

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 63: Perceptions

"I've got my eye on you."

The halls of Stable 99 smelled different 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-yellow-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 26 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 26 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 Farsight'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 find 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 rain.

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 Farsight 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 EC-1101. Now, Crumpets took care to push thorny underbrush aside as they walked down. Every step Farsight 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 E.F.S. before saying in low tones, "You don't have to do this yourself, Overmare."

For a moment, Farsight 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 travelling 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," Farsight replied. "The explosion may have caused some permanent damage to the S.P.P. 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 Farsight 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 a 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?" Farsight 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,"

Farsight 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," Farsight 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.

Farsight 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," Farsight 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 Farsight and Psalm followed behind. "Damn it, Security. Why'd you have to die?"

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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.

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"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 smile of her own. "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 for it.

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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 boasting 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.

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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. With each step, the bright orange metal hooves let out a click and left a little smear of molten glass behind. "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 dragon's 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 S.A.T.S., 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 power hoof 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 Candlewick aside as a moment later the insides of the dragon exploded out of both ends. As the corpse collapsed 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 superheated 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 power hoof. 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 power hooves would be. One of the other scarred gangers 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 a 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

pegasus '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 ganger 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, realized that what he'd said might have been confidential, and 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 machine guns 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 disarming 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, move her body, and then knock the pillow aside and disarm 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 powder," P-21 said as he trotted back into the middle. In a dash, Razorblade 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 Baling Wire play his trick on Trumpet here, what happened to him?" P-21 asked.

The muddy colt sighed, "Nopony 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 travelled 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 loosely 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 surfer 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 vilest 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 lavender 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 S.P.P. 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 beside 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 S.P.P. 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 griffins 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.

“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 reinforced this fact. It flowed endlessly from the firmament, raced down the cracked black walls, spurted out of downspouts, sprayed off molding, and crashed 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 ended. Downward. Downward. Down.

Escape was impossible. The curving streets only led 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 pointed in a direction leading away from the city; the maps in the travelers' kiosks ended at that wall, as if there were no Equestria beyond it.

The Wasteland was 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 Pony, "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 Atori 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 whacked 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 Atori 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 ghoul. Her wings resembled drenched feather dusters, and Adama balked a little at the ghoul 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."

No pony 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 radoaches?"

"It's called a harpoon," Adama muttered grumpily as she looked down at it. "My tribe, the Atori, 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 Atori?"

Lancer reached out and pulled her off Adama'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 Atori 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 in piles in the streets, 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 books and magazines, 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 as 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 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. Pegasus 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 pegasus 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 printouts. 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 light-years 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 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 *else* 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 travelling 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 gray 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 pegasus 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 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, and she shivered and fluffed 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 glasses 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 barrel, 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 slid shut 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 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 lifted the talisman around his neck with a forehoof, "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 damping. 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 groaning 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 creak. 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. Backtracking 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 beside 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.