

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 69: Whiplash

"Well, just tell me what you really think. Tell me, tell me, tell-me-tell-me-tell-me!"

There were no words. I sat there, hollow, cracking inside like glass. She stormed up to me. "Get out! Get out! Get out!" she yelled over and over again. I couldn't move. Couldn't think. She looked at the bowl of soggy cereal and flipped it into my face. "You think you can come here and pretend to be her!?" Tepid milk and cereal sloshed down my chest.

"Glory..." I murmured.

"No! You don't get to speak! I don't... I can't..." She shoved me and the chair right over. "Get out! Leave! Don't you ever come back!"

But I couldn't go. I just sat there, a white lump dripping sugary milk. "Glory."

She sobbed, drew her gun, and pressed it to my forehead. "I'll kill you," she slurred around the mouthgrip.

I just sat there, feeling the barrel underneath my horn. I actually smiled and lifted my eyes to look into her anguished purple ones. "You're the only one allowed to hurt me," I rasped ever so faintly. I supposed that extended to killing, too. Her jaw shook on the grip. "Glory. I've been... I've been a very... very... bad pony." And I smiled up at her as I wept. "Please, Glory."

Her shaking stilled, but her eyes hardened. She holstered the gun. "Oh. I see what's going on here. You're the substitute? To handle me and my gross biological needs?" My smile faded as she stepped back. "Get. Out. I don't need you, and I don't need Blackjack." She pointed imperiously to the door with a wing.

"What?" I asked weakly.

"Like you don't know," she spat with contempt, then added in a mocking tone, "If you can't restrain your carnal impulses, I'll just find a stand-in to handle your biological needs." She gritted her teeth, fresh tears running down her cheeks. She sat hard and just covered her eyes with a wing. "Just... go. Go somewhere else. Anywhere else."

Had Cognitum sabotaged our relationship intentionally, or just in cold, cruel callousness?
"Glory... that wasn't me..."

"Stop! I don't... I am so sick of Blackjack! Of everything!" she said, shaking her head. "Do you have any idea how hard I worked trying to find a way to reach her? And then she returns and... and she's... go!"

But I couldn't go. I couldn't do anything close to leave. "Glory, that isn't me."

Still not listening. "She talked to me like I was nothing. Like when I try to help her she says I'm of no use to her now! Like... like everything we'd done together was just..." she said as she paced back and forth.

Now it was my turn. I rose up on my hindlegs and lunged at her. Thank goodness she didn't still have Rainbow Dash's body, or she probably would have tossed me *through* the wall this time. She fell back, and I landed on top of her. There was one brief moment when I thought I'd get through to her.

Maybe a kiss would seal the deal. I pressed my lips to hers, closing my eyes, trying to will her to realize it was me. For a moment, I was pretty sure it had even worked.

For a moment. Then her hoof slammed like a hammer to my nethers, and she shoved me off to the side. I curled up, pain temporarily overwhelming my brain. Glory rose. "I told you, I don't want a replacement," she said coolly as she drew her pistol again, this time to turn me into far less annoying dust.

I'd often wondered when the Wasteland would break me. I suddenly wondered if this was when it would break Glory instead.

Then the door opened again, and P-21 trotted in with Scotch Tape on his back. "Hey Glory," the filly said. "You won't believe who we ran—" And then she actually took in the scene before her. "What the hay is going on here?"

Apparently Glory wasn't comfortable with killing me in front of a minor. "It's just... she's just..." Lost for words, she finally just kicked me as I lay there curled up and hurting. "Get out of here. I don't want a stupid impostor. I don't want to hear how much you love love love Security. I especially do not care if Blackjack sent you herself. Just go." Somehow, the second kick hurt worse than the first.

P-21 set Scotch Tape down, trotting towards me with a frown. "Not a very good Blackjack impersonator, is she?" Scotch commented, looking me up and down. "Didn't do the eyes right, and not even a cutie mark decal."

But P-21 still didn't say anything. I just gazed at him with tears in my eyes. I couldn't convince her. I'd thought Cognitum had taken everything from me; I'd hadn't realized just how right I was. A former enemy, Whisper, had accepted my identity more readily than the mare I loved. How sick was that? And if Whisper had met Cognitum and a few impostors with good intentions before I showed up, would she even have believed me? Was I even Blackjack anymore? Maybe there was a good reason I didn't have my cutie mark.

Something cool and glassy bumped up against my temple, and I raised my eyes to see a purple healing potion held by P-21. "Here. Brewed this morning. I know how bad it hurts to be kicked like that, Miss..."

"Go Fish," I muttered, taking the bottle and sniffing, then drinking it. Immediately, the throbs to my pelvis diminished significantly. I rose, having no idea where I'd go next, but I couldn't stay here. I wasn't wanted here.

P-21's eyes ran over me again, and he gave a little half smile. "Funny. That's her actual name. Security, I mean." Glory was talking with Scotch Tape over by the door about... something. I was too crushed to care. I wanted to teleport away then and there, but I met his gaze. It was searching for... something...

"I know. I am her. It's me, P-21. I'm Blackjack," I said miserably. Scotch Tape perked an ear and looked over at us.

"Oh, Goddesses, it's another crazy one, isn't it?" she said in annoyance. "That's the third one this month. At least it's a mare. Remember that stallion one? Or the alicorn?"

"I try not to," P-21 said with a frown, still not looking away from me. "She couldn't decide if she was Blackjack, Twilight Sparkle, Trixie, or Princess Celestia."

"Bwackjack?" a mare said from the still-open door, and then a white head popped out over Glory's, pale eyes blinking as she stared at me. Suddenly her mouth split in an ear to ear grin.

"Bwackjack!" And she bounded right at me, bowling Glory over in her rush to my side. The pale blank looked very much as she had when we'd parted, though her white coat was far dirtier and scratched up and she had sticks and dead grass stuck to her mane. "Ish you! Ish weally weally you!" she said as she lunged at me and wrapped her hooves around my neck, hugging me tightly. "Youw all wight!"

"No no no, Boo! That's not Blackjack. I told you back in Chapel. It's another fake," Scotch Tape said as she tried to tug one of the legs off my neck. "Geeze, she wasn't even close to this clingy with that other one!"

Boo glared flatly back at Scotch Tape. "This is Bwackjack! See?" she said, hooking her forehooves to my head and shoving my face at the filly, her pale hooves stretching my face in a leering grimace. Scotch Tape recoiled, and Boo yanked me back in a tight embrace. "Dizcord say yous gonna get out, and he was right!"

"Discord?" P-21 asked with a baffled frown.

"Mhmmm! Dizcord was in muh head and tellin' me what I needed ta do while Bwackjack was dealin' with da bad computer thingy," she said with a beaming smile as she looked me over.

"But... that's not Bwackjac... er, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape said with a flush.

"Ish too!" Boo said with a roll of her pale eyes. She patted me on the head. "Unca Dizcord said the bad 'puter thingy was gonna do swapsies and he was gonna get her to swap somethin' else and I needed ta get Bwackjack's thingies!" She undid her saddlebag and shook it sharply.

From it tumbled a few pistols, black barding, a half dozen little statuettes, Penance, and the bizarre Perceptitron thingy. Instantly a half dozen little mares popped into my head with a baffling rolling chatter of asking me where I was, what was going on, props for me not being all dead and stuff, and if I was doing okay. A great wave of confidence washed through me as pieces of my life and the statuettes returned to me. Wonderful as that sensation was, though, it was secondary to that of lifting up Vigilance and looking at all those names inscribed on the handle. There was mine at the bottom, and I cradled it to my chest. "Thank you, Boo," I murmured.

"No prowblem!" Boo beamed. "Unca Dizcord said you'd be saddy waddy without your swaggy waggy... whatever dat means," she added with her own look of bafflement.

Glory stared at me and the pale mare. "But it... that's... it's impossible!" Glory sputtered. "She knew things. Intimate things that only you knew about, Blackjack! She could fight like you! We watched her take apart three Brood like they were nothing."

"But did she whine and angst about it?" I shot back, making her blink and frown, chewing her bottom lip. Add another little chink of doubt. I'd just keep laying them on till she cracked. "She must have copied my memories when she transferred me," I guessed. Add those to the messed up memories she swiped from Luna and any other lingering remnants and I guessed there was one pretty crazy mare in my body.

"Copied your memories? Transferred you? What are you talking about?" Yes! This was it! My chance! I took a deep breath and spilled everything. Everything about the Core and being too scared and confused to move, then finding Rampage and everything that followed. I then started rambling about how I'd screwed up and should have left the Core and found her and made sure everything was okay but I'd been tricked and how I wanted to be with her for as long as I could and P-21 too and we'd have lots of babies between the three of us and maybe Tenebra and Stygius and—

She rammed her wing into my mouth, and I came out of my frantic state. Glory just stared at me, her cheeks flaming red. Behind her, P-21 and Scotch Tape looked on, the former arching his brows with

a mild smile and the latter with her eyes wide with shock. "It sure sounds like Blackjack," P-21 said languidly.

"Well... I saw Blackjack before the Tower exploded... and... it's just too ridiculous and..." Glory stammered, then scowled at me, narrowing her eyes. "Who's Tenebra?"

I spat out gray feathers and gave a sheepish look, tapping my hooves together. "Stygius's sister," I said meekly. "Really cute. Kinda needy in the attention department. Would be really fun in a threeway though. Or four way, if you're game, P-21. Or fiveway, if Stygius joins in." She stared at me, eyes locked wide. "Of course, just you and me for a while is great too!" I blurted.

"What am I, chopped lettuce?" Scotch Tape huffed, crossing her forehooves. "Never get invited to any of the good parties. Might as well be back in the stable," she muttered with a pout.

P-21 just chuckled. "It's Blackjack. It has to be. No impersonator could be that bad."

"Thank you!" I said, springing on him, wrapping my hooves around his neck, and kissing him as hard as I could. My brain caught up ten seconds later and I drew back, afraid I'd pissed him off. To my joy and surprise, though, he merely looked happy to see me. I nearly kissed him again right there on the spot.

"But wait! Wait! What about Rampage? She vouched for her," Glory said with a little frown. She threw her hooves in the air. "This is just insane."

"Again—" P-21 started evenly.

"Blackjack!" Scotch squealed with glee while jumping forward to give me a hug, cutting him off. He smiled and patted her on the head before turning back to Glory.

"Exactly. Now, why don't we give her a chance to explain... calmly." Glory still looked skeptical, but she nodded.

For the third time today, I explained everything that had happened from the implosion of the tower to now, filling in everything I'd rushed over before. Boo jumped in here and there, mostly providing dramatic reenactments, with sound effects, of the fight with the Legate. Glory asked questions about Professor Zodiac and how and why I had a new blank body. P-21 asked more about Cognitum. Scotch Tape wanted to know more about the batponies. Two hours later, I nursed a Sparkle-Cola and a developing headache. Three of the four ponies present were deep in thought.

Boo, for her part, was building a tower of snack cakes, singing, "Snack cake shtack-up, shnack cake shtack-uuuuuup!"

It was a welcome disturbance to the awkward silence. Glory seemed completely at a loss, and I couldn't blame her. "Okay. My turn," I said at last. "Tell me what's happened since Cognitum showed up."

P-21 regarded the others before answering. "Well, it was quite abrupt, actually. We were all set to enter the Core and find you, when suddenly you— I mean, her, Rampage, and a shellshocked stallion all came out. Like she knew exactly where to find us and what we were doing."

"You— ugh, *she* was really bitchy, Blackjack. Like... I've seen you whiny, but I've never seen you *mean*. She was mean. And as soon as she trotted out, she walked right up to those Harbingers, told them she'd assumed command, and they just... accepted it," Scotch Tape said with a frown. "I expected them to shoot her up a little at least."

"We talked to her alone," Glory said in a small voice. "She answered enough questions to prove she was Blackjack, but when we wanted to talk some more, find out what had happened, she said Project Horizons was going to go off and she needed to stop it. Told me to keep my biological urges in check or wait till she could get me a replacement."

"Then she blew us off when we said we were going to help her. 'Best way you can help is to follow me and stay out of my way,' she said," P-21 said with a frown.

"Honestly, she could have given the Overmare lessons," Scotch Tape said absently. For a few seconds P-21 stared away from Scotch Tape, his jaw clenched and a dark fury simmering in his eyes.

"And you thought that was me?" I asked, a little incredulous.

"Blackjack, you've been gone for months! Last time I saw you, you had more metal than flesh, and for all I knew, something had been put in your brain. It wouldn't have surprised me!" Glory snapped, then flushed again.

Scotch Tape stared at Glory, then back at me and came to her rescue. "And Rampage was there, vouching for 'Blackjack'. She was pretty mean too, though. I mean, she's been rude, but... I seriously think she'd have hurt me if she wanted."

"We were confused, Blackjack," P-21 said, drawing a deep breath and recovering. "We didn't know what to believe. And there are impersonators of you and other heroes all over the place now. Some are doing it to try and exploit a famous name, but others are fanatical admirers or just plain crazy."

Glory closed her eyes. "One came here; said she'd had her body surgically restored. She really believed she was you and not some damned raider whose whole family was wiped out by Enclave. Took two days before that story fell apart." Her cheeks burned even more as she rubbed her mane.

"She got you in bed, didn't she?" I asked with a grin. That must have been two days I was watching somepony else through the Perceptitron. Really, how much could you watch other ponies going through their daily routines before dying of boredom?

Wrong question to ask. She immediately burst into tears, covering her eyes with her hooves. "I'm sorry! You'd been gone so long, and... she seemed really convincing and... I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!"

I watched her sob for several seconds, glanced over at P-21 and Scotch Tape, and they gave a pair of matching shrugs. "I forgive you, Glory," I said, trying to keep my voice as even and uncondescending as I could. "You love me and so you had sex with a version of me. No big deal."

"No big..." Glory stammered, her face streaked with tears. "I cheated on you, Blackjack. I let myself cheat on you. I fell for a cheap fake."

"And I forgive you," I said as I trotted over to her, put an arm around her shoulders, and pulled her in closer. "I don't care that you had sex with somepony else. What I care is that you're happy. That's it. That is all that matters to me. So I forgive you." *So please stop with the weird surfer hangups about sex, because it's really weird.*

She melted against me, burying her face in my mane. "Oh Blackjack, it *is* you," she sighed.

That was all I needed to hear. That phrase in her voice in that tone made everything that I'd lost somehow manageable again. I swept her up in my hooves and gave her a kiss she properly deserved. After so long apart, nothing would ever separate us again. An eternity, and far too short a time, later, we parted, and Glory and I beheld the amused smirk of Scotch Tape, the delighted smile of Boo, and the calm nod of P-21. She blushed but snuggled up against me. "What now?"

"Okay," I said with a small frown. There was a large list in my head. And, oddly enough, sexytimes with Glory kept aggressively, passionately bumping up on it, over and over, warm and wet and... um, I mean, later. Right. "Velvet Remedy and the Zodiacs are getting word out that the other Security is a fake and that I'm the real Blackjack. Everypony is going to be meeting at Blueblood Manor to discuss what to do next." As much as I wanted to strap on the operative barding and go and take back my old body, I couldn't be reckless. This was bigger than me, and I knew what my old body could do. Cognitum wouldn't hold back when I came to reclaim it.

"Blueblood Manor? You know it's a ruin now, right?" Scotch Tape asked.

"Well... yeah. But it's neutral ground and it's big and open enough for a lot of ponies to meet up there," I said with a semi-sheepish smile. "What. It's got a ballroom, right?"

"That had a tank drive through it," Scotch Tape countered, then frowned. "Oh, yeah. About tanks, you might want to talk with Deus. I don't speak tank, but the whole drive here from the Society, he was acting weird. Like drifting into ditches and stuff."

"He is pretty big," Glory pointed out.

"Yeah, but he doesn't just wander off the road, or didn't the last time we rode on him," Scotch Tape said. "I don't know if he's sick or if there's something bothering him, but something's wrong." She surveyed me, P-21, and Glory, then rolled her eyes a little. "Anyway, I'll go up to the manor. Maybe there's some corner that's undamaged enough for us to use. Come on, Boo. Let's give them some privacy."

"Awww, but I just got back! I wanna stay with Bwackjack!" Boo protested with a pout.

"Trust me. They're just going to be talking about love... um... and mushy stuff," Scotch Tape said, pushing the blank towards the door.

Boo grinned. "Awww. Bwackjack and Glory sitting in a tree... wait... Bwackjack and Twent... uh..." Boo blinked at the three of us. "Who's gonna be kissin' who with three of 'em?"

"Probably all of the above. Now come on. I think that Charity got her hooves on some of those chocolate-packed Fancy Buck Cakes from the Society," Scotch Tape said with a smile. That perked Boo right up, and the pair departed, leaving me with the two most important ponies in my life.

"I've got one other thing to tell you," I said, holding Glory as I looked to P-21 soberly. Much as kissing sounded absolutely awesome, there were other things I needed to talk about first. I shifted us over to the couch in the living room and bowed my head. "I'm pregnant."

P-21 arched an eyebrow in surprise, and Glory flushed. "Um... didn't you just get that body, Blackjack?" At least she smiled when she asked it.

"Not in this body," I said with a roll of my eyes. "In my old body." Then I glanced at P-21. "And I'm pretty sure that it's yours."

Both their smiles disappeared. P-21 wore an inscrutable look on his face. "I mean, there's a small chance it's Stygius's. I don't know exactly when my implant got mistaken for a bullet, but I think odds are that you're the father."

"Something I seem to excel at," he said, glancing at his cutie mark. "I wonder, if you took this off, if I'd have a sperm underneath it."

I gave him a hug, and though he stiffened, he didn't pull away. "That's nowhere near all you are. But the reason why I bring it up is because it's why we can't just kill my old body."

"Blackjack! Would you really?" Glory said, looking a little hurt.

"In a heartbeat," I answered, staring right into her purple eyes. "Which I happen to have again." Now she tensed and looked away, but I took her hoof. "I'm not angry with you anymore for what you did. You saved my life, Glory. You kept me fighting. Thank you. But life as part machine..." I shook my head. "It isn't as good a life as you might imagine. Much as I hate Cognitum for what she did, I have to admit, she did me a favor keeping this spare around. I can feel your hoof, Glory. I can feel *you*. You don't know what that's like," I said as I stroked her cheek.

Finally, she gave a little smile and nuzzled me back. "I'll have to go easier on you next time we're together. I wouldn't want to scar you up so soon."

"Knowing my life, that won't take long," I said, then glanced at P-21. He still looked distracted and troubled. "What I need to know," I continued to Glory, "is how long do you think the fetus will be viable in that body."

Glory's eyes widened. "I have no idea. Your pelvis wasn't as heavily reinforced as your spine since the bones are so large, but... If I have to estimate... four or five months. After that, cross bracing will start to crush the uterine wall, and then..." She shook her head.

"Then we're going to need a surrogacy spell. I can't carry the fetus. Blank bodies... well... even though they're a copy, the plumbing down there doesn't really... work." Now it was my turn to bite my lower lip. I looked at Glory, but she could neither cast such a spell nor be a suitable surrogate. It was supposed to be as close a relation as I could find... I'd need a unicorn, at least... "I'll talk to Triage about it."

"Blackjack, there has to be some way I can help you," Glory said, staring at me in worry.

"It's okay. Thanks, though," I said, pausing and fidgeting a bit. "I just need to know, P-21, should I even try to get my baby back?"

P-21's eyes shot wide as he gaped at me. "What... why... how..." he stammered, then composed himself with a sharp breath. "How could you ask me that?"

"Because as far as I'm concerned, it's your baby too. And putting a bullet through my old body's head is easier than trying to get my unborn baby out of it." I closed my eyes, tears streaking my cheeks as my mind struggled with the horrifying choice before me. It stuck in my throat, and finally I sobbed. "I've given up so much. What's a little more?"

"No!" he said sharply, and I flinched. He sighed, covering my hooves in his. "No, Blackjack. You're not giving that up. What's the point to living if you lose that?"

"The world's more important than me and my baby," I said hollowly. "Aren't I being selfish taking the risk?" Glory stared at me as if suddenly struck dumb, her eyes wide and aghast.

"Technically, sure. So what?" he asked scornfully. "This is something you need to be selfish about, Blackjack. This is our baby. I've had a rough time learning what that means from Scotch. I want to know what it's like to do it right from the beginning. I *want* this. And you need something that you won't sacrifice, Blackjack. Something that is yours. A line in the sand you won't cross." I remembered him once shouting in my face about him killing me if I ever crossed him.

Glory didn't look at the pair of us, her eyes downcast. I turned back to him, smiled, and gave a little nod. Getting my body back would be difficult... far more difficult than getting a few missile launchers, snipers, and spark grenades and unloading on her. Still, we'd find a way.

"I'll go help Scotch," Glory said, starting to get up, and I stared at her in surprise.

"Glory?" I rose and stepped after her. Something about her tone, so small and hurt, was just wrong to me.

"Stop," she said, not turning back to look at me. "Just... let me go, Blackjack." Her shoulders shook slightly as she bowed her head, her mane hiding her face from me.

"Glory? What's wrong?" I said as I walked around in front of her. I didn't understand... was this some other Enclave moral landmine I wasn't aware of? I glanced back at P-21, but he seemed just as clueless as I. "I... I'm sorry," I said helplessly, hoping it would be enough for whatever offense I'd given.

Then she lifted her head, and I felt as if I had my old body back. Everything inside me stilled as she smiled through her tears. "So am I, Blackjack," she said with a sick little laugh as she sat down. "I was ready to hate you. I really had written you off. And as much as it hurt, I think I was okay with it. And then you show up, and I was wrong, and it turns out you still care about me." She smiled even wider and added, "And you're pregnant. Congratulations." Her eyes were on P-21 with that last word. "You don't even have your old body anymore."

"Glory, what is wrong? Talk to me," I said as I reached out with my hooves to hold her shoulders. "Tell me what I did wrong!"

She cocked her head, smiling at me with a look of pity as she wept. "Blackjack, do you love me?"

"Of course I do," I said, immediately.

"Why?" Glory asked in that soft voice. So tender. Such yearning to be understood.

"What?" I blinked in bafflement at her.

"Why do you love me?" she asked as she stared into my eyes.

"I..." I stammered, trying to think. "You're... good. And smart. And nice. And..." I said, but the words felt hollow to me. True, without a doubt, but I knew other good, smart, nice ponies that I didn't love. "I just do!" I finally blurted.

She just shook her head with that horrible, sad smile. "I know you just do. But that's not enough. I loved you because you protected me. You were so strong. Too strong. And like my parents you both left me behind and horribly injured yourself in the process."

I rolled my eyes. "Glory, I had to do that. The first time I was going crazy and the second time I was detonating a megaspell that would have killed you. It almost killed me!" I pointed out.

She brushed my mane out of my eyes. "I know, Blackjack. I know why. And I'm not mad at you for it. But Blackjack... I would have rather died than be left behind. Maybe I would have. Or maybe we might have found another way. We could play what ifs all the time. The point is that's not love. Or rather, not the kind of love I need."

"And what is the kind of love you need? Just tell me and I'll give it," I swore. Anything to make this stop.

She actually laughed, and then wiped her snotty muzzle on a hoof. "Just like that? Funny thing is... you would. You'd try to. I know." She sighed. "What I need is somepony who needs me. Not just for emotional support, but who needs me with her. That won't try and treat me like a helpless baby." She shook her head. "I'm not that mare that was trapped under the floor anymore, Blackjack. I haven't been for a long time."

"But I need you," I swore, trying to put as much feeling into it as I could.

"You need someone, Blackjack. But it doesn't have to be me," she said with that wistful gaze in her eyes. "In fact, I think right now that it shouldn't have been me at all. I was just clinging to you in the hopes that, eventually, you'd love me the way I needed to be loved."

"But Glory... I..." I fumbled, feeling gutpunched. "I can love you like that. I can."

"No, Blackjack. You're a good pony, but you can't put me first. You almost didn't put your own child first. That... scares me. I can't imagine the kind of mare who can do that. I wonder if I could ever do what you do so easily..." she said quietly.

I wondered if this was really happening. Maybe any second the sadistic torture program would pop out of the couch cushions and go 'surprise, want to execute Goldenblood now?' Then I'd be free to meet the real Glory and everything would somehow... magically... be fine...

Damn it... LittlePip never had to go through this. Why did I? I looked at P-21, but all he gave me was his own sympathetic gaze. Not a shake of the head or a nod of advice. Not a word. This he was leaving entirely up to me. I returned my eyes to her face. "You've been there for me so many times, even with all my mistakes and screw ups. I don't want to lose you."

"And I'll be there for you in the future," Glory said quietly, "as a friend. But you and I... we don't... have anything anymore. I've always been carried along, swept in your wake, left behind, and picked back up again." She covered my mouth with her wing. "And I know you do like me and care for me. And I'm very thankful for that. But that... that isn't love. You have a deeper connection with P-21 than you will ever have with me. And I need someone I can have that connection with. It isn't going to be with you." She sniffed and leaned up, kissing my cheek softly, and then pushed my hooves off her shoulders.

She started to walk out the door, and I just stared after her. Then I blurted. "Glory, do you love me?"

She paused and looked over her shoulder at me, smiling calmly amid the wet on her cheeks. "No," was all she said, and then stepped out of Star House. Her name caught in my throat as I struggled to say whatever magic phrase would change her mind. Something. Anything... The quiet click of the door was like a shearing blade right through my heart. Slowly I bowed my head, and tears began pattering by my hooves as I thought of all the things that could have been... that should have been...

Damn it. It wasn't fair...

"I don't know if I can keep doing this," I said faintly as I stared at the closed door. "I just... What did I do wrong?"

"That's not a question I can answer. Glory had a point. She could have waited a little bit before bringing it up, but she did." He came up beside me. "It's not easy being the one left behind all the time. And if you were going to dive into Tartarus, would you be okay with her coming with you?"

I closed my eyes and saw her wing fall off. Heard her anguished screams begging to die. "No. No, I wouldn't."

"She knows that, Blackjack. We all do. And I know exactly how you feel because I feel the same way with Scotch. Part of me wants to tie her up and keep her here where it's safe, but I can't do that. Not if I wanted to keep her as a daughter." He smiled and patted my back.

"Do you love me, P-21?" I asked as I looked at him.

He blinked a little, seemed to think a moment or two, and then nodded once. "In a way, maybe. It's not a love I'm used to. I think you're the only mare I could ever feel that way about."

"Why?" I echoed her question, thinking that if I heard his reasons, maybe I could find some way to fix this mess.

"She's right. We've been through a lot together. We have a common background. We've suffered the same troubles. We have lots of the same feelings. Lots of the same fears." He sighed and nuzzled my cheek lightly. "Like for instance, I know what you need right now to get through this."

Nothing was going to help me get through this. Ever. "Like what?" I asked skeptically. He gazed warmly into my eyes with just a look and I blinked. "What?" Then I felt my insides give a twitch. "Oh..."

* * *

I've been called a bad pony for a wide variety of reasons. As I lay there in bed, I wondered if having rebound sex less than two minutes after the breakup was a valid one. P-21 had taken me upstairs and systematically eradicated my ability to hate on myself with a deluge of dearly missed endorphins. As upset as I was about what had happened between Glory and myself, P-21 had simply given me such a wonderful slurry of sensation that I couldn't hate on myself right now.

One thing was clear: Stygius had lost his crown. Over the last two hours, P-21 had bit, licked, nibbled, stroked, sucked, thrust, pinned, and spurted me into a deliciously thoughtless lump of exquisitely spent mare. Then, so I couldn't hate on myself for getting something good after breaking up with Glory, he'd taken a page from her book and tied me down and did me so that I both ached and melted with him. LittlePip once talked about thirty something orgasms? Well, if I ever talked to her again, I'd have to compare notes, because the way my... *everything* was buzzing, I couldn't tell if I'd had dozens of small ones or if the one he'd given me a little less than two hours ago just hadn't ended yet. I was slimy and sweaty and achy and creamy and half a dozen things besides, but one thing I wasn't doing was crying my eyes out.

"Feeling better?" he asked into my ear as I lay slack on the bed. I could only nod my head, given that the bridle didn't let me talk. "Need more?" he asked, touching my wonderfully sore posterior and making me groan. I finally shook my head. Tempting as it might be, I couldn't do this forever. I had enemies to beat and... stuff...

He began to bite slowly down the side of my neck. "Are you sure?"

Well... maybe one more hour.

* * *

Okay. I was positively glazed and had difficulty walking, but I needed water, then to use the bathroom, and to wash. "I dunno how you did that," I slurred. "That... how?"

"Practice. Lots of practice and learning to pace myself. And I had some of those healing potions set aside just to help me push past the refractory period," he said calmly, not quite as messy as me but definitely in need of a wash too. "It's a little cheat we use when we're pushing round five, six, seven..."

I slipped out of the bed, feeling him drip out of me, white on white. He'd removed the bit, but the black tack and harness was still tight on me, and I couldn't summon the focus just yet to take it off. Ugh... my hoof for a hot shower. "Are you okay with what we did?" I asked, looking back at him. The question made him frown thoughtfully. If his fur hadn't been spiked in erratic ways, he'd have looked far more moody.

Finally, he smiled. "If it'd been any other mare... no. No in a big way. But it was with you, so I think it's fine," he replied evenly, then raised a hoof. "If, however, I feel myself getting shaky or panicked, I'll let you know." He stretched, and I found my eyes lingering on his athletic, toned rump, making my insides twitch again, but no! I had meetings to do and stuff. Of the six tiny mares in my head, one suggested one more round, one said enough was enough, one couldn't stop giggling, one was taking notes, one offered critique and pointers for next time, and the last had her eyes covered with her wings as she blushed into her hooves.

"Come on. Let's go clean off. We can clean this, too," I said as I gestured to the harness he'd bound me up in. Walking stiffly, I stepped out the door.

"Blackjack, I should go first. I know I heard somepony downstairs a few hours ago. What if somepony came back?" he asked as I walked along the balcony. With my sweaty, sticky mane in my eyes, it was hard to see as I trotted down the stairs.

"Oh please, who could—" I began to say when a throat cleared. I froze and scraped my hoof across my bangs. I stared down at Calamity, Velvet Remedy, Stygius, Tenebra, Goldenblood, and Whisper all sitting in my living room. Goldenblood was at the foot of the stairs, one brow arched as the others all stared at me. Velvet seemed to be struggling to speak. Tenebra's eyes popped wide as a little trickle of blood dripped down her lip.

"Told you she'd totally come down the stairs like that. Pay up!" Whisper laughed, smacking Tenebra's shoulder in her glee. The batpony wobbled like she was made of wood.

"LittlePip never did that," Velvet said stiffly, cheeks burning.

"Th' harness might look good on you though," Calamity replied casually, giving Velvet a wink.

"Might look better on you," Velvet countered, her cheeks flushed as she regarded me. "I do hope you'll forgive us, but we let ourselves in. And you were occupied and... ahem..." They seemed to be waiting for me to do something.

Walking quite stiffly down to the bottom, I gave Velvet Remedy an easy smile. "Oh. No worries. I mean, I'm glad all of you are here. P-21 was just helping me with some problems I'd had." I gave a deep sigh. "On the plus side, it was really good, on the negative side, my rear is really raw." I beamed a smile at all of them. "Do you mind if I wash up, or do you want to talk first?" I said as I wiped some semen from my muzzle.

Calamity and Velvet both gaped at me as little white gobs fell behind me... drip... drip... drip... My eyes went from one to the other as the silence continued. "What?" I asked in bafflement.

"Dear Goddesses, she's like the anti-Pip," Velvet murmured, eyes wide in a mix of wonder and horror.

"What? It's just semen and some bondage gear," I said with a shrug and not even the barest hint of a blush. "I'll be right back when I've stopped oozing out my backside," I said as I headed to the door. There was a thump as I opened it, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Tenebra passed out on the

floor. Whisper seemed unable to breathe in her wild mirth. I gave P-21 a baffled look as we stepped out into the rain. *Surfacer ponies... who could figure them out?*

* * *

After P-21 and I washed up and put the fun away and he'd put his hat back on, I felt... better. Guilty. Upset. Confused. I'd probably be a sobbing mess when it all came back on me. But right now, I was stable enough to do what had to be done. Our little troupe headed over towards Blueblood Manor. Velvet's alicorn friends cast the rain shielding spell to keep us dry and let us talk. They were all beautiful and regal, but it just wasn't the same. I wondered how Psalm was doing. Most of my head, though, was occupied thinking about who might show up to the meeting and running through what I'd say. For all I knew, it would be just a dozen or two ponies curious about the Blackjack impersonator.

The weather, which had been hammering down, now let up into a very un-Hoofingtonlike drizzle. The almost continuous lightning strikes had halted. The winds had died down to an eerie stillness. I didn't like it. If the clouds disappeared, I might have a heart attack.

"Please tell me that this nice weather is LittlePip's doing," I asked Velvet plaintively.

"It's LittlePip's doin'," Calamity said, straight-faced. Velvet glared at him, and the bandaged stallion smirked. "Wut? She said please."

"LittlePip hasn't found a way to cut through the interference. Homage was working on a tower with Ditzzy. Number thirteen, I think. She might have found a way and just not forwarded the message to us yet." She looked over at me. "She should be at the meeting. She can tell us then." She glanced at P-21 talking with Calamity, the former occasionally letting his eyes wander over the oblivious latter, and asked in a quieter voice. "Are you okay?"

"Been a long time since I could answer that with a yes," I said with a small smile. I checked behind me. Whisper was forcing Stygius and Tenebra to have a discussion about me and semen. Goldenblood walked behind them, silently, eyes downcast. I glanced over at Velvet. "Can I ask you a question? Why do you love Calamity?"

The question seemed to surprise and even amuse her. "I don't know. It was the wings, originally."

"Yeah, there's just something about fliers," I said with a rueful smile, making Calamity and Stygius nicker and P-21 roll his eyes.

"Not that," Velvet laughed, then paused and reconsidered. "Well, not entirely that. He's... good. A protector. Loyal. True. I don't have to worry about him."

"So if you met a second pony who was just as good, you'd love him too?" I asked, in complete seriousness. A number of emotions ran over her features with embarrassment winning out.

"Well?" Calamity asked with a grin. "I got to say I'm a mite curious myself."

"No," Velvet Remedy stated firmly.

"And... if he asked you to stay behind? To keep you safe?" I asked delicately.

"Why would he do that?" Velvet Remedy asked with a baffled smile. "He's learned I can take care of myself."

"But what if it's something that would kill you? Or hurt you. Or was different than what you wanted?" I looked at the brown stallion. "What would you do if she died? Or if he died?" I asked her. Both their smiles disappeared as I looked back at the ground. "I just didn't want her to die."

Velvet nudged my shoulder. "No one does. I guess we just try not to think about it. I saw Steelhooves's head cut off right in front of me. It hurt. It almost changed who I was. And if it had been Calamity or LittlePip... maybe it might have. That's the price paid for being in love."

"And it ain't just you that has ta' pay it. Takes two ta tussle, tango, 'n' tic-tac-toe, as they say," he said with a little nod.

Something in my face must have shown the shame, fear, and anxiety in my chest. Her amusement faded. "Hey, Blackjack. Are you..." she paused as I grimaced. "Something happened between you and Glory, didn't it?" I gave a little nod, and she sighed and glanced at P-21. "When you both... Well... I mean... With you and your... ah... well...orientation... I didn't know if something had happened."

"It's alright. It's nothing I didn't see coming a mile away," I lied... or did I? After all, I knew she was upset. I'd blamed it on her transformation into Rainbow Dash. On her being from the sky. On... everything but me. "That was vigorous rebound sex. Good for the endorphins. I'll pay for it in guilt later."

"Is this separation permanent?" Velvet asked with a sympathetic little smile. The question made me sick to my stomach.

"Probably should be," I said, feeling that ache inside my chest. "I have things I have to do, and she'll be better off with somepony else. Honestly, this should have happened long ago." I faked a smile as happy as I could. Think of sexy, happy inner thigh nibbles. Don't think about anything else. Pretend like nothing had changed. Self-delusion was so familiar that I could step into like it was nothing.

But it wasn't nothing. Part of me asked what was wrong with me. The other part questioned what was wrong with her. Part of me was afraid to find the answer, and another wondered if it was worthwhile.

'Not the most focused pony in the Wasteland, are you, Blackjack?' I thought to myself.

Velvet sighed as we climbed up the hill towards Blueblood Manor. Or what remained of it. Between the Crusaders, the Harbingers, and Deus, most of the once-immense building was smashed. Even the wing that had held Vanity was gone. I started to feel both sad and upset. Silly, given all that had happened. Battlefields didn't respect the dead. Still, I would have liked one thing to remain sacred.

Then I spotted a stone slab beside the road that hadn't been there months ago. About six feet high, the flat face had been worked smooth by what I suspected was an arcane disintegration beam. Then somepony had cut in the face:

Vanity

Here lies a noble heart

Goodnight, Sweet Prince

I approached the slab slowly, my eyes tracing the carvings. Somepony had taken great pains to cut those letters an inch deep into the granite. At the base was a smaller phrase: 'In Appreciation'. Then more than a dozen names. I read each one over and over again. "We wanted to remember him," croaked a ghoulish voice, and I started and looked at the teal ghoulish pegasus in maid's livery, looking as dry

and desiccated as a feather duster even in the humid Hoofington air. Harpica smiled softly. "It's too easy to forget some days. At least this way, his name won't be forgotten."

I choked as I regarded the stone. Forgotten. When I died, how would I be remembered? Would any raise a stone with my name upon it? Probably not, and if they did, it would be undeserved. To be forgotten was true death. With flesh rotted and bones pulverized to dust and the great histories lost to the passage of time, what of the person who had lived? Or had they ever lived at all? There were twelve names on Vigilance's mouthgrip, but what did I know of the first ten but their names? Almost nothing. And when Vigilance rusted away, would anyone ever know?

"Blackjack?" P-21 asked as I trembled, feeling all those happy endorphins falling away. No. Keep it together, Blackjack. Fake it! Smile.

"I'm fine! I'm... fine..." I said as I struggled to regain my balance. I was in control. Or if I wasn't, then I had to act like I was. Just as good. "Just fine." Doubt lingered in his eyes, but he gave a small encouraging smile.

"He would have been honored," Goldenblood rasped silently from behind me. "I never knew a pony more inappropriately named." Harpica blinked her milky eyes at the scarred unicorn but then gave a happy little squeak at the compliment.

"Thank you," she said as she looked at our party. "I was told to wait out here and bring you to the others when you're ready."

"Did Homage, Ditzzy, and Life Bloom make it back?" Velvet asked the teal ghoul.

"I believe so, ma'am. Those are your friends from out west?" she asked. Velvet nodded. "Ah yes. They did ten minutes ago. They're waiting in the garden."

"Garden?" I looked across the ruined manor and spotted the ballroom... the roof collapsed in due to a tank being driven through it.

"It was the only place with enough space. The manor is a terrible mess. Those Crusaders were absolutely ghastly. Children can be so destructive at times," the ghoul said in her whispery rasp. True, and having a battle and a tank driving through it too had done absolutely nothing for the structure. The exterior walls were still intact, but the interior rooms had collapsed in on themselves. There were still some signs of what the rooms had been used for, but I guessed that, in a year or two, the manor would be just another ruin dotting the Wasteland.

Provided Horizons didn't kill us all. Didn't kill Velvet and Calamity. Didn't kill Glory. Didn't kill P-21. Didn't... didn't...

"Blackjack?" P-21 said in alarm as I swayed. For some reason, I couldn't quite breathe. It was all going to fall apart. I was going to get everypony killed. I'd fucked up too badly for too many reasons and I couldn't do it! My heart thundered in my chest. What was I even doing? "Blackjack!" P-21 shouted.

"Anxiety attack..." I heard Velvet say, but it sounded like it was coming from far away. "She needs to go back to Star House. This is bad."

"No!" I choked, trying so hard to keep it together. There wasn't any more time. No more time for anything. Anything at all.

Then P-21 held me and murmured softly in my ears, "Breathe, Blackjack. Just breathe. You're fine. We'll find a way to get through this. Just breathe." Somehow I started to actually take breaths rather than make choking noises.

"You said you'd kill me if I ever fucked up," I whispered, pressing my face into his chest. I could hear his own heartbeat, slow and steady and sure. "I've gotten everyone killed."

"We aren't dead just yet," he told me quietly. "Now just breathe and calm down."

It took me about three or four minutes before my heart resumed a normal rate and I no longer felt like I was going to pass out. Throw up, maybe, but not pass out. I wiped my eyes and gave a rueful smile to Whisper. "Must be funny. Seeing big bad Security losing it."

"Eh..." she tilted a wing back and forth. "Would be if your life wasn't so fucked up. Way I look at it, you're not psycho or dead, so there's got to be something going for you." I actually laughed a little at that.

"Better?" P-21 murmured.

"Yeah," I said, and together we continued around the side of the manor towards the back. There was a strange murmuring noise, like a babbling brook or overflowing storm drain. "Hopefully enough that I can address all ten people that actually came to hear me."

"Ten?" Harpica asked, sounding alarmed.

"Fine. Twenty then," I said with a roll of my eyes as we approached a gate in desiccated hedgerow. "I mean, who in their right mind is going to go way out here for a probably-just-another-imposter Black... jack..." I trailed off as I stepped through.

That wasn't twenty.

That wasn't a hundred.

It was everypony.

Near as I could tell, everypony I knew sat on the stone steps of a classical amphitheatre. Stone columns decorated with proud, cracked unicorn stallions framed the stage. One wall of the dead hedge had been crushed flat, letting Deus point his turrets in. I wondered if that was intentional: making sure the rowdier guests behaved. The various ponies entertained themselves in a variety of ways. Bottlecap, Charity, and Finders Keepers seemed to have set up an impromptu swap meet with the Collegiate and Society. The Zodiacs appeared to be talking weapons with the Halfhearts and Flash Fillies. A small group of Highlanders had a jug band and were selling hooch to ghouls from Meatlocker. The Burner Boys were running gambling games with some Thunderhead ponies and a hoofful Steel Rangers. An enterprising trio of Crusaders in the back ran a little food booth and were giving a radroach burger to a sand dog. A trio of hellhounds lingered in the back, with everyone giving the beasts a wide berth.

But for all the busy spectacles the one that stuck out most to me was the simple fact that no one was killing anyone else.

"What are they all doing here?" I gasped.

"You said you wanted everyone who could come. Once word got out that the Security at the Society was a fraud, and that the Lightbringer's friends and Security's team vouched for this one... well, suddenly everyone wanted to be here. Between alicorn teleportation, Enclave pegasi, and the clearing weather, this was the place to be," Velvet Remedy said with a sweep of her hoof.

"They're all people you helped in one way or another, Blackjack," P-21 said quietly. I could pick out Windclop and a few other familiar faces from Meatlocker, more alicorns than had arrived with Velvet, griffin Talons from back west... "They all want to return the favor."

I just stared and felt everything spinning out around me. "I need... I need a moment."

"Take a few. Say an hour? As long as there's food and entertainment, we can wait," P-21 said.

Velvet Remedy and Calamity trotted to meet Homage, Ditzzy, and Life Bloom over by the band. Harpica went to mind the foals near the Crusader food stand. Not having a clue what else to do, P-21 and I trotted over to Deus. A camera swiveled down to me, and I gave a shaky little smile. "Hey, big guy. It's me. Mind if we talk?"

Deus's engine let out a soft purr and the tank's rear hatch popped open. I carefully wiggled in, P-21 slipping in behind me with far more ease. In the middle of the tank was the glass jar containing the metal-reinforced brain of the stallion. More cameras whirled to orient on me, and I gave a small smile. "Yeah. I'm really Blackjack. Security the reboot. I'm sure I'll be shot and mangled all to hell inside a week." I regarded the jar. It'd been a while since we'd parted ways. "Do you have something you need to tell me?"

Deus's cameras all bobbed up and down in unison. His aphasia might be killing his speech, but he'd adapted better than I probably would have to being stuck inside a war machine. I considered; I'd gotten better at memory magic since we'd last met. Maybe. "Is it okay if I go into your mind and find the memory of what you want to talk about?" The cameras paused and then moved slowly up and down.

Glancing at P-21, I pressed my horn to the glass. Not quite the same as a pony, but it wasn't like I jabbed my horn into their brains. I concentrated, felt the connection forming, and waited. I had plenty of experience with mindplay at this point. I felt the world fall away as I dove in deeper than I ever had.

Deus's mind wasn't like sinking into a pool of images. I floated in the middle of a plain of slaughtered zebras like a white ghost, looking at a colossal pony caught in the workings of an immense factory. A gargantuan collection of pain and rage and disappointment. I had no clue where to begin as the pony screamed and writhed against the steel pinning him in. Every few seconds, the gears tried to turn, biting deeper into him. But he didn't have a body anymore! I recalled Glory or Triage telling me brains can't feel pain. So why...

When I'd lost my legs, I could still feel them. Just because they were gone didn't mean they weren't 'real' to my mind. Could all this pain be the same thing? I floated over to one immense gear and gripped it with my hooves. The thing was my size, and in the real world I'd never be able to budge it, but this was the mind. In the mind, will counted more than muscle, and willpower was just a nice way of calling a pony stubborn. I had stubborn coming out my ass.

With several pulls and yanks, I dislodged the gear. Instantly a deluge of words hammered into me as an explosion of gore erupted from his side. 'No good rapist. Fucking rapist. Rapist scum. Rapist asshole. Deserves to die. Deserves to suffer. Just put a bullet in his head.' I pushed through, forcing the gear free of the rest. Rapists fucked up and it was easy to say that all of them were scum, but nopony deserved this. I latched my hooves on another chewing pair and pulled with all my strength. 'Not my boy. Not my child. My son'd never do this.' hammered into me. Well, I'd done some things my mom would be ashamed of too. I pushed through the pain till those toothed wheels tore free.

Again and again I swooped around him, attacking the metal that encased him. I grabbed one and a single word screamed across the plain. 'Cunt!' It was accompanied by the images of dozens of different mares who had rejected and hurt him, hitting me like a sledgehammer. Well, I'd been a cunt in the past too. I strained and pulled as hard as I could, the gear groaning before it tore free in a waterfall of gore and a scream of rage and frustration. I seized another and heard Big Macintosh say solemnly, 'I'm right disappointed in you.' Well, I could empathize with that as well.

I seized a gear and was instantly hit by sensations of all the mares he'd violated. I could feel him going inside them. I nearly cut the connection then and there, but I was here to help him. Then, after several seconds I realized something... he wasn't getting off. It was as if he was just beating them up inside with his cock. I couldn't forgive that... but I could understand why he had done it. He'd deserved punishment, but not this. A little empathy would have gone a long way towards helping Doof be a better pony.

Suddenly the machinery ripping into him shivered and began to come apart. Massive beams and girders began to collapse all around him as the crushed pony within forced his way free. I backed off as he burst cables and bent steel. Finally, with a clanging clamor of an ironworks being dropped, his head burst free, and he screamed a single word that echoed across that plain of carnage.

Not 'Cunt'.

'Why?'

As he sat there, gargantuan and alone, the gray stallion sobbed and bled. I hesitated, then slowly approached his colossal face. "I don't know why, Doof. I'm sorry, but I don't know why anypony put you through what you suffered," I answered. I was just the last in a long life of pain and suffering. "I just know you want to be a better pony, and I just want to give you the chance."

He sobbed, blubbering in the midst of that plain. Finally he wiped his eyes. "I don't hurt so bad no more. You do that?"

"I think so?" I said with a nervous grin.

"Why?" he asked as he looked up at my glowing, ghostlike form.

"Cause... who wouldn't?" I asked back awkwardly.

"No pony, if they think you're scum," he answered back, his voice deep and rumbling. "If you're scum, no pony will give you the time of day. They'd rather you died than give a bit of help, 'cause you fucked up, and you deserve it."

"Well, I don't care if you are scum. No pony deserves that."

The massive Doof just stared at me. He still had metal spurs and shrapnel embedded in him. Some of them just went too deep for me to pull out. I just knew it. There was a limit to how much I could do for him here. "Rampage is in trouble," he rumbled.

"Yes, she is," I said. Then I balked. "Do you mean in general or something specific?"

He pointed ahead of him, and in the air a massive window appeared. The image was grainy, as if captured through a camera. It showed Rampage confronting Cognitum outside the Elysium country club and... what in the world had she done to my body? On top of the two beam rifles she'd added to her sides, she was flanked by two small hovering robots sporting a long beam weapon each. And she'd added spikes. Spikes! They covered the little filly and the cutie mark etchings and made her look utterly ridiculous. Had those been added before or after her little speech?

The striped mare started out grinning. Then snarling. Then she lunged at Cognitum. The cybermare stopped her calmly and efficiently with a raised hoof, then telekinetically lifted her and slammed her once, twice, thrice into the ground. Then the hovering robots disintegrated her.

Suddenly a targeting reticle appeared on Cognitum, and Deus charged towards her. Cognitum gave a chill stare at the tank. I could almost imagine her calculating precisely how to strike to destroy it in

a single blow. Suddenly a filly Rampage rose up and threw herself in the path of the machine. The vehicle immediately halted.

"No, Deus! I need her!" Rampage sobbed. "Stop, you big idiot!"

"Interesting," Cognitum purred as Deus ground to a halt. Cognitum smiled down at the little filly. "You will get what you want when I decide to give it. Perhaps in a century or two. But let me assure you that if I die, you'll have eons to contemplate your meaningless, worthless existence, Rampage. I am the only one who can give you the death you seek."

Cognitum trotted away with a satisfied smirk that made me want to run her over with a tank too. But something bothered me. I turned to the mountain of gray and regret. "Why did you care about Rampage?" It would have been great if it'd been about keeping her safe or something, but I suspected that it was something else.

He lifted his great brown eyes. "Because... she's my daughter."

"What?" I asked in bafflement. "She's... how? How do you know?"

More memory windows. Wow, was I actually inventing vocabulary for this mind magic stuff? In it, a board of ponies faced Doof. Vanity was on the far side. The unicorn mare in judge robes in the middle slapped a gavel sharply. "Request for visitation rights denied. The court sees no reason to grant any privileges to a prisoner with such a contemptible record of behavior." The ponies behind the board began to file out.

Doof lunged forward, and four guards wrestled him back. "Let me see her!" he roared. "I'll fuck all of you cunts, let me see my daughter!"

Vanity stopped at the exit. The white stallion appeared... tired. There was gray at his temples and bags under his eyes. He glanced contemptuously at Doof. "Give it up, Doof. In twenty years you'll be free. Sooner if the M.o.P. gives you psychological adjustments. Stop tormenting Twist with these endless appeals."

"In twenty years she won't be my daughter anymore. She'll... she just be some stranger! I want to see her. I want to know what she looks like," Doof said, pulling the guards forward as he leaned towards the unicorn.

Vanity stared at him flatly, then drew from his vest a small photograph. He levitated it in front of Doof's face. In it were Twist, Shujaa, and a little filly with a curly mane. "Peppermint favors her mother," Vanity said coolly.

"Can I have that? Please, let me have that, Vanity!" Doof begged.

For a second, the unicorn seemed about to relent. Then one of the guards shoved Vanity aside. "Out of the way, we need to get the prisoner back to his cell," the mare said sharply. Vanity hesitated, then returned the picture to his pocket, backing away as a squad of guards surrounded Doof, trying to get him out the door.

"You cunts!" he roared as he was born away. "I'll kill all of you! All of you!"

The window faded and disappeared. "The stripes are different, but I'll never forget my little filly." A dozen more windows opened up, some showing a desolate Arlose in the Stadium. A filly Rampage taking out a raider four times her size. An image of the mare pitting a radroach against Gorgon's, and then when she lost, wrestling the monsterpony instead. An image of her getting fitted for her armor. I could almost imagine Doof looking on.

"You never told her?" I asked.

"I was Deus. Baddest bastard birthed in the Wasteland, and I didn't have a shred of proof. Not like they can do paternity tests anymore. So I tried to make sure she had a place in the Reapers. Besides, if I'd gone soft on her, it would have come back to hurt both of us. Reapers don't do soft," he said low and slowly. "Besides, who wants to know they had a monster for a father? Better I just stay back."

"She would have wanted to know," I answered.

"It wouldn't do any good now. I can't even hold her like this," he muttered. "I just think... I think she's in a lot of trouble. I want her to be happy, and I can't help her like this. Can you promise me... can you promise to help her?"

"I don't need to. I will help her. She's my friend," I said firmly. "I won't give up on her just because she screwed up."

"Even though she stabbed you in the back?" Deus asked with a small smile. "I don't know how you do it."

"I'm really... really... really stupid," I said with a hapless grin. "I want my friends back, and I want everypony okay. And yeah, I know it's immature and naive and... I just want it that way. Call me an idiot."

Deus stared at me with that same look Rampage always used to give me, then slowly shook his colossal head. "Be careful, Cunt," he said, the word about as affectionate as he could manage.

"You too, Doof," I answered, then cut the connection. I opened my eyes and sighed. Well, as much of a screwup as I was, I could at least still help somepony a little.

I started to make my way back towards the hatch when I heard P-21 say sharply outside, "No. You need to go somewhere else right now, Glory."

I froze, then slowly peeked out to see the pair arguing behind the tank. "But I need to tell her—" Glory began.

"You've told her enough already," P-21 cut her off coldly. "Really. 'Why do you love me?' Isn't it enough that you are loved? Period? Only you would want to quantify something as elusive and ephemeral as love!"

"P-21, I—" Glory tried again, clearly flustered.

"No. Not you. You cut it off. You could have had her wrapped around your hoof. It should have been you trying to deal with the shitstorm going on in her life. But no, you had to pile it on with another shitstorm, and if there's anypony that needs shit squared in her life, it's Blackjack!" he stormed on, pointing a hoof away. "Just get out of here. She needs you like a baton to the kneecap."

She just stood there, her face stern. "I know you love her, P-21." P-21 paled as if she'd slapped him. "I also know that as long as she and I are together, you and her wouldn't be. It took three bottles of champagne to get us in the same bed. Not a good sign for an open relationship, even if it would make Blackjack happy. I know myself and I'm not going to pretend I'd be okay with something I'm not."

Ugh... but it would have been such a simple solution! Why couldn't anything be simple? "You couldn't have waited till this was over? Let her do what she has to and then break her heart?" P-21 muttered.

"There is no good time. You two have a baby together now. You're..." Glory started to tear up. "Do you know how much it hurt to hear that? You two have something I'll never have with her. And sure, I could pretend that the foal is mine or adopt or something, but it'll never be the same as what the two of you share." She hissed in pain and shook her head. "Better I find some mare I can share that with. Some mare who won't make me wonder if I'm second best. Who won't try and make me stay back, even if there's risk."

"I don't know if Blackjack even loves me," P-21 said uncertainly. "We had sex. Love... is different with Blackjack."

"You'll find a way," Glory said with a small smile. "And what I wanted to say was that Rain— I mean, Mare Do Well has spotted the *Blizzard* and *Sirocco* to the southwest over the Luna Space Center. There's a chance that Hoarfrost and Afterburner might be working with Cognitum. That's all."

She turned and had started away when P-21 stammered, "Glory!" She paused and looked back at him, one brow raised. "I'm sorry it turned out like this."

Again, that sad smile I hated so much. "You love her. You don't have anything to be sorry about." P-21 stared after her, his face troubled and helpless.

I ducked back into the tank, breathing hard. He loved me? Love? Captial-L love? The reactions in my head varied from 'Whoo hoo', to 'we need to carefully consider this', to 'aww yeah', to 'now calm down, Sugarcube'. But the overwhelming feeling I had rolling through me was...

Huh?

How did that happen? Like me as a friend, maybe. I could understand that. We'd been through a lot together. But Love? Love. LOOOOOVE! El oh vee ee... No matter how I bounced the word off my brain it came back as a raging ball of doubt and uncertainty. How could he give it? How could I deserve it? Did I even want it at this point? And that horrible, nasty little 'why' popping up right, left, and center.

I closed my eyes, banging the back of my head against the hatch rim as I sat there in the tank. Why. Why why why? I had way too much going on right this second. I'd just have to focus on getting things with Cognitum finished. Once that was done, we'd have the rest of our lives to talk about love and family and... a wonderful life I could only barely imagine right now.

I slipped out of the hatch and gave P-21 as fake a smile as I could manage. "Hey. Somepony was talking about the Space Center?" I gave an exaggerated look around the hillside behind the tank, ignoring the purple tail disappearing around the corner.

P-21 blinked and stared at me. "Oh. Yeah. There's word that two Raptors were seen over by the Luna Space Center. The *Sirocco* and *Blizzard*. Might be they've hooked up with Cognitum." He paused, uncertainty gnawing at him. "Blackjack..."

I hurried on before he got to a conversation that I just wasn't going to be able to have. Not without a lot less stress and a lot more time for sex, cuddling, and soul searching. "Oh, that might be a problem. Well, we'll deal with it. That's what I do. Deal with things." I let out a hearty laugh that I hoped didn't sound like I was going to vomit. The laugh withered away as I grinned desperately at him. Nope. Not going to have it. Not in a million ye— "Do you really love me?" I asked plaintively.

Luna damn you, Blackjack.

He gaped at me, his mouth moving silently. "You heard..." he finally muttered, lowering his head so his mane obscured his face.

"I heard," I said with a sigh as I sat down behind the tank and he joined me, flopping down with a sigh. "Love... you... me... yeah..." I muttered lamely. "If you want to put off this conversation till later I'd be just fi—"

"Yes, I do," he said simply, whacking my emotions across the knee with a baton. "While you were gone. Even before you left, I think, a little." He lifted his head and smiled at me. "You're not the mare who lived in 99 anymore, Blackjack. You're... different. Better. You know things and you've been through things. So... yeah. I really think I do." He swallowed hard and then asked, "Do you feel the same?"

"Love..." I sighed and then made a face. "I hate that word. Looooove. Wuv. We need more words for it. Like the kind of love when you really like a person, and the kind of love when you feel like you'd die without them." I slid sideways and rest my head on his shoulder. "I don't know anymore. I was in love with Glory... but now I don't know what I had with her. I like you a lot, P-21. And losing you... the idea just hurts. Is that love?"

"I don't know. This is new for me too. I feel for you like I felt for him. That's all I can say." He gave a little shrug and kissed my ear.

I took a deep breath. "Well, I suppose you won't get jealous if I have a three way with Stygius and his sister."

He chuckled, "Why would I? I'd definitely like to be there, though. That Stygius has a backside that makes my mouth water."

"He's so adorable when you nibble him down there too. And he has this tongue trick that makes it feel like he's licking right through you straight to your tonsil—" I started to say when a stallion cleared his throat loudly beside us, and glanced over at Big Daddy. The bony old stallion definitely wasn't looking too hot after getting blasted by my old body. "Oh, hiya. Come, join us. We were just talking about sex."

"Oh, I heard," he said with a sigh. "But it just don't have the same zing anymore when ya need ta take a potion ta have it." He stared gravely down at me for several seconds. "I need you to come join us. We're havin' a war council." I shared a serious moment with P-21, and then we both nodded and got up.

Some things were bigger than our love...

"So, do you believe I'm Blackjack?" I asked him as we walked around the hedgerow surrounding the amphitheatre.

"Maybe," he said as he glanced at me with his starry eyes. "When I saw ya before, it was blood and stars. The other you was just blood. You... you're nothin' but stars. So I dunno what ta believe. But you askin' is better than the other you demandin'. That's a start."

"So where are we going?" I asked, looking around, not sure where a 'war council' could be held.

"That big dome thing over that way," he said as he pointed a hoof off to the far side of the amphitheatre. I peered through a gap that opened up to the stage and spotted a large gray rotunda also decorated with unicorn stallions. He and P-21 kept trotting around, but I stopped and frowned.

"Hey, it's just quicker to go this way," I said as I trotted out on stage. The pair of stallions gaped at me as I walked out.

Why was it so silent all of a sudden?

I froze in place as one of Deus's spotlights illuminated me, suddenly aware of dozens... perhaps hundreds of eyes drilling into me. I glanced back at P-21 and Big Daddy, the latter with his jaw hanging

and the former covering his face with a hoof. In the middle of the stage was a microphone that Homage and Scotch Tape were working on. Both of them stared at me with equally baffled expressions. Time seemed to freeze as I walked slowly over to it. "Um... hi?" I said, and from Deus's speakers came my magnified voice, with a squeal of feedback.

Scotch Tape jumped down and did something to some equipment in the pit in front of the stage, and the feedback died away. "Um... thanks for coming. Really appreciate it. Um..." I peered over at P-21 as he mouthed something I guessed was 'get off the stage!'

"It's a fake!" somepony in the crowd shouted.

"Another one of those damned impersonators!" yelled another.

"You don't even have her cutie mark!" guffawed a third. "Get her off the stage!"

"Now wait a minute," I said, glad for the authority of the microphone, cutting off the hecklers. "I am Blackjack, also the pony known as Security. We are all here because this place... this horrible, dangerous place, is our home. It's a home that is under attack by enemies seeking to either control us or destroy us." The heckling died away as I took a deep breath. If I stopped, I'd probably never get going again.

"All of you know me. For six months, I've travelled all over the Hoof. Some of you know me personally, others through reputation. A few of you might have even fought against me. I'm that idiotic pony who always tries to do better. Who tries to give second chances. Who refuses to be an executioner. Stupid, I know. But stupid that doesn't stay down tends to stand out.

"Now, some of you have seen another me that came out of the Core talking about unity. That everypony must work together and follow her lead. Has Security ever done that? Have I ever stood before any group and told them that they had to do what I say or die? No! ...Well... not if you don't count slavers. But otherwise..." Okay, keep it together, Blackjack. "Anyway! That is not what I believe. If anyone is to stand with me, I want them to do it of their own free will. Because together, we are stronger than any of us alone."

There was a softer murmuring at this and I bowed my head a little. "I know it's a hard thing to believe. It's an even harder thing to prove. All I ask is the opportunity to do so. Because I *am* Blackjack, and that other over-cyberized tyrant is the impostor. And if there is some way I can convince you, I'll do it."

"There is," Triage said loudly as she, alongside Boo, trotted onto the stage with a metal box hovering above her. "Blackjack's story is that Cognitum stole her original body, and she ended up in a blank... a magical copy. Well, I happen to have a test for that." There was more murmuring, some of the crowd angry but others curious. She arched a brow. "Anyone doubt the Collegiate running a scientific test here? Anyone?"

"Science sucks," someone in the back of the crowd yelled.

Triage stared flatly in the direction the voice had come from. "Duly noted," she replied monotonically. She set down the box, opened it, and drew out a bucket, a radroach, and a Sparkle-Cola bottle full of rainbow fluid.

She hefted the bottle before the crowd. "This is pure taint. You all know what it does. Tumors. Deformities. Madness. Death. And in case you wondering if I'm lying..." She dropped the radroach into the bucket, then, turning her face away and covering her mouth with a hoof, popped the top of the bottle and dribbled a little of the rainbow glop onto the insect.

The radroach gave a shriek, and then a multitude of legs, much more than a dozen, began to thrash and wiggle out the top. The bucket rocked wildly as something with tendrils or antennae tried to wiggle free. Triage pulled out a beam pistol and fired into the bucket repeatedly. It took several shots before the thing disintegrated. Wiping her brow, she then gestured to Boo. The assembled crowd seemed to draw in their breath sharply as Boo extended a hoof over the bucket. "Boo is a blank. And blanks..." She let the same goop dribble onto Boo to a gasp from some of the assembly. The rainbow sludge clung for a few seconds, then disappeared into her skin. Boo's only response was a little giggle. "...are immune to taint." Some in the crowd gave a disappointed 'awww'.

She then glared impatiently at me and nodded at the bucket. I sighed, stuck my hoof over it, and waited. Triage dribbled some of the goop onto me, and I winced, my mind filling with thoughts of wiggling eye-tentacle-penises, but nothing happened. My hoof tingled a bit, and I felt... good, actually. Like I'd had both a long night's rest and a full meal. I inspected my leg. "Huh."

"Maybe you need more!" some wit shouted from the audience.

"Oh, for the love of Luna," I snapped, rolling my eyes. I seized the bottle and tossed my head back, chugging down the sludge. There was a seminal texture to it, and a flavor that hovered somewhere among wallpaper paste, rust, and raw radroach. The benzene and cotton candy smell filled my nostril as I drained the bottle. When I finished, I looked over at the rapidly-retreating Triage. My guts rumbled, and I groaned as I clutched my stomach, then let out a phenomenally loud belch. A roiling ring of rainbow gas rose up from my mouth, expanded to slide over the unicorn statues atop the pillars, and transformed them into crude and uncouth depictions of Discord. I smacked my lips and peered at the residue sloshing in the bottom of the bottle. "Mmm, pretty good."

A ragged yellow earth pony stallion hopped up next to me, snagging the bottle with both hooves. "It's a trick! See?" And before I could stop him, he drank the dregs of the bottle. He grinned as rainbow goop soaked into his lips. Triage sighed, putting a cigarette in her mouth and lighting it with a precise beam shot to the tip. "That wasn't taint! They put the taint in the bucket ahead of time and used unicorn magic on them statues!" he said with a grin... that just kept getting bigger on half his face. The left side unzipped along the jaw and then along his throat. Tendrils began to wave from the breach as his stomach started to bulge like a sack of swelling worms. The crowd screamed in alarm as his head seemed to be in the process of turning inside out, his body jerking spasmodically and flipping over backwards.

Then Triage unloaded the beam pistol into him as I fell back. Thankfully, the incineration beams took hold and transformed the grotesque mass into a pile of dust. "Max charge cartridges. Never bother with anything else," she said idly. She took a pull on her cigarette, looking indolently at the crowd, and levitated the bottle from the dust pile. "Well, that's good enough for me. I believe her story. Anypony else want to check and see if there's a trick?" she asked, pointing the mouth of the bottle at the crowd. As one, they all leaned back as if just the empty bottle were dangerous. Triage dropped the bottle into the bucket, set the bucket into the metal box, and flipped it closed with a resounding clang.

One by one, Big Daddy, Finders Keepers, General Storm Chaser, Grace, and Paladin Stronghoof joined Triage on the stage, flanking me. "I don't know about the rest of you," Big Daddy said, the old earth pony pointing a hoof at the crowd, "but if I got a choice between this mare and that cyberized cunt, I'll take this pony right here. If any one of you has a problem with her, you got a problem with yer Daddy."

Finders gave a grin. "Well, I know that, until recently, in the last six months, scavenger casualties are down and caravan profits are up fifty percent. It wasn't the Harbingers responsible for that. I'll throw my lot in with a mare who asks for my help rather than demands it." His smile faded. "Also, remember Riverside. We lost a lot of good people there."

"Three months ago, we had a small problem in the skies," Storm Chaser said, prompting a little laugh from the crowd. "This mare, who by all accounts had no reason to care about our problems, came to the sky and threw herself into the middle of a battle with the goal of saving as many innocent lives as possible. Whichever side they might have been on. She didn't want to conquer or condemn; she just wanted to stop the fighting. If we'd had more pegasi like her, we might not have had the war. More than that, if we had more like her, we might have come down to help generations ago."

Grace gave an elegant nod of her head. "Blackjack has changed every life she's encountered, sometimes for the worse, but usually for the better. In spite of setbacks, she had never deviated from her ethos of doing better. It is an outlook that has spread beyond her. The Society is instituting reforms for the serfs that work our plantations, thanks in part to this mare's generosity and compassion." Her expression turned firm. "I saw none of that in Cognitum, the 'Blackjack' who came to us from the Core. In her was a mare who sees us all as her servants. For that, and for personal kindnesses rendered to me and my family, I stand with this mare."

Paladin Stronghoof was silent for a moment, then spoke in his deep, sonorous voice. "I know the Steel Rangers do not possess a beloved status with most of you. For far too long we hid, safe within our bunkers, protected by technology we denied to others." He lifted his head, his blue eyes hard. "We've often been met with hatred and resentment, and until recently, it has been deserved. We came to this place to restore a weapon we had no right to use. And when we were broken, by her hooves, no less, it was this glorious mare who gave us a new chance at building a future here!" He rose to his hindlegs, the light making his eyes shine and sparkles appear about his shoulders. "Never before have the Steel Rangers encountered such selfless generosity! It is a testament to—"

Triage's magic surrounded the single lock of gold atop the massive unicorn's head and yanked him back down to all fours. "Yeah. We get it. Enough of that," she said sourly, taking a pull off the cigarette. "Point is, we stand behind her. Any of you have a problem with that, say it now."

The crowd murmured back and forth to themselves. I stepped forward. "This isn't an easy place to live. In fact, I'm sure all of you have, at least once, thought how much it sucks to live here. But the Hoof is our home, and that doesn't change no matter how hard it gets. We might all be different. Different people. Different values. Different dreams. But to all of us, this place is home, and all of us are family." I turned and saw P-21 beaming on the edge of the stage. I looked back. "And whether you love your family or not, you stand by them no matter what! So that together, we all become stronger. So that together we rise up, with no one being left behind. Together we rise! Hoofington rises!"

Somepony began to stomp their hooves. Then another. A sand dog began to clap. Some more let out cheers. And then it was like a dam broke, and the amphitheatre filled with jubilation. "Holy shit, we pulled it off," Triage muttered, barely in hearing range. "How about that?" The six on stage began to shift around, murmuring to each other.

As the crowd continued to go nuts, I heard a mare say quietly, "Mother would be so happy right now." I blinked over at Glory, who had come onto the stage with P-21, Scotch Tape, Velvet Remedy, and Homage. "You did it," she almost whispered. "You brought the Hoof together."

I stared at the cheering crowd. Ganger and Society, Collegiate and Steel Ranger, ghouls and griffins, and even sand dogs and hellhounds. "Not quite. I'm missing the zebras," I answered, barely audible over the ruckus. "But give me some time." I started to speak to her, hoping this was the perfect moment to mend things between us, but she turned and walked away.

"War council now, girl," Big Daddy muttered, then addressed the crowd. "Alright. We're gonna plan the best way to stomp the Brood and the Remnant out of our valley, so just sit tight." Spirits were so high right now that even I thought it was possible.

As we trotted off the other side of the stage, I asked him, "You think we can actually do it?"

He glanced back and snorted. "Right now, hell no. There's at least five hundred Harbingers and probably five times that many Brood. But it never hurts to have high spirits."

The war council was taking place in a fancy marble rotunda next to the amphitheatre. A large round stone table occupied the center, and Grace, Triage, Finders Keepers, Paladin Stronghoof, Mayor Windclop, General Storm Chaser, Mare Do Well, and Rover were all crowded around it. There were a number of other ponies sitting further back in their own clumps. Goldenblood, Stygius, and Whisper stood off to the side. Velvet Remedy, Calamity, Homage, and Life Bloom were off on the other side. Sagittarius, Candlewick, Dazzle, Storm Front, and Xanthe formed a third knot. Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape took their seats as a fourth. I tried to ignore the overhead friezes of superior-looking unicorn stallions leading earth pony brigades into battle and slaying dragons. It was easier to pay for art than to do half the things those images presented. Instead, I rushed to Rover and gave the big augmented brute a hug. "I thought she killed you!"

"Ponies..." he said with an exasperated sigh. "Dogs dig, and fast. Riverside gone, but sand dogs still here." He made a face as he tapped my leg. "Why is pony always losing augments?"

"I didn't lose them this time, they were stolen. And I plan on getting them back!" *Along with my baby*, I added mentally.

"So, first order of business was going to be making sure you're actually Blackjack, but I think the bit on stage took care of that," Big Daddy said as he settled into his seat at the table. "Are any of you folks still not sure on that part?"

Everyone looked around to everyone else for confirmation, and then finally Big Daddy folded his hooves in front of him on the table. "So what's going on, Blackjack? We've all heard bits and pieces, but we should be sure we have the full story."

I sighed and took a deep breath. "It's a long story." Then I recounted everything from the destruction of Shadowbolt Tower to the appearance of the Nightmare Citadel. I tried to be as succinct as I possibly could. The only things that I omitted were details about Horizons and about the Eater of Souls. All they needed to know was that Cognitum wanted to fire up an unimaginably powerful machine that would either make her unstoppable or kill everyone on the planet.

After I gave my brief and answered the questions I could, it was time for Goldenblood. The scarred, sour-faced pony gave a soft-spoken and far more detailed account of where Horizons was, how it worked, when it would align to fire, and how long it would take to impact.

"Now," Calamity drawled from the side, "Maybe I'm missin' somethin' here but... why'd you build such a damned thing in the first place?"

Goldenblood took a deep breath, his mouth working a moment like he was chewing on lemons, and muttered something.

"What was that?" Homage pressed.

"Because Princess Luna was a complete cunt who had to be stopped before she took over the fucking world, okay?!" Whisper snapped from next to him.

"More or less," Goldenblood said with a resigned sigh. "Luna had to be stopped if she, or any of the Ministry Mares, became a tyrant."

"So let me get this straight," Mare Do Well rasped from inside her helmet. "You knew Luna was going completely out of control... and decided that the best thing to do was create a weapon that would *kill everypony in the world?!'*"

Goldenblood threw his hooves in the air. "I made a mistake, okay? I screwed up. I was manipulated. I made a bad choice. I am sorry that it's going to kill everyone in the world! Okay? I'm sorry!"

"Sorry. He makes a superweapon to kill everypony, and he's sorry," Mare Do Well scoffed. "Ugh... whatever. At least that explains all the bits the O.I.A. kept dumping into the M.o.A. and mysteriously withdrawing again. That drove m-- er, drove Rainbow Dash nuts," she huffed.

"Well, Rainbow Dash had the least financial acumen of the Ministry Mares. I felt she'd never notice," Goldenblood said with a shrug.

"Give a mare two centuries to figure it out," she muttered. Maybe it was the Flux I'd just drank, but everything seemed so much clearer and sharper to me. The map Stronghoof had made of the valley was laid out on the table, the red like the outer ring of a target. From Withers in the northwest, it formed an almost perfect circular arc along No Pony's Land until it met with the sea on the north east.

"Turning Goldenblood into a punishment piñata wouldn't do anything to stop Cognitum or Horizons," I said as I looked at the council. "And that has to be our focus. She's got a deal with the Legate. He has the Brood attack. The Harbingers kill them. Everyone loves her."

"And Cognitum insists we help or face dire consequences," Paladin Stronghoof said grimly, his eyes narrowing dramatically. "A diabolical plan."

"Except that the Legate's going to turn on her sooner or later. Either as soon as she leaves for the moon, or when she gets back. When that happens, the Brood is going to stop playing around. They'll slaughter everypony in the valley," I said with a frown. "We're going to have to be ready for it when it comes."

"Can the Brood really keep soaking up these casualties?" Storm Chaser asked. "Our scouts reported them taking severe hits from the Harbinger positions."

"Don't think of blanks as ponies or zebras," Triage explained. "If the bodies are recovered, the Flux can be alchemically extracted and shaped into a new blank instantly. Then a cybernetic control system is installed, combat routines implanted, and a new soldier is ready. Really, the only losses in combat so far are those on the Harbinger side."

"The Harbingers have been getting more and more insistent on resupply from the Finders," Keeper said with a snort. "I know they might have the fanciest guns in the Wasteland, but they're using up all the bullets for them."

"Which means that when the Brood stops playing around, they're going to push in hard," I said as I glared at the map.

"But how will we do any better than the Harbingers?" Grace asked as she too stared down at the map. "If the Brood are effectively limitless, there's no way we can win either."

"We can win because we're going to be smarter than 'shoot and then shoot some more'," I said, turning to Triage. "They must be being produced by Trees of Life; if we destroy the trees, no more bottomless reserves, right?"

"Right," she said with a nod, and the glow of her magic lifted a pen to the map. "There're three bunkers producing the Brood. Here, here, and here." She drew three X's, one west of Fluttershy Medical Center, one south of Elysium, and one northeast of Happyhorn. "If we can get some ponies in there and destroy the trees, we'll still have thousands of Brood to contend with but won't have to worry about them getting endless reinforcements."

"That's not going to be easy," General Storm Chaser said as she regarded the three. "Any strike teams going in there would be facing severe odds. Infiltration would be extremely risky, too."

I took in the sight of the ponies gathered and a chill ran up my spine as I realized that whatever we planned here might mean the deaths of friends. "Leave it up to the Zodiacs," Sagittarius said. "We'll take out those bunkers."

"Tough as you guys are, you can't take all three," Dazzle said. "The Reapers can get in there and tear down a bunker or two. Right, Big Daddy?" The old earth pony chuckled and nodded. "Candle, Storm Front, myself, and a few others should be able to get in and out without too much trouble."

For a moment, Sagittarius seemed ready to argue, but then he smirked. "Bet we get our bunker first."

"You're on," Candlewick rasped with an eager grin.

Xanthe shifted and fidgeted. "Well... I mean... we're not Reapers or Zodiacs, but my friends and I should be able to get the third." Two dozen ponies stared at her, and the stealth suit she wore chirped an 'uh oh'.

"Who are you again?" Triage asked, arching a brow.

"This is Xanthe," I said as I trotted to her. "She and her friends took down Red Eye's forces at Paradise Mall. How are you doing, Xanthe?"

"Cursed," she replied with a tragic sigh. "But well. I am glad you are still alive, Maiden." I grinned and gave her a hug, the zebra stiffening under my embrace. "Well... what's a little more curse?" she muttered.

"These three can get the bunkers," I said, turning back to the table. "But that's still going to leave us with a couple thousand Brood to deal with. How can we make that number more manageable?"

Triage took a thoughtful drag of her cigarette. "Well, since the Brood are more like organic robots than anything else, they've got to have some kind of control system that lets them act in an organized fashion."

"Then step two is their command and coordination. How can we disrupt it?" I asked as I looked to the smarter ponies.

"They've got to be using some kind of broadcast system. Maybe even the MASEBS," Homage said as she peered more closely at the map. "I used every backdoor code I know, and I still couldn't get control of the valley's towers. Somepony has installed a superuser that's locked all root privileges systemwide, and I don't have the time or expertise to remove it."

"So we can't shut them all down at once. If we could jam it, though, then instead of facing one monolithic force, we'd be fighting thousands of isolated cyberzebras. Much more doable." I turned to Mare Do Well. "What do you think?"

"Sabotaging the enemy's communications? Sure. Fliers could do it. We can't use the MASEBS anyway; might as well deny them access too. No big," Mare Do Well said casually, getting a curious look

from Goldenblood. The purple armored mare straightened a bit. "We'd need some help for the fireteams disabling them."

"Why not just destroy them with one of those Raptors?" Whisper asked. "Boom. Gone. Problem solved."

"Aside from the fact that Cognitum might have two Raptors of her own," Storm Chaser said, "if we destroy the towers, they'll go to a network of smaller broadcasters. If we can jam the airwaves with garbage, they won't be able to fall back on secondary broadcast systems. We'll need some designated channels for our own communications, of course."

"What about the Legate himself?" Calamity asked. "Seems like one good shot'll take the head off this here serpent."

"The Legate..." I paused, thinking of how to best put it. "He's immortal. Shooting him in the head won't kill him. I know. I tried it already."

Calamity, Velvet, Homage, and Life Bloom gave sickly smiles before they took in the utterly grim looks on everypony's face. "Y'all are serious? Y'all got folk out here that won't die?"

Big Daddy, Grace, and Triage gave a little shrug. "It happens," Big Daddy said simply. "I've dealt with a few in my time. Rampage was that way."

Calamity sputtered, "This place is damned screwed up!"

A multitude of ponies chuckled, along with myself. "Welcome to Hoofington, Calamity," I said with a smile.

"Even if the Legate is immortal, he's got to have a support staff," Velvet said with a troubled frown. "...Unless he has some kind of direct control like the Goddess did."

"Gee. That's a wonderful thought. While he is immortal, though, I don't think he has that level of control, or will. I was in Unity. The alicorns had their own semi-independence while in the hive. If the Brood are acting as just organic robots, then it's different. So somepony has to be actually supporting the combat troops."

"The Remnant is handling it," Sagittarius said, but then the green unicorn frowned. "Though I can't say they seem to be all that happy about it."

"So we just go behind the lines and wipe out the zebras. Simple," Whisper said with a happy shrug.

"Not so simple," I said firmly, before Velvet Remedy could object. "The Remnant are victims of the Legate and Cognitum too. We need to get in touch with Lancer and Sekashi. They have to be working on this." Velvet Remedy seemed very approving of my comment.

"Even if we don't directly target the personnel, we should try to take out their weapons," Stronghoof said, pointing to the southeast corner of the map. "They're bringing weapons from Dawn Bay by the cartload to a depot here, southeast of the Luna Space Center. It appears to be their base of operations." He glowered at the paper. "Short of using a balefire bomb or megaspell, any attempts to wipe it out will be dearly paid for."

"Still, an unarmed Brood is a lot less dangerous than an armed one," Storm Chaser said, then thumped her hoof on the table. "Damn you, Hoarfrost and Afterburner! A few Raptors could take out that depot easily if they didn't have to deal with enemy aircraft."

"Since when is anything easy for us?" I asked with a wan smile. "How many Raptors do we have?"

"Three that are combat capable: the *Sleet*, the *Cyclone*, and the *Gale*-- ahem, the *Rampage*. They need at least another month of love and care to call them combat *ready*, though. The *Castellanus*... well..." Storm Chaser shook her head. "She won't drop out of the sky, but that's about it."

"What about attacking Dawn Bay directly?" Grace asked. "Could that draw them off? Is it even possible?"

"If we'd had the HMS *Celestia*, possibly." Stronghoof blew through his mustache. "Since we don't..."

"The Legate probably wouldn't care, even if we did. He's concerned with this battle. He wants to wipe us all out and call it a day," I said with a frown.

Storm Chaser regarded the map. "We're going to have to pull back defensively. Concentrate our vulnerable populations into more easily defended camps and keep a line so the camps don't get cut off." She reached down and tapped the map. "Stable 99, Megamart, Miramare, the Halfheart headquarters, Elysium, Scrapyard, Meatlocker, the Nightmare Citadel, and the Burners' headquarters," she said, gesturing to each in turn as she moved counter clockwise around the map.

Finders Keepers rubbed his chin. "And if we can't hold those, we're going to need somewhere to fall back to."

"Stable 99 and the Citadel have stable doors to hide behind," Whisper pointed out.

"Right. So their fighters can fall back and keep fighting." Big Daddy nodded. "The Ironmare station on the bay is another place we can fall back to. Our arena. The Skyport. The Collegiate. And Chapel."

Triage sighed and tapped the end of her cigarette on the table as she regarded me coolly. "Any chance we could hold out in the Core? It was made to be a fortress."

"No." I shook my head. "It's a deathtrap. The Enervation will liquefy you in a few seconds. As far as I know, that's the plan. Push us all the way into the Core and call it a day."

"Well... it's going to be brutal. We're completely surrounded. We're going to need more fighters. Lots more," Storm Chaser said, glowering at the map. "This is shaping up to be an organizational nightmare."

I sighed, tapping my hoof against the floor, before looking over at Velvet. If we just had LittlePip to help us coordinate things, we might... wait... "Stronghoof, how many broadcasters did they get out of Shadowbolt Tower and take to Stable 99?"

"A few hundred," he said, and then his eyes alighted. "Ah! You want to distribute them across the Hoof so we can organize our defense more effectively." I grinned and nodded.

Storm Chaser rubbed her chin. "With me organizing our air forces and Big Daddy organizing our ground forces, we might be able to pull it off. I will have to be in charge of course," she said matter-of-factly. "We can't squander the air power we have left."

"You in charge. You're organizing a few Raptors and flight squads. I'll be in charge of every gang and soldier in the Hoof. I'm the one calling the shots here, missy," he snapped back.

Stronghoof rose to his hooves. "I am not a neophyte to tactics myself, and I would be less likely to employ the brutal tactics you favor."

"Right. Till you fall back on the tried and true tactic of jumping in your bunker and closing the door, leaving us all alone," Triage sneered.

"Enough!" Windclop shouted. "It seems simple enough to me that Blackjack will be the one in charge. Right, Blackjack?"

But now I frowned. "No. I can't. I have to stop Horizons, or all of this is pointless." I saw the defense we needed most falling apart. Somepony had to manage all of these factions so that we had a chance. My eyes surveyed the present ponies and stopped on the perfect candidate.

"Him," I said, pointing a hoof at Goldenblood.

The silence was almost louder than the squabbling it replaced.

"Him?!" Mare Do Well growled. "Blackjack, have you lost your mind? That's Goldenblood! That's... you... you want him in charge?"

"I do," I said simply as I trotted over to stand beside the scarred unicorn.

"Are you insane?" Goldenblood hissed under his breath.

"Jury's still out," I said with a strained grin. "Goldenblood here liaised with all the ministries," I said more loudly, "managing resources to keep Equestria going. He's a neutral party. He doesn't favor any one of you over any other. No axes to grind. No reason to stab any backs. You can trust him to get you through this."

Mare Do Well made choking noises inside her helmet. I fixed a stare on her. "Unless you want to run the defense?"

I doubted a Ministry Mare would fare much better in getting a half dozen factions to cooperate, even if she hadn't been quite as controversial as Twilight or Rarity. Still, it was a plan B if she insisted on spiking plan A. The purple-power-armored pony sat back, then pointed a hoof at the scarred stallion. "You better not screw up this time, Goldenblood. Fool me once... shame on... just don't mess it up!"

"Is this an acceptable compromise for everypony?" I asked as I looked from one to the next. "Goldenblood will keep everypony coordinated and working together." None of them liked it, but all of them could accept it.

"Blackjack, are you sure—" Goldenblood began.

I put my hooves on his shoulders. "I want everypony to live. Can you do that?"

His mouth worked as his yellow eyes stared around. "I... I can try."

"That's all I want. Keep them from each other's throats and keep every one of them alive. Listen to Big Daddy and Storm Chaser on tactics, but above all keep everyone alive. Don't let anypony mess around with anypony else. No backstabby. No betrayal. None of that." I took another deep breath. "Can you do that?"

He fidgeted for a few more seconds, closed his eyes as if searching his soul, and then gave a firm nod. "Good," I said, patting him on the shoulder. Then I grinned. "How'd you like my speech?"

His face was pensive, and he took a few seconds to answer. "It seemed hauntingly familiar. Hoofington rises?" He cocked his eyebrow.

"What? I was terrified. It just seemed like an appropriate theme to rip off," I said with a roll of my eyes.

"Well, I hope your plagiarism won't come back to bite you in the tail. After all, look what it did for me," he said, staring in the direction of the Core. The city was so still and quiet. No lightning. No rain. Silent.

Was it wrong of me to prefer the rain and storm?

I stared down at the map. We needed more fighters. Needed... I furrowed my brow. "Velvet? I need to borrow some alicorns."

(Author's notes: Okay! Another chapter down! This is another chapter that started to grow on me and I had to cut it off. Next chapter should finally bring about other things. We are getting closer to the ending... promise. Really! This chapter was very hard to write and I'm sorry if it upset people. All these chapters are just going to get rougher to the very end as Blackjack works to try and stop Cognitum.

I'd like to give the usual round of thanks: to Kkat for creating FoE; to Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine for editing it; to everyone who put in the time to read it; and to everyone that gives feedback either at Cloudsville or FimFic. It's very appreciated. Also, if anyone wants to help support the story, bits can be donated through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com.

Two other pieces of info! First, some incredibly talented and generous musical artists have made a Project Horizons Club soundtrack. It was supposed to get me to Bronycon this year but, sadly, that's just not in the cards. Still, it is greatly appreciated and can be picked up at: <http://hoofingtonrises.bandcamp.com> for seven dollars.

Secondly, I have a new story project I'm working on though FimFic. <http://www.fimfiction.net/story/204342/broken-accords> It's essentially a typically overly complex and horribly written story. If you've enjoyed Horizons, hopefully you will enjoy it too.

Again, thank you.)

(Heartshine: This was a fun and painful chapter to edit. Gotta love romantic situations! Also I twitched so much with Blackjack being 'glazed.' That stuff is hell to get out of your hair...)

(Bronode: If anyone lost their lunches this chapter, that's my fault. I pushed for most of the drippy descriptions. I'm not sorry.)

(swicked: I enjoy working on these things way too much. And the 'champ' has finally been unseated! Long live our sexy blue demigod of love and his many-horned crown of pre-lubricated, vibrating appendages!)

(Hinds: So... I think that the chapter lives up to its number. There's a lot of good non-sex-related stuff in it too, of course (I'm interested to hear if anyone has thoughts on Blackjack's speech; there's a lot going on there), but... yeah. Chapter 69, everyone!)