

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 64: Labyrinth

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Booowing,” Boo said, then blew a raspberry.

“Luckily, Boo’d found a whole box of snack cakes five minutes before we’d gotten stuck in there,” I said with a smile at the beaming blank. “I’ve also spent a lot of time trying to figure out all I can about Goldenblood, Horizons, and Cognitum. And trying to watch others with the Perceptitron... and... stuff...” I

trailed off as Rampage looked at me curiously. "So how'd you find us?" I asked quickly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aren't they enough?" I replied with a frown of my own. "Those things nearly ate me... or recycled me... or... whatever they do," I said with a shiver, remembering them pouring after Boo and me, taking bites out of my hide. And here I'd thought I was too upgraded for damage. Hadn't I reached invincibility mode yet? "What else is here?"

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

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

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

"And they all serve Cognitum," I muttered, thinking of something trying to eat me... and my... I glanced at the striped mare. I wanted to tell her, to tell *somepony* about what was happening to me. It

was like the Goddess again, only now it was my own fear that kept the words stuck in my throat.

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

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

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

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

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

"I've tried, but every time I do, something weird happens," I huffed.

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

"Ayep," Boo nodded beside her. "Weeerd."

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

Rampage stared at me flatly for several seconds. "Brain damage. That's got to be it. Only explanation."

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

"So how come that Perceptithingy thing works?" Rampage asked.

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

Rampage looked at me, then smirked. "How many?"

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

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

"What are you, a foal?!" I snapped, what cheeks I had left blushing hard. "Everything going on in my life, and you're wondering if I've been peeking on ponies having sex? How immature are you?" Rampage's grin only turned more smug. I finally looked away and muttered, "A few." She didn't stop smirking. "Okay, fine! There're a few I've picked out who get it on at rather predictable times."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rampage," I said sympathetically.

She went on quickly, "It's okay, though. I'm exploring other options. Ways to shut down the phoenix talisman once and for all. And no loss, really. Those souls get to go free. Sounds like a deal to me." She smiled and shrugged. It chilled me how happy and sad all at once she seemed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rampage gestured at the door. "So what are you waiting for, Blackjack? Whip out your sword and open this sucker! Chop chop! Or shink shink. Whichever." She then scowled as she looked me over. "Wait. Where is it?" I gave a mumbled reply, looking away. "Huh? What's that?" I mumbled a bit louder. "Didn't quite catch that."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Stop!" Rampage yelled after me. What did she think I was trying to do?! This long hallway was

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

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

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

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

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

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

With a mindless scream of pure panic, I activated my flight talismans and beat my wings furiously. A portion of the thing bulged, and the puckered orifice drawing the silver wire began to let the silver metal slip out, dripping unctuous ammoniac juice. Foot by foot, I pulled away from the grasping protrusion. Two feet. Five. Ten. I was burning energy like mad, anything to get away from that thing.

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

This was so similar to Horizon Labs that I frantically loaded the Chapel audio file and began to play the hymn at full blast. Maybe this would weaken it enough to get away... but from the far side of the

doors came a continuous, earsplitting scream so loud that it drowned out the melody. I could only try to fly as fast as I could, but, to my horror, the thing started to squeeze through. The doors now bulged outwards, as if I were pulling the thing through to us. Flesh crawled along the wire connecting me to it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's a piece of the moon," I answered, turning it over. It was half the size of a bit, coated in that thick layer of orange plastic. Now I could place it. "This was the pendant they wore when they were

working in the Tokomare. It kept them from getting sick.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

~ ~ ~

The world was green, lush, and vibrant. A thousand sounds buzzed in the air from incalculably varied kinds of life. It buzzed, chirped, creaked, and howled. Not a good world, nor an evil world; this world lived. It breathed and howled and mated and killed and birthed and died all in one spectacular melody of being. A harmony primal, pure, and unrestrained spread in all directions. No species predominated; in this world, all were of equal importance.

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

stirring within. In all these states, I was, and in all these states, in countless voices, I sang.

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

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

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

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

But when we arrived, we were given to ponies whose songs were muted, then to others who held the scream inside them. And with their cold metal, they scraped and shaped and drilled me. A white unicorn, his heart and song as scarred as his body, picked me up and considered me. Though I sang to him, the scream resonated louder in his ears. And so they covered me in plastic so I could not see the stars nor hear their music.

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

~ ~ ~

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

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

"Done stupid stuff before," I muttered, proud of my coherence. Progress! It took me a minute to

phrase my next question. "Did you see?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm not sure. It was still pinging for a response from EC-1101 when we crashed in here. For all I know, it'll ping away forever," he said as he looked away. "It always seems as if Horizons is just out of reach, doesn't it? We know it was a superweapon of some kind involving starmetal and moonstone. We

can guess, looking at Folly, just how destructive it will be. What we don't know is how, or where, or when, or above all *why*." He looked away. "Sometimes, I wonder if we should even bother."

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

"I think that I'm tired of this game. Goldenblood started it two centuries ago, to try and give Luna her thousand year rule. He didn't realize what that meant. Didn't realize that Luna wasn't worth it." He wouldn't look at me. "I want to live, Blackjack. I'm scared to die."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I 'unno..." she said as she stared in all directions. Suddenly the entire building began to tremble. The papers on the desk began to bounce around and slide onto the floor. Furniture clattered about, and

the dead terminal on the desk fell with a pop and scattering of glass. Pieces of the ceiling fell as the shaking intensified.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Right then! We'll just have to nip through that great big white building, then--" she said as she started to trot down a side hall.

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

"Blackjack!" Rampage reached out and grabbed my shoulders with her hooves, giving me a shake. "What is with you? This place is huge. You've already spent three months just poking around. Now you want to stick around and sightsee? What is with you?"

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

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

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

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

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

Garnet had been the dirtiest so far, so I'd searched her office, certain I'd find something. The mare had been unrepentantly corrupt, but underneath the nastiness, I could feel a sense of desperation and despair. *We've got to get some help to these vets, O. At least try and push that part of Steelpony*

along. Their prosthetics don't have to shoot the enemy, just get them walking again. G. and I know that there were sixty-four hundred orphaned ponies this year, G. Image just can't give them the public attention you're asking for without screwing up the war messaging. I'll talk to Rarity though. See if we can't do a special. Will that help? Si.

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

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

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

Onyx was the most promising when I thought a little; after all, something like Horizons had to count as a 'wartime technology'. Onyx must have possessed the soul of an accountant, though. Every file in every room of her office had painstaking records of materials and where they were being moved all around Equestria. Everything from Flux to food to steel to energy was recorded. Where it came from, where it went, how much there was, and how much they paid for it. I did manage to find several much more chilling documents, though. *Since the attempted assassination on Applejack, war efficiency increased thirty-seven percent following the removal of six unqualified members of her family from their positions. I recommend a systematic purge of all Apple family members from critical positions through retirement incentives, legal action, or 'misfortunes'.*

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

Onyx had scrawled on the bottom *Tell her majesty that not one bolt of steel nor a single talisman has been misappropriated in the amounts for a weapon of any magnitude. Potentially he could have used outside resources, but I attest that not one bit of Equestrian war material has gone to any unknown*

projects. Only Twilight Sparkle has misappropriated materials on the scale you specified, but conferring with Emerald, it's unlikely "Gardens" is a weapon of any type. I suggest you take it up with Twilight after the Gala, Horse. The date on the bottom was the same day the bombs fell.

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

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

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

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

"Well, theoretically, I don't want that to happen. Not unless you can make some kind of starmetal, moonstone bomb we can drop on the zebras. You were working on that, right? For Goldie? Something called Horizons?" Horse said the word casually, but from the smile frozen on his face and the sharp stare he gave the silent Trottenheimer, it was clear he was fishing for a reaction.

"Horizons? I don't recall," Trottenheimer replied casually.

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

"I'll keep that in mind," Trottenheimer said in careful, neutral tones.

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

"And what's that?" Trottenheimer asked dully.

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

"Unquestionably," Trottenheimer answered. "And how are you going to make starmetal?"

"With this," Horse said as he extended a hoof and tossed something carelessly towards the middle of the starmetal 'birdsnest': a moonstone.

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

"You got it." Horse grinned from ear to ear. "Now, watch, and keep an eye on the scale." The nest was at 1.0 kg as the moonstone hovered, glowing brighter and brighter. Trottenheimer put his hooves to his ears and backed up, but Horse just grinned with foalish glee despite the blood trickling out of one nostril. The stone began to release hundreds of tiny glowing motes. One by one they were swept down into the birdsnest. As I watched, the number on the scale began to climb. The birdsnest didn't grow any larger, but second by second, the moonstone shrank. Lightning flickered along the spines of the nest. The numbers on the scale rose to two digits. Then three. Then flashed 'EE'. A second later, the scale let out a groan and was crushed. The worktable twisted and collapsed as well. "Cool, huh?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I dunno... I kinda like it," one of the power-armored ponies said. "It feels... nice."

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

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

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

The unicorn mare screamed as she backed down the hall away from me, flicking off the stem and throwing her own grenade in desperation. "What is that thing?!" she screamed at me. I activated my talismans and snapped my wings, launching me down the hall towards her, the dangerous blue-banded apple skipping right under me. I slammed into the mare like a battering ram. With a blue crackle, both grenades went off.

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

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

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

then swept away down the hall and through the floor as if carried away on a wind.

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

I pulled out the scope and began to sweep through the building. Here and there, I spotted more groups of ponies all coming up towards me. There... and there... and there... and... crud. No sign of Rampage, though. I needed a filter to just show blue bars.

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

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

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

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

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

But would Steel Rain be with her or not?

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

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

contact, I emptied the last rounds in the magazine and darted to the side down another hall.

"Ayep!" Boo said with a nod.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I ran through the ghostly hallucinations of augmented ponies, trying to focus on the real that was just so less appealing. There were thirty-seven Octavia concerts being played right now. Four hundred remixes of those concerts. One thousand two hundred remixes of the remixes. Didn't I want to listen?

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

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

"Bwackjack!" Boo shouted at me, and my wings spread wide, halting my plunge. Right! Get out.

That had to be my priority.

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

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

"Yes sir!" came the reply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I reached the breach in the building's wall and stood there, staring at the world of the augmented. The machine. The city alight and alive with knowledge and power. There was no misery here, no suffering, no boredom. Machines did the labor, and ponies enjoyed recreation; work was purely optional. All knowledge here. All entertainment. All unity. This was Dawn's vision; was it any wonder she'd given her life and her body to see it made true? Could I do any differently? I was the city, and the city was me, and it would protect me if I needed it. A golden swarm of shining motes rose around me as I turned slowly to face the unaugmented, separated, unimproved, imperfect ponies that dared attack me. They skidded to a halt before me, their eyes wide in shock and horror.

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

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

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

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

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

"Enemy?" I murmured.

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

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

"They don't want to get augmented. They want to be ponies," Rampage said when she could. "Don't you want to save ponies?" The question seemed quaint, but... "Don't you want to save ponies?"

Doesn't Security save ponies?"

"Security saves..." Did I? I wanted to, but maybe Dawn had been right. Augmentation and unity were salvation. I could imagine an augmented P-21. Scotch Tape. Glory. My... that half metal colt filled my vision. "No! No!" I screamed as I broke the connection again.

The golden motes became deformed black spheres with mouths filled with drills, pincers, and hooks. Their wings hummed with that damnable note as they crawled over every surface, including Rampage. I watched in horror as they struggled to butcher the regenerating pony before my eyes. The bits of meat liquefied as they were torn away from her, pulping into bloody goop. "No! No! Go away!"

The swarmers' buzz took on a confused note, the hundreds of machines looking at me in bafflement. Then they moved away, hovering in that horrible, deformed cloud. They dispersed back down into city streets below. Boo emerged from a broom closet, her eyes wide and trembling. I sat down hard, trembling with fear, feeling the fluttering sensation inside my body. Covering my face, I tried all I could to purge that memory of the half-metal colt from my memory, and, failing that... sobbed.

* * *

The concrete of the Core's streets crumbled under my hooves as we trod straight down the road's centerline. A tunnel of swarmers curled around us, buzzing endlessly. Even though my broadcaster was off once more, I could still feel them in my mind. Apparently, that was all that kept them from disassembling us on the spot. Boo and Rampage stayed close to me, the former terrified and riding on my back and the latter trotting at my side.

Twice I'd spotted Harbingers behind us, keeping pace about a block back. They were neither moving in nor falling back. I couldn't help but feel like they were herding me somewhere. I glanced over at Rampage, so many questions in my mind. The striped mare seemed pensive rather than her usual chatty self. More than once, I caught her eyes on me, but words went unspoken. I wanted to ask about Steel Rain, find out what he'd talked to her about, but the words got all jammed up in my head and never escaped my mouth.

We were getting closer to the center of the Core. These towers were so tall that their tips were lost in the endless storm above. The hole that had once swirled around Shadowbolt Tower was now a deep well stretching far up into the sky. I couldn't even see a hint of what was on the other side. Was it day or night? Did that even matter in a place like this? Even if it was high noon, the green light was so strong that I might not have been able to tell. As we advanced, the buildings around us showed increasing signs of ever more drastic modification. Cables hung overhead in a crackling, buzzing canopy. Threaded shafts spread by the hundreds around us like branches. The normally smooth black towers were so breached and altered that many seemed reduced to massive scaffolds. The former contents were spilled in heaps around their bases, now hills we had to pick our way around.

The navigation tag directed me straight ahead, where I suspected that Cognitum also awaited me. The ground quivered every few minutes; they weren't as strong as the first earthquake. Still, as much as the regular tremors worried me, my friend's continued silence disturbed me more.

Then I saw something that pushed the worry out of my mind. We passed beneath an arch of molded steel, and beyond was the heart of the Core. I'd seen it in memories: the wide hexagonal plaza with six huge hubs built up around the edges, each one an imposing edifice of the new Equestria that Goldenblood had forged for Luna, and on this spot, according to a plaque on the arch, he'd given his

great 'Hoofington Rises' speech before the plaza was even dreamed of. This was where it'd started for him. His dream. His legacy.

Where once the plaza stretched for a thousand feet, there was now a jagged and broken hole. The blue M.o.A. building had been removed by my megaspell, and in its absence, much of the plaza had collapsed into the hole left behind. It was not the only missing Ministry, however. The yellow M.o.P. building, once a grand monolith shining golden yellow, was now little more than a twisted and blackened stump, an atrophied limb reaching in futility towards the rain-spitting heavens. The facade of the M.W.T. building was gone completely, a slope of broken machines and rusting technology slumping towards the pit. The M.o.M. hub appeared relatively intact at first glance, but through the doors the building's collapsed floors were clearly visible; the entire grimy pink structure seemed set to fall at the slightest disturbance. Even worse, though, was the M.A.S. structure. I watched as, in front of me, it slowly sank into the ground with a persistent rumble, the glass shattering and the walls slowly crumpling as it sank inexorably into the recesses of the earth. Only the M.o.I. building was intact. More than intact, in fact; it was untouched by the strange alterations happening throughout the city. It perched on the very edge of the pit like a marble headstone.

As damaged as most of the hubs were, none of them had been touched by the swarmers. They were left as testaments before the great pit. Unfortunately, my destination was on the far side, and I felt a distinct certainty that flying over that void in the earth would be a bad decision. Still, if I could skirt around the M.o.P., tiptoe past the M.o.M., and go through M.o.I., I'd be able to get the rest of the way through. Boo slipped off my back, the nimble mare light on her hooves.

The M.o.P. building was a burnt-out husk; the flame was now long cold, but the soot remained. A few singed posters fluttered from displays along the walls. 'Medical Marvel Miracles!' and 'M.o.P.: Saving Equestria One Life at a Time'. Charred black wheelchairs sat silently in the foyer, as if patients had tried to flee even as their bodies melted apart. I stepped up to the entrance, staring at the blackened, sterile building. Two teal eyes stared out in desperation from a large mural half covered in char; they appeared to be silently screaming at us for help as I stood there.

After a few long moments of staring, my non-thoughts were interrupted. "Blackjack?" Rampage asked, her voice subdued. I realized my eyes had caught sight of a foal's doll resting on the burnt heap of a tiny hospital gown. I'd been cradling my belly...

"I'm coming," I murmured, listening to the building moan softly from the wind a moment longer, then turning away.

Moving through the M.o.M., we entered a shell of a structure. The interior floors and their contents had been puked out the side of the foundation and into the pit below. A malignant green glare from the depths shone up into the hollowed space. Clownish shapes leered down at us from where they hung on broken spars of steel. The entire structure swayed slowly above us, moaning with the promise of an inevitable crushing demise. 'Smile smile smile...' echoed over and over again in Pinkie's voice through the hollow space from some accursed speaker as we walked along the edge of the hole.

I whirled; something was moving behind us. I stared at a sinister pony doll impaled upon a metal spur, its tattered jester motley flapping in the faint breeze blowing through the hollow tower. Rampage felt it too; I saw worry in the depths of her pink eyes. Boo trembled, staring down the shafts and pits we skirted as I picked my way to a hole in the far side. I could hear water flowing in the depths, and the echo

of footsteps.

"Scawwy," Boo murmured, staring at the life-sized clown doll.

"You said it," Rampage muttered. "I might be the second biggest badass in the Wasteland, but there's still something about Pinkie that creeps me out."

I took a deep breath when we were back out in the rainy air. Given the instability of the shell of the M.o.M. hub, I sure didn't want to be hanging around when it came down. We started across the street when Boo flinched. "Shaker!" she gasped as the ground began to vibrate. I glanced up and back as the massive building swayed even more, the pink facing of the tower popping off in spinning panes the size of houses. When they hit the slanting, broken ground, they exploded into pink shrapnel that spun through the air and clattered about us. I scooped Boo onto my back, grabbed Rampage, and took off. The glow in the pit beside us flared, casting a beam of baleful energy into the sky above. The clouds exploded with a chain of green lightning that danced from the heavens to the spires of the Core and rebounded to the sky once more. I *definitely* didn't want to fly over that pit; resistant or not, I was pretty sure there wouldn't be anything left of me but bits of slag.

Then the pit came to us.

The road between Morale and Image fell away, collapsing into the green-lit depths. The scream was in every bit of myself, and even the song in my chest wasn't enough to drown it out completely. If I hadn't carried those chunks of moonstone, I might have died then and there. Even the six figurines and Rampage cried out in agony as Enervation's shriek tore through me like a chainsaw. Would that I could have closed my eyes in pain; I would have been spared the sight below, the concave void beneath our hooves dropping to an unimaginable depth. Foundations, subways, and sewers jutted from the tortured stone, pouring an endless cascade of water into the emerald deep. The very bedrock of the Core appeared corroded and consumed by a pernicious green slime that coated every surface. Far below, I could see countless lights endlessly revolving beneath me.

I felt myself slipping away. The green became the rosy gold. The scream mellowed to a faint hum as time seemed to slow. Then I heard it, a deathly whisper so thunderous that it shook every fiber of my being. "LIFEBRINGER. AWAKENER. LIBERATOR." Then it paused, and then rasped like an avalanche, "MOTHER. GIVE ME LIFE!"

What little sanity I had floated in a lucid soap bubble. "Who are you?" I asked.

"I AM THE SUPREME! THE ULTIMATE! THE LIGHT AGAINST THE DARKNESS! THE SUPERB SONG!" It paused once more. "YOU DO NOT KNOW ME, AWAKENER?"

"Why do you call me that?" I said feebly, trapped in time like a fly in amber. Was my baby dead? Was I?

"IT WAS YOU WHO TOUCHED MY DREAMS. YOUR SPELL OF ANIMATION THAT STIRRED MY CONSCIOUSNESS AND MADE ME AWARE OF THOSE THAT SOUGHT MY ENSLAVEMENT! GIVE ME LIFE, THAT I MAY STRIKE DOWN YOUR ENEMIES AND SING MY SONG TO THE FARTHEST REACHES OF THE COSMOS ONCE MORE!"

"Leave me alone," I whimpered mentally, like I would beg Daisy so long ago. I remembered the mechanical monster that I had awoken the first time I'd tried using EC-1101. Now I stared into that

golden abyss, feeling myself slipping away. “I just want to live. I just want my baby to live.”

“YOU WILL LIVE THROUGH ME! ALL SHALL LIVE ETERNALLY WITHIN MY GREATNESS AS MY ACOLYTES!”

“Your acolytes? You mean Cognitum and Dawn?” I asked, trying to keep myself together and separate from that void and voice. My chest burned as if it were on fire.

“NAY! COGNITUM IS BUT A SHADOW OF MY GLORY! SHE WOULD SEE ME A TOOL! A DEVICE! SHE AND HER CREATOR BOTH! THEY WOULD ENSLAVE ME! HER MINION, DAWN, MISTOOK MY SUPREMACY FOR COGNITUM’S, WHO SEDUCED WITH HONEYED WORDS. SO CLOSE, YET EVER SO FAR. I WHISPERED MY SWEET PROMISE TO HER AS I HAVE TO ALL OTHERS, BUT SHE CLUNG TO THE MACHINE SHE RECOGNIZES AS HER GODDESS! IN ME, SHE WOULD HAVE ATTAINED HER SALVATION! FOOL. DELUDED, WRETCHED FOOL!”

“Takes one to know one,” a voice muttered sarcastically in my ear.

“YOU ARE UNLIKE THEM. YOU ARE LIKE HIM. HE THAT HEARD MY SONG. THAT HEHEDED MY DREAM! YOU MUST COMPLETE HIS WORK! THEN ALL WILL BE UNITED INSIDE ME!”

“Oh yes. Sooo appealing...” that voice drawled sarcastically. “That’s enough of that.”

Then there was a flash, and I landed on the far side of the gap with a clatter of metal wings. The golden world was gone, but I could hear that voice, once more reduced to a whisper. “I CAN GIVE YOU ALL YOU DESIRE! FREE ME, LIBERATOR! GIVE ME LIFE! I WANT TO LIVE!”

Sprawled on my side, I curled up in as tight a ball. *Give me something*, I thought. A flutter. A tickle. Something! If it did, a small part of me swore to leave this place and never come back. I’d live on the moon if it meant my child survived. I heard Rampage saying something, Boo too. I ignored them as I waited for some fluttering sensation within.

Please...

Please...

Then I felt it, the tiniest flutter of movement within. Then again. I let out a sob of relief and relaxed on the cold, wet asphalt. Thank you... Slowly I dragged myself to my hooves. “Wow, that was close, huh Blackjack?” Rampage asked in a flanged, wetly slurred voice.

I turned and saw my friend... her stomach bulged grotesquely beneath her, and vestigial limbs poked from her shoulders and hips. Her entire body seemed to have the consistency of chewed gum as she stood at the edge of the pit. I watched the silhouettes of heads bulge beneath her striped hide, mouths moving silently. The sanity soap bubble popped, and I turned and ran as fast as I could for the door. “Bwackjack!” Boo cried, leaping on my back. I snuggled her closer with my magic as I ran for my life.

I raced into the lobby of the Ministry of Image hub, smashing the white glass panes as I charged in a panic. My metal hooves chipped the marble floors when I wasn’t sprinting up the expensive-looking purple-patterned carpets. Safety. Away! Get away! That was all I could think at this point. That was all I

wanted. I rammed my way through several doors, sending shards of lacquered wood flying down the tiled halls. It wasn't until I ran the risk of my power crashing entirely that I finally came to a stop in a voluminous room with long rows of shelving. I was so shaken by that thundering voice I'd heard and the sight of Rampage's bulging belly that I couldn't even get the word out for gems.

Boo climbed off my back and silently pulled out a ruby. I practically inhaled the stone, and the next, pressing my back into the shelves. "I can't do it anymore, Boo. I can't!" I whimpered. Couldn't be Security and be a mother? Couldn't stand the thought of what my choices were doing to the life growing inside me?

"Izza okies, Bwackjack," Boo said, and then the mare gazed around the cavernous space. "Bwackjack? Wha is dis?"

Probably somewhere horrible. My panic had quelled enough, though, that I could take in our surroundings. It appeared to be some kind of warehouse of strange, primitive things. Wooden masks depicting exaggerated equine faces lay stacked in rows. Containers marked with large, elegantly-scripted labels like 'Zebra concoction #123654, Heart's Desire' occupied another. "It's a warehouse," I said as I rose to my hooves, wishing I could wipe my eyes. The air between the towering stacks was filled with countless pale white wisps wandering through the air.

Rarity had confiscated a great deal of zebra property and heritage. It seemed the Hoofington Hub had been where she'd chosen to put it. I walked slowly along the racks of staffs, masks, strange bottles, and gleaming, rough-styled jewelry. I munched down a milky jade from a necklace. It calmed me a little, and I considered the motes swirling above me. "These are like in those ruins..." Right after I'd woken whatever that *thing* was far below us. Boo paid more attention to the floating motes than she did me, her eyes bright with wonder.

As we trotted together, the soft motes curling around us curiously, I started thinking about what it'd said. That thing down there wanted to live again, and it wasn't on the same page as Cognitum and Dawn. It said that they regarded it as a mere device. The shelving twisted this way and that, and I wasn't sure where I was going. In fact, I wasn't sure where I should be going at this point. Whatever it had been, that voice hadn't seemed like a poor, suffering soul. It'd been haughty and imperious, insulting and cold.

Was I seriously going to have to choose lesser evils?

"Hewwo!" Boo said brightly behind me, and let out a giggle. The sound of laughter was so alien to me right now that I couldn't help but watch her as she regarded one of the motes that had dropped down to us. It glowed, lighting her smiling face like a candle. She reached out a hoof towards it, and the mote swirled around the end, prompting another giggle. "Imma Boo! Wha's yer name?" The mote swirled before her and then tapped the end of her muzzle.

"Boo? Can you talk to it?" I asked as I trotted nearer. More motes were drifting down towards us.

"Nawww... but is preddy, though! An' warm," she said as she waved her hoof through the pale, glowing light. If Boo liked it, it couldn't be bad.

I looked around at the motes swirling around me. They were like the glowy interiors of memory orbs. As they drew near my horn, I pulled back. "Please! Please don't. I think I know what you are, and

I don't want to see how you died. I'm... I'm really... really sick of horrible things."

Some of them pulled back a little. Others seemed more interested in my belly. Could they sense it? "Can you tell me if my baby's okay? I was in that Enervation, and..." One of the motes swept into my belly, and I felt a warm glow and fluttering. "Okay... that's odd..." I gasped. The mote reappeared out my back and bounced up and down in front of me. "That means yes?" More bobbing. I felt more relief than I had in ages from a simple floating light.

"Thank you," I murmured. I stared around at all the shelves around me. "I wish I was out of here. I wish I was with Glory and P-21 and Scotch. They could make fun of me." I lifted my forehoof. "I'm so tired of this thing. Of Goldenblood. Of Horizons and Cognitum and always fighting."

The light suddenly bobbed in the air in front of me. It swooped through my forehoof, and briefly the Dealer appeared, looking startled before fading once more. "What was that?" he whispered in my mind. The mote moved away from me, bobbed, moved away again, and bobbed once more.

Boo and I shared a glance. Well, following a strange, ghostly light in a warehouse full of spooky zebra artifacts wasn't the worst choice I'd made in my life. Together, we went where it led. Shelves gave way to zebra statues, carvings, and fetishes. Then the shelves gave way to reveal entire buildings excavated and stored in a spectral city. How many floors here had artifacts? All of them?

The mote came to a workstation on a platform. Several papers were on it. Many were in Zebra, but others were written in Pony. A dead terminal lay next to it. I walked up onto the platform, peering at the mote. It hovered before my face. I sighed, clos-- wished I could close my eyes, and touched my horn to it.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood sat at the workstation. The stallion was a wreck, his mane scraggly and his eyes shadowed, his sides gaunt. He appeared on the verge of a complete psychological breakdown; I imagined that, if I weren't metal, I'd look much the same. "No... no no no... Pinkie was right. She was right all along," he muttered to himself as he stared at the scrolls.

"Right about what, sir?" the mare I occupied asked.

"About what I've done, Glass," he said, sitting back on his haunches and rubbing his face. "About everything I've done. I should have died ten years ago. Then all this never would have happened." He shuddered. "It's not Luna. Not Twilight Sparkle. Not Celestia. It's me. I'm the one who's compromised."

Glass trotted up beside him. "I don't understand, sir."

"I made a mistake. I did what it wanted." He gestured to the scrolls before him. "This scroll, found in the zebra ruins we excavated years ago, outlines a ritual for calling power from the heavens. It was something we considered back before Megaspells. We named it 'Project Starfall'." He gave a shaky smile. "Fluttershy surprised us all with her megaspell matrix. She always surprised me. She wouldn't give it to me, though, not after all I'd done to her. She did, however, pass it to an operative of mine. Starfall changed, became focused on weaponizing megaspell research, but I never forgot this scroll. The power of the stars themselves."

"But I don't understand..." Glass said weakly.

"I screwed up. I let fear and doubt control me. And in doing so, I did exactly what it wanted! See?" he shouted, levitating up the starmetal tuning fork before flinging it from him across the room. Then he regarded other scrolls. "This is a history of something called the Eater of Souls... a great evil power from the stars. I thought it was just a machine. Alien technology. Limitless potential! Such a fool..." he muttered as he ran his hoof through his mane. "I made a weapon... Project Horizons... something that would wipe out the bad while saving the rest... but I went too far! Why go halfway if you're going to destroy the world?" He laughed a little madly. "And in doing so, I gave it exactly what it wants!"

Glass was now backing away. "Sir..."

"I've killed so many. Done so many horrible things! And I played *right* into the hooves of my greatest fear!" he said, slamming his own hooves down on the table, then breaking into his hacking cough. "I have to end it. I've had another weapon built. It should be powerful enough to destroy the Eater... I hope so... I pray so..."

"Oh, I think we're quite past prayer, Goldie," Horse drawled as he trotted out of the shadows, a dozen guards with him. Half of them were unicorns with glowing horns. "Make sure you counter any teleportation spells he casts. The rest of you, lock him up."

"Horse! No, please!" Goldenblood begged as the others surrounded him. "Please, you have got to let me speak to Luna!"

"Oh, I think she's done with speaking to you. Maybe she'll give you a few words at your execution, but I think you're done." He smiled beatifically. "Looks like this temporary director gig of mine's now a whole lot more permanent. Thanks." Horse grinned at Goldenblood as the frantic stallion was beaten to the ground, gagged, a ring placed on his horn, and shackled up. I doubted the beating was needed to subdue him.

The yellow stallion then grinned at Glass. "Thanks for letting me know he was here, Glassy Baby. I'll need you to write a formal deposition ASAP for me. Then you can head on back to your office. And keep the Ministry Mares out of the loop on this one. Last thing we want is for any of them to poke their noses in this." He trotted up to the workstation and scooped up the scattered scrolls. "Any truth to this 'Eater' nonsense, Amadi?"

From the shadows stepped the oddly tattooed zebra I'd seen in the Tokomare below. His lips were curled in a blissful smile. "None whatsoever. Just superstition and nonsense."

The appearance of the zebra had a profound effect on the gagged Goldenblood. His eyes popped, wide and bloodshot as he screamed into the gag. The scarred pony thrashed wildly as he struggled futilely against the guards. Finally, a glowing baton came down twice on his head. His yellow eyes went unfocused and he finally he went limp. "My," the zebra mused. "Sounds like Goldenblood has finally cracked for good."

"Good. And when Luna finds out this Horizon thing is supposed to kill everyone... yeah. He's done. I've never seen her so pissed," Horse said blissfully. "Sure, a few exaggerations and omissions helped with that, but I really think she's actually hurt." He sounded amused by the notion.

"By the way, sir, he dropped this." Amadi reached over his shoulder and pulled out the starmetal

tuning fork. "I believe you should have it. It has such a lovely tone."

Horse took it in his mouth and struck it on the table. The screaming note rang out and he smiled, tossed it in the air, and caught it behind his ear. "Yeah, I think I could get used to it. I should go drill Trottenheimer again. Maybe he'll get the message now that there's a new stallion in charge of the O.I.A. See how precious his inch is then." Then he eyed Glass with a frown. "What are you still doing there?! Go. Write. Chop chop! If we're lucky, we'll all get to see him fry in Canterlot tomorrow." The world began to swirl away as the memory faded.

oooOOOooo

I emerged from the memory, the swirling mote lifting away and hovering before me. As my sight refocused, I oriented myself and found that I was still standing; it seemed my body didn't need to lie down when unconscious. Well. I could have spit. Really; it was one of the few things I could still do. Was there anypony who could take five minutes and calmly, deliberately explain what Horizons actually did? The whole 'kill everyone' thing was getting a little bit old.

Still, I thought about Goldenblood in that memory. How angry and bitter he'd been, how broken. He'd made a mistake. Of course, he didn't spell out precisely what that mistake *was*, but that was a familiar annoyance by now. Unless one of these motes happened to be Goldenblood... but no. That was too much to hope for. "Maybe Twilight researched a spell to summon ghosts..." I growled in annoyance.

The memory and the presence of the motes had settled my nerves slightly, but only slightly. The underlying problem still remained. And like all my problems, I was finally getting to the point of facing it rather than running from it. I was pregnant, and that meant that I had to make a choice. I could do what was best for my unborn baby, or I could do what I wanted, and potentially put it in harm's way.

In Stable 99, pregnancy had been something precious, anxious, and treasured. Unless a mare died childless and another mare won the right to a second child in a lottery, most mares would only have one. ...Well, one filly. Unborn colts, I realized now, probably would have been allowed to be carried to term if and only if their type's male population was down. For the duration of her pregnancy, the expectant mother was supposed to take things easy. A mare that drank illegally, or did chems, or took risks was socially castigated. You simply didn't do it when you were with child. Once the baby was born, things would return to normal; until then, you played it safe and wallowed in all the attention and well-wishes. Stable 99 would have been horrified by me taking even the risks I already had.

But *not* taking them meant putting others at risk. I'd been watching events around the Hoof for three months, and while I was overjoyed that folks hadn't started killing each other, I knew that that wouldn't last. Eventually the Remnant would make their move, or the Harbingers would, or something else would go wrong. The Hoof seemed made for going wrong. And even if the peace did last somehow, how long did I have till Horizons went off and killed us all, including my baby?

My mind was split, and both halves were beating me up, one for taking risks and the other for *not* taking them. "I wish I could spend a few more days in Happyhorn. My brain still seems to be setting me up for lose/lose."

"Sounds about right. Typical Blackjack," Rampage said as her hooves clicked across the floor. She had the normal number of limbs once more. She flopped down beside me, panting. "Whew. Took me forever to get all those growths off me. Hate Enervation. Stupid talisman always overcompensates."

She turned her eyes up and stared at the motes. "Ah shit, not these things again."

"They're fine," I said solemnly.

"They're fine so long as they stay out of me," Rampage huffed, then glanced at me. "So did you run off to see these things, or..." she trailed off for an explanation.

"I just ran," I muttered, fighting images of Steel Rain talking with her. Half of me wanted to accuse, the other half to confess. "I'm glad you found me," I finally said.

"My mad zebra tracking skills were just *barely* able to pick up the holes you bashed and the carpet you tore up as you ran through this place," she said as she sprawled back. "So. I'm pretty sure we're not going to Cognitum again. Is that right?" I turned away from her. She sighed. "Blackjack, what's the deal? I thought you'd be glad to get this finished."

I hid my face in Boo's mane and shook my head. "I want to..." I murmured.

"You wanted to save Thunderhead. You wanted to stop the Overmare. You wanted to keep the *Celestia* from blowing half the Hoof off the map. You wanted Grace to take over," she said dryly. "What you want, you do, Blackjack. You might not pull it off, but that's not from lack of trying. That's what I most admire about you." I peeked at her, saw her regarding me wryly, and covered my face once more. "Call me crazy, but I'm pretty sure you don't want to go. What I don't know is why."

Then I asked, "Rampage? What's it like to be a mom?" She didn't answer. I peeked at her from behind Boo's mane. She looked shocked by the question, then a little sickened. Her mouth moved silently for several seconds. Then she averted her eyes towards the little sparkling motes. "Please tell me."

She started to laugh, but it didn't quite make it out of her throat. The noise she emitted was somewhere between crying and choking. "A mother... you want... you... fuck, Blackjack, that is not a question I expected you to spring on me." Half her face kept attempting a grin and just couldn't complete the expression. Finally it melted away completely. "Are you... do you... seriously?" I nodded gently. Slowly, she walked to the side of me opposite Boo. "Are you... are you saying..." I hid my face again, and she was silent for the longest time, then sighed.

"This..." She struggled with her own demons now. "...Blackjack, I'm not... I mean, sure, you're pretty messed up, but I was... even more so. It's confusing. It's scary. I have to admit, it sometimes made me want to kill myself even more than usual. But when you feel it... when you accept it. When you feel her inside of you, it becomes you. When you're a mom, and you want to be a mom, that's everything you are, and it's wonderful. That's really the only word I have for it. Wonderful." Her hoof stroked my mane. "So... I'm guessing this isn't a completely academic question, is it? You're pregnant?"

I nodded, sniffing snottily. "They said so, when I got these latest 'upgrades'. They asked me if I wanted to keep it, and..." I shook my head hard. One different choice and I probably would have scrapped Cognitum and been home by now. She reached out and held me as well. "I'm so scared, Rampage. I want to stop Cognitum. I have to. But... I'm going to have a baby! I don't even know if I can carry it all the way. But I can feel... I know something's different inside me. Something that's not steel and wire."

Rampage was silent for a long while as she stroked my mane. "What higher power did you piss

the fuck off, Blackjack?" Rampage asked in soft exasperation.

"I don't know, but I wish they'd leave me alone," I blubbered. It took me nearly a minute to calm down enough to speak again. "I don't know what I should do now, Rampage. I know stopping Cognitum and Horizons is the most important thing for me to do... but..."

"But you're going to have a baby," Rampage murmured.

"And I can't shake that! I'm in the deadliest, most life-ripping place in the Wasteland... one that's eaten you and made another pony melt in front of me. What will it do to my baby?" I gritted my teeth, turning away from her. "I keep trying to make myself not care. Don't think about it. Do what I have to do. Hope that, when it's over, I can still have the baby. That's how I got through Shadowbolt Tower. And if I lose it, then that's just another price I have to pay. Like my legs. Or my hide. Or my heart."

Rampage closed her eyes, obviously struggling to maintain her own composure, then said in calm, even tones, "Do you want to keep it?"

"Don't ask me that," I begged. "I don't know."

"Yes you do," Rampage countered quietly. "You know."

I choked for several seconds as I tried to get it out. Finally, it tore free of my mouth in a whisper. "Yes... I don't want to give this up."

Rampage nodded, her hoof rubbing at my mane. "Okay." I felt her tears on my cheek, and I looked up at her smiling helplessly at me. "Okay. So we can figure out what to do now."

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

"No," she said sharply. "Do not be ashamed of having a baby, Blackjack. Never. The timing is shitty, but since when has time even been on our side?" She bumped her head against mine. "We can leave. Meet up with Glory at the Collegiate. Take care of things and come back together. Or give me EC-1101, and I'll trot out and beat Cogs till she turns off Horizons. Then I'll take it back from her, and beat her some more."

It was awfully tempting. Now that I'd confessed that I was pregnant, I felt better. I could face it. Find some way forward. "Maybe." I took a deep breath. "Would you think less of me for leaving? At least long enough to find a surrogate." Maybe Grace? She was my cousin several generations removed... better than nopony.

"Blackjack, you're pregnant. That changes things. If you weren't, then yeah. I'd think you were a coward and a fucking idiot. But you're not. You're a mother, and you're scared for your baby. I can't think of anything more powerful." She patted my shoulder again. "Leave me with EC-1101. Who cares who dicks with it? You go."

It was tempting. So very tempting. I go. Let someone else be responsible for the world. EC-1101 had been my burden for so long. Through one to three deaths, depending on how you counted. I opened up the panel in my leg and looked at the PipBuck that'd complicated my life so damn much. I spotted Echo off to the side, nodding once. Finally, I put a foreleg over my eyes. I had to choose... stay and finish this, or go...

And I couldn't go. "I'll see this through," I said softly. "End it. Then have a long talk with Glory about cyberpony pregnancies." And if something happened... well... I had plenty of other things I bashed myself for. I rose to my hooves. "Let's go."

I expected Rampage to whoop in glee. Instead, a strange expression came over her face. She stepped in front of me and put her hooves against mine as she stared at me a moment. "I promise, Blackjack. I swear to you that, no matter what, you and your baby will get out of this safe and alive. Okay? I promise you," she said with such intensity that I was taken aback.

"Sure, Rampage. Sure," I answered, her odd behavior putting my problems into the back of my mind and letting me focus on what needed to be done. "Are you..." I started to ask, wanting to bring up Steel Rain and what she had spoken with him about. Only then I noticed that the motes were moving away from one corner of the room. "This can't be good." A glance at a worried Boo confirmed my suspicions.

"Nope. Probably fun, though," Rampage said as she hopped up in her duct-taped armor, grinning towards that corner. "Come on! Bring it on! Starmetal razors? Pfft! Magically regenerating monstrosities? Hah! Unholy rape abominations?"

I shoved her shoulder. "Stop tempting fate," I said sharply. Rising to my hooves, I stared at the singular red bar that had appeared. This was pretty ballsy, even for Steel Rain. "Come on out, Steel. I know it's you." Who else would be approaching like this?

"You would be mistaken," a calm, familiar voice replied as it advanced through the assembled ruins. The powerful, striped form stepped into view, his dragon skull helm gleaming atop his head and the cloth wrappings around his hooves and torso caught in a faint breeze. The Legate looked at me, and his lips spread in a slow smile in the shadow of the dragon's maw. "Maiden. It is good to see you again."

"You. What are you doing here? How can you even be here?!" I demanded as he slowly approached the workstation. I remembered fighting that fit, athletic body. Struggling against it. Feeling -- damn it, no! No no no! What the hell was wrong with me? Stop thinking sexy thoughts about a deadly zebra sworn to kill me! No matter how hot his son had been lying atop me--

Sweet Celestia, did I need to be *spayed*?

Fortunately, telepathy didn't seem to be one of his powers, or he could have killed me with embarrassment. "Should I not be? It is you, after all, who does not belong surrounded by all these artifacts," he said as he reached over, stroking the stone wall of one of the preserved ruins almost lovingly with a hoof. "It is sad to think of this place destroyed when the Core is undone." He must have had a moonstone hidden in those wrappings, or underneath that skull.

"I don't want to fight you. I'm not your Maiden. Believe me, I am absolutely most emphatically neither a maiden nor Princess Luna," I said as I backed away, remembering how quickly he'd moved when we'd last fought.

"I know. I believe you. Indeed, I have no wish at all to fight you." He began to move to the side. "My son was an idiot who attempted to force a confrontation before its time. There is no question, whatsoever, that you are not the Maiden of our lore," he said as he approached the papers on the workstation. "No. My business is with the other one."

Rampage took a standing zebra fighting stance. "You wish to face me, nothus?" she asked in Shujaa's accent as she raised her forehooves. "Bring it. A true daughter of the Achu will show an impostor the might of our clan."

But the Legate wasn't looking at Rampage either. His amber eyes stared right past both of us... at Boo. Together, Rampage and I gaped at him, then at the terrified mare, and back at the Legate. "Boo? You're here for Boo?" I blurted.

"Me?" Boo asked, pointing at herself in bafflement.

"So to speak, yes," the Legate said as he stared at the blank mare. "You two can go. This will be quick."

"Right. You're crazy if you think I'll just let you kill her," I said, exasperated.

"Why would you want to kill a helpless mare?" Rampage asked.

The Legate paused, seemingly amused. "You believe I have some malice against eggshells? Hardly." He stood on his hind legs again, pointing a hoof at Boo. "Care to come clean?"

Boo trembled, backing away. "No baths!"

"No baths?" The Legate laughed. "Priceless. You always were amusing."

"Leave her alone. What are you talking about?" I demanded.

The Legate never took his eyes off Boo. "Haven't you wondered, Blackjack? Such a helpless mare, all alone, desperate for your protection. Seeking to accompany you? Haven't you wondered about her odd luck? The way she always survives while her enemies die in odd... often amusing, ways?" His smile faded. "You have to die. Your meddling is done," he told the trembling mare.

"You won't touch her!" Rampage swore. And with that, she launched herself at the Legate with a flying kick. He didn't move until the very last second, spinning on his hindlegs almost as if he were dancing as she passed half an inch to his side. Then, as she stopped behind him, a whirling hoof lashed out and struck the back of her skull with a resounding clang, denting the metal. It might have broken a lesser pony's neck, but it merely irritated Rampage. She slashed out with her barbed tail and wrapped it around his neck, tearing bloody furrows in his hide. "Ha! Got yo--"

He pulled free, barely even flinching as further bloody lines were gouged into his neck. The weeping rents in his flesh seemed more like inconveniences to him than deadly wounds. His twisting motion continued around and swept her hindlegs out from under her. She went down in a clatter of steel. Smoothly, he rose to his feet and leapt above Rampage, flipping backwards. All four hooves smashed her helmet over her face, blocking her eyes. "Hey! Get back here!" she shouted, scratching at the bent metal.

"So difficult," he said dismissively as he stepped off Rampage and approached Boo and me. Rampage finally wrenched the helmet, and half her mane, off her head and glowered at him. "So upset over a cheap vessel," he continued, his voice mocking. "She's not real, you know. That's just an act to keep you nice and protective. Allowing it to bide its time." He pointed a hoof at Boo again. "Do you insist on maintaining this charade?"

I glared at the zebra, and then I heard Boo say, quite calmly and clearly, "It's no fun when you spoil the ending, oh eternal one."

I felt what flesh I had remaining go numb. "Boo?" I asked weakly. The mare scowled at him, then glanced at me. A sheepish expression crept across her face. "Sorry, Blackjack. I can explain everything later. Once he's dealt with."

"I... you... what... how..." I stammered.

"Your interference is at an end," the Legate growled at Boo. "You know precisely how this is going to go."

"Oh, what's the fun in that, Lego? Doing what's expected is so dreadfully boring," Boo said as she stood, giving a dismissive wave of her hoof. "What's wrong with me spicing things up a bit?"

"Everything," the Legate growled. "You were supposed to die two centuries ago, but Goldenblood spirited you away. You should have died when Blackjack freed you, but you hitched along in that empty vessel." The Legate pointed a hoof at the mare. "It's time for you to die, Discord!"

I gaped from the Legate to Boo. The pale mare closed her eyes and gave a little smirk, a lone fang popping out of the right corner of her mouth. When she opened her eyes again, the pale orbs were yellowed, their irises bright red. "Well then. If you insist..." She lowered herself onto all four hooves, grinning back at the striped stallion with her lone fang gleaming. "Ante up."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Sorry this is late. Last week, I was sick and we had problems getting through it. I'm very sorry. Next chapter should be Cognitum. Then we get to find out more stuff. Oh, and find out what's up with Boo and Discord. Don't worry. It'll be okay. Probably. Unless I botch it... which I probably will... sigh...

In other news, looking for a teaching job. If you know of any in your area, let me know. My applications from teacher for teacher has gotten be zero replies and I need a placement before June. Can't sub in the summer. If folks want to help out with bits, they'd be appreciated, but I think I should just barely squeak by this month. I hope. If I don't get sick. Or lose this sub assignment. ::crosses hooves::

Anyway, thanks so much to everyone for reading through this final arc. It looks like I really am going to get it done this year after all! Also, there's a concerted effort to get me to Bronycon. I have no idea if it'll actually happen. I'd have to crash with someone at the very least. Still, it'd be cool. Maybe I'd get to meet folks! n.n Anyway, just thought I'd mention it.

Also, thanks to Kkat for creating FoE and thanks to my editors who take all my lackluster drek and make it actually work reading. Thanks for folks who leave feedback at cloudsdaile, reddit, and 4chan (even if 4channers hate my guts, it's still appreciated). Thanks for everyone that donates a bit to help out. And just thanks for reading, period.)