

## Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

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 stop 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.

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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, staring 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. Nopony 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..."

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"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 loosey-goosey 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 Lightbringer 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..."

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"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. Bouillotte 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."

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"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..."

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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.

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"...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 license 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."

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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 power-mad 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 ghou, 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.

*Card Trick. 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.

"Nopony 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 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 Lakeside 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, 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 germ 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, no pony 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.

"Ooopsie!" 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. Parallelogramically." 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 it'sy 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 PipBuck 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, 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. Someday...

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. "Blackjack?" 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.)