

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 66: Ruin

"Well, there's something here about a dragon, the kingdom falling, chaos reigning... Okay, apparently it was all because the prince and princess were so lost in each other's eyes that they couldn't perform their royal duties."

Once upon a time, there had been a Princess born in a castle. She was a beautiful Princess, for everyone told her so, and the sweetest Princess, for everyone proclaimed it. Of course, they also remarked on what a pity it was that she had killed her mother when she was born... though only when they thought she couldn't hear. She lived in a palace surrounded by servants who provided for her and her fat, ugly older sister and insipid, vain older brother. She had anything and everything she ever wanted, so long as it was pretty and worthless. And she had a father who loved her more than anything... well, perhaps not more than *anything*. Not more than his precious little Society, or his legacy, or his collection of baubles and trinkets, but she was *somewhere* on the list of things he loved. Towards the bottom.

And one day, he said he'd give her a gift: anything she could possibly want. As usual. But because she loved him, she believed him, and so she asked that she should someday rule the Society. Because she was, as she'd always been told, the prettiest and the sweetest and the smartest. And her father had coughed and smiled and patted her head and suggested a new gown or a dolly instead. But she knew she was better than her older siblings, and so she asked again, with all the seriousness she could, to rule the Society. And he'd coughed again and mumbled something like 'well, we'll see' which meant 'no fucking way in hell' and sent her on her way.

And so the Princess was upset and did everything she could to show everyone that her fat older sister was slow and stupid and her vain older brother was perverted and dumb and neither was worth a big pile of brahmin poop. And she learned to say what people wanted her to say and do what others wanted her to do, even if it felt icky and made her feel bad, because then they'd be scared she'd tell and she could make them do things she wanted. And she got money because sometimes that worked even better than doing the other stickier ickier things. And so she was all set to get rid of her fat, ugly, stupid, nasty older sister and her dumb brother, and even her father too if he didn't get his old ass out of her throne.

Then a wandering Barbarian came to her home, and her father was afraid because the Barbarian had killed lots of ponies and could kill lots more. And her father knew that the smart, good, beautiful Princess was going to take her throne sooner or later, and so her father hatched a plot to keep the good Princess from the throne. He gave it to the stupid Barbarian instead, and everyone was so afraid of the Barbarian that the Princess couldn't take everything over. So when her father died, the Princess snuck in and stole all the special bits of lore the wandering Barbarian desired, and promised money and weapons besides.

But the Barbarian was a stupid cunt who ruined everything! Everything! She'd picked the Princess's fat and ugly sister to rule instead and ruined months and months of planning and plotting and scheming and getting favors and bribing and stockpiling weapons. And so the Princess had taken all of the precious trinkets that the Barbarian coveted and smashed them to bits, but she made sure to take all their secrets just in case the Barbarian changed her mind and stopped being a stupid cunt.

Then the Princess met a noble Knight of a powerful order who also desired the secrets the Princess had learned. He served a powerful Sorceress with power greater than that of the Barbarian queen, and if she went with him, the Knight would see her made Queen of her castle. And so she freed

the Knight from the cell where the Barbarian had placed him and fled with him to his fortress. And she met the powerful Sorceress and her mechanical weapons of war, and the Princess began to feel like she'd take back all which was rightfully hers.

But the Princess quickly learned the Knight's order was not like back home. No matter how she stomped her hooves, they ignored her. When she made demands, they laughed at her. When she lifted her tail, they were repulsed. More than once they simply locked her in a cell where she would be out of the way. But then the Sorceress called. She wanted the secrets. The Princess tried to tell her, but there was so very much and it was all so very confusing. 'But fear not', the Sorceress promised, she knew how to get the secrets out of the Princess's head.

And so she drilled holes in the Princess's head, put wires in her brain, and sucked all the secrets out, no matter how the Princess cried or screamed that it hurt or begged her to stop. The zaps kept coming. And the Princess was put into a magical bottle where she didn't have to eat or go to the bathroom, but also couldn't go anywhere else. And if the Sorceress was in a bad mood because the Barbarian had gotten herself killed in the sky, or because a bad thing called Horizons was going to go off, she'd entertain herself by making the Princess experience all the horrible things that the Princess had once wanted for the Barbarian to suffer... and things the Princess had never imagined before... and things the Princess rather wished she didn't know.

Then one day, the Barbarian showed up and faced the Sorceress, but the Sorceress was too clever and the Barbarian had been betrayed by the only friend she'd brought with her. The Sorceress took the Barbarian's body for her own, leaving her trapped inside the Sorceress's iron throne. Not even the arrival of a mischievous spirit, who whisked away the Sorceress's Dark Magician and fallen Lady, could save the day. And so the Sorceress had freely cast her spell... only to discover it had been a trick all along. The Sorceress left for the moon to punish the one who played the trick and cast the true spell, leaving her Knight and Vizier behind.

The pair had stood around for several minutes, and the Princess could feel the Barbarian trapped within the machine. The wires connecting her brain to the iron throne were still working, even without the Sorceress to control them. She could feel the Barbarian struggle within, losing the strength of her will with every second. Then the Knight kicked a copy of the Barbarian off the platform, and thanked the Barbarian for saving him long, long ago.

Then he moved far back and fired his cannons straight into the heart of the iron throne. The Barbarian's scream echoed on and on inside the Princess's head as the top half of the massive structure was torn apart by the colossal blast. The flaming pieces cascaded down into the murk far below. The shockwave knocked the jars over, and the Princess was rattled as her prison rolled over and smashed into a bank of terminals on the edge of the platform. The filly could barely think as she grabbed the wires with her hooves, desperate to keep them from yanking out of her brain.

It didn't help that the Barbarian was still screaming in her mind. The top half of the machine was a flaming mess, but the bottom half and the platform were still intact. The computers smoldered, the blast having sundered the machine without setting it aflame, but it still billowed a thick, oily black smoke that washed across the platform.

"Think she noticed that?" the Knight asked casually as he trotted up before the smashed computer.

The zebra snorted. "I doubt it. She has the tunnel vision of a machine, and in Blackjack's body she has no clue what is transpiring remotely. Even if she did, by now she is likely reunited with Blackjack's friends. She can't come and investigate." He gave a tiny shrug. "If she asks, tell her

Blackjack had started gaining control of her old shell, and remind her that Princess Luna would never be so timid."

"Yes, she's easy to manipulate like that," the Knight said with a dry chuckle. "You'll head back and get the Brood ready?"

"Of course," the zebra replied. "I'll have to get my stripes redone, of course. Quite a pain, but I keep a pony for just such an occasion."

"You zebras and your stripes," the Knight replied with a laugh, one the Vizier did not share. "Red. Black. What's it matter?"

"Unicorn. Pegasus. What's it matter?" he replied with an edge to his voice. "Accept that there are some aspects to my kind you do not need to understand, and I will accept the same of yours." The Vizier looked around at the controls. "You'll be ready to catch the moonstone when it falls?"

"I don't plan on being vaporized," the Knight answered. "You think she'll be successful altering the trajectory?"

"She has Blackjack's talent for victory. I am utterly assured of it. A pity she doesn't realize Blackjack's talent is victory, not survival. We will simply destroy her wherever she lands triumphantly rather than at the scene of her staged battle." The Vizier laughed and shook his head. "I had looked forward to witnessing her face when she was vaporized along with her most ardent supporters, but this will have to do." The Vizier then regarded the empty terminals. "You're going to need help making sure all is ready. I could provide—"

"Please," the Knight interrupted with a shake of his head. "I trust you as far as dividing the Wasteland between us. I need your Brood. You need the Core. Let's not complicate matters by providing any more temptations for betrayal than necessary. I'll find some Harbingers with the necessary technical experience."

The zebra paused for several seconds, just smiling at the armored pony. "I suppose," the Vizier conceded. "We should keep perspective. After all, the last thing either of us wants is to serve beneath the hoof of that delusional monstrosity. Once we've sorted her out, things should take care of themselves." He turned, regarding the smoking, sparking heap of the computer. "And at last Blackjack is out of the picture. Discord failed to interfere. All is as it should be."

"Yes, his pitiful failure was quite extraordinary," the Knight chuckled. "I hadn't quite expected him to turn to dust, but—"

The statement made the zebra freeze. "Discord was here?" the Vizier muttered.

"Yes, for a minute or two, right before you arrived. Stopped me from smashing the metal nag to scrap, made some taunts, and sent her and Cog's pet skull somewhere. Then he turned to dust and blew away," the Knight said, now sounding a bit baffled in that helmet. "What's the matter? Everything happened as you predicted. Well... aside from Cognitum not being able to use EC-1101. I wonder what happened there. Still, nothing else major changed."

"You don't know that!" the Vizier hissed. "Discord. Pinkie Pie. Blackjack. You have no idea how dangerous they are. You think killing makes a pony dangerous! Killing is nothing! Knowledge. Interference. Those are dangerous, *foo!*" He spat the last word so sharply that the Knight took a step back. "If he was here, it was for a reason! Why Dawn? Why Snips?"

"He was crazy!" the Knight retorted. "Now all three are dead. I don't know what you're so upset about. He didn't even have enough power to save himself."

Now the Vizier appeared particularly pissed. "I must triple check everything now. I've worked far too hard to let his ilk unravel everything. He did something. Changed something. Meddled in some way." He trotted towards the elevator. "If I were you, I'd put a few more shells into those remains. Make certain that Blackjack is annihilated! Kill off the rest of Cognitum's little collection. Send out patrols. Something is amiss, and we must know what it is!" He glared up at the direction she'd gone. "I never would have sent her on her way if I'd known he'd been here!"

"Well, it's too late now. You'll look oddly suspicious trotting around with her when you're supposed to be dire enemies. Guess that 'prophecy' you made up bit you in the tail," the Knight said scornfully.

"The prophecy is real. It was revealed to me by... higher powers. I've learned the best way to sabotage prophecy is to place someone unworthy in its role," the Vizier muttered. "My opposition to the Star Maiden was the deception... and a source of grief for Blackjack," he continued in aggravation as he paced back and forth. "What could he have done? Something... something... some juvenile, puerile prank... with dire repercussions..."

"What's the big deal? He's dead."

The Vizier struggled to maintain his composure, his whole body shaking for a moment. "You don't understand just how persistently he's worked against my goals. How difficult he's made the execution of my plans." He paced back and forth, speaking faster and faster. "You can't imagine how infuriating it is to creep and skulk about because one of his little schemes put the Princesses on high alert and suspicious of everyone else trying to move up. He's inspired heroes, elevated the Princesses, and legitimized their roles in Equestria. His petrification didn't help, either. With his absence, any disruption to the social order was noted! It made this so terribly difficult. Had it not been for the war, I never would have had my opportunity! I refuse to let him undo all my hard work! Now, *what did he do?*"

"Nothing! He appeared, taunted Cognitum a bit, then turned to dust. He seemed to want her to bond with Luna's soul." That made the Vizier hiss again in frustration. "What? You said that that wouldn't matter!" the Knight protested.

"Of course not. We planned on killing her, Luna's soul or not. But *Discord* thought it mattered. He thought it important! Important enough to die for!" The zebra ran towards the elevator. "We must remove the soul immediately!" Then he skidded to a stop, his eyes wide. "Unless that's what he actually wants us to do... but if he... but I... he... AHHHGH!" The zebra clasped his skull, screaming in frustration, "Damn you, Discord! *What have you done?*"

The Knight took several steps back. "Look, what does it matter? I have the Tokomare, and soon as Cognitum returns, she's dead. So what's the—"

The Vizier was on him in seconds. His hooves hooked around the Knight's neck, and he gave a colossal heave over his back. The silver-armored stallion crashed down with an impact that made the whole spire vibrate. "The point? The point is that he can *change* things!" the zebra yelled. "He can see things a step ahead. He knows what to do and what not to do! You have no concept what it means to fight that!"

The Knight didn't reply beyond a groan as the Vizier rose, his face grim. "I did not want to do this... it was so much better taking advantage of the fears and ambitions of others. Cognitum. Dawn. You. Even Blackjack. Now it seems that I have no choice."

He walked to the edge of the platform, sitting and spreading his hooves wide. "Stars of the dark places. Stars of ash. Stars of death. I beseech thee. Tell me the dance of your circles. How has Discord marred your celestial orbits? Please! I beg thee. Ashur. Dagon. Namtar. Show me..."

A blue-white glow surrounded him, cold and clear, and his anger stilled. A frigid shaft of light seemed to drop upon him, and the air around him groaned and crackled. A sickly green glow began to shine out of his chest, pulsing with each beat. "Things have gone awry..." he began, and the groan around him deepened ominously. The beating green light slowed, and a spasm of pain crossed the Vizier's face. "But all will be set right, greatest and most glorious ones! I beg you... what was the meddler's last ploy?" The glowing beat slowly resumed, and a tense smile returned to his face. "I see. I understand. And Cognitum?" The shivery light rang as if it were laughing. A look of relief spread on his face. "Thank you. Then she is not the true Maiden, now or ever."

"What are you doing?" the Knight groaned. "What is that light?" It throbbed like veins of green radiance within the Vizier's hide.

The zebra didn't answer immediately, and when he did, his voice had a soft, unnatural tone to it. "The light of stars that died long ago, and would not go quietly into the darkness." The Tokomare began to glow as well, the starmetal shining with the malignant green glare of Enervation. Even the Knight's armor took on an ethereal illumination. In that light were strange, incoherent things suggestive of faces and tendrils and other terrible shapes hidden within the silvery radiance. "And the two he took?" Now his smile faded. "Interesting..."

"Stop. P...please... stop..." the former Steel Ranger muttered weakly, metal hooves clenched against his helmet.

"We did not stop for Caesars. What makes you think we would stop for you?" The light continued to wash over everything for a few moments longer, the Enervation scream now sounding like the whisper of hundreds of unholy voices. They hinted at ways to break things. Corrupt things. Undo things that should not be undone. Make things that should not be made. Then he nodded. "I see. Blackjack was the only factor then?" Another pause. "And she is no more?" More hissing whispers. They rose and fell, and made the zebra frown. "Blackjack is broken..." He muttered the phrase as if tasting it and finding it to his liking. "Good. Then all is accounted for," he said as he rose to his hooves, his face sublime with confidence as the glow faded.

"What... what was that?" the Knight muttered weakly as he drew himself to his hooves.

"Things far greater and more glorious than you. They've shown me their secret orbits and the drawing of their power. Discord affected *something*, but it was slight. The tiniest wobble of the outplay of events. A hair's shift out of alignment, ultimately for naught." He trotted towards the lift.

"You serve those... things?" he groaned, still wobbling on his hooves.

"You would *oppose* them?" he asked in reply, with a content, blissful smile. "They are more magnificent than Caesar or Princess, and you would do well to be counted as their ally rather than their enemy. I have struggled on their behalf for so very long. When the war came, I *finally* had my golden opportunity, and I am *not* going to waste it."

"So your goal is to turn Equestria into some kind of... of... star worshipping cult?" the Knight sputtered.

The serene zebra didn't answer immediately, then replied calmly, "Something like that."

"That's sick. I won't let you. I can't believe..." the Knight began. Then the Vizier gave him a look... just a single glance... that silenced him. There was power in that stare, a lingering remnant of the dark entities he consorted with flickered that same baleful green.

"You can't believe. That is why you will never rule anything, Steel Rain, because you cannot believe in anything greater or more meaningful than yourself. You will either serve forever as Cognitum's puppet, or you will serve my masters just as I do and revel in the power they grant their most devoted. But you will serve, or you will die. Is that understood?"

The Knight stood there a moment, cannons pointed right at the zebra. The Vizier waited, a bored smile on his face. Then the Knight turned away, and the zebra gave the tiniest shake of his head. "Good. I need somepony here pushing the buttons when the time is right. Leash your delusions of ambition, or they'll get you killed." He hit a button, and the lift began to rise. "I must rectify other small permutations. I will contact you shortly."

The elevator rose up, and for the longest time the Knight watched it go. Then he sat down, tore off his helmet, and was violently ill over the platform edge. After he puked, he sat a while, muttering to himself. "That striped bastard thinks he can talk to me like that? Me? I'll show him and his fucking stars who owns this world. I won't serve anyone. Not him or Cognitum or Dawn or Crunchy Carrots. Me. I'm the one who should be in charge. I won't be second to anyone. Anyone!"

The Princess drew back from the raging stallion into the safety of the shadows beside the wreckage of the computer. She could not draw far. The wires in her head hurt terribly, and if she pulled on them... well... she wouldn't live long after that. "I just want to go home. Please. Just let me go home," she whispered to herself.

"I wish to return home as well," a synthetic voice murmured. The Princess started, then peeked at a little notch at the base of the processor. A broken and battered pony-shaped object lay there. The Sorceress's Lady. The Princess knelt down, looking at the pale green light flickering in the mechanical eyes. "I thought I would save the Wasteland. That I would make it all better. I just had to give enough to make it so..."

The Princess's magic tugged at the broken Lady, pulling her from the hidden notch. Behind her were some faintly glowing bones. The Sorceress's Dark Magician. The purple glowing aura surrounding them formed a ghostlike image of the rotund pony. The Princess drew the broken machine into her hooves and embraced the cold, hard metal. "My head hurts so much," the Princess whimpered.

"I'm sorry. I can't help you now. I can't save anyone," the broken Lady whispered.

"It's like when I was shot in the head, only this time it's lots of little holes and the bullets are still in there," the Princess said as she hugged the smashed torso and head like a run-over windup toy. Any second the Knight would either follow the Vizier out, leaving them all trapped, or he'd obey the Vizier and find them all cowering.

"You should get back in a jar. The stasis fields should stop your pain," the Dark Magician said, his bones flashing brighter with every word.

"I don't want to get in the fields. It's like not having my body again. I don't want to not feel like my body isn't really there again," the Princess whimpered, quivering.

The broken Lady, however, did not respond for several seconds. "Child, what are you talking about? When were you... shot?"

"All the time. I'm always getting hurt. My body. My heart. My soul. Always getting hurt. People always shoot me. Even my friends shot me. Glory shot me in the face... but it's okay. It was an accident," the Princess muttered weakly.

"What?" the Dark Magician muttered. "Child, do you know what Blackjack told me before I died?"

The Princess frowned, opening and closing her mouth slowly, thinking about what she knew about the Barbarian. "She... she swore to get Snails out. And I think she said she was... sorry?"

"How can this be?" the Dark Magician asked, his glowing socket motes turning to the smashed Lady.

The broken stub of a leg reached out and brushed the wires dangling from the Princess's head, making her wince and draw back. "It must be... it must be the neural taps Cognitum wired. She kept the connection constant. When the computer was destroyed, the link persisted; it must have shoved Blackjack's memories into the only buffer still connected to it!"

"Can her brain hold the experiences of another pony?" the glowing skull asked in awe.

"She's young. She and Blackjack both. I can only assume there's enough space, but... why isn't she... Blackjack?" the broken Lady asked.

The Dark Magician replied immediately. "Because there's none of Blackjack's soul in her. Blackjack's mind... her memory and personality... they're just like a character in a story to Charm. Without her soul, they're just detailed data." He peered into the Princess's eyes. "How long can she hold those memories?"

"I don't know," the broken Lady murmured, "But... perhaps long enough to bring Blackjack back... if we can get that body!"

"There you are," the Knight said evenly as he walked around the corner of the smoldering computer, helmet clipped to his shoulder. The Knight's kind and gentle face was now harrowed, his eyes sunken with anxiety. "I thought I'd heard voices."

"Steel Rain. Listen. You don't have to do this. You don't have to serve Cognitum or the Legate," the Dark Magician said rapidly.

"Shut up. I'm not planning on serving anypony," the Knight growled. "I'm going to be the one on top. You'll see. It doesn't matter how often I get set back. I'm going to be in charge and no one will stop me."

"You spoiled bastard," the broken Lady retorted, "Can't you think about anypony besides yourself?"

"That's worked wonders for you and Blackjack, hasn't it?" the Knight replied with a glower. "She's dead and you're... about to join her," he muttered dully.

"What's happened to you?" the broken Lady asked.

"Nothing. I'm fine," he snapped.

"He was touched by the song of dead stars," the Dark Magician replied. "The Black Book was rife with all kinds of their dark magic. After a while, you just stop caring about how it hollows you out and fills you up with its temptations."

The Knight sneered at them. "I've had it to here with stripe talk about dead stars." He tapped the collar of his power armor with a hoof. "The Legate's going to take Cognitum off the board. I'll take him off the board. Game over. I win. Tokomare's restored. Core's restored. I get to reboot civilization. The Steel Reign of King Steel Rain. Sounds catchy, huh?"

"Sounds stupid," the Princess whimpered, hugging the broken Lady all the tighter to keep from shaking. "Go away. You won't be king any more than I'll be queen. No pony likes you."

The Knight blinked at her. "I like me," he said in faintly injured tones, his voice regaining a little of his old self.

"No pony else, then," she said with a roll of her eyes. "It doesn't matter how smart or clever or sneaky you are. If no pony believes in you, or likes you, or wants you, they're not going to follow you. It doesn't matter how shiny your armor is or how big your guns are. Every pony knows you hate them, and probably think you'll kill 'em the second it suits you... 'cause you will." She closed her eyes. "I used to be just like you. Then I got wires stuck in my head. Now I'm not so stupid anymore."

The Knight opened and closed his mouth a moment, then gave a little frown. "Well. I guess there's just one thing left to do." He stepped forward, raising a hoof. "Hold still. This'll be quick."

"Wait!" the broken Lady implored. "Charm has a copy of Blackjack's mind. If we get that blank back, we can put her back in!"

The Knight froze, staring for a moment, then laughed and backed away. "Oh, you think I want Blackjack back? There are five people in the world I really want dead. You. Cognitum. That striped bastard. The Lightbringer, simply 'cause I don't want to deal with 'heroic weather' while I'm remaking civilization for my glory. And Blackjack. Blackjack most of all." His left cannon let out a loud ka-chunk as it loaded a round. "Because if she had just had the decency to die and leave me the *Celestia*, I would have taken over the Hoof four months ago." He grinned at the three of them. "Time to end this."

Then a great hissing mass launched itself from out of the shadows behind the three, clearing the filly and diving at the armored stallion. "STAY AWAY FROM MY KIDS!" the Revenant screamed in near feral rage as the maroon ghoul opened his jaws wide, Pink Cloud boiling up his throat. Had the Knight been wearing his helmet, he might have simply opted for a point blank blast and been done with all of them. As it was, he had to backpedal rapidly to avoid having his face melted off, trying to keep the demented Revenant at bay with armored kicks.

The two tumbled off the maneframe's platform, the Revenant springing on top of the Knight. The broken Lady's eyes turned to the Dark Magician's sockets. "Can you retrieve Blackjack's body? Do you have a spell or something... anything... that could pull that blank up here?"

"I... no. The distance is too far for basic telekinesis. And all of my spells affect the soul, not the body." Then he paused, the glow in his sockets growing. "But her soul is bonded to her body. If I had enough power, perhaps I could summon her spirit, and the body could come along for the ride."

"What kind of power do you need?" the broken Lady asked immediately.

"A circle of at least six unicorns, Snails, or... or..." His eyes turned this way and that in his skull. Then they stared straight up. "Or that." The Princess raised her eyes, looking up at one of the golden arms projecting out into the void thirty feet overhead. As she watched, a dozen emerald lightning bolts struck the end, the energy being sucked up along the cables. "That might do it."

"Each of those arms carries one point twenty-one gigasparks, at least. It'd vaporize you," Dawn said immediately.

"Not instantly, though. I'm a soul jar, albeit a flawed and improperly prepared one. I should last long enough to get Blackjack back. I might even survive. Wouldn't that be a laugh?" he said hollowly. "Once we do have the body, though, how do we get Blackjack back inside?"

"I should be able to do it if we can just get our hooves on Cognitum's neural mapping array. If it still works, that is. I think it landed over there on the side of the platform. I don't know how we're going to get you up to that arm and get me the array before Steel Rain or Sanguine kills us."

"I'll do it," the Princess said. "I'll get him up there." She closed her eyes so she wouldn't see the doubt in theirs. "Blackjack did so much for so many. I should be able to do this."

"I don't mean to be rude, but you still have wires connecting you to the jar," the Dark Magician pointed out. But the Princess trotted to where the wires entered the wrecked jar's rim, bit down on the cables, set her hooves against the housing, and pulled as hard as she could. The harder she strained, the worse her head throbbed and tingled unnaturally. Her stomach lurched as nausea rolled through her. For a second, she was sure her teeth were going to yank right out, but then the wires suddenly jerked as the cover gave way to reveal the clustered circuitry around the jar's top. She twisted, yanked, and freed a large ring of arcane technology her head wires were directly connected to, then put her head through it like a yoke. The heavy ring scraped along the floor as she trotted to the skull. The Princess deftly tied the skull into a bit of slack in the wires connecting her head and collar. The filly then ran to one of the supports as fast as she could and struggled to get up high enough where she could use the crossbracing to wiggle her way up to the golden arm.

The Princess fought tears of frustration. She could do this. She needed to do this. She just needed to get up a couple of feet. But the Lady was broken, and there were no others who could—

"Excuse me," a mare said pleasantly, trotting from around the back of the computer. "I need some medical assistance for Mr. Horse," the Golem said with a worried frown, glancing over her shoulder at the quivering lump on her back that had once been a pony. "He's not himself. It has been over one hundred and five million minutes since he told me how amazing he is." She looked back at all the rest of us. "I'm quite concerned," she added in complete sincerity.

The three others stared back for two seconds. Then the broken Lady spoke up. "Yes. Yes! We're trying to get him medical help. We need your help to get him help." She gestured at the Princess with a wing stub. "Please, boost her up to the ladder. Then I need you to take me to the front of the maneframe, quickly."

The Golem tilted her head and blinked cluelessly. "It would be more efficient and effective to contact paramedics and have Mr. Horse taken to a Ministry of Peace medical center. He seems to have lost most of his epidermis."

"Just... that's what we're trying to do. Please!" the broken Lady begged. "I promise it'll help Mr. Horse."

"Oh. Okay then!" the Golem said brightly, sliding Horse gently from her back and setting him down, then casually scooping up the filly. Clinging to her back, the Princess was lifted high enough that she could climb onto the bracing and start to wiggle up to the spire. "Careful," the robotic mare said brightly.

"Thanks," the Princess replied, then started to pick her way up the side of the spire, the lambent pony skull weighing heavily around her neck and the Dark Magician's radiant bones dangling and rattling against the metal as if still connected by invisible sinews. Below her, she saw the broken Lady and Horse both picked up and carried over towards the front of the machine by the Golem. "Do you think Mr. Horse

will be okay?" The feeling of compassion was alien to her, but unlike so very much the Sorceress had taught her, it wasn't altogether unwelcome.

"Do not worry about Mr. Horse," the glowing skull admonished as she climbed. "He probably lost his soul long ago. Worry about yourself." The edge of the golden ring cut into her neck with each foot she ascended. Off to the side, she could see where the Knight and the Revenant still fought, but both were lost in a pink haze that spread over the floor of the platform. Their movements were just a blur of candy-colored mist, clanging metal, and feral hisses.

"What about you? Aren't you worried about yourself?" she asked.

"No," the bones replied with a papery sigh. "I'm old and I'm tired. I've done so much, and too much of it's been bad for me to ever be able to even attempt to live happily. And... now that I'm back together... I owe Blackjack for what I did to her. Owe a lot for the ponies I've hurt. Some things don't get forgiven."

"Blackjack feels the same way all the time," the Princess said. "She can't forgive herself. But I know she'd forgive you."

"And you as well, child," he said as she climbed closer to the humming arm. "Irony. The mare that can't cut herself a little slack for her mistakes will happily excuse far worse from others." His voice dropped. "She rescued my friend, and I hurt her for it."

The Princess reached the furthest she could. The ring dragged at her neck, threatening to pull her to the wreckage far below. The broken Lady and the Golem were occluded by the spreading pink mist, getting something from the front of the machine. The Princess now looked at the glowing skull and at the thick cables overhead where the arm met the supporting structure. "I can't get any higher," she said as she carefully untied the wires from the skull, then looped the slack around her upper foreleg and scanned around.

"Wait. There!" the skull said as her gaze passed a large lever underneath the arm. A small sign marked it 'Breaker'. "Pull that!"

She moved along the structure to the bar and threw all her weight into it. Fortunately, the lever resisted for only a few seconds before it flipped over. The gold-tipped arm let out a crack as a gap opened between it and its power cables. The lightning stopped crackling. The gap was just big enough for the pony skull to fit.

"What's going to happen if I put you in there?" the Princess asked.

"So concerned..." the skull muttered, sounding amused, and the Princess flushed. "Well, have you ever put a bit in a fuse box? Something like that. And whether an imperfect soul jar can survive the current, magical discharge, and Enervation... well... let's find out." The skull chuckled. "'Let's find out.' If only Snails and I had known how much trouble those three words would cause us."

The Princess didn't know what else to do. Only that he was being brave, and that a real princess, not a snotty nasty mean princess, would give him something before he went. So she kissed the top of his skull, then threw him up into the gap. The rest of the glowing bones followed into the breach, and as soon as the skull bridged the gap, a blinding light arced through. "Okay... this stings a bit... ow... Ow! Okay... more than a bit!"

An aura of magic burst forth, and a crackling black claw of sorcery arched out of the gap and reached down into the depths far below, sweeping to and fro. The Princess could no longer see the fighting between the Knight and the ghoul at all through the Pink Cloud. "Ow. Ow. Where are you,

Blackjack? Ow..." the skull said as crackling sparks of energy rained down from the gap. The skull rattled around in the space like mad, but the Princess didn't dare get any closer to try and keep it still.

Suddenly, the hand of black energy withdrew from the depths, pulling with it a white mass, and set the pale, sodden shape on the deck behind the blasted computer. The Princess scrambled down to it as swiftly as she could. "Ow... ow... ow..." the skull repeated as the lightning crackled more and more. "Is she okay?" the Dark Magician asked.

The Princess fell the last ten feet, landing hard and almost falling over, but she didn't bother to fully regain her footing before scrambling over to the waterlogged mare. The plastic-covered moonstone talisman still hung around her neck. She carefully pressed her ear to the white unicorn's side. She waited a moment. She heard the heavy thud of a heartbeat within. "She's alive!" the Princess shouted, smiling up at the skull trapped in the electrified gap.

"Huh? What do you know?" The Dark Magician actually sounded surprised! "It worked! It actually worked! Snails—"

The gap where the skull rested exploded, the metal arm shuddering as it was twisted and sheared away, tumbling end over end into the abyss below. Of the glowing bones, nothing remained. A second later, the oozing pink body of the Revenant was tossed back up onto the elevated platform the remains of the computer sat upon. Broken pink bones jutted from his limbs as he struggled, most of his torso crushed and mangled. From around the side of the maneframe came the Golem and the battered remains of the Lady.

"Quickly. Set me down," the Lady said, and the robot dropped her next to the prone form. "Grab that terminal, Sweetie! Bring it over here."

"Mr. Horse isn't going to like me breaking off pieces of his masterpiece," the Golem said in worry as she reached over and pulled one of the terminals off the ruined machine.

"Do it," a choking, mottled voice hissed. Everyone froze at the horrid sight of the skinned stallion lifting his head. Blood dripped down his lips. "You're trying to transfer an intelligence, right?"

"Y...yes..." the broken Lady said in a low voice. "From a filly's brain back into a blank copy with her soul."

"Oh. I thought this was going to be hard," the Skinned Pony muttered. "You're using the mind array from this, right? Sweetie Bot, pull off the back of the housing. Wire in the array to access terminal AB-02. Wire in the filly to AB-01. If the copy has the soul, it should self-arrange. Just like pouring water through a pipe."

"Here all of you are," the Knight said as he stepped around the ruined machine, his helmet back on his head, his armor pristine, and his guns at the ready. "Cognitum's little menagerie. What do you think you're doing?"

"Well, I'm doing my best not to scream. Fortunately, I've had two hundred years of revenge fantasies to help focus me," the Skinned Pony rasped. "You'd be smart to join our side. Serving that crazy nag isn't a good idea. She's a lot like you. Manipulation and backstabbing are her two favorite hobbies. I should know."

"Fortunately, my compatriot has the means to destroy her with ease. She'll go to the moon and fix Horizons so it'll fire where we want it to, and the Core will be restored. Then we kill her on the way back." The power-armored stallion tapped his nose. "I'll have to deal with the Legate when it's over."

That fuck is too sneaky to trust, but I'll have the whole Core at my disposal. I'll get him, one way or another."

"Stay away from my children!" the Revenant hissed, the broken ghoul dragging himself towards the Knight. "I won't let you hurt them. I won't!" he spat mindlessly, Pink Cloud oozing out of the holes in his hide.

"Shut. Up," the Knight said, then stomped down hard. His hoof crushed the ghoul's skull like a silver hammer hitting a rotten egg. He twisted his hoof for good measure in the pulpy, rotten mass, grinding it into the metal deck. The body quivered, then went still.

"You murderer!" the broken Lady cried out at him.

"Oh, you have no right to talk," the Knight countered. "It's time to tie up loose ends."

The Golem worked furiously to wire things into the back of the terminal, shielding the Barbarian with her body. "Wait," the Skinned Pony rasped. "I can help you. I know things."

"Oh?" the Knight stopped. "I'm listening."

"There's a base in the valley. A special stable made for Equestria's nobility. The Redoubt. I can tell you how to access it." The Skinned Pony shuddered as his flayed body cracked, dripping more blood. "All I want is a healing potion, restoration talisman, or something."

"Why would I need that when I have the Core?" the Knight asked with a metallic chuckle.

"It never hurts to have contingencies," the Skinned Pony rasped, quivering, as fresh wounds opened up on him. "I'm bleeding quite profusely, and the agony's getting rather excessive, so I'd appreciate healing sooner than later."

"Yeah, yeah. Just a second. Need to finish off the... rest..." He trailed off as he looked past the Golem at the Barbarian. "No. No way. She's more tenacious than a radroach!"

"Stop!" the broken Lady hissed as the Knight shoved the bloody Skinned Pony aside. "You heard the Legate! He fears Blackjack! Leaving her alive would be your best weapon against him."

"I have no doubt it would. But I also know that Blackjack isn't going to let me rule the Core. She's handled way too much shit. I'd rather face a star-worshipping zebra alone than let that bloody mule loose again." He lowered his guns at the Barbarian.

The poor Lady threw her broken body at him. She didn't get far. One hoof came up, blocking the lunging mare. She collided with it, and the hoof came down, crushing her against the floor. "You're just as bad as Blackjack is. Take a hint and die!" he shouted as he stomped again and again. The battered and dinged cybermare clanged and crunched as she was smashed to scrap against the floor.

The Princess gazed up at the Golem as it finished wiring both sets of cables in. The gem-studded net was spread over the Barbarian's skull. "There. That should be sufficient," the robot said brightly. "Once the transfer is complete, we need to get medical attention for Mr. Horse immediately! He's a very important pony, you know."

The Knight started, distracted from his destruction of the Lady. "Oh fuck no!" he shouted, and his cannon roared. He fired hastily and high, though, so much so that the Princess and the Barbarian weren't even knocked across the deck by the shockwave. The Golem, however, smiled benignly as the blast ripped her synthetic body apart, the sturdy frame ripping in half and sending the remains bouncing over the remaining pair of ponies. The Princess hugged the terminal, keeping the cables plugged into the back

of the boxy machine. The front half of the robot landed with a crash, her eyes rolling in her smoking sockets.

"No! Sweetie Belle!" the Skinned Pony rasped, reaching a bloody hoof out towards her.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Horse. I'm afraid I broke," she buzzed as she lay there. "Would you like me to execute the transfer?"

The Princess looked up at the armored pony. He stood on the broken body of the Lady, his cannons swiveling down at the Princess as she hugged the terminal. All she had to do was throw the machine aside and beg him for help. Maybe offer to run the Society for him. Something. Anything to save herself. Because that's what she'd always done.

What she'd always done had never made her happy before. "Yes!" she cried out.

"No!" the Knight shouted, then cried out as a starmetal-edged pinion found a gap between two plates in his legs and rammed through. The armored stallion reared up and slammed the somehow still-struggling Lady in a fury. "No more of your interference! Die already!" He kept smashing down until there was a wet pulpy noise. The armored shell fell slack.

Then the terminal let out a beep—

* * *

I lurched as everything came together, the experience like a board across my face. Steel Rain's actions... Cognitum... Amadi... all of it fell into place inside my head and I grabbed Charm and lunged away as a second shot blasted out a chunk of the platform. Chunks of metal debris rained down on us, and I felt the now-unfamiliar sensation of pain as my shoulders were pummeled. Still, it had to be worse for her, with wires dangling out her skull.

"You... no!" Steel Rain shouted as I set her on my back. "What does it take to kill you?"

"Sometimes I wonder that too," I said, more to myself than to him. I slowly made my way around towards where Horse huddled, bleeding profusely. I took in the crushed forms of Sanguine and Dawn. "So you're going to betray Cognitum and Amadi both? Is there anypony you won't stab in the back?"

"Myself," he answered glibly. "I'm just not that flexible." He chuckled as he kept his cannons trained on me. "I don't suppose there's any chance you'd just happily let me rule the Core and the Wasteland without any interference, is there?"

"I don't suppose there's any chance you'd actually let me live in peace and leave other ponies alone, is there?" I countered as I stared at him, trying to think of how I'd beat him. Nothing was coming to me. I should have been coming up with... something... or even just doing things on impulse. Instead, I felt a cold knot of terror where my victory had been earlier. I didn't know how I could beat him. I didn't even know if he could be beaten. I didn't even have a weapon I could use.

"No. No offense, but after what you did on the *Celestia*, I have to kill you on general principle now," he said. His cannons thunked as he loaded a new pair of shells. "Now, hold still and let's make this—" On 'this' he fired, and where I'd been standing exploded. "Clean."

But I wasn't there. I'd teleported directly behind him, panting hard, feeling the adrenaline surging inside me. Without my steel augmentation, that teleport had been almost... easy. My eyes focused on his guns, and my magic reached out and began to field strip the firing pins from both of them. I might not have been able to hurt him, but I could at least take away his favorite toys.

A metal hoof slammed back at me, and I barely ducked. The glittering, silvery hoof flew over my head, and I backed away with the firing pins floating beside me. He whirled around, and the cannons made a clicking noise. "Looking for these?" I asked with a smile before tossing them out over the edge. "Oopsie."

That pissed him off. He charged, and I ran with Charm clutching my head, the plastic medallion bouncing off my chest. I was getting tired and sore; I tried not to enjoy it too much. As much as I'd have liked some barding and as useful as my augments would be right now, I couldn't help but love every sensation inside me. My heart beating, my stomach growling, my shoulders aching, my ears ringing... each and every one was a reminder that I was alive now.

Unfortunately, among all the sensations I'd regained, there was one I'd lost entirely. Cognitum still had my baby, so that definitely diminished my enjoyment quite a bit.

I still wasn't sure how I was going to beat him with no weapons. I didn't even have a rock or baton. Still, there was lots of debris. I levitated up a spar of metal and gave an experimental swing. The bar clanged off his helmet, and he didn't even slow down. In fact, he caught up a little more.

If I could get some more space between the two of us, I'd try to get up the elevator... wait... no, Horse needed help. That wouldn't work. Maybe more talking? But he wanted to kill me a *lot*; what else was there to chat over? Come on. Think. Usually I'd be at the shooting, stabbing, or stomping part of the fight by now.

I teleported again, over to where the bloody trail led to Horse lying bleeding next to the ruined Sweetie Bot. The machine buzzed and crackled softly as he whispered into her ear. He didn't look like he was going to last much longer without skin. I carefully set Charm down. "We need to get you into one of the stasis jars," I said as I surveyed the smoking debris. There wasn't an intact one left, though. And there was no way a healing potion would survive down here in all this Enervation. "Damn it. I wanted to ask you questions. About Horizons. Goldenblood. Cognitum."

He reached out with a bloody hoof for my face, and then felt my forehead. "You're a hornhead. I don't suppose you can read memories like a M.o.M. Pink?"

"I... maybe?" I didn't have time for any kind of finesse, really. "I don't have a memory orb to hold it in, though."

"So hold it in your brain as best you can. That was all anypony could do. The best they can." He closed his eyes and gave a shudder. There was so much blood. So much! "I was so clever. Didn't realize I was getting played."

"By Goldenblood?" I asked with a frown.

He snorted blood. "Yeah, right. That hornhead was just another piece on the board. We all were. All except for... her..." He began to slide over. "Better get your memories. I'm feeling cold."

I looked around for Steel Rain, but I couldn't see him anywhere. That worried me even more. Leaning in, I pressed my horn to his brow and tried to make the connection. My forays into Rampage's mind gave me something to expect, but where her memories were layers and layers of water, Horse's mind was a geometric fractal pattern in which thoughts were arranged almost haphazardly. I had no idea what to grab, so I thought 'Horizons' and watched a portion of his brain light up. I grabbed that portion, pulling it into myself as pieces of his mind slowly blacked out one after the next.

'Cognitum!' I thought furiously. Much more lit up, so I took the brightest sections I could. 'Goldenblood', I thought, and grabbed a feeble memory, the only part that wasn't going dark. I had no idea if I'd retain the memories when the spell ended, or if I'd contaminate myself with Horse. He hadn't

seemed particularly good, but if he could help... "I got it. I've got them!" It was all I could say to the dying stallion.

"Good," he said, and then pulled his plastic covered pendant off and pushed it into my hooves. "Your best... weapon..." he breathed, then slumped over to the side. I pulled away and watched as his body slumped, liquefying before my eyes. "Damn it... I... wanted..." he gurgled, but whatever he wanted, I'd have to get it from his memories.

I'd had quite a few memories in my time from dozens of different ponies. I could remember all the memories I'd had with Charm, and could feel chunks of Horse like huge blocks of ice slowly melting away inside my head and joining the rest of the pool that was Blackjack. Would I stay me, or would having Charm and Horse's memories change me? I felt sad for some of the things Charm had done; she could have thrived in 99, but she deserved better.

I glanced over my shoulder at Charm. I knew the filly now, knew her disappointments and her demons. If I'd known what I did now when we'd first met, I wouldn't have left her alone with Scotch or picked her to rule, but I would have been more compassionate and respectful. She was like the Overmare: hounded by shame, feeling urges no filly should face, and keeping herself together with an overwhelming sense of pride that she didn't come close to meriting. She would have had a happier life working under Caprice... before I'd come along, that is.

It'd take me some time to think about what I'd grabbed from Horse. I could only hope that it didn't affect me too badly. I examined the medallion. My best weapon? How was it a weapon? It was just a piece of moonstone covered in plastic. How could I use it as a weapon? What was I supposed to do, hit him with it? I would do better teleporting Charm and me to the elevator and getting the hay out of here! "Come on, Charm," I said as I turned back to the filly.

Then Steel Rain dropped from the wreckage behind me, plummeting like a silvery meteor. I fell back and rolled as his hooves stomped down. Each impact dented the floor plates as I rolled to the side, barely keeping ahead of him. I tried to blast his head with magic bullets, but I might as well have been spitting on him for all the good it did. The magic just deflected off his silver armor. I struck the edge of the maneframe, lying on my back and watching the hoof drop towards my head.

I rolled in towards him; he reacted more quickly than I'd hoped and pinched me between his forehooves, but I summoned my magic and flashed away again before he could squish me. I hopped onto my hooves. "Okay. Time for us to g—" But the words and the plan died in my throat.

Steel Rain stood by Charm. One hoof was stomped firmly on the end of the taut wires trailing from her head to the nearby ring, and the other was resting on her head, ready to push it away and either yank the wires out or just outright crush it. "No more fucking around, Blackjack. No more. That striped fuck was right. You're way too dangerous to be left alive. Now, you're going to come over here, you're going to lay down, and you're going to die, or I'm pulling every plug all at once."

I stared at him. Could I teleport in and away before he could move his hoof? Would she survive it? "You're just going to kill her after me," I challenged.

"No. I *might* kill her after you," he countered in a voice that made me imagine a shit-eating grin on his face. "Maybe I will. I'm in a real bad mood right now. But *maybe* I'll hold on to her. Maybe use her as a bargaining chip with the Society. There's got to be more of those jars lying around. You never know. But you know that I *will* kill her if you don't come over, and you'll have another dead filly haunting you." He laughed and shook his head. "But what's one more, Blackjack? Think of how many ponies have died to keep you alive. How many more will die if I tell that zebra fuck and Cognitum that Discord

farted you back into existence? I know, first things first, Cognitum's going to pulp your friends. And that zebra? Who knows what kind of freaky star curses he's got shoved up his ass?"

"You bastard," I muttered, staring at the helpless filly. I couldn't think of a way to save her. I wracked my brain a thousand times a second, but I couldn't think of a way to beat him and win without losing her.

"Oh, sure. Insult my parentage, too. That'll work wonders," he laughed. He lifted the hoof and hooked the tip of his armor to one of the taut wires. "Maybe I can pluck these one by one? Play a melody in aneurysms. We can take wagers how many it takes before she's a vegetable. Or maybe you can be Security one last time, trot over here, lay down, and save a pony. That's your thing, isn't it? Saving ponies?"

Yeah, it was. And he knew it too. I didn't know what else I could do. No sword. No augments. No guns. I slowly walked closer, wracking my brain for some way to win. Some way to beat him. Some spell. Some trick. Some something...

But I couldn't simply let him kill her. Even if she wasn't a good filly. She was still a filly, a pony, and she deserved saving.

Charm smiled through the tears on her cheeks. "You're a fucking moron, Blackjack. You know that?"

I froze, and Steel Rain looked down at her. "Shut up," he growled.

"Or what? You'll kill me?" Charm said, grinning even more as she wept. "You're scum. A coward taking a filly hostage to kill a pony better than you."

I stared at her. "Stop it, Charm. He'll kill you."

"Oh, I know he will. There's no 'might' about it, whatever he says. He's smart. You should have killed me the second you made Grace Regent, but you fucked it up," she said, laughing.

"Shut *up*!" Steel Rain bellowed again, a note of desperate frustration in his voice.

"Fuck you, you stupid fuck!" Charm shouted back at him, laughing some more, tears running down her cheek. "You are fucked. Because Blackjack is still Blackjack. It doesn't matter what you do to her. She does the right thing. No matter how much it fucking hurts. And she's been fucking hurt."

I gaped at her. "Don't. Please, Charm..."

She sniffed and smiling bitterly at me. "You're the only pony who's ever wanted to save me, Blackjack."

"Don't!" I begged, as Steel Rain looked from her to me.

"What..." the silver armored pony said as he turned his attention back to his hostage.

"Goodbye," she said, and her legs tensed beneath her. I tried to grab her with my magic, but she was too quick. By the time I'd grasped her, she had already kicked off and was lunging towards me. I could lift her but I couldn't stop her. Too heavy. Too fast.

The wires in her brain snapped taut, flipping her body around in the air a moment before several pulled free with a spray of blood. Tiny, wet gobs of pink, bloody tissue gleamed at the ends of the wires. She slid close enough to me that I lunged at her and pulled her into my hooves with my magic. Her body

spasmed wildly with a gagging sound as she seized, her eyes pointing in two different directions. I heard the thunder of Steel Rain approaching as she thrashed.

I did the only thing I could think of: I threw Horse's moonstone medallion at his face as hard as I could. It was a pointless, futile gesture. Charm had made me capable of fleeing now that the wires were pulled, but I could no more leave now than I could save her. The medallion flew true, impacting against his shoulder.

The metal armor flashed white, then exploded with enough force to bodily throw him to the side, crashing like an avalanche into the wrecked terminals. The medallion shot off in the opposite direction, but I caught it with my magic. The plastic had melted away, leaving a tiny round wafer of moonstone within. Then I turned and took in his silvery armor. No wonder my magic bullets hadn't even scratched it. "Starmetal? You lined your armor with *starmetal*?"

And I felt myself grin as I threw the sliver of moonstone against him again. It blew out another chunk of armor from his side. Given the armor had only been lined with it, rather than made of the stuff, I wasn't vaporizing the pony within. I was, however, blowing apart hoof-sized hunks of armor with each impact, striking the moonstone hard against the silver coating. "You murderous son of a mule!" Away went the plate covering his shoulders. "You bloody asshole!" An explosion ripped a strip of cabling and reinforcement from off his neck as he staggered back.

"Wait! You don't understand! I was molested as a colt!" Boom went a foreleg strut. "My mom rented me out to raiders!" Boom went a chest plate. "Cognitum made me do it!" The left side of his helmet flew apart in chunks and a wide, terrified eye stared at me. "The Legate used his star magic on me! I swear!" His other forehoof exploded in a cloud of shrapnel. "Damn it, stop!"

"I don't care! I don't care if you were brainwashed by your father into becoming a sex slave for Crunchy Carrots who tortured you for failing to conquer the Wasteland. You're dying right now!" He charged me, knocked me aside, and ran towards the prone Charm as fast as his damaged armor would allow. "Don't you touch her!" I screamed, teleporting in front of him and throwing the flake of moonstone at him again and again with my magic. "Murdering, betraying, fucking cunt!" I beat him back with every blast. Only the armor was keeping him alive. If he had a single sizable piece of the material inside his armor, I'd turn him to jelly. I *really* wanted him jelly. Once or twice the pebble struck hide with no effect, and I magically jerked it back before he could snag it in one of the holes.

The platform wasn't doing too good either. I was keeping between him and Charm, but a lot of the detonations were making the entire spire tremble and shake. The structure let out a shriek, the platform tilting in the direction of the wrecked maneframe. Still, I couldn't stop. Not until he was dead. If I managed to take off the rest of his helmet, I was going to put a magic bullet through his face.

And he knew it, too. His armor was now a crippling liability; the front half – I hadn't put much work in further back than his cannons – was a smoking wreck. With the disabled weapons and struggling servomechanisms, he was barely able to keep moving around the edge. I blasted him with a magic bullet, but he raised a hoof in time; all I managed was a bloody hole in his leg. It didn't matter. I'd get him with the next. Or the next. Each hit knocked him further back and further back. Finally, I hit him with a detonation that nearly knocked him right over the edge.

Then, the fucker did the one thing I'd hoped he wouldn't. He raised his bloody hooves in the air and shouted as loud as he could, "I give up!"

"What?" I whispered hoarsely as I froze. He gave me a perfect shot: right through the hole in his helmet, straight at his eye. Even without S.A.T.S., I could hit him.

He coughed weakly. "I surrender. I quit. I throw myself on your mercy!" My eye twitched as he pulled off the ruined helmet and grinned at me, his pink features now swelling up. He coughed again, bringing up bloody phlegm. "Arrest me. Lock me up. Take me to trial. I'll pay for my crimes however you want."

"Is this a joke?" I whispered, staring at him. It was a trick. *Shoot him now*, a smart, sane part of me insisted. Right now. Before he said another word.

"Nope. Not at all," he said as he collapsed against the rails at the end of the platform. "Name whatever punishment you want that leaves me alive, and I'll take it. I'll care for the poor and the sick. I'll help the elderly. Whatever you want."

"You lying, betraying shit! Why should I think you're going to do what you say? The first chance you have, you'll try and kill me. It's your fucking nature!" I shouted at him.

He gave me an exhausted, ragged smile, blood dripping from a puffy gash beneath his eye. "Because, deep down, in your heart of hearts... you're an optimist," he countered, struggling to breathe as sweat rolled down his pink hide. "You want to save ponies. You always want to give them another chance. Well, I'm telling you that if you give me a chance, I'll become a better pony." He shuddered, looking about ready to fall over as he added, "To prove it, there's a cache of supplies at the top of the elevator. Fresh healing potions just made a few hours ago. Even some Hydra. Might save your filly friend there." He grinned at me, blood leaking from a shattered tooth. "Come on. Don't you want me to do better?"

I did. I stepped up closer to him, and he suddenly looked nervous. I drew so close he stood up on his hind legs, and I rose too. "You're right. I really do want you to do better." He gave a nervous little smile. Then I slammed him in the face with my hooves, knocking him back over the edge. He scrambled for purchase and caught a gap in the rails. "But even my optimism has limits."

"Blackjack!" he screamed as I turned and trotted towards where Charm lay. The filly was still breathing but didn't seem responsive. "Blackjack, please!" Steel Rain begged as I carefully levitated her onto my back and started towards the elevator. "You save ponies! That's your thing! Please!" he begged, but he wasn't a pony. I wasn't sure what he was, but it wasn't a pony. "You're not an executioner," he screamed as I stepped onto the elevator.

The statement, one I'd said dozens of times before, broke through. If I just let him die, was I still Blackjack? Was I any better than him? Okay. Yes, I was. But still, just leaving him to die? Why didn't I just shoot him in the head while I was at it?

I sighed, closing my eyes. Everything I'd taken from Horse and Charm told me I was a complete idiot for even thinking it. That I should go back and put a magic bullet through his head. Maybe two or three. That's what a good, sensible pony would do. Heck. That was what LittlePip did. I wasn't saving anything worth saving, and I might be sparing a monster worse than the four that had violated me. He wouldn't change. He would stab me in the back the first chance he could. That was his nature. Heck, he might just be trying to call me back just so he could yank me down with him. There were a half dozen reasons why I should just go, and a half dozen more why I should go back and make sure he was dead. There was only one reason to try and help him...

But Security saves ponies.

I returned to the edge of the platform, glaring down at him coldly as he dangled by a twisted hoof. It was certainly broken. He wasn't going to get far on that. "You are going to be tilling fields for the Society for the rest of your life," I muttered. His head snapped up, and his tear-streaked face gaped at me. Suddenly, he grinned and started laughing. "Shut up. Right now, I could shoot you for a loud

sneeze.” He stopped the shrill laugh but still wept in relief. “Hold still and tell me how to take off the rest of that armor.” I didn’t know how damaged it was, but I wasn’t going to try and teleport him with that weight.

He walked me through what to push and twist, and soon chunks were falling away. Soon, all that was left was him in some padded, half-shredded garments, a plastic medallion around his neck. From what I could see, my moonstone battering had given him quite a beating. “Now, hold still,” I said, then teleported him up to the rickety platform. “Now,” I said as I glared at him, “you’re going to take us to this cache, and then we’re going to my friends, and you’re going to the Society. You’re too guilty for a quick kill. You can work the rest of your life to feed the Wasteland.”

“Of course. Of course,” he said, smiling ear to ear. Then he raised his head and looked at me as I stood against the rail, Charm precariously perched on my back. There was a thoughtful, almost contemplative expression on his face. For a moment, one could almost believe he was thinking of turning over a new leaf. Starting a new chapter in his life. Wanting to do better. “You’re a good pony, Blackjack.” Despite myself, I smiled with him.

Then he lunged forward, ramming us hard over the edge with a body slam.

But I appeared a few feet away. He laughed as he faced me. “Sorry, but I just couldn’t help—” then his laughter died as he saw what dangled from my hoof.

His moonstone medallion.

The stallion’s eyes bulged as he stretched his hoof towards me. “I’m shrowry! Pleasgh!” His dark bruises began to swell like blackened boils. “Pleagh, Blachjagh!” They burst one by one, rotten black blood soaking into his barding. He started to scream as his crippled forehoof melted away, and he extended the oozing stump towards me. “Shavvve muh!” he bumbled as one eye burst, then the other.

“I did,” I answered quietly. He couldn’t speak after that, and he started to thrash wildly, screaming incoherently. I supposed that, being younger and intact, it’d take longer for Enervation to finish him off. When I got on the elevator, half of him was dripping through the floor. I hit the button up, and watched the quivering, bloody lump till it disappeared through the floor grate.

Security might save ponies, but some ponies just refuse to be saved.

* * *

The elevator ride took far longer than I was comfortable with. Charm quivered on my back, still breathing but horribly ill. I tried to ignore the blood oozing from the holes bored into her head. It took nearly fifteen minutes before the elevator slowed and came to a halt. The doors opened into a battered, crumbling building that had once been the M.W.T. hub in Hoofington. I searched around the wreckage for the cache that Steel Rain mentioned and found it stashed in an air duct.

To my surprise, I found that the healing potions inside were indeed still a good, solid purple. Levitating the vials, I inspected each one carefully and saw a tiny sliver of moonstone Wonderglued to the vial. Somepony must have worked out that if the medallions protected a pony from Enervation, the moonstone within would protect healing potions too. I carefully trickled one into Charm’s mouth, with the unresponsive filly swallowing reflexively. It didn’t do much for her; I supposed having pieces of brain yanked out was an injury beyond the scope of most healing potions. The hydra made me balk, but it was all I had. I injected her with the nasty sludge, making her shake and convulse. When that gradually subsided, she seemed to be breathing easier, but she still wasn’t conscious.

I moved cautiously but soon realized that, without starmetal-plated armor or my broadcaster, I was a sitting duck for the swarmers. The buzzing machines worked in a frenzy, tearing apart wreckage

and garbage and carrying it away to construct more struts, braces, and shafts. Still, I had little doubt that if we got too close, they'd rapidly take us apart too.

The only thing I had to fall back on was my magic, and I had a destination in mind thanks to the memories I'd taken from Horse. I'd never managed much in the way of distance before, but now I was a third my previous weight. Maybe I could make it? I closed my eyes, focused my magic, and disappeared in a flash of white.

When I reappeared, I found myself in a dusty office. A shimmering pink sheet of magic, just like the one that covered a certain house, blocked the door. Windows looked out over the Core and down towards Ministry Plaza a few blocks away. My horn throbbed badly, but I didn't feel like I was burning out. I set Charm down on the musty couch in the corner... even better, it folded out into a bed. That shouldn't surprise me, considering whose office this was. Delicate statuary decorated the space, showing abstract images of alicorns, pegasi, unicorns, and earth ponies done in, silver, gold, copper, and a silvery white metal I suspected was platinum. Surprisingly, there were also carvings of a zebra done in veined black and white marble, a dragon in glittering crystal, and a griffin intricately whittled from warm yellow and tan wood. Paintings on the walls depicted scenes of Equestrian life from before the war, and, shockingly, there were three pictures showing zebra lands.

I moved behind the desk and was further surprised by a number of photographs. The Ministry Mares before they'd become the Ministry Mares. Princess Luna and Princess Celestia. Spike. A half dozen pictures of Fluttershy. A school in a valley shaped like a crescent moon. Pumpkin and Pound Cake. Psalm. And a very faded picture of a unicorn mare I didn't recognize.

And there, on the top of the desk, was a dusty nameplate that read 'Goldenblood: Director of the O.I.A.' Horse's memories were of Pinkie sealing this place after Goldenblood's arrest. Pinkie must have been busy, since she had merely sealed the office up for later, just like his house. I pulled open file cabinets and saw several files missing. Taken by Goldenblood after he'd been removed for striking Twilight or absconded with by Horse when he'd taken over. Horse preferred to operate from Robronco.

Idly, I flipped through several of the remaining files, taking in the meticulous strokes of the notes and sketches in the margins and corners. One letter written by some politician about forcibly relocating zebras from Zebratown to the Appleloosan desert with the 'other riff raff' had the comment 'Relocate to the Appleloosan desert' over a drawing of a bound and gagged unicorn stallion being loaded on a train with a tag 'To: Riff Raffia' tied to his ear.

Other memos were more serious: 'I'm sorry, Elder, but Princess Luna can not address the zebra issue at this time. She abhors the abuses suffered by your people, but there is a war on, and she cannot defend your people with one breath and tell others to fight the enemy with the next. Please ignore the rhetoric coming from Image and know that, as difficult as it must be, Princess Luna acknowledges the many contributions the Equestrian zebras have made and the suffering they have endured. Please stop attempting to force a public statement on this matter. It won't be addressed until after the war.'

Beneath it were scribbled notes. 'Ask her majesty to talk to Rarity about toning down the 'spies and infiltrators' commentary. When ponies start talking about mass incarceration for security reasons, it's time for a time out.'

Yet in other notes, there were instructions to arrange 'sympathizer' attacks on members of the Apple family. 'Prune the rotten branches' was the phrase used for killing ponies in position of power. Goldenblood had lists of the ponies to be used, promoted, or removed as benefited the war effort. 'We are the grease that keeps the wheels of the kingdom turning. Slimy, disgusting, and unappreciated, but vital.'

So why, then, had he created Horizons? A moonstone/starmetal reaction that would devastate the entire planet? What was the point of it? Why had he suddenly gone renegade? Why had he sabotaged EC-1101 so that, when it found Luna, it would call her a tyrant and set off the weapon? It made no sense. 'Why' was the missing element to *all* of this making sense. It was easy for ponies like Cognitum to dismiss Goldenblood as crazy. He hadn't been crazy. Manipulative, murderous, sure. Mad? I just couldn't see it.

I reached out to the terminal, and it booted up almost instantly. It seemed slicker than even the color models I'd seen in Blueblood Manor. They must have been the very latest designs. Of course, the contents were so heavily encrypted that I didn't have a chance of accessing it via hacking. So I just entered in all the passwords I could think of and got rejected again and again. Knowing my luck, it would be something completely random.

Then I looked at the pictures in the frames, particularly the ones of Fluttershy. Carefully, I removed each photograph from its frame. There, on the back of a picture of Fluttershy in a volunteer nurse's outfit, I saw a tiny note written in Goldenblood's impeccable writing: 'The most important things.'

The most important things? To Goldenblood? I'd heard this. I wracked my memory, trying to think it through. Goldenblood had said this to somepony at some point. Not family. Not money. Not power... I stared at the terminal and carefully typed, 'Loyalty, Love, and Secrets'.

The screen flickered, text scrolled, and then it flickered again. Suddenly, the screen went blank save for one line.

> THERE SHALL BE ONLY ONE PRINCESS. I PLEDGE MY LIFE TO ETERNAL DARKNESS. I SWEAR MY LOYALTY TO THE UNENDING BLACK. ALL HAIL NIGHTMARE MOON. MAY THE NIGHT LAST FOREVER!

Buh? I stared at the line, even read it aloud three or four times. It didn't make any sense to me. What, had Goldenblood been some sort of Nightmare Moon worshiper? It made the current Cognitum with Luna's soul an even more terrifying possibility. Still, if he'd been evil, why worry about zebras? Or Fluttershy? Or anything that he did before?

Then I felt a wind sweep over me and turned to see a black vortex of magic forming. It swirled around in a flat, ebony disk, then stilled. The surface shimmered like a pool of black ink hanging vertically in the air. "Well... this is new..." I muttered. I carefully reached out with a hoof, pressing it to the disk. It sank in, disappearing to some place cool. The moon? That seemed like some heavy duty magic to me.

I gently levitated the prone Charm onto my back and gathered up the photographs in an envelope just in case. After all, I didn't have my statuettes any more. Then I closed my eyes and poked my head into the swirling portal. It was like moving through cold oil, the surface coating me as I took one step through, then another. On the far side, I stepped into a stone chamber lit with thousands of tiny star lights that swirled and twinkled overhead. The walls were of blackest marble shot through with veins of amethyst. Cold, imposing black statues loomed over us, their crystalline eyes seeming to follow me as I stepped away from the portal. With a slurping noise, it winked shut behind us.

"Oh, that's not good," I muttered, then observed my surroundings in more detail. This wasn't a prison. It appeared to be some sort of castle. There were racks of vaguely familiar armor on stands, wielding archaic weapons that seemed like they'd been forged centuries ago. Dark purple carpets lay on the floor. A faint coat of dust covered everything. I found a set of the dark purple barding and slipped it on, then levitated a spear. Not exactly ideal weapons, but at least I wasn't naked and unarmed anymore. Carefully, I made my way forward.

The hall beyond was just like the room behind. Tapestries showing the moon eclipsing the sun were everywhere. Windows depicted a dark alicorn banishing a white alicorn to the sun. Stars and star sapphires decorated every door and wall. In its own way, it reminded me of a far grander, and colder, Star House. I carefully stayed on the carpets so my hooves didn't click on the ebon floor.

Here and there were signs of modern technology. Cables drawn along the edge of the floor. A room with a dusty broken terminal. An old rifle from the war, so badly maintained that it'd serve better as a club. Compared to the grand architecture, they clearly didn't belong here. Magical glyphs throbbed powerfully against the walls, illuminating the halls.

Then I heard a distant giggle, and my hackles rose. I whirled, looking around for the source. A second later, a ghostly moan sounded. I whirled again. "Okay. I've just about had it. Mad computers. Star curses. A whole lot of ponies helping me and getting killed. Magic portals. Now ghosts. What next?"

The giggle echoed again from the direction of some ascending stairs. Well, being here by myself wasn't getting me anywhere. I slowly advanced. More groans, moans, and giggles, from more than one person. Definitely not ghosts, or at least I hoped not. The stairs opened on a floor that was much smaller than below. This looked more like the Canterlot Palace I'd seen in memories. The noises were coming from a nearby... bedroom... along with the sound of classical music and a familiar wet noise I hadn't heard since 99.

I pushed the door open and beheld the glistening, undulating mass of pony flesh that was an orgy. Over two beds, a half dozen mares and a half dozen stallions were vigorously engaging in coital relations. Half of them were batponies like Stygius. The other half were unicorns, pegasi, and an earth pony. I stood in the wash of sweat and semen that rolled out the open door in a sweet, salty pong.

Okay. That was it. My brain was officially out of order. I couldn't process this anymore...

Fortunately, I didn't have to, as one of the pegasus mares on a bed glanced over and froze. She brushed her golden bangs back and gaped at me for a minute, then shoved the batpony mounting her hard. Pushing him off, Psychos- Whisper flew through the air and landed before me. "Blackjack? It is you! But not metal! How the hell did you get here? What do you think you're doing? Who is that?" She gestured to Charm with a wing.

Stygius rose from where she'd shoved him and flew over. I stared at them both for a long moment, then threw my hooves around her neck, sobbing brokenly.

* * *

An hour later, after they'd cleaned up and we'd taken Charm to an infirmary and I'd filled Whisper and Stygius in on the many, many things that had happened to me since we'd last seen each other, we walked together through the enormous silent castle. We'd been joined by a batpony mare who didn't seem to be all that pleased to see me. Tenebra, Stygius's sister, was a dusky mare with a short, chopped blue mane. A round, topaz talisman marked with concentric rings bounced around her neck as we walked through the massive structure. Thus far we'd only seen a half dozen other batponies since we'd left the orgy above. "So this place is what now?" I asked the lighter fog-gray mare. Apparently Stygius didn't have a speech talisman handy... or wasn't trusted with one around the 'strumpet'.

"Nightmare Castle," Tenebra said sourly. "And you aren't supposed to be here," she reminded me for the tenth time since we'd left the party. "How did you get here? No pony is supposed to get here without us!"

"I told you. I found a terminal in an office that had that quote on it, and it summoned a portal that brought me here. I had no idea that here was here! Where is here?" I asked as we walked through a banquet hall the size of my stable's atrium. The dishes were still laid out in rows, silver gleaming coolly in the starlight illumination.

"Another... well... okay, I'm not sure where. It's a place that's in Equestria in the Hoof, but it's set slightly to... well..." Whisper glanced over at Stygius, who chirped and shrugged, looking over at his sister.

Tenebra rolled her eyes. "We're in Equestria's shadow. A place where Nightmare Moon could hide her forces as she prepared to conquer Equestria. When she was banished, most of her forces fled this place. Most. Those who remained maintained this place as best as they could."

I nodded up above. "And what was with the sex party up above?" Tenebra and Stygius both flushed, averting their eyes, while Whisper chuckled. "Don't get me wrong. It was a pretty sweet seven point five on the kinkometer. Reminded me a lot of the afterparty of my cute-ceañera." If I didn't have my entire life going crazy, I might have joined in. Apparently, though, my arrival had ruffled a lot of wings, and we were going to somepony that I could talk to about my current situation.

"We're trying to save the batpony race," Whisper said with a smile and a shrug. "Their genetic pool is so small that you could spit across it. It took me a month to convince them to bring in some outside blood and get serious about breeding a new generation." She snickered. "Yes, Blackjack, I'm saving ponies by fucking them! Two of your favorite things in one! All I need is some Wild Pegasus, and I'd out-Blackjack you!" I'm sure she expected to get a rise out of me; when none came, she sulked a bit. "Looks like they're not the only ones who need a good fucking..."

"Debauched pervert," Tenebra muttered, blushing bright red.

"Hey, I don't hear you complaining about not being obligated to fuck your brother anymore! Honestly, I finally find a community I feel comfortable in, where family members regularly fuck each other, and they *still* act like it's a bad thing. The whole world is insane, I tell ya..." Whisper retorted. Stygius gave a suffering roll of his eyes as I stared. "They're down to a population of around a hundred batponies here, and they're getting some significant defects."

Tenebra flushed. "I admit, it is a relief to know that I won't have to... bed him. Still. All this... sex... well... it just doesn't seem all that appropriate." Ah. Thankfully, after Glory, I could better understand her madness. ...About general prudishness. Whisper was still a bit...

"Speak for yourself," said mare replied. "The breeding program's been a huge hit with most of the younger batponies here. Stygius wasn't the only one who wanted to get out and sow his oats." The batstallion grinned at me sheepishly. Whisper shook her head and smirked at me. "Well, hopefully Hades will be able help you out, Blackjack. He's really isolationist, though. As far as he's concerned, this is their world and we're just visiting. So keep that in mind. This is like dealing with a stable. A really, really inbred stable."

We were approaching a pair of glittering black diamond doors that slowly groaned open at our approach. Inside was a throne room of cavernous proportions. I wondered if Nightmare Moon had some insecurity issues when she made this place. You could easily fit the population of most of the Hoof in here. A dozen or so batponies haunted the dais at the far end of the chamber. On closer inspection, there was definitely some genetic damage visible in a few of them. One with mismatched ears, the left larger than the right. One with a small, almost vestigial wing. Another with missized fangs pointing in different directions, standing next to a mare with eyes that did the same thing. Most were normal... ish. Still, I couldn't help but imagine what these ponies would look like in a generation or two.

A single throne stood at the far side of the chamber. Seated in it was an impressive piece of pony. The stallion was almost jet black with red, dragon-pupiled eyes and a powerful, athletic frame. He wore intricate ebony armor inlaid with silver scroll work. At his side, hanging on the edge of the throne of jet, was an impressive-looking sword. This was not a pony that I wanted to fight. I cleared my throat, smiled as best I could, and gave what was probably a rather maladroit bow.

"Father," Tenebra said formally. "This is Blackjack. Blackjack, this is our king, Hades."

His red eyes narrowed at me, then glanced back at Tenebra. "Who?" His armor or a talisman under it must have had enchantments beyond just making his squeaks and chirps audible; instead of a normal voice or Royal Canterlot Shouting, his speech was deep and thunderous, rolling ominously through the chamber, echoing off the walls, and vibrating through our hooves.

The yellow pegasus gaped at him. "Seriously?" He glowered at the four of us. "It's Blackjack. Security. The badass mare who's causing all kinds of trouble over in the other world!" Whisper said with a wave of a wing in my direction.

He gave a dismissive sweep of his hoof. "The concerns of that world are none of mine. If she's another of your breeders, set her to work."

Wait? Breeders? I suddenly felt like I was on the other side of Medical in 99. "No!" I said sharply. Not that it wasn't tempting on a tiny, immature level, but... "I need to get back to my world. I need to find my friends, get my body back, and stop a mare from either destroying the world or conquering it completely!" He gazed down at me dispassionately. "Look. Show me the door, and I won't bother you again."

"No," he rumbled darkly, perfunctorily.

Tenebra stepped forward. "Father, please. Blackjack has many—"

But he raised a forehoof, silencing her, and turned his eyes to Stygius. "I will not risk our discovery by outsiders." His voice was solemn and grave. "My son did a great disservice to our kingdom when he left to go looking for a... rut mare. I have only allowed others to be brought here with the understanding that they will restore my kind to our former strength." His glare made Stygius wilt.

"Oh, Darling. Must you be so grim?" a mare asked, her voice light and airy and lifting the gloom of the place. From a doorway in the side of the room emerged a pale gray batpony in a white dress. Silver earrings glittered in the wan magical light of the chamber.

"Mother! You're up!" Tenebra said, swooping towards her and helping the mare over to a seat.

"Of course. I heard we had more new visitors from the outside," she said in a frail but friendly tone.

Stygius held up his blackboard. 'Persephone. Mom.' I read it and then smiled, giving another, less awkward, bow to her. "Your Majesty."

"Please forgive my husband; but he takes his royal duties so very seriously," the pale batmare said as she gazed at the flustered stallion.

"I will not relent, Persephone," Hades said, scowling at us. "Do not ask it of me."

"Perish the thought, dear husband. Go on. Be kingly," she said with a little wave of her hoof as she leaned against Tenebra.

Hades coughed, glancing over at her and then back down at me. "As I said. The only outsiders we will admit are for... procreational uses."

"I think quite a few are fond of 'recreational' too," Persephone said, making Tenebra blush.

"Mother!" she said in scandalized tones.

"What? If I were in better health, I'd join you. With my darling, of course." She looked archly at her husband.

"I like her," Whisper whispered to me.

"There is more to life than survival and gravity," Persephone continued. "These outsiders can teach us much."

"They are for breeding, nothing more," Hades contradicted flatly, fighting his own embarrassment.

"My husband can be terribly possessive," Persephone said with a frown. "It's one of his less admirable traits."

"*Possessive?* Are they slaves?" I asked, bristling and wondering if this really was like being on the other side of Medical.

Whisper jumped in immediately. "They were refugees, Blackjack!" she said quickly. "Ponies who lost their homes when Thunderhead fell. Or escaped former slaves. Or scavengers. They have rights."

"We are not barbarians, Blackjack," Persephone added with a sober nod. "I'd happily accept many more of them."

"So long as they breed," the king interjected. "It is my fondest wish that, in a few generations, we will not need outsider blood any longer," he continued with a distasteful curl of his lip. "Until then, I will bow to genetic realities and do what I must to save my people. But the survival and wellbeing of the world of light is none of my concern!"

"A weapon is going to go off that might destroy everything in that world! My friends. My loved ones!" I stared around the court. "How can you not care? If the other world is destroyed, what happens to this one?"

Slowly, he rose to his hooves, his armor creaking. "Are you saying that this weapon will destroy the entire planet?"

I balked a little. "Well, no. From what Trottenheimer said, it sounds like it's *just* going to kill everyone!" I put as much scorn into that as I could. "Doesn't that matter to you?"

"No," he replied as he started to limp towards us; his right hindleg had an odd hitch to it. "The world of shadow is not affected by such things. Balefire bombs. Megaspells. They only affect your kind. Your people. Ours will be kept safe here." He gestured around at the immense palace. "And eventually, we will return to the world of the light to restore it in our Goddess's image."

"But... but so many will die!" I protested weakly.

He gave another wave of his hoof. "Very well. A few dozen more breeders can be brought over, your friends included. Will that halt your wailing?"

I sputtered as I stared at him. "What about everypony else? There're thousands, maybe millions, who will die when Horizons goes off. And if Cognitum manages to catch that damned stone, she'll control weapons that will dominate Equestria for a thousand years or more."

"Darling, perhaps this is one time we should let her go. It sounds quite serious," Persephone said quietly.

"I will not make an exception for a mare who should not be here." He rolled his eyes as he turned and limped back to his throne. "She will dominate your Equestria, not ours," he said scornfully. "Your world is not our affair. Your problems are not mine." He gave a dismissive wave of his hoof. "Be gone from my presence. Breed a batpony or three, and perhaps I will send you back." And he settled back onto his throne and stared silently at me.

I stared at him. "You... I... How can you—" I was silenced by a mouthful of yellow feathers.

"Thank you for your time, Your Majesty," Whisper said, then bowed to him, giving me a sharp glare before we trotted away. I clenched my jaw. There had to be another way out of here. There just had to be!

Outside the throne room, I pointed a hoof back the way they came. "What is his deal?! How can he just write off a whole world like that?"

"Pretty easily," Whisper replied. "Rulers aren't always smart, Blackjack. His world is this castle. I don't think he can even imagine something that isn't like this place." Whisper had been right. It was a stable mentality.

Tenebra and Stygius flew to us. "Mother is talking with him, but I don't think he's going to change his mind. At least not soon. He wasn't fond of the... ah... orgy idea..."

"If you know a better way to rapidly spread genetic material through a population, be my guest," Whisper retorted. "Or a *funner* way..."

Anyway! "Okay. So how do I get back? Do I have to recite a spell or something? Praise Celestia and get the boot? What?" I said with a little scowl. If this place was just a big, fancy stable, then I needed some way to open the big rolling door between me and my friends.

Tenebra regarded her sibling. "Stygius's talent lets him cross just like Father, but only he alone can use it travel from this world to yours. As king, Father controls the portal allowing all passage."

"And he really thinks that Horizons won't destroy this place too?" I snapped.

Whisper shook her head. "I don't know if he's aware of it, but he seems convinced that nothing reaches this place. So... I don't know. I don't know how many super massive explosions like that there's been. The balefire bombs and megaspells didn't touch this place, so... maybe?"

"But... I... we... he..." I stammered, then sat down hard and pressed my hooves to my head, letting out a scream of frustration. I'd survived Cognitum and gotten out of the Core, but now I was stuck here! In my rage, I teleported away. I just wanted to be out of this place and somewhere... anywhere... else!

* * *

I landed on a pile of scree and loose rocks. The light provided by my horn revealed a few dozen feet of broken, shadowy landscape. There was no moon or sun to light the world, but a faint twilight glow provided just enough illumination to make the darkness of the land vaguely perceptible. Near me were the outlines of a ghostly building amidst spectral trees. I reached out and felt the bark. It didn't feel like a

tree. It was... firm. Neither warm nor cool, neither wet nor dry. I moved slowly through the grove, the rocks not shifting under my hooves. It was utterly bizarre trying to walk over the uneven surface. I couldn't move so much as a twig or pebble in this shadowy world.

Then the door to the building opened, and a pony-shaped form emerged. Like everything else around me, she was ghostly and translucent like smoky quartz. A pale white glow in her chest spread light through her. I reached out and touched her wing as she trotted around to the side of the building and sat down. I stared at her face, slowly picking her features out. I stared for a minute, then whispered softly, "Glory?"

She didn't react. I bit one forehoof to keep from crying out as I reached out and touched her cheek with my other. Like everything else here, it was the same hard, immutable surface. "Glory. Oh Glory. I'm here, Glory. I'm finally here."

I watched as tiny, smoky tears crept along her cheeks and fell off her chin. Her lips moved silently as I wept as well. I put my hooves around her neck, holding her as close as I could. I didn't know if she could feel me, but at the very least I could be here for her.

The door to the house opened, and a dark shape emerged. It appeared like an alicorn of black ice. Within, a dark purple shape seemed to strain against its confines. A small mote of light lingered in its belly. I watched as it walked slowly away. Glory moved through me as she pulled away and stepped in front of the alicorn, her lips moving quickly.

I slowly approached them, wishing I had Sekashi's ability to read lips. Clearly, Glory wasn't happy. P-21 emerged, followed by Rampage. I started at the sight of an ethereal filly inside her, following her movements, along with a whole cluster of motes. Walking slowly, I made my way around the smoky, wraithlike pony shapes of my friends.

I scowled at myself. "I want my body back, you cunt! I want my baby!"

The dark purple shape turned and looked at me, its head slipping out of the cloudy shell of my body. Step by step it emerged, regarding me with cool teal eyes. "It is not in my power to grant you that, Blackjack."

"Princess Luna?" I asked in shock. The motions around me congealed, moving at a crawl, as I stared up at the spectral alicorn. Then my gaze sharpened. "Or are you Nightmare Moon?"

"That is the question, is it not?" she replied coolly. "Princess, or Nightmare?"

"Really? I have to deal with riddles now?" I asked flatly. "Which is it?"

"Are you Blackjack, or Security?" Luna countered with her own question. I don't know if it was her size or the presence of her alicornness, but I balked and swallowed hard.

"I'm Blackjack. Most of the time. I'm only Security when I need to be," I answered. She smiled slowly. "So... are you saying you're... both?"

"Ponies are not simple things. This is something that I understood better than my sister. Ponies are complex. Twilight often let her desire to please override the wellbeing of others. Applejack lied to herself when she believed her family innately trustworthy. Pinkie Pie laughed long after the joke stopped being funny. My sister believed that ponies were simply, innately, good. That all people were. I understood the nuance of dreams. The subtle differences of thought. You ask if I am Princess Luna, or Nightmare Moon. The answer is yes. The more important question is which was I *more*... and that, I cannot answer."

I considered a moment, then sighed and decided to focus on the present for the moment. "Cognitum stole my body and put you in it. Can't you... I don't know... help me take it back?"

"Why would I fight against myself?"

"Cognitum's not you," I said to her.

"No? She has ambition. Pride. A determination to prove herself. How is that not me?" Luna walked slowly away and lifted her head to the sky. "I was ambivalent when Celestia abdicated. On one hoof, I'd seen what rule had done to her. On the other, I craved acknowledgement and respect. I resented her. A thousand years, and little had changed. I was in her shadow again, the lesser Princess... but I was wiser than I had been. I would not rebel; I'd felt the cold bite and loneliness of a millennium of exile. So when she stepped aside for me, I was terrified and thrilled all at once." She turned and regarded my frozen body. "Who is to say she cannot be me reborn?"

"She is evil!" I snapped. Luna gave a sad smile. "She is! She collected ponies like they were toys. Prizes! She manipulates, deceives, and violates others."

"Blackjack, I ordered the deaths of ten million ponies and caused the deaths of sixty million zebras over the course of the war. You've seen Nopony's Land. You haven't seen the multitude of other battlefields, but I assure you that there were many worse. And if you consider how many lives the megaspells took, the number of corpses at my hooves becomes incalculably higher," she bowed her head. "No matter how you regard it, I am evil too."

I know ponies whose fuck ups have killed millions. I wanted to tell her that she was wrong. That she hadn't been responsible for all that. But hadn't I been kicking myself for months for the ponies I had killed? How would I feel if I'd killed *millions*? I swallowed hard, struggling to find an answer contrary to one condemning her. "It was Fluttershy... she made the first megaspells. The zebras made the balefire bombs. Goldenblood... he... he manipulated you! He was working behind the scenes, doing things." Luna's smile looked almost pitying. "And the nobles and those business ponies started the war. And if Celestia hadn't started it in—"

"Shhhhh." She hushed me and reached out with her ghostly purple wings, holding my cheeks. "Do not speak ill of my sister. I beg you. Do not." She closed her teal eyes. "It is my fault. I knew what Fluttershy was doing, and Goldenblood. I could have ended the war. Surrendered. Worked out a compromise with the Caesar. It would have been difficult for Equestria, but ponies have been through hard times before and triumphed. I refused. I resisted. I used the war for my own ends. The blood is on my hooves."

"But Goldenblood... the O.I.A..." I stammered weakly, trying to find somepony to blame.

She smiled and raised her head. The darkness above us filled with wavy, waxy light. It coalesced into Goldenblood and Princess Luna. "So the ministries will be behind the war effort, out in public," the spectral – well, *more* spectral – Luna was saying. "The military will actually fight the war. What am I supposed to do?"

"Smile and wave to the adoring public," Goldenblood rasped. "Social events... royal functions... that sort of thing."

Luna frowned down at him. "I refuse to be a puppet of my own bureaucracy," she said firmly.

"Princess, this is messy business. It's best if you aren't involved directly. Anything you do that is taken badly by your subjects will come back on you. When this war is finished, you'll clean house. Unleash the courts on the Ministry Mares, replace them with your own loyalists. Push any unsatisfied

generals to retire and promote faithful majors to positions of control. The pivot from war to peace will be the mechanism to convert you from puppet to benign monarch for the next thousand years.”

“I will not sit idly by, Goldenblood,” Luna retorted. “I won’t let the ministries run amok and simply rubberstamp everything they do with the expectation that, when the time is right, I’ll sweep in and end the war. I have to be involved. I can’t sit on the sidelines giving rousing speeches while my country is at war!”

Goldenblood stared at her, then looked away. “Perhaps there’s a way.”

“What?” Princess Luna asked, leaning in.

“Since we’re concentrating the government functions in the ministries, we’re going to need some way to coordinate between them. A paper pushing bureau. We don’t want the ministries doing it themselves or they will bureaucratize you out of power.” He thought some more. “If we create a very passive, low-key office to conduct affairs outside the normal Ministry operations, we’ll be able to keep tabs on the actions of the ministries and manipulate them. We could expand on that. Infiltrate layers of your own government to know what they’re really doing. Control and influence indirectly.” He paused, wracked by a sudden fit of coughing. “Officially, you’d be a virtual figurehead. Unofficially, you’d be pulling the strings and running the country. When the time is right, we’d end the war, clean house, and put you fully and openly at the top.”

Luna smiled broadly. “Oh, I like that. I really do. And I know just the pony to put in charge of it.” She patted his feverish brow with a wing.

“Princess Luna, I’m going to die. This Pink Cloud is killing me,” Goldenblood said weakly.

“Nonsense. I need you, Goldenblood. You and I, together, are going to create an Equestria that will last a thousand years. You can live for that, can’t you? Can you live for me?” Luna asked, her eyes wide, lashes fluttering.

Goldenblood let out a long, wheezing breath. “As you command, my Princess.”

The image faded, then shifted to a new one. Goldenblood sat behind a desk, a mask covering his muzzle connected to quietly hissing air tanks. Luna stood nearby, levitating a scroll. “This Trueblood certainly has some interesting theories about the application of chaos magic to living systems. He actually thinks he can use it to merge living creatures.”

Goldenblood didn’t look up. “If Twilight Sparkle finds out about that, she’ll resign. You know how she feels about anything related to Discord.”

“Yes, well, you make sure she doesn’t find out. Keep Chimera out of the M.A.S. as much as possible. Fluttershy should be much more amiable to its potential to make injured ponies better,” Luna replied, then continued with a teasing smile, “And it would let you spend more time with her. You keep dreaming about her. *Such* dreams.”

Goldenblood flushed. “You told me you wouldn’t do that anymore.”

“Now, Goldenblood, I could hardly avoid such intense dreams and call myself a Princess of the Night, could I?” she said as she trotted over to him. “You might want to pursue it.”

“I’m hideous, and I can barely breathe. There are far better, far more whole ponies for her to spend her time with than I,” Goldenblood said sourly. “Besides, she’s not interested.”

Luna just chuckled. "Trust me, she's interested." Goldenblood gaped at her from under his mask. Luna smirked as she waved the scroll at him. "Get this Trueblood some funding and see what you can pull together. I think the results of his research should be interesting."

The scene faded again, and a whole and healthy Goldenblood rutted vigorously with Fluttershy in a forest clearing. When he finished and they'd collapsed together in the grass, he gazed at her, then frowned. "Princess Luna?"

Fluttershy smirked at him, wrinkling up her nose. "Just wanted to pop in a minute. Completely accidental. Really. Though, while I'm here, do you think you can find out more about these 'megaspells' that are floating around the M.o.P.? Anything with the word 'mega' in it is something I want to know about."

"Why not just peek into her dreams?" Goldenblood said sourly.

"Because when she dreams, she dreams of babies," Luna said with a roll of her eyes. "And bunnies. And you."

That made him smile a little. "Fine. You could have waited until I woke to ask me that, though, Princess."

She pushed his shoulders down and straddled his hips. "Oh? You prefer this?" Her belly swelled more and more as wrinkles appeared in the corners of her eyes. His pristine white hide suddenly became striped with livid pink scars, and he coughed and struggled for breath. She leaned down, kissing him firmly, and the fantasy reasserted itself. She slid him back in with a sigh and a blissful smile. "Enjoy the fantasy, Goldenblood. You deserve it."

"Thank you, Princess Luna," he said a touch sarcastically, his hips moving. Suddenly the image changed again, now looking down at a double bed with a pregnant Fluttershy next to a sleeping Goldenblood. His hips twitched under the sheets as he murmured in his sleep 'Princess Luna'. Fluttershy lay next to him, her eyes wide as she stared up, tears running down her cheeks.

I tore my eyes away for several moments. "No. That wasn't you. This is some sort of... something."

"I wasn't a prude like my sister, Blackjack. True, I almost never did such things in the flesh, but dreams are another story. After all, the night is the time for lovers," Luna replied softly, shame in her eyes. The image reasserted itself in another office. Luna paced back and forth angrily in front of a dour Goldenblood. "I can't believe she did that. I can't believe her! Five years. Five years out of the throne, and she pulls something like this! She could have gotten herself killed. Or worse!"

"Possibly much worse," Goldenblood said quietly. "She won't try it again. She blames herself for Big Macintosh's death." He didn't look up from the scroll he was reading. "What will you do with Psalm?"

"Psalm..." Luna murmured. "I don't know if I should give her a medal, a prison cell, or both. For now, keep her on ice in the O.I.A. Don't let her kill herself, or worse, go to the press. For now, we'll just play the part of mournful ruler. Tomorrow, we'll have Rarity go to town on making Big Macintosh a hero known all across Equestria. How will the ministries respond?"

"Applejack..." Goldenblood said thoughtfully. "She'll stay. Pour herself into work. That's her normal M.O. The others should be neutral. Twilight, though... she's taking it almost as bad as Applejack, and I'm not sure why." He was silent for a moment. "I want to resign."

Luna's head snapped up. "What? Goldie, is this a joke?"

He shook his head slowly. "I think it would be best. You can use your Eclipse persona to manage the O.I.A. You don't need me anymore," he replied, keeping his eyes down.

"Why?" Luna demanded flatly. "If it's for more pay, I can easily increase that."

He sighed, that rusty choking noise. "Luna, when we started this, I expected I'd have been dead for four years by now. I'm not. I'm grateful to you and the doctors for saving my life, but I'm tired of all this. I want to go back to teaching. Maybe a rock hunting expedition. Something that's not war and death."

"And you want to try and fix things with Fluttershy," Luna retorted. "Don't deny it. I've seen your dreams. Will your resignation resurrect your dead child, Goldenblood?" The question made him flinch as if she'd struck him. Luna sighed and trotted over, putting a hoof on top of his. "I need you to see this through to the end. Trueblood is making breakthroughs that might allow us to stop using ponies altogether. Silver Stripe's augmentations are already making a difference. The fact is that nopony could do this as well as you can. You're an artist, and your medium is politics."

"Princess!" He lifted his head in anguish, and she just looked on calmly, arching a brow. Slowly, he crumpled under her teal gaze. "I don't want to do this anymore."

She stared on. "Very well. If that's what you want. We'll process your retirement." She turned and stepped away from him. "Of course, we're going to have to redact your memories for the last five years. You know enough to make you an incalculably valuable asset if you were ever captured. For safety's sake, we'd have to take everything. There's no telling what might be of use to the zebras."

Goldenblood gaped at her. "Everything? But... I..."

"Everything," Luna replied, her voice softer as she glanced back at him over her shoulder. "Wouldn't that be easier, Goldie? No more painful memories of her leaving you? No more dreams of dead, bloody foals? You could go on to whatever life you wish, never knowing what you did. It's a gift, really."

Goldenblood stared at her. "And when it comes time to clean house?"

Luna didn't answer for several seconds, then turned to face him. "Well, I imagine that that won't be your concern. As you said, I can manage without you now. But some of the Ministry Mares are going to have to answer for the things they've done." The threat was lightly spoken, but it hung in the air like a sword.

"Very well," Goldenblood said as he averted his eyes. "I'll stay."

"Good," Luna said as she trotted over, putting a hoof on his shoulder. "I'd rather do this with you than without you." Then she turned and trotted away, leaving him sitting alone with a horrified look on his face.

"You made him stay," I said softly as the image evaporated. The lingering light from her horn cast stark lines in the shadows around us.

"He was valuable and useful to me. Of course I made him stay. I manipulated him into doing what I want. Something my sister would never have done," she said quietly. "Still, our relationship was never the same after that. He was increasingly... resistant. Effective, ruthless, oh yes... but a wall had gone up between us. He avoided sleep, waiting until he was exhausted and fell into dreamless slumber. He kept secrets from me. I didn't think he could, but he did," she said with a slow shake of her head.

"Horizons. And Gardens of Equestria," I said evenly.

"Yes..." she murmured. "Gardens concerned me more, honestly. I knew Twilight had the Elements of Harmony, the artifacts that had banished me so long ago. I always worried that, for whatever reason, they might be used again. I couldn't, of course, ask her for them. I never had the relationship with Twilight that my sister had. If the bombs hadn't fallen, I don't know how long I would have waited before arresting her and her friends. I had a list of ponies to purge from the ministries, and all of them were on it. I'd ride the public sentiment following the end of the war over their dead bodies. Everypony would blame them. And Goldenblood. Especially Goldenblood."

"Because Goldenblood made something that could destroy Equestria?" I asked.

"In part, but also because I had to be clear of all the things done via the O.I.A. I believed a pardon for Fluttershy would ensure he died quietly, with no problematic last minute confessions."

"Why did he make Horizons?" I asked, looking above us for answers. "That's what I don't understand."

Luna's horn glowed. A prison cell formed in the air above us. Goldenblood was chained upright to the back wall. A collar around his neck barely let him breathe, and his forehooves were held above his head. "Why?" Luna asked the chained stallion. "Why did you do this? After all we've done together. All we've been through... why?"

Goldenblood didn't answer her. He just stared flatly, his yellow eyes steady. "I was used."

"By me?" Luna asked flatly. "You knew that when we started this."

"By many people. I let myself be used. I thought it best." He closed his eyes. "I should have died in Littlehorn. Then none of this would have happened. You would never have ruled as you have. The war would have fizzled out. No ministries. No more nightmare."

"No Fluttershy," Luna said coldly.

He was quiet for almost a minute. "Are you going to execute her along with Twilight and the others?"

"I deeply respect Twilight and her friends. They've done good work for me," Luna countered.

"But you don't like them. They aren't your friends," Goldenblood wheezed. "Not like me."

"You? You dare?!" Luna's eyes flashed as she loomed above him. "You betrayed me! You deceived me. ME! And you dare to call me a friend? I am a royal Princess. I do not need friends!"

Goldenblood, filthy and exhausted, slowly smiled. "You're wrong, Luna. You do. We all do."

"What is Horizons? Gardens I can disassemble without you, but where is the other?" Goldenblood didn't answer. "Speak! We command it!"

He closed his eyes. "No," he murmured. She gaped at him, and he went on, "Here are my terms. Abdicate in favor of your sister. Let her end this nightmare. Then I'll tell you everything. Banish me after that, if you want. Execute me, if you want. But leave the throne, Luna."

She glared down at him in disgust. "Keep your secrets, then. Let them hang you," she said as she turned and walked out of the cell.

"He wanted you to quit?" I asked the luminous alicorn.

"Yes. I cannot comprehend why. For nearly a decade, we had worked together. Built a new Equestria together. Then, suddenly, he wishes all of it torn away. Why?" She shook her head, looking to

the side where a massive pink and green dragon blasted Goldenblood with flame. Every bit of him was burned away. Every bit. By dragonfire...

"Wait..." I muttered as I stared at the memory. "You didn't have him executed, did you?" Luna gaped at me, and I glared at her. "You're still playing games!"

"He's dead," Luna murmured. "Burned to nothing."

"Dragonfire doesn't always kill, though!" I snapped at her. "LittlePip used Spike's to travel into the S.P.P. hub! You did the same thing to Goldenblood, didn't you?"

Luna stared at me a moment, then whispered, "Yes."

"He's alive," I said. "The golden son of a mule is actually alive." Given how many other ponies I'd run into who'd lived through the apocalypse, I couldn't say I was surprised anymore. "Where is he?"

She stared at me for the longest moment. Then she whispered softly, "I don't know."

"Stop playing games. Tell me the truth. Where is he?" I insisted.

For a moment, I didn't think she was going to tell me. I started to turn away, but then she said quietly, "Here. He's here. In my fortress. My Redoubt."

I felt a cold prickle go up my spine. He was here. And so close. So very close. "Thank you," I answered, not looking back at her.

"I just wanted to protect my people. I just wanted to do better than Celestia... for once," Luna begged. I glanced back. The purple soul was slipping back inside the dark shell of my body. If only things were different... if only things had been better...

If only so many things...

The time around us thawed, and my body continued walking away. I sat there, my eyes clenched shut in this desolate, shadowy world. If Hades had his way, I'd get to see all of them die or enslaved. And there was nothing I could do about it.

Except find that golden bastard and beat some answers out of him.

Footnote: Loading, please wait...

(Author's notes: So, another step closer to the end. Thanks so much for following along for so long. While I'm not sure if I'll get to the end before 70, I do hope I will get it done soon. Thanks to everyone for being fans and sticking with the story as long as you have. Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, and equally huge thanks to Hinds, Bro, swicked, and Heartshine. The school I'm working at decided not to give me a job, so I'll be moving home in a month. Tips at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal will be appreciated greatly, given that I'll be unemployed for 3 months. Yeah. Here's hoping I get a reply to one of my applications. Sigh.

Anyway, hope the story was decent.... and I really need to get a girlfriend... boyfriend... lyra plushie... something! ::hurries off in shame::)

(Editor note: Just to be clear, when the wires in Charm's brain snapped taut, she flipped over her back. ~swicked.)