end it? The dream could go on and on, easily lasting a thousand years or longer. I watched Twilight sign with a weary smile of satisfaction as it returned to the next two. Refuse to sign? But I had to sign. This was a peace signing. If I refused to sign, the dream would go on, stuck on this moment.

The Roamani delegate, the last, signed. Then it was slipped in front of me. Every eye was upon me. My people. My sister. My Ministry Mares. My friend. Everypony stared at me, waiting for me to be the good Princess I wanted to be. To step fully into Celestia's horseshoes...

If only. I levitated the pen. Down, at the bottom, was a line marked 'Princess of Equestria:'. If only... If only...

I rammed the pen right through the parchment. The dull ripping was like a scream in the silent room as I continued the violation, tearing it in two. Then I rose to my hooves, thundering in the old voice for addressing my subjects, "You think this meager offering sufficient!? You will never have peace! Not while a single one of you accursed zebra walk free! You shall have war! You shall have slaughter! You shall not have forgiveness, but annihilation!"

The room exploded in shouts. Shouts from Ministry Mares, outraged that I had

thrown peace aside. Cries of concern from my sister... my wonderful, kind... sister... Bellows and proclamations of doom from the zebras. Silence from Goldenblood.

It didn't matter now. The dream could only continue to two ends: the removal of Princess Luna from the throne, or the annihilation in balefire.

Either way, the dream of Princess Luna's Equestria was dead.

Emerging from the hallucination, I stared at the sight of the pieces of F.A.D.E. generator flying every which way, smoke rising from the barrel as I shook. Luna's dream... but that dream was gone, and now I returned to my nightmare. One where I fought on the body of an enormous monstrosity from beyond. A monstrosity with defenders, and not just mechasprite hordes. The fleshy glop had assembled itself into a host of horrid scuttling things that now crawled at me from every direction.

To my left, the riot shotgun fired a dozen rounds, flechettes tearing into fanged maws. To my right, Duty and Sacrifice blew meaty holes in the faces of the faceless. My sword swept to and fro before me, slicing neatly again and again into uncaring flesh. It made no difference. I could not defeat these enemies with bullets and blade alone. In desperation, I threw together my bullet spell with the shield thingy I'd attempted earlier, and a sphere of brilliant white energy exploded out from me. The bubble swelled, pushing the rising, abominable tide back long enough for me to take to the air.

So did they. Buzzing chitinous wings, fleshy membranes, and greasy quills erupted from the creatures as they swarmed after me. I swooped and soared amid the spines, looping around the thick central ring. Every few seconds I'd twist around in midair, flying backwards as I blasted my pursuers with magic and bullet alike. A volley of shooting stars streaked out at them, seeking the nearest creatures and burning them with white-blue flames. Still, it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. This was a distraction, keeping me occupied.

I needed more time. An opportunity I could use to find the remaining F.A.D.E. shield generators and destroy them. As I streaked along the Eater, I glanced down at my hoof. A flip, and I stared at EC-1101.

Control the Eater.

Could I?

Dare I?

I flipped around and around the central ring, letting Luna do the flying. Soon I was chasing the rear of the swarm chasing me. A thin smile crossed my lips as I opened fire. The rear of the swarm turned, some pulling inside out as they reversed direction and dove straight at me. I waited, smiling. Wait for it. Wait for...

In a blink, I disappeared, and from the far side of the Eater I watched as half the swarm collided headlong into the other half, the mass dissolving into a cannibalistic frenzy of gnashing, wriggling meat. It wouldn't take long for them to sort themselves out. I made straight for one of the mucky terminals. If I could control things for just a few minutes and stop the Eater's interference, I could eliminate the remaining F.A.D.E. shields and get out.

Through the swarm of hungry nightmares, I spotted the light of a terminal jutting like a glowing cyst from the Eater's flesh. I teleported to it at once, banging the spacebar to make sure it still worked. Opening the back, I plugged the wires from my PipBuck into it. I could already hear the swarm, a curious rustling accompanied by a slimy sucking noise. I just had to use the program... take control...

Just like Cognitum.

I froze, staring at the screen and my reflection in it. Cognitum... she'd believed the Eater was just a machine. A dangerous one, but ultimately one that was simply malfunctioning. Fix the malfunction, fix the machine, fix the problem, fix the Wasteland. Save the Wasteland. Save the world.

Just like Dawn.

Tools were made to be used. They weren't good or evil. They simply were. I'd used my guns to kill hundreds, maybe thousands. That didn't make the guns evil. Was there any point in simply obliterating it? The ultimate waste of technology was to destroy it, forfeiting not only the use the technology would give but all the resources that had been spent in its creation. Whether I loathed it or not, this was just a device to be used. After all that had gone into raising this machine over the centuries, all the pain, strife and death, didn't I have a *responsibility* to use it?

Just like Steel Rain.

But I'd use it to save my friends. My stable. My loved ones! Certainly they were worth saving. I couldn't just let LittlePip and her friends die! Couldn't let everyone die when I had the means to protect them and give them the future they deserved! My ends justified these means!

Just like Sanguine.

Sweetie Bot had said that the program would link me to the Eater. It sounded so simple to assume that everything would go my way. That I could be hooked up to this colossal thing and be the one in control. But I'd been flesh and blood once, and blissfully reminded of that state for a moment in my blank body. There were consequences when you connected a pony to something they weren't ready to handle.

Just like Deus.

I didn't need to see the swarm to know it was racing up towards me. Gnashing, squealing, chomping, hissing, buzzing, flapping, scratching noises rushed at me with the growing volume of an avalanche. I didn't need to rush, though. I simply closed my eyes, smiled, and pressed a button.

And got rid of EC-1101 once and for all.

I wasn't sure what dumping a megaspell, uncontrolled and directionless, into the Eater would do. For an instant, I had a mental picture of immense magical power contained within a crystalline matrix of incomprehensible beauty and complexity. Then that matrix exploded into a billion fiery stars, and I opened my eyes as the scream sounded... not an Enervation scream, nor the scream of the monstrosities about to consume me. No, this was a physical scream that seemed to emanate from every direction at once. And there was one unquestionable aspect to it:

Pain.

The swarm collapsed into maroon splatters behind me as the entire massive structure heaved under me. I lapsed into S.A.T.S., but even that couldn't help me hit the cover of the F.A.D.E. shield generator. Two shots went wild, exploding against spines that seemed to be splintering, melting, and reforming before my eyes. I aimed along the barrel as those two fragments of moonstone each gave a final burst of bright white—

The whiteness faded, but what took its place made no sense. Everything blurred and swirled around, and somepony kept saying "Fish? Are you there, Fish?" from a million miles away. The blurs congealed themselves into shapes... books on bookshelves. A portrait of the Princesses over a cold fireplace. A clock with a pendulum slowly swaying. A desk. A pony behind that desk...

Goldenblood.

The scarred unicorn wore a sweater vest and a pair of black wire frame spectacles that he peered over at me. As I focused on him, he gave a relieved smile. "Oh, good, the drugs are working. We finally have lucidity," he said calmly. "Welcome back, Go Fish."

"T'not m'name..." I muttered thickly. What was going on here? "Yer suppst t'be ded," I said as I squinted at him. I lifted my hooves and felt them draw short with restraints. "Let me go," I growled at him.

"In time, Fish. When you're more coherent and cooperative. I'm very glad this new drug cocktail is working. Doctor Trueblood really outdid himself," Goldenblood rasped, his voice low and gravelly. "How are you, Go Fish? It's been awhile since we've been able to have a talk like this. We came close, once, but you slipped away before we could make any significant progress."

I narrowed my eyes. "This is a dream," I muttered as I glared at him.

"Oh?" he asked with a mild smile as he leaned back in his worn, upholstered chair.

"You're the Eater of Souls, trying to stall me from destroying you and saving the world," I growled at him. Goldenblood didn't say anything. He just cocked one brow, watching me with those annoyingly curious eyes. I glared around the office, then back at him. "You've stuck me in this dream of Happyhorn to convince me I'm crazy so I won't do what has to be done."

"Right. Save the world. Because that's the only thing that will make up for your mistakes, isn't it?" Goldenblood replied flatly. I felt the padded restraints on my hooves. Tugging would be too obvious. I needed to engage him till I could figure out how to get out of here. "In your long litany of failures and mistakes, the only way for you to atone is to suffer, and, since your failures are monumentally greater than all of ours, mundane suffering wouldn't be enough; you have to ritualistically self-inflict horrible injuries to make the world a greater place. To save it. Is that right, Fish?"

"That's not my name," I growled at him.

"I'll call you by your nickname if you'll openly consider what I have to say," Goldenblood said evenly, putting his hooves together in front of his muzzle. "Deal?"

I started to flex and relax my forelegs, giving a little tug with each. To him, hopefully, it wouldn't appear as if I was trying to pull free. "Fine," I answered. "Say your piece."

"Blackjack, you're sick. You're here at Happyhorn to protect you from self-harm while we struggle to treat you. Once, you were a police pony with aspirations of following your mother into the Royal Guard. You failed to protect one pony... a filly...

and from that, your decay into increasingly self-destructive behavior and delusions commenced, eventually culminating in a complete split from reality. You've been here ever since."

"Right. Keep talking," I muttered, trying to think how to get out of this nightmare. The clock? The portrait? How could I end this? He wasn't talking though, so I had to. "If I'm crazy, why would I put myself in the Wasteland? Why would anypony?"

Goldenblood smiled paternally. "You'd be surprised how many psychotic breaks involve some kind of apocalyptic element. I'm working on a paper, actually. There's some deep-seated fantasy in pining away for the death of the civilized world. To some, it's a place of absolute freedom and liberty, where frustration can be met with responsibility-free violence. To others, it's an escape from the mundanity and tedium of life. For you, it's a place in which you feel like you can suffer as you deserve." He lifted a file as thick as my hoof and took out some withered pages. "Think about it, Blackjack. You got out into the Wasteland, and the first thing you did was run into foals needing your help. You failed one." He checked another paper. "A short time later, you killed forty foals. You magnified the failure of one to an unforgivable degree." Another paper. "Failed to prevent zebras from getting killed. Failed to protect mares wearing 'bomb collars'." Another, and he chuckled. "Killed everypony in your bunker home." He just smiled at me and then shook his head. "Every time you start to feel better, you find some horrible way to make things worse for yourself. You simply cannot forgive yourself for one mistake."

"Right. I want to kill helpless ponies," I scoffed.

"You want to suffer," Goldenblood countered wearily. "Back when you were lucid, you engaged in increasingly self-destructive behavior. The risky sex. The binge drinking. Masochism. Self-mutilation. You're punishing yourself for that one mistake you made, where you failed to save a filly." He sighed, opening the tometic file to bookmarked pages. "For a time, I hoped we were going to make a breakthrough, but it seemed your delusions magnified. Trying to stop a war in the sky? Going to the moon to stop a superweapon? Fighting some 'Eater of Souls' for the world? Does any of that sound even close to reality?"

"It's not my fault," I replied, not wanting to admit that he had a point. "And it doesn't matter. I'm not going to believe none of that was real. I lost my friends... ponies I loved..." I hissed, feeling hot tears on my cheeks. "It wasn't just a crazy thing in my head!" I shouted at him, loathing the look of pity in his eyes. "How do you even know any of this?"

“While you have been mostly catatonic during your stay here, we’ve been monitoring your mental state regularly with magic,” he said, his lips still fixed in that faintly amused and patronizing smile. “I loved how you cast me as some nefarious government agent manipulating everything behind the scenes.”

“Right, so you became a psychologist after Littlehorn, is that it?” I snapped at him. Out! Where was the way out of this?

He sighed, rubbing his temples. “Blackjack, ‘Littlehorn’ never happened. The ‘great war’ never happened. They were ideas unfortunately implanted within your delusions by another patient here, which you eagerly adopted.”

“Then how’d you get your scars?” I demanded.

He gave a strained, almost dangerous smile, before answering lightly, “Housefire, in which I lost my wife and daughter.” I swallowed, glancing over at a picture of a pink-maned pegasus and small yellow-maned filly hanging by his desk. “Satisfied?” he asked thinly.

A sense of mortification stole over me. “Sorry,” I muttered, looking away, feeling for the first time that this might actually be real. “But it happened. How do you just make up a war like that?”

“Ponies have been writing fiction like that for ages, Blackjack.” The edge in his voice faded a bit as he went on with a touch of scorn, “But do you honestly think Princess Celestia and Princess Luna would ever, ever commit Equestria to a systematic butchering of another race? Especially zebras, who are as rational and caring people every bit as much as ponies?” When I didn’t answer, he sighed again and shook his head.

“So... Morning Glory and P-21...” I spat at him, trembling. “Rampage and Lacunae and Scotch Tape... LittlePip and her friends... you’re telling me they all don’t exist?”

“Of course they exist, Blackjack. You didn’t create all of your fantasy by yourself,” he said, his horn glowing. The restraints I’d been trying to tug out of suddenly loosened. “Come. I’ll show you.”

He led me towards the door where Doof and Lighthooves waited, both wearing orderly uniforms. Both watched me with a wary eye, their gray and red hides bruised. “You sure about this, doc?” the earth pony asked.

“Yes, she needs to see while she’s still lucid,” Goldenblood said as he stepped into the hall. The pair fell in behind me.

“Easy for him to say,” the red pegasus muttered. “He’s not the one that’ll have to restrain her.”

“My balls still aren’t the same,” Doof replied.

“Yeah. Sorry about that,” I muttered, getting a surprised look, then a suspicious glare.

Goldenblood took me to a large window. “Here’s the Wasteland, Blackjack.”

Gazing through it, I looked down at a large room with about two dozen ponies. A third of them were wearing patient gowns, the others divided into nurses and orderlies. And there, surrounded by other patients, were my friends.

Glory sat with her singular wing, away from the group, looking over textbooks, her purple mane so beautiful as it fell across her face. P-21 also sat by himself, off in a corner, glaring warily out at the others. The scars around his neck were visible even from this distance. Rampage, covered in bandages and wearing a straitjacket, seemed to be having a conversation with herself at a table. Psalm, not Lacunae, sat nearby, rocking in place as her lips moved silently. Scotch Tape, looking faintly older than the filly I remembered, gazed out a window through bars at the world outside. LittlePip, strapped to a wheelchair in a straightjacket, appeared to be raving as a red-eyed stallion addressed her with a worn expression. Velvet Remedy sat singing to a rapt audience of none, while Calamity watched her with a hollow-eyed look. There were plenty of other ponies I didn’t know, too – a vaguely familiar earth pony stallion conspicuously wrapped head to hoof in tinfoil, an absolutely adorable green pegasus stallion, a dishwater-gray unicorn surrounded by heaps of paper, scribbling words furiously, and a red-maned white mare with a neutral expression being visited by a pale green unicorn, for instance – but most were ponies I knew.

My friends...

“So they’re all crazy too?” I muttered, glaring at Goldenblood.

“Your delusions had their foundations in other patients here. Some were modified to fit your fantasy, others catered to you, lending their own fractured self identities to your mindscape,” he answered calmly.

“Morning Glory?”

“Nervous breakdown, suffering from intense stress and expectations about her success, leading to control issues and anxiety disorders.”

“P-21?”

“Who? Oh, him. PTSD from repeated sexual traumas with high risk of suicide.”

“Psalm?” I asked, testing him, but he didn’t falter in the slightest.

“You recast her as Lacunae, a mother figure, which is understandable given your own mother’s remoteness and untimely death. Schizophrenia.”

“Rampage?”

“Dissociative Identity Disorder,” he replied smoothly. “You should really call her Peppermint.”

“Scotch?”

“Scotch Tape. Borderline Personality Disorder, stemming from early abandonment. She also suffers from the delusion that others are fictitious parents of hers. It’s a... rather unique take on the standard transient, stress-related psychotic features that we sometimes see in those clients,” he added with a faint smile.

Okay. What about the others? “LittlePip? Seriously?” I asked.

“You mean Pipsqueak? Where to begin?” Goldenblood actually grinned. “First there’s her rampant substance abuse, which has led to permanent psychosis. Add that to Narcissistic Personality Disorder, and delusional disorder with delusions of reference and persecution. . .” He trailed off. “One pony controlling all the weather and ‘saving the wastelands’? Sound familiar?”

I ignored that. “Velvet Remedy?”

“Narcissistic Personality Disorder and a severe case of delusional disorder. She is convinced that she’s ‘destined’ to be the second coming of Fluttershy.” Then, before I asked, he pointed at Calamity with a hoof. “PTSD from time served in the Royal Guard.” He rubbed his chin. “They do work well together in group, though. Pity he feeds her need for reaffirmation. Ah well, there’s always a dependent when there’s a narcissist.”

I huffed and just pointed at tinfoil pony, not having a clue where to start.

“Applesnack? Scopo and haphephobia.” At my blank stare, he sighed. “Fear of being seen and touched, as well as some associated depression issues. You’d think he was a monster under there.” I pointed at another, and he just gave me a parental smile. “We could do this all day, Blackjack, and you won’t learn any more than you have in group.”

Fine then. “What about me?”

His smile wavered a little and he took a moment before answering. “Perhaps one of the greatest cases for Complex PTSD that I’ve ever seen in my life. That, combined with an underlying Bipolar Disorder has created a, to be frank, fascinating mix of delusions, self-neglect, and impulsivity. You vary between utterly agitated to the point that we need to sedate you to catatonic depression where you don’t move for hours. You portray yourself as either the sole savior of the entire world or scum that deserves to be raped and mutilated. Or both. And you seek self-annihilation for perceived, unforgivable offenses that are amplified and re-amplified in your mind.”

“This is ridiculous!” I snapped as I turned away— and ran into Doof; immediately, both he and I tensed. What was I doing? Where was I going in a dream? “This isn’t real,” I said, wheeling on Goldenblood. “You’re dead!”

The scarred stallion sighed. “Blackjack, think about it. What is more likely: that you are fighting for your life in some irradiated nightmare, or that you are simply ill and need to get better? That you’re Security, facing incredible odds to save lives, or that you’re a mare who’s far too hard on herself and needs some help? That you’re the long-lost descendant of Twilight Sparkle with Princess Luna’s soul and a special spell that will save the world, or that you’re just a police pony who let one bad day completely consume her?”

I turned back to the observation window and stared down at them all. Was it all in my head? I simply couldn’t tell anymore. He put a hoof on my shoulder. “There is no Wasteland, Blackjack. There never was,” he rasped, like a grizzled uncle who smoked too much.

Then I imagined the sound of shuffling cards, and an equally grave voice intoning: *You think I’m some desolate landscape? I’m everywhere.*

A world without the Wasteland...

I closed my eyes. “That sounds really nice. Really,” I said in complete sincerity. “I’d like to get better. To have a simple life. Just be a pony... a simple... good... pony...” Then I opened my eyes and stared down at my friends. What would it be like to just going back to being just Blackjack? But as I gazed at my friends, something niggled at me. A malcontent little part of myself. I glanced at Goldenblood, in his glasses and sweater, his eyes full of concern. “There’s just one thing I want from you. Something really simple.”

Goldenblood’s frown deepened. “Anything, if it will help.”

“It will,” I said as I stared through the window. “What is P-21’s real name?”

There was no answer for several seconds, and I glanced at the baffled stallion. "What?" Goldenblood asked lightly.

"P-21. That stallion there," I said, pointing a hoof. "Though if you've been reading my mind, you know who I'm talking about." His eyes went to P-21 and then back to me. "Come on. You can't honestly tell me that his name is actually 'P-21'. So tell me his real name."

He continued to frown at me. "Blackjack, I can't just tell you..."

"Sure. Tell me this one thing! It'll be our little secret!" I said as I glared at him.

His eyes went from P-21 to me and back again. "Blue... Blue... um... hooves? Blue... buck..." He fumbled as his eyes twitched from me to the window repeatedly. Sweat trickled down his temple. "I can't remember. I'll have to check his file!"

"It's okay. He can tell me. Let's go," I said as I nodded at the window and started towards the stairs down to the room below. But Goldenblood and the other three weren't moving. I rounded on all of them. "You don't *know* what his real name is, do you?" I jabbed my hoof at the window. "Morning Glory. Psalm. Scotch Tape. Even 'Pipsqueak'... that was from LittlePip's book! So give me a name that's not from the Wasteland!" I shouted at him.

"You need to calm down!" Goldenblood replied in alarm. "Restrain her," he said to the two orderlies, who rushed in.

But I was through with mind games. The pair grabbed me with their hooves, but I didn't move. I just stared at Goldenblood. "You keep trying to trap me in dreams!" I shouted at him, the building starting to rumble and crack. "But I am the Princess of the Night, and you will constrain me no longer!" I bellowed as the cracks spread, now through the struggling, grunting stallions like they were cheap porcelain figurines. I seized that fundamental truth and pushed against this lie. I watched as Goldenblood's eyes went wide with fear before the world exploded into shards of darkness.

The interior of the *Seahorse*, with my legs nailed to the floor as stallions sweated and grunted against me. I ignored and pushed again, the ship creaking, the blackness of my sight cracking like smoked glass. Another dream. Another illusion! But I was through being distracted. I kept pushing my will against that blinding darkness. "Face me..." I grunted as I concentrated. The darkness shattered.

Now I was standing in a restored Core, wearing the most ridiculous princess garb as thousands of Wastelanders all shouted their love and praise. Cognitum would have eaten it up. My friends were all alive, of course. It was like the Eater didn't know what to throw against me anymore, but why was it bothering to throw anything against me at all? I stared straight ahead, denying the shoddy fantasy, watching the cracks creep down the black obsidian towers. "Face me!" I commanded over the crowd, and they disappeared like dust as the skyscrapers exploded into enormous shards falling into the sky.

Star House. P-21 as husband and father. Glory as wife. Rampage as friend. I pushed past it, the house shattering like glass into fragments of thought. These phantasms weren't my friends, and I wasn't going to be caught up by illusions of the real thing! "Face me, you coward!" I screamed as the shards flew away from me in every direction.

And now I landed on my face atop the Eater. My brain felt as if it had been yanked out one ear, mashed liberally, and shoved back in the other. I struggled for focus, looking at the casing ahead of me. Through blurring vision, I raised the gun. "No more dreams," I muttered. "End this..."

The shard of moonstone flew true. I pressed my face to the ground as the casing exploded, showering me with bits of starmetal, talisman, and metal scaffold. Three down. Three to go.

Wait. Why was the world moving?

I raised my head and looked around, realizing that the silvery ring of metal was no longer a ring. The spines were curling and rearranging themselves, and the central ring I was on had become disconnected, now more like an undulating, segmented curved bar of metal than a solid loop. And it was continuing to move as I held on with my fingers, trying to avoid being flung off. But as the whiplike motions increased, all I could do was teleport into open air away from it and watch.

Like a colossal serpent, the silvery snake rose up, the spines now merging to form both bony ribs and batlike wings. The large lump I'd landed on earlier was now an

immense dragonlike skull with baleful eyes of green death glaring straight at me. The fleshy ooze covered it, forming muscle and scale. Two clawed hands floated to either side of it, able to hold a dozen Blackjacks each. Three small, flat silver satellites orbited it, beaming fields of magic out in a triangular arrangement to catch Tom as he fell. But I couldn't think about them now. All I could think of was the titanic thing before me.

"YOU HAVE MY ATTENTION, MY LITTLE PONY," it boomed, not just in mere sound but in a magical wave that tore at the soul inside me. That song within me was the only refuge I had against the impact of its attention. **"BE HONORED."**

I stared up at the brilliant glow of Tom. Three shields generators left to kill, and yet, I couldn't think with that thing before me. The sheer hideousness of those maroon and black scales... those eyes that plucked at my very soul! Give me the Legate. Give me a dozen Legates. They'd be better than this.

I gaped, struggling to think... to act... Finally, all I could do was say a single word.

"Why?" I whispered.

It's serpentine lips spread wide. **"TO SAVE THE UNIVERSE FROM THE INFINITE VOID. TO SPARE EXISTENCE FROM THE INDIGNITY OF DEATH. I WILL NOT GO WILLINGLY INTO OBLIVION. EVEN NOW, WITH SUCH ENTOURAGE, I AM ROUSED TO MOTION AGAIN."** Then the massive green eyes narrowed. **"YOU CAUSED ME PAIN, MY LITTLE PONY. GREAT PAIN."**

I licked my lips, murmuring, "It seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

The immense thing, its massive bulk floating so easily as it slithered on its bed of wires closer to me, smiled. **"I FORGIVE YOU. I KNOW PAIN WELL, AND I KNOW YOUR SUFFERING. I KNOW YOUR FEAR. LET ME END BOTH. LET ME GIVE YOU PEACE AND RELIEF."** It reached out its hand, claws as big as my body spread wide. **"LET ME REUNITE YOU WITH GLORY,"** the Eater offered in its sibilant hiss. **"FOREVER."**

To be together again... a part of me yearned for that.

The sword slashed across a massive palm, sparking with silver fire when it clashed on the starmetal bones within. The wound was virtually a papercut compared to the size of the monster, but papercuts can still hurt! I flew back as the hand clenched shut on the space I'd occupied a second ago, the Eater howling as its eyes blazed in rage. "Sorry!" I shouted at it, a wild thrill running through me. "She'd never forgive me if I just gave up! I promised, after all."

“I HAVE WAITED EONS BEYOND MEASURE FOR MY RESTORATION. YOU SHALL NOT STOP ME, PITIFUL MORTAL!” the Eater screamed, but now I was in motion. There were three shields, their generators now detached from the Eater’s body, that I had to take out before Tom came in contact with them. If he did, even disabling the F.A.D.E. generators wouldn’t disrupt the magic. I teleported to the first of the three. If my count was right, I had three moonstone shells left. No pressure.

I hovered over it and took aim. The generator casing was now connected to a platform ringed with levitation talismans and crackling spark batteries, all held together with starmetal rods. I pointed straight down and— immediately dodged to the side as a tail as big as a skyscraper whooshed past me. Even though it missed, the draft behind it plucked me out of the air and carried me along like a feather. The Eater coiled around after me, lips wide with a malicious grin.

“SUCH HUBRIS. SUCH FOOLISHNESS. I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE, AND IN IT IS YOUR DEMISE!” the Eater hissed as it moved far, far too fast for anything that size. Not even Raptors moved so quickly as it did in pursing me. I teleported again... and was almost ripped in two by the sweep of one of its disconnected claws. **“YOUR EVERY ACTION, YOUR EVERY REACTION, ARE ON DISPLAY BEFORE ME. YOU CANNOT PREVAIL.”**

“Talk talk talk,” I grumbled as I kept flying, trying to avoid getting sucked into the massive drafts that followed its immense bulk. “If you’re so powerful, I’d be dead already. I bet that it’s taking a lot of energy to keep your corpse going.”

“YOU WISH FOR DEATH! IT IS THE ONLY ATONEMENT FITTING FOR YOUR SINS,” the Eater roared as we dueled in the air, me dodging, teleporting, and dodging again. This wasn’t like with the Legate. One solid hit would be like a mother of all boats landing on me. **“ADMIT YOUR FAILINGS. YOU REGRET THE SUFFERING YOU’VE INFLICTED ON THOSE YOU LOVE.”**

Okay, now this was getting annoying. It was taking all my skill and magic to avoid being smashed into cybernetic goo by this thing, and yet I couldn’t help myself. “You know what? You’re right! I do regret a lot of the shit I’ve caused, but I’ve always tried to do better.” That tail streaked straight for me, and I hovered, teleporting just behind it as it passed. “But you know what else? It’s not always me! Sometimes, the Wasteland just fucking sucks!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, at it, at the Dealer, at the whole damned world. “But I don’t care, because I will never give up! Not even if it kills me!”

I flew for another floating shield generator but this time teleported backwards. The

hand passed by, and I teleported forward before the draft could suck me away. I grabbed the starmetal framework and pointed the shotgun at the box. An immense mental pressure crushed in on my mind, but I shoved the attack away. A trigger pull, and I dropped. The platform exploded above me, shards of metal raining down as it collapsed.

The hands came up, and I tried to teleport away when suddenly a green light flashed. I tried to squeeze myself through the Blackjack-sized hole in my mind, but couldn't do it. Instead, I smashed into the upturned palm of one hand, ramming into it like hitting a brick wall. Immediately the fingers started to close, to crush me like a bug. But the starmetal platform fell atop me, and the flaming disk held the fingers at bay. I launched myself up through the burning hole in the middle, flying clear as the Eater screamed in frustration and flung the platform at me. I barely dodged aside, flying as fast as my wings and Luna's soul could take me.

One down, two to go. I tried teleporting, but it was no use! The Eater was now tracking me, watching closely. **"YOU THINK YOU CAN DEFEAT ME ALONE, LITTLE PONY?"** the Eater asked as it gazed hungrily at me.

"I am not alone!" I shouted as I flapped furiously towards one of the platforms. The Eater struck, mouth wide, but this time, I didn't dodge. I turned and struck, flying straight into his face. My riot shotgun blasts seemed imbued with a silver moonlight as I fired straight into those widespread eyes. "Everyone I've made friends with and who helped me is here with me now!" And with each shot, like a moment frozen in S.A.T.S., I could see Rampage's obnoxious smirk, Lacunae's patient smile, and Scotch Tape's innocent grin. The shots seemed to consume the Eater's corrupted flesh with white flame as I flew around its head far faster than I ever had before.

"YOU ARE ALL NOTHING! FLICKERING EMBERS IN THE ETERNAL DARK, EASILY EXTINGUISHED!" the Eater howled.

"But together, they got me here!" I retorted as I stung it like it had never been stung before. "Every one, every single person, who's helped me get to this point!" Whisper and Stygius. Lancer, Pythia, and Sekashi. LittlePip and her friends. Duty and Sacrifice barked, the shots burrowing deep in its scaly flesh before exploding like grenades. "All of us, working together, have a power you can't imagine!"

It raised both hands up to protect its face. **"THEN THE SOLUTION IS SIMPLE! ALL OF YOU MUST DIE! YOUR SOULS SHALL ACCOMPANY ME FOR ETERNITY!"** It inhaled and spread its hands wide, and from its maw erupted a torrential blast of balefire that sent my radmeter through the roof. I threw all my magic into a shield

and managed to get clear of the core of the flame. But I didn't back down, retreat, or regroup.

No, that would have been the *smart* thing to do.

Instead, I darted in, dragging my vorpal sword along its body, trailing smoke and little bits of my armor and hide. "No! No more! It's time we're free of you!" I said as I hewed at it, seeing Glory and P-21 with their confident smiles... ponies I hadn't deserved, but who had loved me despite everything! The Eater would never take them. "Everypony I've cared about and loved is with me! You're the one who is alone!"

"I NEED NO ONE! NOTHING!" the Eater screamed, flailing wildly. Its claws and tail and wings smashed buildings, tore the wires free, and beat a whirlwind inside the glowing magical field. **"I WAS GREATEST! BRIGHTEST! I WILL BE SO AGAIN, EVEN IF I HAVE TO SNUFF OUT EVERY OTHER WRETCHED, TREACHEROUS SPARK IN THE SKIES!"**

While it ranted, I swooped in to the second-to-last shield generator. Two shotgun shells left. I fired, and the slug streaked in and hit the casing... but something was wrong. There was a feeble glow of white magic, and then the side of the case detonated with an anemic pop. I flew in and finished the shield talisman with my sword. The triangular projection of magic flickered and went out.

Then the tail smacked the platform with such force that I was all but plastered against it as it streaked right into the magical wall of the shaft. I heaved myself away with all the strength I could muster, the platform impacting against the wall of magic and the spark batteries exploding in a shower of lightning. I had only a moment to gather my wits before I was flying as fast as I could, a stream of blinding balefire pursuing me. I dove down, and the river of destruction followed, leaving blazing devastation in its wake. I raced across the bottom of the bowl, and the stream only died when it risked immolating the Eater's own serpentine tail.

Only one more. A light grew overhead as Tom re-entered with a blazing corona. No time to think. Only to fly. Only to win. I streaked along the massive, serpentine body, too close for it to blast itself. Faster! Almost there! I could hear the moonstone song radiating above me.

One... more...

Reaching the Eater's head, I flew clear and streaked for the platform. My shotgun was ready. I was ready.

Then my wings disappeared.

The claw ripped through them so quickly and cleanly that I was transformed from a flying body into a ballistic one without being knocked off target. Bloody stubs of metal continued to beat in a futile attempt to keep me in the air. I waved my limbs in a desperate attempt to reach the floating platform before I tumbled to what would certainly be my end.

My fingers popped free and caught on the platform's edge, and I swung around the frame and collided with the underside with a resounding bang. "Ow," I groaned as I hung there a moment, then shook my head hard. "One more..." I muttered, pulling myself atop the platform and over to the box holding the shield talisman. Falteringly, I struggled to my hooves.

The Eater rose before me, the ruined remains of my wings being shaken from an immense claw as it spread its hands wide, deathly energies crackling in its maw. Overhead came a rush of wind and an azure glow, like a blue sun descending. It didn't matter. Distantly, I could hear Chapel's bell tolling.

I'd won.

I pointed the shotgun at the box beneath my hooves and pulled the trigger.

The slug impacted at my hooves.

And...

Nothing?

I stared down between my legs at the sight of the lead slug smooshed against the casing, but instead of a moonstone shard, starmetal glittered in the middle.

No, I thought numbly, drawing out the bottle of moonstone dust and seeing only silvery sand within. It fell from my fingers, tumbling down into the shadows below. The spent shotgun followed it.

Then one hand seized me, five points piercing around my torso. The Eater lifted me up before its face. **"I TOLD YOU, MY LITTLE PONY. FUTILE."**

Then its other hand grabbed my shoulders, and like a hellhound plucking the wings off a bloatsprite, the Eater of Souls tore me in two.

A numbness spread through me as I fell from his talons back onto the platform. Only my augmentation kept me from passing out immediately from blood loss as I lay there, seeing my entrails and synthetic sinews and wires dangling down beneath

me. **“NOW! BEAR WITNESS!”** he bellowed as he moved down beneath the sole remaining field.

Tom impacted.

The tapered crystal seemed to have grown in its transit, or perhaps I was just a lousy judge of size. The tip of the stone dragged along the edge of the shaft in a blinding trail of fiery light and magic that swirled around me. Only my proximity to the shield talisman kept me from being instantly crushed and blasted off by the hurricane force of displaced air or the colossal heat. I'd eliminated five of the shields, but the sixth still sufficed to keep Tom from reaching the Eater.

An enormous flaming blue alicorn seemed to swell from the stone, and brilliant, blazing hooves struck around to either side of the magical wedge holding it at bay. The Eater wove back and forth, cackling with glee. Those floating claws snatched handfuls of blazing spirit fire and drew them to its maw, where it devoured them hungrily. Every bite seemed to make the Eater swell.

“YOUR CHAMPION HAS FAILED,” the Eater taunted amid mouthfuls of glowing blue luminescence.

“WITH MY LAST MOMENTS, I WILL DEFY YOU!” Tom cried out as the Eater's disembodied hands ripped away more flaming gobbits.

“YOUR LAST MOMENTS ARE DELICIOUS,” the Eater cackled as he feasted on the still-living star.

And all I could do was hang there, my guts dangling out beneath me, my chest ripped open. I'd failed... I'd failed... Sister... Glory... I'd failed...

I closed my eyes. At least I could enjoy the moonstone's song, beautiful, but now desperate and strained as it fought against its nemesis. It truly was a beautiful melody...

But not the only song I heard.

I opened my eyes and looked down at my chest. I guessed it was the big round drum with all the wires coming out of it. Slowly, dripping blood and other fluids, I pulled it from my crippled chest cavity.

You have a heart of moonstone. That was what Glory had said. I stared a second longer, and then I lifted my sword in my other hand. Carefully, I cut the end off the drum.

There, nestled in a bed of gemstones, was a hunk of moonstone. I'd been told she'd

been lucky to find an 'appropriate gem' to power my body, and as I stared at it, I realized that I'd seen it before: in Horizon Labs and the disassembled silver bullet. It was larger than the slivers in the slugs I'd used before. It hadn't been corrupted yet.

I wasn't beaten yet...

I yanked the stone free, and instantly my vision filled with "CRITICAL ERROR" in bright red letters and "SWITCHING TO RESERVE POWER" with a percentage that was ticking down. Rapidly. I dragged myself along the frame, feeling my life ebb away with each exertion. Then I took the stone and pressed it against the casing. The metal began to glow brighter and brighter, and then exploded with a detonation that blew my hand apart but left a hole in the metal. I fumbled with the stone, barely able to catch it with my other hand, holding it as if my soul depended on it. I raised the sword with my magic.

"NO!" the Eater screamed, grabbing me again and pulling me away from the platform. The moonstone did nothing against the fleshy meat protecting his starmetal skeleton. **"NO MORE INTERFERENCE. YOU ARE DONE!"**

Almost...

But I wasn't *quite* done.

I slipped into S.A.T.S.

Three magic bullets to the F.A.D.E. diamond inside the case.

Execute.

The magic bolts streaked out, hitting the insides of the box and ripping out the connections between the diamond and the power supply. The gemstone went dark, but the field was already active. The Eater froze, and then its mouth split wide in a hysterical laugh of triumph.

I stared at the stone and then closed my eyes. I might not actually be Princess Luna, but I had her soul. And while I couldn't raise or lower the whole moon...

...I could raise a small piece of it.

My horn flared as I pushed Tom up the shaft. Just a bit. Just enough for the wedge of magic to lose power, flicker, and disappear. With a relieved smile, I cut the magic.

Tom fell.

The Eater dropped me as Tom smashed the platform to the ground, and I fell along

with it. Both of us landed on a knoll of rock, broken and bent. Lying on my back, I watched as the Eater clawed and raked his talons against the flaming hooves, but now nothing protected him. Every impact of Tom's hooves was a lightning bolt, and bit by bit, Tom smashed the Eater down towards the earth, and me.

"YOU ARE DONE!" Tom roared as his hooves detonated like megaspells, making the platform rock wildly. **"YOU ARE FINISHED!"** he boomed, rearing back and smashing the Eater in its blazing face. **"YOU ARE ENDED!"** he thundered as he blazed, the heat baking me even with my augmentation. Despite being mortally wounded, a part of me refused to simply die, and I stared at the inactive talisman next to me.

"NO!" the Eater whined. **"I CANNOT DIE! EXISTENCE NEEDS ME!"** But he was silenced by an azure hoof smashing him in the maw.

I fumbled with the moonstone, but my remaining hand couldn't seem to get it back in right. It would have been easy just to lie there and be obliterated by the two, but I needed to see this to the end. I reached into the generator casing, pulled out the darkened diamond, and reconnected the wires to the talisman. A flickering sphere appeared around the platform. As my systems rapidly drained, I desperately devoured the gems I'd taken from the locker, but they only barely stemmed the rate I was hemorrhaging power.

A second later, the Eater hit. The serpent was beaten back as the blazing alicorn slid inexorably down the feeding funnel that was now the Eater's execution cell. The Eater, now trapped within its own pit, thrashed wildly, slamming against the shield and the walls. The floor of the basin gave way, and both Tom and I followed as the Eater struggled to get away from its radiant enemy. **"NO! I AM BRIGHTEST! I AM GREATEST!"** the Eater howled. Tom pinned one of those claws, his furious aura burning away the flesh. The starmetal beneath flashed a brilliant white and exploded. The Eater screamed as the second claw, pressed against Tom's chest, soon followed. **"NO! I don't want to die! Please..."**

"All things die," Tom answered. **"Hush now... it's time to go to bed..."**

The immolated flesh finally gave way, and the starmetal skeleton was now utterly exposed to the stone. Glowing. Shimmering. Shining. Swelling. Glaring. If I hadn't had my augmented eyes and been protected by the shield, I would have been blinded, then consumed by the sheer brilliance. The walls of the shaft liquefied... vaporized... and I was left in my tiny bubble of protection as the numbers in my vision counted down to zero.

Then Horizons went off.

Maybe it was one final gasp of Perceptitron weirdness, but all at once I could see not just from the shaft but from all over the Wasteland. From Charity in the door of the chapel to Grace in the hospital at the Collegiate, to Whisper staring from a rooftop... the blue-white glow was everywhere. I could only guess the magic fields kept everypony from being blinded as the light stretched higher and higher in the sky, the glow spreading from horizon to horizon. It wasn't just mere light and energy, any more than the Eater was simple metal and malfunctioning machinery. It was a beam of light that shone out into the universe. In Tenpony's windows, a line of light gleamed towards the heavens from behind the distant mountains. In the S.P.P. hub, images from dozens of towers showed the pillar of light stream into the night.

Then, like a pitiful whine in the back of my mind, I heard the Eater's last whimper, "Will it hurt?"

And then he was gone.

Tom remained, an outline of moonstone chunks vaporizing in the furnace, looking at me gravely. Then the star spirit bowed its head once to me and vanished. The column of light dwindled to nothing. With the energy dissipated, the walls of magic disappeared too. Nothing remained of the Core. It had been transformed into an almost perfectly concave bowl resting at the base of the great granite knob that had been the southernmost tip of the island. I didn't know why, but the surface of the rock wasn't a molten mass. I could only imagine that somehow the departing spirit had prevented us all from being cooked.

But the souls lingered.

Millions. Tens of millions. Freed from the Eater, they hung like a constellation of stars spreading in all directions. Some sank into the earth. Others streamed towards the sky. Some touched the weary survivors. I killed the shield and stretched out my hoof towards the countless motes. One drifted against me, and for a moment I smelled Mom's mane. I heard the warm chuckle of P-21. Another gave my cheek the caress of a soft gray wing.

And from the mare's chest, a mote emerged. Among so many, few would note it any brighter than the others as it rose towards the starry sky which had been its home for so long. Only LittlePip, in the S.P.P., would hear a Princess's sobs as it joined the others.

The mare that remained, little more than a corpse animated by failing technology,

stared up at the motes until they were indistinguishable from the stars, meaningless numbers approaching zero in her vision. To the south came a booming rumble as the concrete walls of the dams collapsed into the pit. To the north rose a matching gurgle as the sea rushed in to fill the void.

And there, on the wreckage of the platform, the mare stared at the stars as the number reached zero. Darkness took her. And silence. Yet her lips curled in a smile as she felt hot liquid rolling down her cheeks. The rumbling grew, becoming her entire world... stretching into eternity.

(Author's notes: Story is done. Epilogue to follow.)

(Hinds: I'm just going to go ahead and paste the release announcement I wrote for the forum:

"Well, everyone. . . It's out. 77. The final chapter, with the epilogue after it. I doubt that this is the end of work on PH; there will be typos found and fixed, almost certainly, there are a few edits Somber wants to make, and we hope to get it on FIMFiction. This is, however, the end of the story, over 1.6 million words resulting from over four years of work. We did it. It has been quite a ride. Kind of hard to believe that this is the last time I'm expecting to fly the Somber Signal... Though the Signal wasn't there at the beginning, of course, when PH, was just another small, anonymous FoE sidefic in an EQD compilation post, less than ten chapters to its name. Only two chapters posted, when I first saw it, and certainly no dedicated comment thread; I left my error-spotting mixed in with posts about many other stories. Still, Somber saw them, and *somehow*, I'm not really clear on the details now, I ended up working with him in the document for Chapter 3. I do rather wonder how my life might have been different if I'd decided to spend that time reading some *other* new two-chapter story in the compilation. PH has gotten so, well, okay, not big *exactly*, since it's still a niche within a niche within a niche, but hopefully you know what I mean. Speaking of that, thank you all very much for reading; without you, our readers, I doubt that we'd have lasted anywhere near this long. Some of you may have helped more than others, but I think every bit of positive or constructive feedback has probably helped. Anyway. The end of the story is here. I hope you enjoy it. :)"

Oh, and, after Murky, Somber asked if any of us had ideas for cameos of characters from other FoE stories. He ended up going with my suggestion of Whiskey Rose and Caravan Lily from Cascade-jackal's Wasteland Bouquet (<https://www.fimfiction.net/story/35229>). Which I keep trying to drum up readers for, as it has less than a hundred votes total and only eighty-three upvotes. If you're looking for another FoE story to read after PH, why not give it a try?)

Epilogue: Tomorrow

“Once upon a time, in the magical land of Equestria...”

“Brahmin shit!” blurted the green earth pony stallion across the campfire as the pale blue unicorn with the two-toned purple and navy mane finished talking. Ten or so people were crowded around the fire’s warming light. Mostly ponies, but there were a pair of zebras, a griffin, and a helldog too. An alicorn listened in silently, the blue’s eyes soft and wise. The boughs of the Everfree Forest loomed around them, thick and dark and timeless as ever. The old road wasn’t pleasant, the sort of road along which people traveled together for safety, but it was the only path transecting the ancient wood.

“Security died?” the youngest of the group, a pegasus foal with a bright orange mane, asked as she rested atop her mother. The unicorn gave a sober nod, and then foal screwed up her face and added, “For good?”

“No!” the green stallion drawled sarcastically. “Then she came back from the dead a fourth time, and this time she descended deep into the earth to some even bigger monster from destroying us all!”

The unicorn scowled at him. “She didn’t come back!” she snapped, and her ears folded a little. “They found her body. Her PipBuck confirmed it. She was gone,” she said as she bowed her head. “They built a tomb in Chapel. You can actually go see her PipBuck if you want.”

“With its super dooper megaspell inside! Wooooo!” the stallion went on, waving his hooves in the air at the foal.

A vein on the unicorn’s temple began to twitch. “No. Not with the megaspell inside. EC-1101 was gone.”

“Right. Because it never existed to begin with,” the stallion said smugly as he leaned back. “When will you Commonwealthers accept that this whole Security garbage was just a cooked-up story to one-up the Lightbringer’s?”

“It wasn’t made up. Homage and Velvet Remedy, as well as dozens of others, confirmed she did exist,” the unicorn said with a scowl. “You Republicans just can’t accept any other settlement can have its own heroes.”

The stallion snorted with a dismissive wave of his hoof. “Homage said a lotta things, a bunch while on Dash. I’ll accept that there might have been a pony named Blackjack, or Security, or the Maiden, or whatever. I’ll even accept that she might have set off a megaspell or something. But a city of the damned built over an ancient abomination? Going to the moon? The moon!” He scoffed and shook his head.

“Sorry, but I don’t buy it.”

“Well, I’ve always been skeptical of the Lightbringer’s accounts,” the foal’s mother, a tangerine mare with a deep blue mane, interjected. “She took on the Enclave, and only one pony she knew died? I had an ancestor with the Enclave military, and their stories are that Neighvarro was betrayed by a Dashite sympathizer.”

That prompted an eyeroll from the stallion before he returned to glaring at the unicorn. “Right. But aren’t there ponies in the Commonwealth itself that disputed the whole ‘Maiden of the Stars’ thing? That one pegasus... um... Moonshadow? And even one of your councilors! Yeah! First Citizen Boing said that Security had done almost as much harm as good.” He grinned at the clearly uncomfortable mare. “She said ‘let us not wipe the blood from the hooves of heroes, nor worship them without skeptical consideration.’ She didn’t buy into that whole Security deal.”

The unicorn rolled her eyes. “Fine, but there’re plenty of other people who believe that that’s what happened. Psalm witnessed everything right up to the moment she left Blackjack in the Core. And Scotch Tape—”

“Who disappeared too...” the stallion interrupted.

“She witnessed what happened on the moon,” the unicorn pressed on. “And while both admit that Blackjack had her flaws, they confirm her story.” The stallion dismissed that with a haughty sniff.

“What happened to Scotch Tape?” the pegasus foal asked.

Chapel was quiet today. No sounds of hammers banging away like so many other places in the Hoof. Scotch Tape picked through the ruins of a basement. “Sorry it took a year for us to get down here for your mom’s things,” she said as she looked over at Majina. The zebra filly quietly poked through the corroded metal boxes. Most were full of mildewed trash, but there were a few here and there that had intact old books and scrolls. Pythia sat nearby, the cloaked Starkatteri reading through the scrolls at random. “We’ll take whatever we can back to the Remnant camp. I’m sure Adama would like them.”

“Yeah. Back to getting scowls and gestures to ward off evil star wickedness. Yay,” Pythia said with a roll of her eyes, receiving a sharp glare from Scotch Tape. The cloaked filly raised her hooves in surrender and returned to perusing old maps.

“I don’t want to go back to the camp,” Majina sniffed as she poked halfheartedly

through the basement. “Adama liked Impalii. I’m just a reminder that he didn’t make it.”

“And Chapel reminds you of your mom,” Scotch Tape said with a sigh. “I feel the exact same way about 99. And Chapel doesn’t even feel like Chapel anymore. So many new ponies are moving in that it just feels like the Crusaders are fading away. I don’t know where Adagio, Allegro, and Sonata went with Octavia. Charity might still be running the shop, but it just doesn’t feel the same anymore. Nothing’s the same anymore.”

“Yeah. Life sucks. Wear a hat,” Pythia replied as she looked at a new scroll. “Where did your mom get all of these, anyway?”

“She took them from the Legate when we fled,” Majina said as she stared forlornly around the room. “Stashed them away and brought them here when she had a chance. She thought they might be important.”

“Well, she wasn’t wrong,” Pythia said as her eyes flickered across the page. “A lot of these are dispatches from Roam. Stars only know how they survived. Someone must have thought they were special.”

“Aren’t you going to join the other Starkatteri?” Scotch Tape asked.

“You mean wrinklebutt, meltyface, and ‘bwa ha ha’? Not likely,” Pythia said with a snort. “I wanted to understand a shadow on the future. That shadow was Amadi and the Eater. Those three can go back to plotting... whatever,” she continued with a scowl. Scotch stared at her for a moment, and Pythia glanced up at her. “What? In case you haven’t noticed, no one likes me or my tribe. Not even other Starkatteri.”

“Well, you have to do something,” Scotch Tape said.

“I am. I am reading about reallocation of shamanistic fetishes away from the front at Shattered Hoof Ridge,” she answered, brow furrowing. “What about you? Aren’t you building the future or somesuch?”

“Yeah. I offered my plans and designs to Triage. Then she patted me on the head and went to some meeting. With Blackjack gone, I’m just some filly again. I’ll need four or five years before they start taking me seriously. The plans are in for Chapel, but we’re way down on the reconstruction list, and Charity’s only still in charge because Keeper says so. Adults just won’t take orders from kids.”

“Well, give it a few years and bitch at them for not listening to you when their toilets stop—” And at that moment Pythia froze. “No.” Majina and Scotch Tape blinked at her as the filly’s eyes widened. “No, I’ve heard of that!” She tossed the scroll aside

and started to dig through her saddlebags, pulling out a plastic bag containing a stack of rune-covered three by five cards. Pythia withdrew them and started flipping through. "Where did I hear of that?"

"What? What are you doing?" Majina asked with a little frown, sniffing and wiping her eyes. "What are those?"

"Notes some Starkatteri zebras have made of some of the nastier things in the world," she said as she flipped through. "The Eye of the World. I know I've heard that phrase before..."

"You keep them on notecards?" Scotch asked with a half smile.

Pythia froze, giving Scotch Tape a flat look. "What should I keep them in? A black ponyhide tome with runes of evil on the cover? 'Cause I think we tried that once," she said scornfully before resuming her flipping. Then she found what she was looking for, her eyes scanning the glyphs immaculately penned on the card. "Wha..." She looked at the scroll. "No... but why..." Back to the card. "They wouldn't..." She read the scroll again.

"What? What is it?" Majina asked with a small frown.

Pythia immediately put the cards in her bags and stowed them, then started to shove letters and papers in after them. "We need to go. Grab all these papers so I can go over them later, but we need to go. Now!" Pythia said.

"Go?" Scotch Tape asked with a frown. "Go where?"

"The Homeland. I need to see if this order was actually carried out or not," Pythia replied. "I doubt it was. I mean, I can't think of any zebra that would actually do it... but I have to make sure." She rose to her hooves. "Come on. Get them loaded up, and then we need to get going!"

"The 'Homeland'?" Scotch Tape asked, and then her eyes went wide. "You mean the zebra lands?"

"Aren't you a smart pony! Gold star! Now come on," Pythia said, gesturing to the papers.

"You want to go all the way to the Homeland?" Majina asked with a little frown.

"Yeah," she said, then pointed a hoof at Scotch. "I'll need you to find somepony with a boat." Then she pointed at Majina. "And I'll need you to come with me so that they don't make stupid warding gestures when I ask important questions." The two didn't

answer. They just stared at her. “What? Did you two have anything else pressing to do? *You* don’t want to go to the camp. No pony will take *you* seriously. So why not?”

Scotch Tape’s mouth worked. “Cause... I mean... do you even know how to get to the zebra lands?”

“Sure. By boat. After that, I plan to ask for directions.” Pythia started for the stairs and then paused. “Why, *do* you have something else to do?”

The pair looked at each other, and twin tiny smile formed on their faces. They gathered up the rest of the scattered papers and together followed Pythia out of the basement. “You know,” Scotch Tape said, “I think I know a pony with a boat who’d be willing to help us...”

“She went to the zebra lands,” the zebra stallion told the filly. Then he looked at the green stallion. “Accounts vary as to what actually happened there.”

“Let me guess: died three times and saved the world?” the stallion said with a grin.

The striped pair regarded each other and simply shrugged. “It is a long story,” the zebra mare replied with a slightly pained look before addressing the unicorn mare. “But the Commonwealth is not a part of the NCR?”

“Hah, they wish!” the unicorn mare said, prompting another snort from her stallion counterpart. “The Lunar Commonwealth is an independent city state and a trading partner of the NCR. Our laws and government don’t recognize race. If you’re intelligent, you’re protected by the law. Pony. Zebra. Griffin. Even dragons. And we’re strictly neutral. No expansion out of the Hoof. The Highlanders and the dogs are our respected neighbors.”

“Eh,” the helldog, not quite as monstrous as his ancestors, said with a shrug. “Is okay. Commonwealth ponies are nice, but very proud. Don’t like disagreements. Always think they right.” The canine scratched the underside of its jaw. “Just like NCR, actually.”

“Hey!” the stallion and unicorn said in unison, prompting a laugh from several others, including the pegasi.

“The Lunar Commonwealth is nice enough if you’re looking for a place to live, but if you want to be free and get ahead, you just have to go to the NCR,” the griffin rumbled, and the stallion smiled from ear to ear before the griffin continued, “The

NCR is way more loopy goopy with contracts, enforcing the laws, and stuff. You can make all kinds of crazy money with the NCR.” The stallion’s smirk disappeared.

“I’m surprised the two haven’t gone to war,” the zebra mare said casually, and at once the unicorn and earth pony both turned sheepish.

“Eh, we hit some rough patches every now and then,” the unicorn mare said. “Fifty years after the founding, the NCR tried annexing the Commonwealth, but the Light-bringer stepped in. Then a hundred years ago the Commonwealth started talking about forcing a regime change on the NCR. That didn’t go anywhere. And fifty years back the NCR beat the reunification drum again. That actually got to some shooting before sanity kicked back in. Now there’s talk of NCR aggression and ‘pre-emptive defense’. It won’t get far.” She wore a worried frown, though, which the green stallion shared.

“It better not,” he said. “There’ve already been terrorist attacks in Junction City. And sure enough, those ‘United Equestria’ morons started calling for war before we even figured out who the attackers were.” He jabbed a hoof at the unicorn. “I don’t know who blew up those offices, but I don’t think the Commonwealth would kill ponies just to make a political point.” The unicorn gave a relieved smile to the stallion.

“Who does run the Commonwealth?” the pegasus asked the unicorn. “It’s not a republic, is it?”

“It’s a parliamentary council. Thirteen seats, six appointed by important organizations, seven elected by the boroughs around the Hoof. They elect a First Citizen, who sets the agenda. Every ten years, the council have to pass a vote of confidence, or they get booted out and a new councilor gets elected or appointed.” The unicorn screwed up her face. “It makes for some interesting negotiations at times...”

“The Carrots are still wondering why you haven’t used the position of First Citizen to appropriate any tax money for rebuilding and expanding Elysium,” Hoity Toity rasped. “They’re griping about the smaller dividends.” The boiled gray stallion in a slightly threadbare suit was meeting with Grace beneath an arbor overlooking what used to be a mighty reservoir. The canyon left behind was almost as breathtaking with its gray granite knobs and blocks.

The cobalt-maned mare was lying on a bench and reading a scroll. “That’s because the Carrots can’t see an inch past their noses,” she replied without looking up. “By using our own money to rebuild and expand the Society, I can lend our share of the

tax revenue to elsewhere in the Hoof. That political capital is going to be of much more use in the long run than bottlecaps would in the short run.”

“And Blackjack would approve of the altruism,” Hoity rumbled.

Grace sighed, putting the scroll down and gazing north along the canyon. “Indeed. Odd that, even with her gone, we still haven’t reverted back to squabbling, murderous, self-serving tribes.”

“Near brushes with mutual annihilation do have a way of unifying people. I think the fact that the Society, Collegiate, Reapers, Thunderheaders, batponies, and Finders decided to make it work is keeping it intact more than anything else. The plebeians are content so long as they have food, security, some comfort, and hope,” Hoity replied.

“Mmm,” Grace answered as she pondered that. “Noblesse Oblige,” she murmured. “When the people prosper, the nobility prospers.” She rolled the scroll up with her magic. “Charm!” she called out.

From the far side of the arbor, said mare emerged. She was thin, her mane paler and wispier than it had once been. “Yes?” she asked, as if not sure if she was in trouble or not.

“I think it’s time we headed back inside for the day,” Grace said as she carefully shifted herself off the bench and onto a wheeled platform, her hindlegs dangling limply behind her. “Call the children.”

Charm nodded and trotted back to the far side of the arbor. “Baccarat! Bouillotte!”

Hoity wheeled Grace around the arbor easily, and an earth pony colt and unicorn filly came into view. Their coats had a decidedly pale blue hue, and their manes were striped black and blue. The pair were wrestling in the grass, making a perfect mess of the white coveralls they wore. The colt flipped the filly onto her back and pinned her. “Gotcha!”

“Oh yeah?” the filly growled, then bit his ear.

“Ah! No biting! No biting! Momma, she’s biting me!” the colt shouted as he waved a hoof to his mother.

“Bouillotte! Stop chewing on your brother this instant, young filly!” Charm said firmly. She spat out his ear with a glower, then shoved him off. “Baccarat, if you pin your sister, don’t be surprised if you get bitten.”

“Yes, Auntie Charm,” said Baccarat.

"Sorry, Auntie," echoed Bouillotte, but the instant Charm looked away to Grace, she stuck her tongue out at her brother.

"Let's all go up and have some tea," Charm said, then paused, looking uncertain. "It is time for tea, right? Or is it breakfast? Dinner?"

"Teatime," Grace replied with a gentle smile, and the younger mare nodded her head, touching her temple a moment. "Are you alright?"

"I... it's just hard to keep track of things. I'll be fine," Charm answered with a tired little smile. Then she turned to the children. "Now, let's get you messy ones up and changed and we can have some tea."

The pair nodded and took three steps towards the country club. Bouillette glanced over at her brother, and then smirked. "Race you!" And then she took off up the hill. With just a grin, Baccarat followed, and in a few seconds the filly wailed out, "Hey! It's not that much of a race!" Charm followed the pair at a much more languid pace.

"Are you ever going to tell them?" Hoity asked as he pushed her up the hill after them.

"That they're not mine? No. Let everyone believe that they're the illegitimate offspring of Lord Blueberry. He was a good stallion, and his mother loves them. Far safer than anypony else knowing the truth. They're happier this way," she said as she looked back at Hoity. "What of you? Are you still able to get your supply of Aqua Cura?"

"For now. It's only a matter of time until that radiation is purged as well, though. We ghouls are a dwindling lot, I fear," he said as he wheeled her slowly up the slope. "Yet we must go on into that night sooner or later. I, at least, will go with dignity... although if I do go feral, I hope it will be in Carrot's bedquarters. That is a stallion who deserves what little brains he has to be eaten."

"I have no doubt," Grace began to say, but then she paused. On the far side of the canyon, a white pony watched. It was impossible to make out more than that. She looked up at the ghoul, "Hoity, who—"

But when she looked back, the pony was gone.

"Yes?" Hoity asked, looking behind them as well. "What is it?"

"Nothing? Just a trick of the light, I suppose."

"It's not like the system is any better than the NCR's congress," the stallion objected.

"Yes, but most Lunarians can name all the sitting members of the Lunar Council. Can you name all two hundred and ninety-seven representatives in your congress?" the unicorn mare challenged with a smile.

"Eh. It's still not true democracy," the pegasus mare replied with a dismissive wave of her hoof. "When you put power in the hooves of others to use for you, it's going to be abused."

"Like the Enclave?" the stallion said with a smirk, and the pegasus flushed.

"The military rule was a failure of sense and reason, not democracy," she retorted. "We deceived ourselves as a people."

"Yeah, ponies are good at that," the griffin said lightly, getting a chuckle from the zebras, helldog, and curiously also the alicorn. "You guys get way too wrapped up in things. Need to relax."

"I hear employment is up for pegasi," the alicorn said lightly, regarding the winged pair.

"Yes," the citrine pegasus explained with a small smile. "They're bringing the last of the S.P.P. towers down. That thunderstorm that ran amok and ravaged Fillydelphia was the last straw. They just don't have the parts to keep them working right after four centuries. They'll probably take whatever does work and ship it back to Junction City till it burns out too. Regardless, now we're back in charge of the weather again. It's a good feeling."

"Just no blocking out the skies, okay?" the green stallion warned with a frown.

"Two centuries and we still get that thrown in our face," the mare said with a sigh. "The Enclave is gone. There hasn't been a working Raptor in almost fifty years. We have only one working cloud factory. More and more, the high end technology fails. I'm glad there're still some working airships, even if they're nothing like the Raptors of old."

"Yeah. Even the Commonwealth is feeling the pinch," the unicorn admitted. "The griffin invasion and dragon war really took their toll. Even getting quality firearms material is tough." She drew an old, worn pistol and carefully drew back the slide. When she released it, it didn't return until she gently smacked it with the pad of her hoof. "When you can't build a quality high speed lathe or functioning hydraulic press, that's not good. At least we still have steam engines. We're not going completely back to rocks and sticks."

The griffin chuckled. "Hey, don't knock rocks and sticks. These days, more people will carry around a blade than a gun. Ammo's so rare and expensive that it's just safer. Besides, my people almost conquered the NCR with just claws and beaks. If it hadn't been for those alicorns..." he trailed off as he looked flatly at the blue.

"You're welcome," she replied calmly.

"Well, things might have been different," he said, and then he rolled his eyes. "Of course, then the radwyrms invaded and kicked everyone's flank. That was a tough one," he said, getting nods from everyone there.

"Yeah. We can all agree that tainted, radioactive dragons are bad," the green stallion murmured before glaring flatly at the mare. "Of course, if the Commonwealth had joined us sooner, there might have been a lot less damage."

The unicorn rolled her eyes. "I told you, we're not allowed to do that. The Reapers, Brood, and the Skyguard are defensive forces. Only the Zodiacs can leave the Hoof without special permission, because they're law enforcement. It wasn't until we were attacked that we could join in."

The stallion snorted skeptically. "Sure. And if you had joined in before that, you could have saved a lot of NCR lives."

From the back of the collection, a cloaked mare said softly, "It's not the lives you could have saved that matter. That's never enough, and you can drive yourself crazy if it's what you focus on." They turned, but only her white muzzle poked out into the firelight. "You save as many as you can, when you can. That's all anypony can do."

Silence reigned for a few seconds as they looked at each other. The pegasus mare was the one to resume the conversation. "The Brood are real, then?"

"Oh yeah. They're the protectors of the Hoof. They just... they're odd," the mare admitted. "Some of them act like ponies. Others like zebras. Or griffins. There're stallions who think they're mares or mares who think they're stallions. They're not exactly crazy, but strange. They handle day to day policing and the like. The Reapers are sent in for big threats, and the Zodiacs for elusive criminals."

"Are you a Zodiac?" the pegasus filly asked the unicorn, who immediately flushed. She shifted and pulled back her cloak to show a mark for Taurus. "Whoa."

"I... ah... hope you're not after one of us," the griffin squawked, suddenly sweating.

The mare batted her eyes at him. "Not unless you've got a bounty back at the

Hoof. Do you?” She brushed her cloak back into place. “Anyway, the Brood are just strange. There used to be a doctor studying them, but she went crazy. Too much working around with taint. I don’t know the details...”

A grotesquely swollen Dr. Morningstar, fused with a golden tree, birthed a menagerie of fused creatures as she ranted and raved about her children. Candlewick, Dazzle, and Brutus faced her along with a half dozen others fighting to eliminate the horrific birthing monstrosity.

“...but I do know that they weren’t pretty,” the mare finished grimly.

The zebra stallion regarded the alicorn. “Not many of your kind live in the Hoof, do they?”

“Not without good reason,” the alicorn admitted. “The land has magical and spiritual scars of terrifying intensity. While the Enervation is no more, the land hasn’t truly recovered like elsewhere. It aches. When one goes to the Rainbow Dash Memorial and stands before the twisted wreckage, our kind can almost relive those last moments of the *Castellanus*’s flight. Which is why I can confirm that some of what Glimmershine said was true,” she said with a nod to the unicorn, who smiled gratefully.

“I heard there’re still alicorns that are all evil? Is that true?” the filly asked the alicorn with all the tactlessness and licence of youth.

“Some,” the blue responded with a gentle smile. “We are immortal, which is taxing. While ghouls are largely no more, we remain. Losing friends and loved ones is hard on an immortal heart. Constant change is difficult. It’s been two hundred years since I awoke, and I have difficulty keeping things straight sometimes. We also reproduce only with great difficulty, so it is fortunate we are so long-lived. So yes, there are still alicorns who forget the teaching of Mother and Fluttershy. Pity them, for they are truly lost in this world.”

The wind blew over the hills from the restored apple orchard at Sweet Apple Acres, carrying a sweet scent of blossoms on the air. So much hard work just for apples,

but it meant the world to the earth ponies that had come to work their 'birthright'. "Apple family. Go fig," a bat-winged Whisper murmured, watching them caring for the trees off in the distance as she walked along the dusty trail, a troupe of batponies following behind her with a cart. Her band nattered to each other, talking about the concert the night before in Ponyville.

When turning Ponyville into a 'Hellhound Sanctuary' had been a bust, because hellhounds weren't animals and lived wherever they Goddesses-damned pleased, the NCR'd made a real effort to restore the village. There were even some new additions, like the long, scaled-up dormitories housing dozens of alicorns coming to rediscover themselves and learn to cope with the realities of immortality. Alicorn school.

She'd spotted Psalm there, along with Stronghoof. The pair either hadn't recognized her or hadn't wanted to interact. There wasn't much to talk about. 'Hey, been a long time since Blackjack got killed. How you been?' 'Fine, and how have you been holding up since we let Blackjack go die all alone?' At least Crumpets and Dusk had ended up a couple. Eh, lesbians... go fig...

Still, it'd been nice seeing the purple with her beefcake husband. She didn't know what they'd done to him to give him tiny wings in addition to his tiny horn, but regardless, he still sparkled and was frigging annoying. Worse, they actually had a kid. *How could I hate them now?* she thought with a snicker.

The road ended at a pair of cottages. There was a horrible mauling taking place next to one. A half dozen ponies were stomping the shit out of one stallion, pegasi dive-bombing his head while unicorns tried to grab him with their magic. She would have joined in, except that the six were all foals and young ponies and their victim was Deadshot Calamity. The stallion had some gray in his beard and streaks in his mane, but he was still fit. Fun as it'd be to kick his flank, she wasn't here for that. Whisper asked the band to hang back, taking only one guard with her as she continued on.

"Is that you, Whisper?" Velvet called as she walked out onto the porch. A baby in a diaper rode easily on her back.

"Yeah. Sorry it took so long getting here," she said as she climbed the steps of the cottage, giving the mare a quick hug before tugging at a choker with a bloodwing talisman on it. As it came off, her wings retracted back into her body, leaving only downy stubs behind. "Flying with those just isn't the same. Like I'm borrowing someone else's wings." She gave a little self-deprecating smirk. "Even if bat wings

are awesome.”

“They still haven’t found replacements?” Velvet said as she trotted out to the other mare.

“They can’t slap a full cyborg prosthetic on there without reinforcing half the rest of my body, and Morningstar frigging stole Chimera so... no,” Whisper replied, then smirked. “Doesn’t matter. Wings or no wings, I can still kick ass.”

“Yeah. I heard your concert in Ponyville last night,” Velvet replied, and then her face grew pained. “Actually, I think everypony for twenty miles heard it.”

“Hey, you sing the classics, and I sing metal. New music isn’t nice and sweet. It’s pumped and angry and doesn’t take shit from anypony,” Whisper said with a grin. Velvet sighed and rolled her eyes, but she still smiled a little.

“And how are the batponies doing?” Velvet inquired. “I see you brought the band.”

“Bodyguards, actually.” Whisper rolled her eyes. “I decided that if they were going to follow me around all the time, they might as well help me rock.” She regarded them with a smile. “They’re a lot like your alicorns, though. Doing better, but gradually.” Whisper’s grin soon faded as her ears folded back, and she glanced over her shoulder at the other cottage. “Does she know I’m coming?”

“She knows she’s going to have a very important visitor today,” Velvet answered as Whisper swallowed and rubbed a hoof on her other foreleg nervously. “I can go with you, if you like.”

“No. If I can face the apocalypse, I should be able to do this,” she said as she straightened. A cheer rang out, and Calamity was laid out in the grass, his children pinning him down with glee. “So... seven? Think you’re going to stop there?” she asked Velvet.

“You know, after Pipsqueak, we said she’d be the last. But then things happen, and you think ‘what’s one more?’” Velvet said as she touched her tummy, her golden PipBuck glimmering. The rose crystal songbird in the housing glowed gently when the light hit it just right.

Whisper flushed and rubbed her own slightly swollen belly, glancing back at one of the band with a warm smile. “Yeah. What’s one more?” The PipBuck on the pegasus’s own leg was a shining twin of Velvet’s save for its pink crystal star.

Velvet chuckled maternally. “And it doesn’t quite conflict with my singing, since Calamity’s always here patrolling the skies and Homage will babysit.” Velvet smirked

at Whisper. "She always protests, and always accepts. I think she'd just adopt Pipsqueak outright if we let her."

"No way. She's too smart for that. As an aunt, she gets to play with them, but when they start pooping and crying, she can send them back to Mom," Whisper said with a grin. Her smile faded, though, and she gazed off at the other cottage, swallowing.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you? Make introductions?"

"No," the pegasus replied, and, giving Velvet a small smile, continued, "If we could get Gardens going after all the junk we went through, I should be able to handle this."

"True. It's not like you're facing a powermad alicorn," Velvet said. "Though you'd probably prefer that."

"Yeah. Not like I can kick *her* in the face." Whisper bit her lip anxiously, then lowered her eyes. "Thanks, though. It's still so new to me. Family, friends... I can still remember, growing up, Sanguine always telling me how much better I was than everyone else and encouraging me to... show them." Whisper sighed. "He was all I'd ever had. I couldn't even imagine a world without him, but he certainly could imagine one without me. So yeah, thanks again for teaching me about friendship and... being less of a cunt." She gave a nervous smile. "Mean-ness isn't strength."

Velvet gave her a hug. "Thank you for keeping us all together when everything fell apart. If you had given up on us, Apex would have irradiated and tainted the whole Wasteland with Gardens." There was a yelp next to the house, and they both leaned over to see Calamity pinned to the ground, all six kids on his back. "And for teaching Calamity that sometimes Loyalty is standing up to your friends, no matter how much you love them."

Whisper opened her mouth to reply, then closed it and shook her head. Enough stalling. She bid Velvet farewell, retrieved what she needed from the wagon, the guards standing silently back, and then turned and walked to the second cottage. Tentatively, she knocked on the front door.

No answer. She glanced behind her, knocked again, and frowned. Had something happened? She should break the door down! Get her power hooves! ...Or maybe just check the backyard first? Slowly, she made her way around, almost walking into a shimmering field that had to be an invisible blue alicorn. "Go ahead," the hidden protector murmured. "You're clear."

Whisper's snarky reply was lost in her nervousness and a mouthful of scroll case.

She walked a little further around the house...

There she was.

Whether a product of the magic that had transformed her, or just good luck, Fluttershy had aged well. A sort of timeless quality seemed to surround her, the silver strands of her mane blowing softly in the breeze coming off the Everfree. Her teal eyes seemed to gaze across centuries as she sat in the grass. At her hooves, a half dozen bunnies dozed. Though she definitely had wrinkles about her eyes, nothing of her appearance suggested infirmity, just old pain painted over with... something? Maybe hope?

Whisper spat out the scroll she'd been carrying, her mouth working several times before she finally croaked, "Hi... Mom."

The pegasus turned those sad teal eyes to Whisper, and it was a moment before they focused on her. Comprehension slowly stole over the older mare. "Excuse me?" she queried with a little frown.

"Please. I..." Whisper fumbled with a scroll case at her hooves. "Here! Please read this! I... he wrote it... just in case..." She held the scroll case out. After all, if Rainbow Dash had survived as a ghoul, there might have been a chance of seeing Fluttershy again. He was always two steps ahead... sometimes off a cliff, but still, two steps ahead.

Fluttershy was skeptical, and who could blame her? But she took the scroll case and shook out the piece of paper, unrolling it and fitting a pair of glasses to her muzzle. Her eyes widened, then narrowed, then widened again. Tears shimmered as she sniffed. "Oh, that fool... that poor fool..." she murmured as she hugged the scroll to her chest.

"It's true. Trueblood... he saved me. Preserved me." She left out 'Used me'.

"I... I don't know what to say," Fluttershy murmured as she regarded her daughter. "I... I thought I'd lost you. I did lose you..." Fluttershy held herself with her wings. "I'm sorry, I don't know what to say."

"I... you don't have to say anything to me. I just... I wanted you to know. And..." Whisper turned and looked behind her, giving a smile she'd only ever given one other pony. "Go ahead."

From behind Whisper emerged a colt. His yellow coat had a dusky, mustard hue. The mane was an uncanny copy of his father's down to its deep purple color. Bright

teal eyes gazed warily up at Fluttershy as his bat wings fidgeted atop his back. "Um... hi. Grandma."

Fluttershy's face screwed up as tears ran down her face. "This is Noctilucent," Whisper said, unable to stem the flow of her own tears and not sure if she even should. "I call him Nocti." The colt took a few steps towards Fluttershy.

"Hello, Nocti," Fluttershy whispered, and then they all lost it. It was laughing and crying and hugging, as if two centuries of pain and a life of loss were finally able to be released. Even the hidden alicorn couldn't stop her tears as she witnessed the long-deferred reunion.

So it could be forgiven if they missed the sight of the distant, pale mare looking on, shedding tears of her own.

"Well, it's getting late," the green stallion said. "I'll take first watch."

"Second," the zebra stallion offered.

"I'll take first," the unicorn mare insisted. At the stallion's frown, she elaborated, "It takes hours for me to get to sleep anyway when I'm in the Everfree."

"Alright," he murmured, trotting over to his bedroll.

After several minutes, everypony had gotten settled in... with the exception of the cloaked pony who had only spoken once before. "Keeping watch with me?" the unicorn asked the mysterious pony.

"Something like that. May I see that gun again?" the mare asked. The unicorn frowned. "I promise, I won't do anything to damage it."

The unicorn drew the gun, removed the magazine and chambered round, and levitated it over, where a second field of magic wrapped around the weapon and pulled it into the cloaked unicorn's hooves. "It's a twelve point seven millimeter, IF-33."

"Mmmm," the strange mare replied, then pulled out a small box, cracking it open with a waft of gun oil. The gun was easily disassembled, every piece hovering in the air.

"Wait! What are you doing?" the unicorn hissed, trying to keep her voice low.

"I just happen to have a few parts for this model," the mare said as she replaced the firing pin, spring, trigger, and barrel. Then she oiled it and just as easily reassembled

it. Then she turned in over and regarded the handle.

Tarot. Little Poker. Full House. 52 Pick up. Straight Flush. Aces. Royal Flush. Bridge. Hearts. Gin Rummy. Go-Fish. Blackjack.

Then she turned the gun over, and gazed down at the other side.

Bouillotte. Beauty. Starshine. Astrolabe. Star Sparkle. Prominence. Twilight Shield. Night Watcher. Glimmershine.

The strange pony levitated it back to the suspicious mare. "It's a nice weapon. Looks like there's still some room for a few more names though," she said as Glimmershine examined the gun closely. "I'm sorry about your mother, by the way. She died protecting others when all she wanted to do was study and raise you."

"Who are you?" Glimmershine whispered.

"No pony important," the strange pony said as she rose to her hooves. "Take care of yourself. And think about it. It'd be a shame if vigilance ended." The cloaked mare gestured to the snoring green stallion, and Glimmershine glanced over at him.

And when the mare looked back, the cloaked pony was gone.

Not far from the campfire, the forest pressed in, but the cloaked pony walked without concern. She'd dealt with far worse places than this and faced far worse threats than the beasts offered. Okay, Killing Joke was still around, but hopefully she'd stay clear of that. The protectors in these woods, probably invisible, either didn't detect her or recognized her from her earlier visits. This was a sacred place, but she meant it no harm.

The thick trees suddenly thinned out into a large clearing. In the middle of it, rising like a rusty ball bearing in a mossy bed, loomed the enormous sphere of the S.P.P. hub. The cloaked mare approached, passing by five stones. The marble headstones, arranged in a semicircle around the entrance, all displayed in relief the ponies that had once been the Wasteland's greatest heroes. They were simple, for what statuary could capture what they'd meant to the pony they'd meant most to?

The mare marched to the front hatch and rapped on it with a hoof. "It's me," she said. Nothing. Another, louder bang. "Come on, open up," she repeated, staring at the door. "Fine, you want to do this the hard way? I'll do it the hard way."

Then she pulled out a bottle of whiskey, flopped against the door, and started to

sing. She sang long and loud and horribly, and the only reason why the defenders didn't come was that they'd heard the songs before. She sang of friends. Of lovers. Of regret. Of fun. Of sorrow. She also sang very, very badly.

So, on the nineteenth round of 'Oh they shoulda just sent the whiskey', a mare's voice shouted from above her, "Shut up, Blackjack!"

The grating buzz of my alarm yanked me away from sleep. I stuck my left foreleg out from under the blankets, away from my head, felt around for the end table next to the bed, found it, and proceeded to whack my ...PipBuckless leg into the tabletop. Hard. "Ow! Shit!" I sat up, hissing and clenching my eyes shut. "Who stuck my PipBuck on my other hoof?" Wait. This battered, junky model wasn't even mine! "Some prank..." Mom was going to be pissed... ugh... I groaned, flopped back on the mattress, and smacked my lips, tasting the sour gunk in my mouth before rolling onto my back and huffing softly, "Good morning, Blackjack. Welcome to another thrilling day in Stable 99." I half crawled, half rolled, half fell out of bed and gave myself a vigorous shake. Life in Stable 99 was routine, with any deviation punishable by the security mares. I had half an hour to wash, half an hour to eat, and an hour to report to my duty station. The same as it had been every day since I'd gotten my cutie mark.

Slowly, I shuffled through the copious junk I'd accumulated. Hey, where were the stale food chips and drink bulbs? "Ugh... Mom must have had maintenance to clean while I was out. Hope it was a cutie," I chuckled. Heh. A mare could dream... My horn glowed white as my magic lifted my uniform from one of the heaps. I gave it a test sniff... huh... when was the last time my clothes smelled dusty? I tossed it back on its pile and sifted around for another. Sniff... sniff... yeah, this'd work.

Trotting down to the showers, I passed the murals designed to inspire camaraderie and cooperation... at least, according to what I'd been constantly taught in classes. 'We are all in this together' declared the caption of one picture of an abstract white unicorn hugging dozens of tiny ponies in her hooves. Another showed one lone weeping mare under the caption 'Never forget'.

A pair of ponies I didn't recognize passed me, and they both froze. Their eyes were wide as dinner plates. "Hey, you two! Do you know who took my PipBuck?" I asked crossly, but they turned and ran. Ugh, being the daughter of the head of security never got old...

I trotted into the sector's communal bathroom, and immediately my ears perked to a

familiar giggling. Walking past a stall, I glanced in at two mares simply washing and talking about their upcoming free shift. Huh... why had I expected something different? Still, my reputation must have been obvious, so it was pretty understandable that the pair looked up with some trepidation when they spotted me.

“Look, if you two want to have sex, just make sure that it’s not in public. I’m not going to bust you,” I said to both as I washed.

“Wha...” one gasped.

“She’s my sister!” the other responded, glaring at me. “Who are *you*?”

Buh? How could they not know? And why did that feel... off? “Blackjack. I’m on the security C shift.” That must be it. They were B shifters. “What were you two planning on doing? Going to Metronome’s concert? Heading to Pink Pillow’s orgies?” Not like I’d get invited...

But the pair were staring at me like I’d gone mad. Then the first mare said ever so lightly, “I... We were going to Megamart’s reopening, and then to visit the Riverside market.”

I collapsed completely, smashing my face against the tile and collapsing in the stall. “What was that?” I muttered as I stared at the two, feeling something welling up inside me like an immense tide rolling in.

“Well, yeah. I mean, the sand dogs have some of the best tech salvage you can get outside of the megastable.” The mares stared at me. “Are you okay?”

No. I wasn’t okay. I kicked myself to my hooves and raced out of the shower dripping water, feeling agony building inside my head. P-21 should be right down here in this storage room! But the storage room was empty! And Daisy was going to ambush me here! But there was only a mare working a mop. I burst into medical, my breathing going faster and faster as I stared at the doctor within.

The pegasus stallion looked at me in concern. “Yes, miss. Can I help you?”

I ran without answering. Into the atrium where ponies were having lunch and talking rather than struggling with a cybernetic monster. I drew more than a few glances as I rushed past them, but most of these ponies weren’t ponies who knew me. They were a transplanted stable. Only one caught sight of me and started to scream hysterically. I skipped going to Security or the Overmare’s office and went straight for the door.

The open door.

Running faster as faster, I raced past mares and stallions casually strolling into and out of the stable and burst out into the air. Bright sunlight played across the crops spreading out along the hillside. All I could do was run. Glory was supposed to be out there! And Rampage! And Lacunae! But as more thoughts piled on, I sobbed and gasped as I raced faster and faster, trying to catch a life that had left me behind.

And then I reached a rocky outcrop near the top of the hill, and I stared out at the Hoof below me.

A pristine blue lake sat in the middle of the valley like the pupil of an opened eye. On the south end, the sheer cliff of the granite knob rose from the azure depths. All around the valley was green, as if trying to make up for lost time. Across the lake, I could make out a thriving community around the University. There! I could see some sort of circus tent next to the shell of Megamart. And there was the bowl of the Arena, the rest of the covered roof now completely removed. Far to the east, Black Pony Mountain was a buzzing hub of activity. Cloud towers rose here and there in the sky like apartment blocks... but nothing covered the lake. No boats sailed its waters. It was cool and aloof, and just a bit ominous.

I shouldn't have stopped, for at that moment, everything that had happened to me happened once more. Everything, all the way to the last moments following the Eater's death, struck me in one colossal torrent. There were two options. The first was to go happily mad.

I took the second.

I bawled. I wailed. I screamed and blubbered, ground my face into the mud and rocked like a foal.

Crying was vomiting for the soul, and I had so much to bring up.

Dark purple wings surrounded me, and I was pulled into an alicorn's embrace. All I could do was clutch Psalm in desperation, my tears bleeding months of agony and loss. Finally, I found just enough voice to whisper, "I had friends..."

That'd been a long, long time ago though.

A magical field grabbed me and levitated me into the air, pulling me easily through the skies to the top of the rusty sphere. The wind pulled back the hood of my cloak, and black and red mane streamed in the air as I was deposited next to the diminutive unicorn mare some ponies still called the Lightbringer. "You could have

just teleported in! You didn't have to butcher that Sweetie Belle song," LittlePip said as she glowered at me and rubbed her muzzle. "I'm gonna get sick again, I just know it."

"Yeah, probably," I replied with a grin, reaching into my saddlebags and pulling out a bottle of orange juice. "Which is why I brought you this," I said, passing it to her. "Remember, I promised Velvet I'd help rebuild your immune system. That means you taking your vitamins and zinc and getting periodically exposed to germy ponies like me."

"But you're not the one that feels like butt for days afterward," LittlePip grumbled, but she leaned against me anyway. Like Fluttershy, she had a timelessness about her. No pony would think she was young once they got past her height, but she didn't seem old either.

"That's why I find other ways to make you feel better," I murmured, giving her ear a little nibble and earning a squeak. "Even after two centuries."

"Blackjack!" she protested, going all red.

"Hey, I got a letter from Homage too," I pointed out, smirking and gazing into her eyes. "Take care of LittlePip and make sure she's happy emotionally, intellectually, and sexually." I crinkled my eyes in mirth as she squirmed, like she always squirmed. "And I still haven't beaten her score."

"Later," LittlePip murmured, flushed, but also not in the mood... now. It was always a dance. I could not, and didn't want to, replace Homage in her heart. I was a surrogate, and so was she. That we both knew this helped a little. "What do you want, Blackjack? Besides making me sick and sex?" There was warm familiarity beneath that prickliness.

We old ponies needed our friends.

"I need to call in a favor," I said.

"I don't owe you any favors," she grumbled.

"Sure you do," I answered, and she sighed. I didn't need to bring up who held her together for five years when Homage died. Or Velvet. Or Calamity. Or when Derpy and Lionheart went. Or when Snails removed Celestia from the mechanical hull so she could rejoin her sister. I'd been there. Nursemaid. Companion. Even, on rare days, lover. And as I'd helped her through her following sacrifices, she kept me sane when the darkness got too dark and the mattress too hard to leave.

“Okay. Maybe. What do you need, Security?” she asked with a little half smile.

I wasn’t Security. Security had died facing the Eater. I was just a Blackjack groupie... albeit a good one. And after a generation or two, nopony would look at me and think that I’d been that mare in the story. Some days, I didn’t believe it, even when I remembered it all. Remembered it all perfectly...

“Well, if she gets here soon...” I murmured, looking around. “That’s your cue,” I said to empty air.

“Oopsie!” the air said as a shimmer manifested into a purple set of power armor with a wide-brimmed hat and cape. Even after two hundred years, she’d taken great care of Rainbow Dash’s Mare Do Well armor. “Sorry. I wasn’t sure when the dramatic moment would be perfect.”

Then she pulled off the hat and helmet, and Boo smiled at me. “Hi, Momma.”

“You!” LittlePip shouted, her horn glowing and seizing the pony... though Boo didn’t quite look like that anymore. She had two little horn nubs and a little snaggle tooth, and her eyes were yellow and red. I didn’t know how long it would take her to become a full draconequus, but she was still Boo. “What are you doing here, you terrorist?!”

“Terrorist is such a pejorative,” Boo replied. “I just like giving things a little shake up every now and then.”

“You led the griffin armada to us! You brought the radwyrms!” LittlePip snarled, her eyes narrowing. “You stole my figurines.”

Boo spread her hooves, or were they arms, wide. “Yup. Pretty big shake up, huh? Got you out of that bubble for the first time in a century. Oooh, what a merry chase that was.” Boo laughed and then looked smugly down at the pair of us. “Relax, Lightbringer. It all turned out okay in the end. Rarity’s soul was free, and you got your decorations back.”

“Were you behind those bombings, Boo?” I asked. “In Junction City?”

“Me?” she said, pouting as she pressed her hooves to her chest. When I glared sternly at her, she sighed. “I may have been involved. Tangentially. Parallelogram-ically.” She returned my stern look. “The Twilight Society’s up to shenanigans again, and I thought I could rattle their plot by blowing up one of their biggest tools.”

“You could have just contacted the authorities,” LittlePip grumbled.

“Please,” Boo rolled her eyes and smirked at the little unicorn. “They’re much more

inclined to investigate after a little boom in the capital than they would be if incriminating evidence landed in their lap. Government offices blow up, and ponies demand answers. There's a nice little trail of evidence leading up to the Society's more rotten elements, and I'm shepherding a very devoted stallion towards it." She grinned from ear to ear. "This'll be far more fun."

"You're going to rut him, aren't you?" I asked with a smile.

"You would. And you should see him. All law and order and devoted," Boo purred, rubbing her chest with a hoof. "I'll open his eyes a little. Bang out some of his misperceptions and illusions. Play with his values. He should be a better pony afterwards." Then she frowned, rubbing her chin. "Of course, there's an itsy bitsy chance his investigation will result in Celestia One melting Junction City, but, eh, details!"

LittlePip glared at her, then at me, then back at her again. "You... I... how... ohhhh! I should pop you like a raider!"

Boo pulled a bandana from... where did she pull that from?... and wrapped it around her head to cover her eyes. Then she stuck a lit cigarette between her lips. "Very well. You may fire when ready. I mean, he might discover it without my nudges and teasing hints. And if he doesn't... not like the freedom of the NCR matters much." She pushed up one side of the blindfold and smirked.

LittlePip released her. "You are a menace!" she hissed.

"Ah, but I am an interesting menace, and, ultimately, a force for good," Boo replied cheerfully.

"If you're through, do you have it?" I asked her.

Boo reached into her purple cloak and pulled out a piece of hardware. "One F.A.D.E. generator, courtesy of the NCR."

"That! You... how did you steal that?!" LittlePip demanded.

"More sexual favors than I care to recount. I'm still sore from it," Boo said, working her jaw, then leered at LittlePip. "Actually, you know what, I can recount a few of them for you. There was this sweet, virgin secretary mare who—"

LittlePip covered her ears. "Not listening!" That prompted laughter from me, and the mare sent me a glower. "You're just as bad as she is!"

"We'll give the generator back when we return," I told her.

“Return? Return from where?” LittlePip asked, screwing her face up in bafflement.

“You’ll see,” I said, walking back to Boo and giving her a hug. “Please, please be careful. I don’t want to find out you got killed. Or turned to stone. You know, something permanently bad.”

Boo’s eyes shimmered as she hugged me back. “You know me, Momma. I’m always lucky.” Then she stepped back and smirked at LittlePip. “I’m going now! Last chance to pop me like a raider!” she sang as she danced away on her hooftips.

A glowing field surrounded her and booted her off the sphere, flicking her away with a long cry as she disappeared into the forest. “Worth it!” the mare called out distantly from the bushes.

“She’s turning into another Discord,” LittlePip said grimly. “One day, she’ll go too far...” The little unicorn then turned to me and asked with far more concern, “What about you? You’re a blank too.”

“Dunno,” I said, twisting and turning to examine myself. “What do you think? See any Discord on my flank?” I smirked as I saw her, rapidly turning red, staring at my butt. For two centuries, I’d kept her sane. We’d screamed at each other. Bawled with each other. Kissed and made love, though never quite been in love, all to keep our minds off the steady, inevitable grind of time.

Because immortality sucked if you had to be immortal alone.

One day, one of us would go. Probably her... And then...

Then I’d get to see if the Legate had been right.

But I didn’t want to think of that now, so I shoved it to the back of my mind and contented myself with stroking her cheek with my tail and watching her turn into a whimpering mound of embarrassment and desire. I loved her so much for still being that way even after so many, many years. When you’re suddenly living for centuries, it’s the things that don’t change that become so precious.

“I don’t think she and I are identical. Discord rode around inside her for a bit, but not me. She’s becoming another draconequus, and she’s not alone. A lot of Brood are changing too. I met a Brood zebra-hippogriff just five years ago,” I said with a smile.

“And that doesn’t worry you?” she asked, clearly worried enough for both of us.

“She was happier as a hippogriff. I think her soul was that of a female griffin. Every Brood that’s changed is happy with what they ended up as. Even a few that are becoming like Boo. And sure, some of them might become problems, but I won’t

worry about that until they actually *do*,” I said with another smile, leaving out the fact that many Brood were also aging, and I wasn’t. Celestia only knew why... and Celestia wasn’t here anymore.

Boy, hadn’t that been a shitty day...

“So... what do you need me and one of the last functioning F.A.D.E. talismans for?” I turned to her, grinning broadly. “Oh no...”

“Oh, bollocks,” Crumpets muttered as she clomped around the inside of the church in Chapel. The structure no longer served as a place of reverence, and the center of the interior was taken up by a massive block of white marble. Carved into the surface was the image of Security in repose; they’d gone with a ‘lying on her back clutching a bunch of lilies’ image rather than a ‘cybernetic and humping a shotgun’ one. Moonlight streamed through the stained glass windows showing Celestia, Luna, the Ministry Mares, and Security’s companions. “I hate coming in here at night.”

“Hush,” Dusk answered from the balcony above. “There’ve been three break-in attempts this week. Somepony is up to something,” the pegasus murmured.

“Can you believe Boing wants this place torn down?” Crumpets muttered. “Fucking nuts.”

“Yeah, but she’s as nutty as my sister,” Dusk replied tersely. “And you really don’t understand this whole ‘stakeout’ thing, do you?” The earth pony gave a deep sigh of frustration.

Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. “You want to bang?” Crumpets asked.

“That... *really*... isn’t part of a stakeout,” Dusk muttered.

“I can’t help it,” Crumpets replied. “Sex helps me not think of how eerie this place is. Besides, haven’t you ever wanted to do it in a graveyard?”

“Okay! I’m going to watch outside! You just... stay here,” Dusk said as she swooped down to the front door and stepped outside.

“It was just an idea,” Crumpets muttered, and then there was a flash. She turned to the still-open door, seeing Dusk just standing there. “Everything all...”

An apple rolled from the doorway to her feet. Steel Ranger armor could handle just about any grenade made... except for this one. Sadly, Steel Ranger armor also wasn’t the swiftest when it came to leaping away from danger. The grenade went

off with a sphere of lightning, and instantly, her systems crashed. “Oh fuck me!” she shouted.

Her jaw worked the release knob to the side, chewing on it as she heard something boom outside her armor. It wasn’t *her* booming, though. All too many awkward moments later, the helmet released and fell free of her head with a loud thud. Crumpets coughed in the unfiltered and now dust-and-smoke-filled air.

The tomb had been broken open, and the remains inside were in view... as was the mare who had broken in. Sweetie Bot stood over Blackjack’s broken body levitating her starmetal sword. She brought it down, and a moment later, she lifted the Pip-Buck with the hoof still attached. “What are you doing?!” Crumpets demanded as she struggled in the confines of her suit.

“You don’t understand... I had to have it! I have to know!” the robot buzzed, her eyes blazing green, and then she turned and leapt off the slab, running for the door. As she passed by Dusk, she flung the sword away and raced off into the night.

“Mad as a box of fucking frogs,” Crumpets muttered as she slumped inside her armor.

“This is insane! This is insane and you are insane to be doing this insanity!” LittlePip shouted as the battered-together rocket roared beneath us, lifting us higher and higher into the sky. Her magic was one of the few things keeping it together. “Is this thing going to explode?!” she screamed.

“Probably,” I hollered back at her.

“What?” she shrieked.

“Look at it this way!” I yelled. “Would you rather die going a million miles an hour into space, or in a rusting bubble?”

Her glare spoke volumes. “I didn’t agree to this! When I got into the rocket, I wasn’t planning on this!”

“Story of my life!” I shouted as the blue thinned out more and more and all the stars came out.

The moon glowed brilliantly ahead of us.

“Luna’s milky tits... I can’t believe it. The moon. We’re actually over the moon,” LittlePip breathed, her horn glowing as she propelled us along with her telekinesis. The whole trip had taken us only a few hours once we’d separated from the nose of the rocket. The F.A.D.E. generator was mounted on a platform with a dozen industrial-sized spark batteries I’d spent a decade scrounging and preserving, and an air talisman I’d spent years trying to make work kept us breathing for now. We wore two restored astropony suits, helmets off for the moment. One thing about being effectively immortal: you picked up hobbies quick, or started to plot the death of the world.

And, of course, I’d brought music, and we each took turns listening to our favorites, Velvet Remedy for her and Whisper for me. As Whisper sang one of her softer tunes, LittlePip muttered, sulking, “I still can’t believe, even after all this, that she was the Element of Magic! She wasn’t even a unicorn. I thought it was that alicorn.”

“Hey, let’s be fair. You *did* find Whisper like the others. You just used her to liberate Apex, and since we’re being fair, everypony including her thought she was the second coming of Twilight Sparkle. It’s not your fault she went batfuck crazy when it failed, nearly killed the other Bearers, and almost turned Gardens into an Equestria-wide radiation and taint generator,” I said, getting a flat look in return. “Oh, I lost at ‘liberate Apex’, didn’t I?”

“Spike still hasn’t forgiven me,” she muttered.

“It was two centuries ago,” I said, patting her back. “Have you spoken to him?”

“He’s... not like he used to be. I think the radwurm invasion really shook him. He’s not as open towards ponies anymore.”

“Seeing hundreds of radiation-mutated dragons being killed would do that,” I said.

“I think he’s still not forgiven me for using the S.P.P. like a weapon, either, even if it was the only way to give us a chance. Or the Twilight Society,” she added as she stared down at the white expanse of shimmering crystal. “Is there something about this place that makes you think about the past?”

“It’s the moon. I think it’s pensivity and wistfulness incarnate,” I said as I peered down at the immense expanse. “It looks a lot more melted than when I was last here. Those used to be deserts of dust. They look like glass now.”

“Horizons,” LittlePip reminded me.

“Oh, yeah. I guess I did toast the moon a bit,” I said with a rueful grin. She groaned and covered her face with a hoof. “Okay, LittlePip. Find her.” I stretched out on a

cushion taped to the floor.

“Find... what?” LittlePip goggled at me. “You mean, find her? On the moon? With only a few hours of energy left?”

“Yup,” I replied with a smile.

“I... you... I can’t believe you would drag me all the way to the moon for this! I never would have come if I’d known this was what you were planning!” LittlePip huffed.

“I know,” I answered with a smile. “You have the talent. So... find her,” I said as I folded my hooves behind my head.

“I— You— She— That’s not how this works, Blackjack! I don’t even have her tagged! You’re asking me to find one pony-sized object on the face of the moon!” LittlePip protested as she glowered out at the barren expanse... and then paused. “Uh... huh. What is that?” she asked, pointing off to the side.

I leaned over and saw a dark square discoloration in the glassy plateau. “Your special talent at work.” I pointed towards the square. “Onward!”

Her horn glowed as we changed direction, heading towards the square. “I hate you sometimes. You know that. I know you know that!” she grumbled next to me.

I leaned over and nibbled on the nape of her neck. As Homage had told me, there was no better way to derail LittlePip. “I... oh... you... don’t do that when I’m angry with you, Blackjack!”

Ah, the GI— the joy of being a switch and the top in a relationship. “Hush. I’ll pay you back when we get home,” I teased against her ear before pulling away, and we put our helmets on.

The square was all that remained of the rocket terminal. The metal had mixed with the moonstone to create the grayish blob roughly a kilometer square. Thin fingers of metal and stone peeked up like warped whiskers from the plain. Hollows and voids in the ground shimmered like watchful eye sockets as we passed above them. Parking the platform, we performed a check of the scant remnants. The skeleton of my fallen rocket stuck out on one side, and the tram line was an almost invisible shadow on the surface. There was no sign of the tracks, though; they been erased in the fields of glass.

Getting back on the platform, we followed the line. Like the plains behind me, the mountains had gotten cooked too, but they had afforded some protection from Horizons. Here and there, the tram line actually appeared, frozen in gloppiness. Still,

that it survived at all gave me a little hope. If the Astrostable survived, maybe they would have found her. Given her a home for these last two centuries. If...

It hadn't.

The chasm Tom had fired from was collapsed into a shallow depression of glassy moonstone. At the edge, where the stable had been, a few melted structures peeked out of the glass, but there were holes in them I could see from this distance. Still, we... okay, LittlePip, brought us to the edge of them, and we walked inside the Astrostable. Inside, moon dust hung in the void in translucent veils, its glow showing the remains of the stable around us.

Past the damaged room we first entered were airless tunnels, devoid of life. Just like at home. But I'd destroyed this place, too. Goddesses, I'd left behind such a wake of destruction.

No. Stop. No backsliding now. I couldn't blame myself for this. I closed my eyes, breathing deeply. I hadn't been to blame for this, and while I knew I would feel guilty, because that was simply how I was wired, I wouldn't beat myself up over this.

There was a bump against my helmet, and LittlePip shouted, "Can you hear me?"

I opened my eyes, looking at her in her own glassy helmet, which was barely able to hold her horn. "Yeah!"

"Why is that dust just hanging there like that? It shouldn't do that! And where are all the bodies?" she asked.

I blinked and looked around the atrium we occupied. She was right. No bodies. And everything seemed so... neat! Like the stable had been cleaned up, and they'd just left. Where had they gone... some sort of mass suicide? I couldn't see everypony going peacefully to that. I touched helmets again and shouted, "I don't know!"

We looked but didn't find a single one. Nor was there a mass grave, or some kind of disintegration chamber, or anything. The power was off, not destroyed. With time, eventually, the Astrostable could be used again. Some day...

Another helmet bump. "We need to get back!" LittlePip reminded me.

So we left, without Rampage. My hope dwindled. I'd counted on LittlePip to be able to find her, but it seemed that that just wasn't going to happen. Damn it... I should have come back sooner, or realized then that to teleport another pony, I needed a mental hole for that pony to go through.

If only...

We emerged back into the open...

And a herd of ponies.

They didn't wear suits. They simply stood on the surface of the moon as casually as if they were back on Equus. All of them were various shades of monochrome and metallic, with ghostly manes that blew in a nonexistent wind. I glanced at LittlePip, her face aghast at the eerie sight.

Me, I'd dealt with weirder things than ponies on the moon.

I walked towards the dozen. "Can you hear me?" I shouted at them, and thought hard at them... you never knew! I was rewarded with a nod. "Can you talk?" The twelve regarded each other, then peered at me. I heard a staticky buzz in my mind, but nothing specific. After a minute, it stopped, and they shook their heads. I sighed, then straightened. "I'm looking for Rampage. Earth pony... like me, but without the knob on her head." They blinked, and a few squinted their star-filled eyes at me. I used to have eyes like that... hey! "I have a horn! It's just hard to see!"

They laughed soundlessly, then turned to walk, gesturing for us to follow. Back on the platform, with the F.A.D.E. shield up and air restored, LittlePip asked, "What do you think happened to them?"

"I don't know. I guess they became... something else? Star ponies? Moon ponies?" I shook my head. "They seem to be friendly, though."

"Unless they realize you were the one that melted the moon centuries ago," LittlePip commented.

"That... I never meant to do that!" I said defensively. "I'm glad it didn't punch a hole right through the moon... or blow it up completely." I saw the herd of moon ponies had all stopped and were staring up at the pair of us, starry eyes wide. "Um... sorry! Complete accident! Really!"

They didn't look very comforted by that, but they sped up quite a bit, pronking across the glassy plain. Their hooves had to be as hard as diamond to bite into the surface as well as they did. There also wasn't a horn or wing to be seen. Atrophy? Design? Who knew. I was burning up with questions, but the greatest one I had was about my friend.

The herd led us to a steep-walled crater with homes built into the sides in glossy, molded rock. I gazed in amazement at fields of... were those plants? Incredibly delicate crystals? They looked like snowflakes growing in the shadow in the depths

of the crater. The moon ponies in the town seemed quite taken with us, waving their hooves.

“You know... nopony is going to believe this back home,” LittlePip took a moment to say as the dozen we’d followed stopped at the mouth of a cave. We put the suits back on and left the platform, walking amid and past the shining ponies and into the cave. Moonstone glowed brightly all around us, singing its strange ethereal melody.

“Story of my life,” I replied, and we walked towards the back of the cave.

To Rampage.

Somepony’d made a kind of bedroom for her, with a crystal bed and lamps and a dresser. And there, curled up, her head upon a pillow, was the mare. She looked asleep, covered in a shining layer of dust like a blanket. I turned to LittlePip, but she shook her head.

So, the talisman had had its limit after all. Her skin had darkened like tanned leather, but I could still see her stripes.

I reached out to brush her mane, and like a house of cards, she collapsed. Everything not bone simply turned to powder. I stared at the pile of dust, trying feebly to think of what could have possibly happened, but my thoughts came up empty as I examined what was left. Everything looked centuries dead except the phoenix talisman, lying in her ribs like a heart of stone. I scooped it up and turned to the exit. The moon ponies watched the cave with a forlorn expression. Could they hear our thoughts? Feel our sadness? Hopefully they weren’t outraged by what we’d done to her. For all we knew, they thought Rampage was the goddess of the moon.

We got back on the platform without incident, and, though I would have loved to stay and learn more about the moon ponies, we only had so much time.

Back on the platform, as we headed up towards Equus, I held the stone in my lap. “Well, I can do one last favor for her,” I said, and I drew my sword. I hadn’t dared take the starmetal off the platform; Pythia had said it was a different type, but I didn’t want to risk dropping it. I tried to wipe the moonstone coating the talisman away, but the damn stuff was sticky. Oh well. . . I levitated talisman and sword and cleanly cut the former in twain with the latter, the sword giving a brilliant flash of light and crackle of magical energy as it went through. The dead talisman was bisected right down the middle.

“I’m sorry, Blackjack,” LittlePip said.

“Yeah,” I muttered. Then blinked as the magical energy arcing over the halves of

the talisman started to glow. Soul motes escaped, but, rather than passing on, they seemed to be swirling and surging around the broken talisman. The dead pink rock started to glow, and we both stared in alarm as a pink mist issued forth. That mist collected into a small filly-sized shape, and with a flash of light, the body of Rampage the filly was formed. The soul motes started to wander away, but three lingered. Then one tiny mote slipped into her body as the other two departed. The talisman went dark, the halves crumbling.

And then, suddenly, Rampage sucked in a deep breath and coughed. A moment later, she opened her eyes. “Mom?” she murmured, and then stared at me. “Black-jack?” Then she looked around wildly. “What... who... how... the rocket... but... I... you...” The filly blinked at me, then asked, “What the fuck is going on? How’d I get here? Last thing I remember was lying down to take a nap, and...”

I sobbed as I swept her up in my hooves, holding her tight, weeping brokenly. At first she struggled, and then she relaxed, and soon started crying too. “Has it been a while?”

“Yeah...” I sniffed as I held her. “It has been.” LittlePip looked on, envious but silent. I knew she’d have given the world for one of her friends back... and I would have helped her get it.

The striped filly wiped her eyes and then stared ahead of us, where Equus loomed. The land was greener, the seas bluer, the mountains and deserts more defined. The zebra lands no longer burned with megaspells. “Do you ever regret it?” LittlePip asked softly as the world grew ahead of us. “What you gave up?”

I smiled through my tears and lied through my teeth. “Not a bit of it.” That was the only answer I could give. I’d paid the price, and would keep paying it all the many years I had left. Because I could. Because it made things better. Because, as hard as things got, somepony had to.

“So, where are we going?” Rampage asked, actually sounding like a filly for the first time ever.

I hugged her close and reached over to put a hoof across LittlePip’s shoulders as she guided us back to Equus. “Home,” I answered her. “We’re going home.”

——- The End ——-

(Author’s notes: It’s over. It’s finally over. After four years and two months, Horizons is done. I hope

that people feel the ending was worth the ride. It's been pretty intense this whole time. I couldn't have done this without the incalculably valuable assistance of Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine. These are individuals who have donated weeks of their time and energy into making each chapter as good as they can possibly be. I could not have finished Horizons without their assistance, and I will be forever grateful for their help. No matter how frigging frustrating they may be at times. . .

(Bronode: Right back atcha, chickpea!)

Another person I'd like to thank is Kkat, for her creation of Fallout Equestria and for her immense generosity in allowing us to create our own story in her world. I owe thanks to all the readers and commenters who have given feedback about the story and how to improve it. In addition, special thanks should be given to Sethisto at Equestria Daily. If it wasn't for him, Project Horizons would have been consigned to the side fic page and dwindled away. I hope that readers of Horizon move to other fics in this world.

Lastly, I need to thank individuals who contributed money to keep this work going. Writing takes time, and fanfiction doesn't pay the bills. Every single bit has been extremely valued, and I would like to thank my patrons and individuals who donated directly to this story. I don't know what project I will work on next (hopefully something MUCH smaller in scope than Horizons) but I'll keep folks apprised on what's coming next.

If this epilogue clashes with your own headcanon for what comes after Horizons, feel free to ignore it. This was the ending that all my editors felt would be best. There's all kinds of story hooks in place, some of which I might take up, and others which I editors wish to explore in their own works.

(swicked: Except for Hinds, who instead began questioning what "best" could mean, empirically. Did you know that Somber originally intended this fic to be *shorter* than the original? *Because I sure didn't!*)

Ahem. So thank you again for reading. It's been a long, long trek. I hope it has been worthwhile.

Thank you.

Somber.)