

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 72: Captive Audience

"You guys have gotta get me out of here! I'm gonna climb the walls!"

"Ooh, just like a spider! Did the crash somehow give her super-duper spider powers?"

For a time I couldn't measure, the suffocating hoof of acceleration crushed down on my spine and pinned my limbs to the floor while the roar of the engines drowned out all of my thoughts. I struggled for every breath, my body fighting my mind's desire for oblivion. I wanted it to push harder, crush me down till nothing was left. I was thankful for the agonizing respite, but it tapered off far too soon. I lay there, aching and throbbing and trapped with that horrible moment.

Events replayed again and again in my mind, as if trying to correct a horrible mistake that had been made. I kept attempting to edit those thoughts through force of will alone, trying desperately to see Glory soaring to the rocket seconds before the launch... to see her scramble for safety with the rest of the zebras... to see a protective bubble of magic envelop the control station...

Something...

Anything...

Gradually, I was forced to acknowledge the reality around me. I heard Scotch Tape sobbing inconsolably as P-21 did all he could to console her anyway. I cracked an eye open, spotting him reaching as far as the harness would allow. There were no tears in his eyes, only a sad knowledge. I envied his calloused heart and loathed my petty emotions in turn. He glanced at me, and in his eyes was another tie between us: *I know what it's like to lose somepony you love right before your eyes.*

Freezing fluid had splashed everywhere when he'd pulled out the hose, and I guessed that he had burns on his back and flanks, too. Being sprayed with it hadn't burned him like a flamer would. The frost was already melting, but it was clear from the mats of fur missing from his limbs that he was in great pain. Bald, red-raw patches of skin looked like so much thawing meat.

I closed my eyes again as I heard Scotch Tape snuffle. "I'm sorry. I killed her. I am so sorry."

"You... killed her?" I asked as I sat up and felt myself bob upward, my body incredibly light. Any other time I would have welcomed and marveled at the sensation. Scotch immediately fell silent, pressing her face into her father's outstretched hoof, the only part of her that would reach. "What did you do, Scotch?"

"She saved our lives, Blackjack. She saved your life. That's what she did," P-21 said, his voice low, thick, heavy, and reasonable. I didn't want reason. I wanted to vent the pain and bile coiled up inside me. This was worse than Lacunae. At least with Lacunae I could feel like it had been for a greater good. That her two hundred years of being the Goddess's garbage dump had entitled her to an end to her pain. Now I wanted to hurt somepony to get the pain out of me, and the only targets I had were the two who deserved it least.

"What. Did. You. Do?!" I demanded, tears and spittle floating away from me and lingering in the air like miserable little stars.

"I overrode the hatch. I kept my hoof on the button to close it," she whimpered, looking at me with dread. Rage and horrible words were ripped to pieces as I hissed through my teeth.

"Why?" I spat.

"Because if that hatch hadn't been locked down when the rocket took off, we would have all died, not just Glory," P-21 said firmly, but with compassion still in his voice. Still, I could see the warning in his gaze. "If the hatch had come open during flight, we would have all died. If it had aborted the launch, we would have all died. You can't be on the verge of launch, stop everything, and then take off again a minute later."

"I could have saved her!" I screamed at him.

"How?" he shouted back, and with that one, simple word, the blazing indignation in me died. His voice returned to reasonable levels. "How, Blackjack? Did your teleportation kick back on? Do you think she could have healed her wing and flown back here fast enough? And if we had died, then *everypony* would have." His words were a cold, smothering blanket on my rage, dousing the flames and leaving only smoldering char in their wake. "Besides," he added, averting his eyes. "I killed her."

"No..." Scotch Tape moaned, shaking her head. "I did it. I..." But she trailed off, left staring at her hooves.

"I should have stayed with her," he said, low and evenly. "If I'd been there, she would have been able to focus on the launch. We might have been able to take all the Brood out sooner and get her out of there like she planned! But I stayed with you."

"Daddy. That Legate would have killed Blackjack and destroyed the rocket if you hadn't been there," Scotch Tape said, then twisted in her harness to pull out a healing potion. She started to pass it to him, but the bottle slipped from her hooves. Rather than fall to the deck, it spun away slowly through the air, before bouncing dully off the far wall. "What the hay?" the filly asked, and then noticed at all the little tears floating in the air. "Oh..."

I reached out with my magic to float the errant potion to P-21. He drank it immediately, and I pulled myself to sit on the other side of him, hooking my legs into the supports of his couch to keep from drifting away. "You don't really think you killed her, do you?" I said with a little mirthless smile.

"No, but considering how you two were acting, it seemed like the thing to do," he said as skin slowly regenerated over the raw patches. "The Legate killed Glory. Not us. She wouldn't want us to be mad at ourselves or each other. She'd want us to look ahead."

But how could I look ahead when behind hurt so much? How could I look ahead to a future without her in it? A tomorrow with no Glory? I pushed off from the couch, floating across the air and reaching one of the windows. Don't think about it. That hurt least of all, right now.

Below us I could see the grand arc of the world, a mottle of blue, green, gray, and brown. I thought we might be over the zebra lands now, or maybe somewhere else in the world. Wherever we were, I didn't want to visit. One area was illuminated by a fiery vortex that seemed to gyre slowly amid molten mountains and what I thought might have been the outlines of a city. Another flickered and flashed like a constant lightning discharge. Another was a dark blot, like ink, staining the land. Megaspells, I realized. Megaspells running amok even two centuries later. Who knew what other effects were down there, making life hell for the inhabitants?

"How is she floating like that?" Scotch Tape asked as I floated above the ground, tail and mane waving as if I were underwater.

"We're falling," P-21 answered, getting an alarmed expression from his daughter. "Think about when I shoot a grenade from Persuasion. The grenade rises through the air, reaches its apex, and falls. The bigger the charge, the further the grenade flies." Scotch Tape nodded, seeming to follow what he

was saying. "Imagine if I had a charge big enough to throw the grenade over the horizon. If there wasn't any air to slow it down, where would it land?"

Scotch furrowed her brow for a second then looked back to her father. "It wouldn't. It'd just keep flying over the horizon." Her eyes widened. "Ohhh!" Then she frowned again. "But... what about the sun and the moon and stuff?"

"Magic," I answered, getting a groan from both of them. "No, it was in one of those magic books of Twilight's. A disertingy. The natural magic of the Equus system keeps the sun and moon and other natural satellites in their own magical spheres; the moon is in the first, the sun in the second, and other planets further and further out."

"If magic keeps the sun and moon in the sky, what would it do for something like the Eater?" P-21 asked gravely.

Huh. If the Eater had enough magic, would it just float back into space again? It'd have to find a way to push through a mile of rock first, though. "Maybe. I never thought about it." And I tried, and failed. Glory would... and that stopped my speculation cold. "I don't know." I turned to Scotch Tape. "So this rocket runs on magic?"

"A little. Part magic and part physics. I don't really know how, though," Scotch Tape admitted. "I can kinda guess how it works a little, but not why. I think I have more of a civil engineering cutie mark and less a gadgetry cutie mark." She twisted, as if consulting her flank for confirmation. Then she undid the restraint clasp and gave an exploratory push. Instantly she started to backflip slowly in the air. "Whoa!" she shouted, waving her hooves as she attempted an awkward hybridization of walking and flapping in the air. "Daddy, you have to try this!"

"No. I don't," he said as he leaned back against the couch, looking decidedly green. "You have fun, though," he said with a permissive wave of a hoof. "Don't hit the self-destruct button by accident or anything."

I turned my back to both of them, moving away from the window and around to the next. The sun blazed as it came around the curve of the planet, much smaller but far more brilliant than the planet it illuminated. A star like any other, its magnificence undimmed by remoteness. The glare stabbed at my eyes, and so I moved further around to the next window.

Stars. So many stars. I stared out at them, and they seemed to gaze back into me. All those I'd seen before, few as they were, flickered. But these were steady points of light, and so many, the sky becoming ever more full with them as my eyes recovered from the sun's radiance. I could see how some might see them as evil portents, cold and remote and cruel, but to me they felt warmer. They were remote because they had to be. They were trying to light up all that blackness and fill it with color and life. It was all so vast and dark, but it was still filled with endless beauty.

My hoof brushed against a rough burr on the otherwise smooth metal around the porthole, and I glanced down in dull curiosity. 'For Tarot. May she see the future.' I ran my hoof back and forth over the words. Marigold had been here in this very rocket. The first mare to leave the world by pony ingenuity and return safely. She'd brought Twilight Sparkle's baby all the way up to the stars during a time of war and strife, in the hope of seeing a better future. She'd been rewarded with scandal, snide insinuation, accusation, the end of her career, humiliation... and a daughter. Tarot's future had ended in a stable, and ten generations later, here I was, walking in Marigold's hoofsteps. Returning to the moon.

Scotch Tape bumped against my back. "Blackjack," she said in delicate tones. "I'm sorry..."

"She's not dead," I contradicted, not taking my eyes off the stars.

"Blackjack," P-21 began in worried tones.

"She's not!" I said as I whirled on them... and had to grab at the edges around me to stop myself. I had to brush my mane out of my face and take a moment to inhale deeply. I regarded both of them, staring with matching expressions of concern. "She's not."

"Blackjack," P-21 repeated, this time in resigned tones.

"She isn't dead," I repeated firmly. "Think of all the stuff I survived by the skin of my teeth. She's smart and resourceful. She'd find a way to survive." I couldn't take his skeptical, sad gaze any longer and turned back to the comforting glow of the stars. "She's not dead. She never gave up on me, even after that megaspell. I won't give up on her." And until I held her corpse in my embrace, I wouldn't believe it.

"Blackjack," Scotch Tape said in a voice so like her father I wanted to scream. I turned to snap but halted at her smile. "Maybe you're right. I mean, that place was huge! It had magical fields that could hold back a rocket's exhaust. They even stopped explosions. Maybe there was something similar around the control center." She held my shoulder and turned to face her father. "And that Lightbringer, she survived a balefire bomb that was right underneath her!" She turned from him to me and back again, her smile becoming more strained, tears in the corner of her eyes. "It's possible... right?"

Her desperation steadied me, and I held her firmly, hugging her close. "Yeah," I murmured in her ear. "It's possible." I started as I felt two more hooves circle around both of us. I twisted my neck in surprise, meeting P-21's gentle, reassuring gaze as he held the both of us.

"It's possible," he echoed, and pressed his head to mine. For a moment, I was content to just float, comforted by the press and warmth of love and hope, no matter how thin and pale that hope was. I gave my first sincere smile as I caressed his neck.

"No sudden motions. It'll spoil the moment if I vomit on both of you," he muttered as we floated in the rocket.

The comment made me laugh. A tiny, short, pathetic laugh, but a laugh none the less. Since when did he become the funny one? I carefully pushed us all back to our seats with my magic. I was feeling a little queasy too, and I hoped that we'd get to the moon before any of us had to use the bathroom!

It was amazing how little things could help so much.

When we were back down, P-21 regarded me. "Blackjack, do you have a memory orb you can go into for a while? I need to talk to Scotch Tape privately." I blinked in surprise, and so too did the olive filly. Then she suddenly seemed wary.

"Um... maybe?" I thought of the orbs I already had, then thought of something even better. I withdrew the Perceptitron. It was a little battered around the edges, but all the little lightbulbs and whirly bits still lit up when I plugged it into my PipBuck. I checked my copious list of PipBuck tags and frowned. Right there at the top was Glory's. It glowed at me with awful temptation. All I would have to do was put it on and find out if she was alright... or not...

And if I put in that tag and found her dead... could I take it?

My hoof trembled, eyes tearing up as I stared. Right now, I didn't know. Right now, I wanted to believe so much that she was alive. I needed to. But if she were dead, or alive and dying... no. I felt myself falling apart just thinking about it. So I picked another tag at random, and let my world swoosh away.

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Of course, I ended up in Goldenblood. I couldn't get away from him, even if I wanted to. His body felt wrong. There was a heartbeat, but it was a tepid, reptilian beat. He breathed at a glacial pace, like a flywheel that still possessed just enough inertia to creep long after the motor driving it had died. Even the burning pain throughout his chest for most of his life had dimmed to the consistency of wet charcoal.

I was rather surprised to see him in the exact same conference room at the Skyport where Lighthooves had once confronted General Storm Chaser. It made sense, though. Charming as Star House was, it was no place to conduct a war from. The chamber had been transformed. A half dozen green alicorns sat in a row, munching on biscuits as Velvet Remedy paced from one to another. A blue alicorn sat boredly beside the table, projecting a tiny illusory display of the Hoof, complete with tiny glowing blue ponies and red zebras. As Goldenblood read a report about the Halfhearts fighting against increasing numbers of Brood, a purple alicorn winked in, passed over several notes, conferred briefly with Velvet, and then winked away again.

"A report from Stable 99. Five hundred estimated Brood from the coast through the Boneyard and down to the Fluttershy Medical Center." As she spoke, she looked pointedly at the blue, who sighed and flashed her horn. The illusion added a wall of red along the northwest corner of the map. An almost solid ring of red encapsulated everything. Over on the southeast side hovered tiny glowing Raptors.

"Thank you, Velvet. Without your children, this wouldn't have been possible," Goldenblood rasped as he took the papers and glanced at each one almost faster than I could read. "The Brood might be blocking our communications, but they can't stop them."

"And they're not being used as weapons. That's all I asked," Velvet said, still looking a touch disturbed.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"I just... didn't expect we'd separate like this. It feels wrong," she replied as she rubbed a leg, looking pensively to the door.

"Like the ministries," he murmured as he read a few scrawled lines on one of the notes giving numbers of enemy soldiers. Velvet swallowed and nodded. He gave a small smile. "I know the feeling. Honestly, I contemplated tasking the four of you with tracking down and stopping the Legate, but since the explosion, he's been missing. And the fact is, right now, you're more effective apart than together."

"Is that what you told the Ministry Mares two centuries ago?" Velvet asked sharply. He glanced at her and saw the determined scowl on her face. "I've heard the rumors."

He returned his eyes to the paper. "I was a different pony back then. I made mistakes, had the wrong priorities, trusted myself too much and others too little." This note talked about scavengers in the Core. "The fact is that I didn't know the Ministry Mares beyond reputation. I didn't... respect them... as I should have. I thought their lives were secondary to Luna's reign and Equestria's survival. That they were disposable. I was in... *gross* error." He sighed and closed his eyes. "The fact is, I anticipated prison time for Applejack and Pinkie and executions for Twilight Sparkle and Rainbow Dash. An 'accident' for Rarity. Fluttershy would, of course, be pardoned."

"You're disgusting," Velvet said contemptuously.

"Indeed," he replied evenly. "Which is why, this time, I'm trying to do better." His magic scribbled out a note. "This message needs to go to Big Daddy. Scavenging is fine. Encourage it and seize anything useful they find. Refugees seeking shelter are not. Tell him to encourage the scavengers to

embellish the stories about the monsters and killer robots that dwell there. After all, the scavengers don't want competition with refugees," he said as he finished scribbling out the note.

"That's doing better? Lying to them?" Velvet Remedy asked, clearly unimpressed.

"Well, I could order them shot," he replied, deadpan, and then added, "You know. After a formal apology." Velvet shook her head and trotted back to the row of green alicorns muttering under her breath.

General Storm Chaser trotted in. "I have good news. That zebra doesn't have a clue how to use his forces."

Goldenblood frowned at the map. "Despite all evidence to the contrary."

The pegasus gave a grim smile. "Actually, yes. He's an outstanding fighter, but he makes a piss-poor general. With the forces he commands, he should be able to annihilate us with ease. Use his flyers to attack our flanks without giving us a chance to respond. Make rear sorties. Target our strong points with pinpoint strikes. Feel out weaknesses and punch holes in our lines. *Then* drop the hammer of a full assault on our disorganized, scattered, leaderless remains. I could beat us in about two hours with all the forces at his command. One if I forced the Raptors to retreat. Instead, he's encapsulated the entire city and is making a single uniform ground and air advance." She sighed as she looked at all the red. "If we weren't outnumbered ten to one, I'd go on the offensive."

"And that, I assume, is where the good news ends?" Goldenblood asked dryly.

"Unfortunately, yes," the gray pegasus admitted, sighing and shaking her head. "With his numbers, he doesn't need tactics. And we're already seeing their reinforcement patterns matching our expectations: a momentary decline in combat force is followed by immediate resupply. We're fighting a hurricane: no matter how long we flap, it keeps pushing us back. It's not warfare so much as crude attrition." She jabbed a hoof at a red dot, one of three, glowing in the air. The image flickered as her hoof made contact with the projection, and the blue alicorn grumbled. "Sorry," the general said to the alicorn.

The blue huffed and rolled her eyes. "The Goddess is not pleased with being used as a projector!"

"You're not the Goddess, Bubblegum. Remember?" Velvet reminded the alicorn kindly. The alicorn's blue ears folded, and she dropped her eyes.

Storm Chaser gave her a comforting smile. "What you're doing is appreciated, though." She gestured to the display once again, careful not to hit the glowing images. "In any case, the lack of tactics is good. He might be performing some kind of complicated feint, but I'm just not seeing it. Since we're screwed if he really is up to something, I'll bank on him being as stupid as he seems. I'll take a strong but stupid opponent over a weak but intelligent one any day."

"It is a refreshing bit of good news. Until the bunkers are eliminated, shall we proceed as planned?" Goldenblood asked.

"Dig in, hold on, and fall back in unison," the general replied. "We're going to lose a lot of territory in the meantime." Then, addressing Velvet Remedy, "But it will minimize casualties."

"Thank the Goddesses for that," Velvet murmured. "I hate war."

"I don't," the General said grimly, getting a dirty look from Velvet. "Oh, don't mistake me. I don't love it either. I respect war. War is a state of change. If it hadn't been for your LittlePip setting off our war with the surface, the Enclave would have continued to stagnate. The war, horrible as it was, has

forced us to come to terms with a new reality. So I look upon it as a hurricane: it's terrible to be in, but it clears the skies after its passing." That seemed to give Velvet a little bit to think about.

"Clear skies aren't much good to the ponies who didn't make it out of the storm," Goldenblood pointed out.

Velvet Remedy chewed her lip. "You're certain that Blackjack got out on that last rocket?"

"Meatlocker is sending in ghoulish teams to extract any survivors before the Brood cut off the ruins. If they find her... well, I guess we'd better pray Cognitum is right," Goldenblood said. "Otherwise, this will all be for naught."

"Do you expect to find friendly survivors?" Velvet asked. "That blast... I..." She shook her head. "When LittlePip talked about it, I didn't really understand what she went through. And she was in a chamber designed to survive that explosion, and very nearly didn't." Velvet gave a little tremble. "She... she lost a leg." A tiny note of horror was in her voice.

"She was fortunate to be able to regrow it. I don't know if Blackjack's blank body would be as resilient." Goldenblood hung his head. "I can only hope that if there were any friendly forces caught in the explosion they either died quickly or found proper shelter. Now, I need updates from the Burners about the northeast. They've been silent for too long, and we need to check to see if they need pegasus reinforcements."

"Just like old days," Storm Chaser murmured.

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I cut the connection, feeling a migraine starting. Okay. That wasn't exactly as optimistic as I'd hoped they'd be about survivors. I'd rather have heard something like 'Oh yeah, sure, balefire bombs! Pfft, hardly a risk at all.' I heard P-21 and Scotch Tape still talking, the filly sniffing. I pushed the helmet back enough to see him cradling her, holding her in his hooves as he talked too softly for me to hear. A younger me would have listened in. Instead, I entered in another PipBuck tag, and the world went swirling away once more.

oooOOOooo

Okay! This was a little more intense than I anticipated! This body corkscrewed through the air, twisting around as bullets zipped around it. No thundering heartbeat. No gasping for breath. Only the barest hint of straining muscles. There was sensation of movement, but the body's exertion was absent. Still, the power armor and natural strength of the body I was in couldn't be denied. A glance back, past a snapping purple cape, at three cyberwinged zebras flying behind—

Suddenly she... or a very unfortunate stallion... flipped vertical, hooves and wings spread wide, abruptly braking in the air. The Brood directly behind her didn't react in time as the body I occupied arched and flipped backwards. Two armored hooves looped around the zebra's neck. An instant later came a powerful jerk, the zebra's head drawn all the way back to his flanks with a resounding snap. Her body stole momentum from the Brood flyer for a few seconds, then released and banked away sharply to the left as the Brood tumbled to the earth like a broken bird.

The second target had stopped short, firing at her as she spiraled in, the streams of bullets in a deadly dance with her approach. Some bullets found their mark, sparking and thudding into the armor that covered her, punching numb, dull holes in the meat beneath and ripping tatters out of the cape. She closed in on the Brood's side, hooking her hooves around the gun in its battle saddle, gripping it like a lever and slamming her rear legs into its head while it continued to fight. Twisting the second Brood in the

air, she turned it like a shield towards the third, who was callously strafing both her and the body of its comrade.

As the cyberzebra's metal wings began to spasm, she pumped her own and drove the second Brood right into the face of the third before it could evade. As it struggled to untangle itself, she flipped over his head and landed on his back. She braced her rear hooves against its guns, hooked her front hooves around the base of his wildly flapping wings, and stood. With a horrible wet noise and a shriek of metal, she tore the wings right off the third Brood's back. The pair tumbled down to join the first.

A few dozen pegasi clad in Enclave armor hovered aghast nearby. One carried a rather uncomfortable-looking Homage on his back, Spitfire's Thunder a clue to his identity. The cowpony hat glued to the top of his helmet didn't hurt either. "Whoa," came Calamity's voice as he stared on. A green alicorn flying in the back nodded her agreement.

"What? It's basic aerial hoof to hoof combat. No biggie," Mare Do Well replied, then looked at the massive S.P.P. tower to the south of the Core. Like a hive, it buzzed with Brood. "That might be a biggie though." She didn't take her eyes off the swarm. About three quarters of the way up the tower was a ring with a multitude of dishes and antennas pointed out at the Wasteland. "You sure this is the one they're using?"

"Mostly," Homage replied, and Mare Do Well glanced back at her tapping on her PipBuck. "It's definitely got the strongest interference. I think it's our best bet to take down the Brood's network."

"Right," Mare Do Well said as she studied the S.P.P. tower. "So how do we get in there?"

"I can pick them off one at a time," Calamity said confidently, then balked. "Well... if I got perfect headshots a hundred times in a row... and they obliged by hanging back while I worked through 'em... for a few hours..."

"We can do what you did," a mare with Twister's voice offered. "Lure out stragglers and take them out in small groups. Winnow them down."

"There's only so many stragglers," Dusk said. "Hard to lure those without bringing them all."

"We could always try for a frontal assault," drawled Boomer, drawing helmeted looks that I could only imagine as glares. "What? I finally got more missiles loaded on me than I ever dreamed! I wanna use 'em!"

Mare Do Well studied the swarm defending the tower. "We'll need a diversion. I'll get her inside. Any of you have StealthBucks?"

"I do," a stallion said as he moved to the front of the herd... er... flock? Flerd? I really needed to ask GI— He wore curious Enclave armor that seemed to bear Neighvarro styling but had some clear modifications to it. "Never leave home without one, if I can help it."

"Oh really, Windsheer?" Calamity asked with a bit of an edge in his voice.

"Yes really, little brother. I also never leave home without a beam rifle, a dozen optimally charged cells, my PipBuck, a half dozen healing potions, and my arcane toolkit," Windsheer countered calmly. "Knowing that I was coming to a potential warzone, I made sure I brought a whole lot more than *that*." Calamity gave a sharp snort, but Windsheer went on to Mare Do Well. "Also, you're dealing with the S.P.P. Since I'm one of the few in the skies with some knowledge of those kinds of pre-war information technologies, you'll want to bring me along."

"I swear, he was adopted," Calamity grumbled, shaking his head.

"That's one. Anypony else have some StealthBucks?" Mare Do Well asked as she looked at the other soldiers.

"We do," a mare said in a synthetic voice as she and two companions drew close. Something about the fluidity of their armor's movements made me wonder. They hovered as if the metal covering them were skin, and normal power armor didn't need levitation talismans in the wings.

I wasn't the only one to notice, either. "You... you're augmented?" Twister asked. The mare nodded. "I thought all of you died with the tower."

"We were close enough to the medical ponies that they were able to save us when our strings were snapped, and they took us with them on the last Raptor out before the tower blew," the lead mare said with a nod of her head. "If your goal is stealth, we will assist."

Mare Do Well stared at the hovering trio, taking in their integrated beam rifles. The longer I looked, the clearer it was. "You three have a name?"

"We don't go by our old names," the mare answered in that synthetic monotone. "I'm Silver. These are Cobalt and Steel." She gestured to the two behind her with a nod of her head.

"I don't have a penis, by the way," said the one on the left, Steel. "Just so you know," he added in a buzzing synthetic voice.

The other, Cobalt, covered his visor with a hoof.

"Good to know," Mare Do Well said evenly, then regarded the swarm. "So here's my plan. The six of us will take Homage and go high around behind the tower. Boomer can hit them with his missiles. Draw their attention. Fall back and pull them away from where we want to enter. We get in, neutralize any remaining guards, and get Homage where she needs to be to disable the tower. If we're lucky, they won't even know we're in there. If not..."

"Then we'll stand. Just like Security," Silver said with a nod of her head. "At least inside they can't come at us all at once. We'll hold out long as we still have power."

"Anypony else?" Rainbow Dash asked as she surveyed the crowd. No pony answered.

"Well, looks like this is it," Windsheer remarked. "Do take care of him, Lensflare. I want to see his face at the next family reunion when I retell this." Calamity groaned, getting a chuckle. "Oh, admit it, Calamity. The next time the five of us are together is going to be epic levels of awkwardness."

"You got to live to tell that story then," Calamity muttered.

"I plan on it. Oh, and thank you for not killing Dad. I have to see the look on his face when his perfect son does something so..." He balked a moment, then finished, "selfless."

"Don't be a hero," a stallion near Windsheer warned.

"Of course not. I'm going to be a real Wonderbolt, Lens," Windsheer chuckled. Rainbow Dash stared at him as the armored stallion turned his head away, adding in a lower mutter, "For once."

"Take care of yourself then," he said, and his beam rifles gave a 'vree' noise as they charged.

The pegasi shared looks, then nodded. "See you later, Brother," Calamity said.

And like that, the pegasi moved into action. I'd seen plenty of ponies move in concert before, but there was something about the cohesion of a pegasus flock that was just breathtaking to behold. They transferred Homage before the unicorn could blink, Calamity almost casually tossing her shrieking

through the air before Mare Do Well caught her. Then Homage was under the cloak as the four flew higher and higher up in the sky.

Below, the rapidly shrinking pegasi launched in like a horizontal twister, corkscrewing inwards towards the tower. At some unknown signal, the mouth of the twister widened and the foremost let out a strafing barrage of beams while the ponies further back unloaded pairs of missiles and potent sniper shots at the swarm. Like a black blob, the Brood reacted with overwhelming force, firing a storm of lead from the platform ring and the fliers. Yet the pegasi didn't scatter. With astounding grace, the funnel suddenly turned inside out, with the leading edge spiraling away from the tower while Calamity, Boomer, and a few others continued their heavy fire, ending only when the entire mass retreated around them.

The Brood started to pursue, moving like tentative fingers trying to snatch the fliers out of the air, only to hesitate when stretched too far. When the Brood halted, the pegasus cone reversed once more, with beam-armed fliers tearing into the outer edge of the Brood swarm while Boomer and Calamity resumed firing. The fingers that had been retreating to the tower suddenly reversed, bulged, and surged towards the pegasi. Some brave fliers fell, flaming, to the ground below, but far more of the Brood, out of their element, died first.

Three times the cycle repeated, with more and more of the fliers being drawn away from the tower, leaving only a fraction on the platform ringing the massive structure. Each pass through the cycle, those fingers of Brood stretched thinner and longer. Finally, they tore as almost the entirety of the Brood flew out after the pegasi in an angry buzzing cloud of murderous chaos.

"Now," Rainbow Dash said, and they flew along the underside of the huge mushroom cap that topped the tower. Up close, the uniform dome actually seemed to resemble layers of feathers, each barb longer than a Raptor. I could only imagine how they were built and couldn't imagine how they worked. Maybe they literally, mechanically, waved winds around? Skimming the underside of that cap, the six streaked down the backside of the tower towards the thin ring. Again, with that pegasus teamwork that amazed me, they all activated their StealthBucks within a second of each other, disappearing in midair.

Mare Do Well landed where the platform met the door. Somepony had cut it open, and silent as ghosts, they disappeared inside. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of ammunition crates with zebra glyphs had been stacked up in the hallway inside the door. Well, that'd simplify demolition if it came to that.

Like Shadowbolt Tower, the S.P.P. towers were hollow tubes. Unlike Shadowbolt Tower, the inside of the S.P.P. was so choked with pipes and conduits that it was almost impossible to imagine how anypony could rise or fall inside. There were more Brood inside, unicorns this time. Worse, they stood out from the standard cyberzebras; they had a smoother design and more talismans and seemed more independent of the rest of the swarm. Was the Legate upgrading them as the old models proved ineffective? As the six pegasi snuck past a room with a half-dozen of them inside, I watched two more of them appear with four more fliers. Then the pair disappeared... then reappeared with another four... Shit. Teleporting in reinforcements?

"Next left. The broadcasting hardware should be through—" Windsheer started to say when Mare Do Well came to a double door marked MASEBS/SPP SIGINTBRDCNTR. What the heck was that supposed to mean? The door opened, and three things became apparent all at once: first, the room inside had once been a control room of some kind, with a multitude of terminals. Second, it was now holding the corpses of a dozen or so dead zebras, none of which were particularly fresh. Third, it had been wrecked. The terminals and controls were smashed, gutted, or dead. Cables and wires were strewn every which way.

"Oh no. No no no!" Homage said as she wiggled off of Dash's back. "This is bad. This is very bad!" Her horn glowed, illuminating the wreckage more. "I was expecting having a decent access point!"

Enter in some MASEBS back door codes I know. Maybe hack through an added-on zebra security system at most. This is..." She gaped at the mess.

"Ugly, but manageable," Windsheer finished grimly. "We can work with this. It's just going to take time."

"Time," Rainbow Dash said as she looked out at the hallway. "How much time?"

"More than we probably have," he answered. "But then that's what makes it challenging." Windsheer chuckled as he rubbed his hooves together. "Miss... Homage, isn't it? I'll operate, if you'd care to assist?" Homage gave one last look at the mess and nodded.

Silver, Steel, and Cobalt appeared. "And what do we do?" Silver asked, pointing at the door with a wingtip. "Watch the door?"

"Yeah. Be ready for trouble," Dash replied grimly. The three cyber pegasi moved into position around the door, and she glanced back at the pair starting to work on the communications system. "Why the mess?"

"No idea," Windsheer said almost cheerfully as he pulled out a clipboard, paper, and pencil. He held the lattermost between his pinons as he casually began scratching notes. "If you want me to guess, though, I'm betting that these zebras lacked the M.A.S./M.o.A. access codes, and so they just went for a hard bypass... swapping zebra terminal hardware when they ran into a brick wall... which is about as effective as trying to transplant a zebra heart into a pony body. You can do it, if you're not too concerned about dying in a few weeks." He sighed, looking at the mess of wires and the bodies. "Or else they were utterly incompetent and thought randomly wiring things would work. Your guess is as good as mine."

"So you're just going to unplug the zebra parts?" Rainbow Dash asked.

"You make it sound so simple." He sighed. "You're assuming... and I am praying to whatever fickle demon of communication technology... that they didn't just chuck the original components off the platform to get them out of the way." He transferred the pencil to his mouth and began writing more things on the board, flying up and noting where things were plugged in, or unplugged, and scratching them down on the board in precise little notation. Homage levitated the mess out of the way, inspecting the maneframes as well.

Rainbow sighed, going back to the door. "All this, and our success comes down to tech support," she muttered. "I hope the others are doing better."

oooOOOooo

I took off the helmet and immediately felt a sensation like a drill boring its way through the back of my skull, through my brain, and into my eye sockets. Off came the Perceptitron, and I curled up, pressing my hooves to the sides of my head to try and squeeze it back together. Unfortunately, tossing the Perceptitron had sent me flipping end over end through the air, and my stomach immediately threatened to come out my mouth. Then, suddenly, two hooves were gripping me and holding me tight. "Ow... ow ow ow... Ow..." I hissed over and over.

"What's wrong?" P-21 asked.

"Nothing. Just used the Perceptitron a little too long is all," I said as I rubbed my temples, the throbbing subsiding bit by bit.

"Did you..." Scotch Tape began to say, then halted. "Glory?"

I pulled the helmet back to me and studied the battered thing. Really, I was lucky it worked at all. "No. The Perceptitron is kind of hit and miss. You turn it on and hope that the person's talking about something you want to know. Either you get lucky or you don't." I frowned and glanced at P-21. "Did you know that Calamity's brother was here?"

"It's a big valley, Blackjack. Is there a reason he shouldn't be?" he asked with a small frown.

"No. It's just... it seems like it's all gotten way bigger than me now. There's ponies fighting that I don't even know. Some that I barely know. I don't know how to feel about it," I said, and gave the pair a wry smile. "I know. It's not always about me."

"Blackjack, this is bigger than any of us. We're in a rocket going to the moon to stop something from killing everyone in the world," P-21 said gently, putting a leg around Scotch Tape. "When I left 99, I couldn't have imagined any of this. Now, I'm having a chance to be a part of it, and for the better. It's... what he would have wanted me to do."

Scotch Tape then extended her hooves towards me. "Gimme, Blackjack. I want to try it."

I blinked and considered it. "Are you sure? I mean, it gives you a wicked headache." She started to wave her hooves at me, so I levitated it over to her. She pulled it onto her head, plugged it into her PipBuck, and started typing something. "Do you have some tags you want to check up on?"

"Something like that," she said, then fiddled with the buttons some more. "A PipBuck cutie mark would be pretty sweet right about now," she muttered as she fumbled with turning it on. Then she glanced at me and grinned. "Hey, you think that Lightbringer person could do special things with hers? Like figure out how to get secret radio signals and—"

We didn't discover what 'and' could have been, because she started screaming. She thrashed hard against the restraint straps; I pulled her out of them with my magic and levitated her to me. "What's wrong? Scotch! Scotch!" I shouted as I pulled the helmet off the sobbing filly.

"I tried to go into Glory!" she said. "I... I thought... I'd go in and see if she was... but... it was pain, Blackjack! Nothing but pain!" she said, rubbing her eyes. A sensation of horror crept over me.

P-21 pulled himself off his couch, leaving plenty of blue coat on the couch behind him as he drifted to her. "You were inside her mind?"

"No." She shook her head. "I wasn't anywhere. It wasn't like I was in a body. I was just... nowhere. And everything hurt!" P-21 and I shared a look, and I was sure the horror on my face was clear to him. He gave a firm shake of his head and then hugged her.

"It's probably because her PipBuck was damaged. You weren't in a hurting body. Something must have gone wrong with the Perceptitron and it fed back into you," he said firmly, the voice of authority. "Has anything like that happened to you before, Blackjack?" The stress on the question left only one viable answer for me to give.

"Yeah. Sure. Once or twice," I lied, swallowing. "Real pain when it happens. I'm sorry... I mean I'm sorry you felt that. It's a real doozy," I said shakily as she sniffed, but the terrified expression on her face faded a little. I patted her head. "Thanks for trying, though. I..."

"You would have probably whined and cried about it twice as long," P-21 said casually, and though his tone was playfully dismissive, I saw the seriousness in his eyes. "Now, maybe you have a tag for a PipBuck you know is okay?" It took a second for the translation to arrive.

I immediately transferred a few over to Scotch. "Yeah, sure. Pop in and see how the Zodiacs or Whisper are doing for me."

She pulled the helmet back onto her head. I had to give it to her, she was more resilient than I would have been after that. "Yeah. Sure. Okay," she said, then looked at P-21. "And you two can have your talk." From the worried frown on her face, it was clear that there was more going on than I knew. She tapped her PipBuck and went slack, floating in the air. I nudged us both back to the seat, hooking my legs on it again to stay in place. For a moment, silence reigned... and then Scotch Tape blurted, "Oh man! I have a penis!"

He glanced at me in concern. "What?" I said defensively. "It's true. And don't tell me it's not a thing for stallions. It's one of the first things a mare usually notices when they get into a stallion's body." He sighed, shaking his head, and I patted his shoulder. "Thanks for that, by the way."

"Thanks for going along with it," he answered, rubbing his face. "When she screamed like that..."

"I know. And I... do you... do you..." I fell silent as he gave me a pitying smile. "What a mess," I muttered, gazing out the window at the distant stars.

"I think that goes for life in general. When it's all done, you look back on it and it's just one big squishy, lopsided mess," he answered, and we were both silent again as Scotch Tape ran in midair, waved her hooves around, and said 'whoa' a lot.

"Do I do that?" I asked in bafflement. He shook his head, and I pondered the sight of the filly flailing. "Huh..."

Clearly, it didn't interest him much. He put his hoof in mine. "I don't know what's happened to Glory. I hope... I hope that when this is all over, you're okay and she's okay. That's it. It's too much to hope for more than that."

"Yeah," I said as the fear crept through my mind again, and I clenched my eyes shut. I was such a coward; the little olive filly was able to do what I couldn't. I should have been the one to try and make contact with Glory. *She's okay*, I told myself. Don't think more than that. She's okay. I inhaled deeply and opened my eyes, and saw the sober expression on his face. "What?"

He stared straight into my eyes, and said evenly, "I want you to take care of Scotch Tape if I die. Make sure she lives."

The two sentences hit me like a pair of hooves upside my head. "Excuse me?" I asked, faintly.

"You heard me," he replied evenly.

"No!" I shouted, pushing off the couch intending to rise to my hooves and instead continuing to rise till I smashed my head into the ceiling and, a second later, my butt against the floor. I hissed as I slowly turned in midair, weightlessness really losing its charm as I glared at him upside down. "No! I am not having this conversation. You are going to live, understand? I don't care what I have to do, you're going to live, and we're going to go back, I'm going to have my babies, and you're going to get the chance to be a father from day one and Scotch gets to be a big sister. That is what is going to happen."

He shook his head slowly. "How is it you can have an almost identical reaction as a filly almost half your age?" he mused, then leaned out and took my hoof, pulling me in towards him. "I didn't say I plan to die. In fact, recently I've really rather warmed up to the idea of living. I want to do all those things. Be a father. Find another stallion. Live with you. Live... at all..." P-21 said as he stared into my eyes. "But what happened to Glory might happen to me. Or you. Or..." His eyes went to Scotch and he gave a

little shudder. "Her. I know it's unthinkable, which is why I want to say it now. Not... not have it thrust on us like what happened with Glory."

"Glory is alive," I insisted, feeling tears creep into the corners of my eyes. "It's going to be like LittlePip, but better. We're going to have sunshine and rainbows when this is all done."

"I hope so," he said as he pressed my hoof between his. "But I want to know... I want to make sure you know that... no matter what happens to me, Scotch lives. Get her home. She's a good girl, and I'm proud of her. Promise me."

"No," I said flatly, trying to jerk my hoof free... and sending me straight into his embrace. Damn cheating anti-gravity. "I won't. You're both going to live, no matter what. And when this is through, I'm going to teach you both the fine art of cheating death." I gazed into his eyes, feeling tears return and seeing them reflected in his. "You... are... all of you are... not... you're not..." He pulled me in close, holding me gently, stroking my mane as I wept against his neck. "Promise me you won't die... please..."

"I promise," he replied, and I heard the smile in his voice. "Now. What do you want me to do if you die?"

I pulled away, running a hoof through my mane. What to do if I die... like, dead dead. For good... "Celestia... you'll have to stop Horizons. The pair of you... she knows the hardware, and you have the bombs. Disable it however you can, get back to the rocket, and get home. Bury the Eater as deep as you can... the Legate with it if you can find a way. Get our babies from Cognitum... Wipe her from my old body and drag it back home and just... don't go back to the Med-X. No matter how bad you hurt, push through. See if Calamity's brother is into threeways or... or something. But be happy." I met his eyes again. "I just want everypony to survive and be happy. As long as that happens... then okay."

I glanced over at Scotch Tape as she peeked at us and abruptly tapped her PipBuck again. "Oh yeah. These Zodiacs... wow... They're pushing their way into the bunker. This Gemini girl could give Rampage a run for her crazy, but I think she's casting two spells at once. And watch this Sagittarius go... yeah..."

"Scotch, I know you're not watching somepony else. There'd be a lot more 'whoa' and a lot less commentary," I said dryly.

She sighed. "Yeah. It got boring. They're pushing into the bunker over by Happyhorn. I don't really know the Zodiac ponies. I mean, they're good fighters, but they aren't you." She tapped her PipBuck a few times. "Let me spy on Charity. When we get back, I'm going to drive her nuts with little hints and stuff." She went limp for several seconds, then frowned. "Seriously? She's balancing books?" She stuck her tongue out and blew a little raspberry. "I was hoping for something good."

"Try Whisper and Stygius," I suggested.

"Sure. I've never flown before," she said as she plugged them in, and her whole body went rigid. "Whoa! Whoa. Woooooooooaaahhhh!" she started shouting, waving her hooves in the air. "Oh yeah!" she squealed in glee.

That was more like it. I gave P-21 a smile and shrug. "Yeah. She can amuse herself with that." I took a deep breath, glanced at him, and felt a strange awkward silence begin to surround us. For a minute, my eyes wandered about the ship, then back to the floating Scotch Tape, then returned to him. "So..." I started, trying to think of something to say...

"So," he replied.

I was stuck in a metal box for several hours with a stallion I loved while a mare I loved might be dead and a filly was flying and oblivious to what we might do in the next few hours while I faced the

possibility of not just the death of my two remaining friends but also everyone else in the world, but had nothing to do and no preparations to make while we travelled through space and what about Glory and how was I was thinking about this now of all times and what kind of a horrible pony was I to think of this and and and...

And P-21 made it all go away in a way that only he could, and for once, I was glad I was so easy to placate.

* * *

"I think there's something wrong with me," I muttered as we floated a few inches above the couch, taped together to keep us from drifting into Scotch or the controls.

"I think that Glory said sex is your psychological and emotional reset button," P-21 replied, giving a little shrug. "I think that you stable and happy is better than you unhappy."

I felt his heartbeat against my chest. "You didn't enjoy it," I commented. I couldn't help but feel a little dirty. Like I was using him.

"It was good," he said, and I peeked up warily to see him smile. "The act is good. Climaxing is good. Knowing you're better is good for me. It's not all I want, though, no. I was thinking of Life Bloom half the time, to be honest," he admitted with a small, casual shrug. He flushed a little. "There's something about unicorns..." He sighed and shook his head, returning his eyes to me.

"Did you two..." I started to ask, watching his blush spread.

"Wanted to. Talked a little about it during the party. I'm not a good flirt. He's not casual, though. It'd have had to be an exclusive relationship, and... well..." He gave a helpless little shrug. "He'd be nice, but the way things are..."

I sighed and nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. "Wow. I thought I was the only one with messed up relationships from 99."

"It's not always you, Blackjack," he said with soft chuckle... one not quite as sincere as I'd like, but I'd take what I could get.

"Well, if you ever do find a boy to play with I will totally back you up," I said with complete sincerity. "I owe you, after all, for helping me like this."

He nuzzled my neck and sighed. "That'd be nice. Sex with a stallion just... is better. It feels right to me. It's not the sex... that's not that different. It's the smell and the feel and the touch and... just... everything attached to the sex. And it's nice to be on bottom with a good stallion taking care of you."

"Sorry I can't take care of that for you," I said with a little flush. "Twilight doesn't have that in her book of magic spells, or I would."

That made him laugh, and I was glad to hear it. He had such a wonderful, low laugh. "I know you would, but I can do it with you well enough. If it was any mare but you, it wouldn't be okay... and it wouldn't happen. But it helps you, and since it does, I don't mind doing it."

Scotch Tape sighed and pulled off the helmet, wincing. "Wooo... my head is..." she froze, looking down at the pair of us taped up. "Really?" she asked flatly.

"Hey, you had the Perceptitron!" I protested. "What did you expect me to do?"

"Read a book? Take a nap? Knit a sweater?" Scotch Tape suggested, and huffed. "Knowing you two, you're going to gum up our air filters. Ugh." Then rubbed her nose. "Now I'm gonna have to

smell it till we get to the moon. Ugh. I should have brought along someone for fun play too. Instead I'm stuck with my dad and... Blackjack..." She paused as she peered at me speculatively, then shook her head hard. "Nope. Can't. Feels like thinking about having sex with my mom or something." I didn't know if I should have been flattered, insulted, or relieved.

"Sorry," I apologized with a sheepish smile. "Just..."

Scotch Tape gave a casual shrug. "Don't worry about it, Blackjack. I get it. And if you still had your metal body, I wouldn't want to. But you're..." she gestured to me with one hoof, gestured to him with the other, and gave an 'ngh' of frustration. "This... thing. This family thing." She cried out in frustration, "Why does my brain have to keep thinking of you as 'Mom' rather than 'super sexy mare to bang'? I want my turn too! It's not fair!"

I didn't think I could laugh like that anymore. It took several minutes for me to compose myself and Scotch to quit her pouting and join us. Scotch was young, but ten or less years' difference wouldn't raise any eyebrows back in 99. "You really think of me as your mom?" I asked when we pulled ourselves together.

She rolled her eyes. "Well, yeah. I didn't want to have sex with her either, and she was one of the few mares that made me feel that way. Well, Rivets, but more 'cause she was a million years old and her hoo-hah probably tasted like licking the mouth of a rusty gray water pipe."

"More like a bag of stale grass chips," P-21 interjected casually.

Scotch Tape and I both froze, staring at him, and I couldn't help but shudder. Scotch scrunched up her face. "Daddy! Ew! I did not need to..." She clutched her head. "Ah! Stupid brain! Stop thinking about Rivets's hoochie!"

"What? It did. With a slight tang of..." P-21 said as if he were recalling a old vintage of wine he didn't particularly care too much for.

"Daddy! Noooo! There is no tang! No tang! Ah, stop thinking, dumb brain!" Scotch wailed. She covered her ears with her hooves, chanting loudly, "La la la, not thinking about Rivets's tangy hoochie..." She paused and cried out, "It's not working!"

"Ha! It takes years of practice to master the art of not thinking about it, Scotch Tape," I said with an amused smile. Then P-21 looked at me, his eyes narrowed. "What?" I asked him, arching a brow. His lips curled in a small smile, and I felt a little nervous sweat run down the back of my neck. "What?" I repeated nervously, flushing.

"Your mom tasted like... apples," he said with such certainty that I knew, from that point on, I would never be able to eat Sugar Apple Bombs without thinking about the part of my mom I wanted to think about least.

"Oh..." I closed my eyes. "I... didn't want to know that. Why did I have to know that?"

"You're evil, Daddy," Scotch Tape said with a pout.

He gave a great smile of satisfaction and crossed his forelegs before him. Meanwhile, to get my mind off the flavoring of parts of Mom's anatomy, I turned to Scotch and asked, "How are Whisper and Stygius doing?" Anything to not think about... stop thinking about it! Damn it... I liked that cereal!

"The batponies are fighting like everypony else," she blurted with a grateful smile. "They're evacuating a lot of ponies into that stable under the Citadel before the castle is overrun. I totally want wings, though. Flying like that..." she shivered and shook her head. "Anyway, they're going to be falling back soon. The zebras are bringing up a tank, and millennia-old walls just aren't built to stand up to that

kind of punishment, even with enchantments and fliers.” She pulled off the helmet and looked at it. “She really does love him, though, doesn’t she? I mean, she’s a bitch at times, but she really loves him.”

“I think so. I can’t really explain why. Maybe it’s a good stallion, bad mare thing,” I suggested, though I doubted it. Whisper wanted to be loved. She wanted something good in her life. Stability. Family. She might be a Reaper, but she wanted a better life. I could respect that. I carefully disengaged both of us from the strips of tape. “They’re both okay though?”

“Yeah. If they weren’t outnumbered, I’d think they’d be okay. Those batponies can fly, but being a pegasus... so *fast*...” She shivered again. “Yeah. Totally need to get cyberpony wings... maybe not wired into me, but mounted on a backpack or something.” She rubbed her chin, then held the helmet to her father. “You want to try it, Daddy?”

He shook his head, raising a hoof. “No thanks. Spying on another pony like that... no. Thank you.” As he shifted, I saw something amiss on his rump. The hide bearing his male symbol and dots was now mottled and peeling off in large flakes. Beneath, I saw something red and silver. “P-21...” I breathed. “Look...”

He turned his head and stared at his flank, then his eyes shot wide. He reached down and scratched at the surface, little flakes of blue coming off. “It must have been the liquid oxygen,” he murmured. “How...”

“Medical must have covered your real cutie mark with a decal. Couldn’t have stallions with talents other than breeding equipment,” I said as I reached up to scrape it again. He stopped my hoof, and I glanced at him. He wore a pensive, and slightly afraid, expression as he stared at the tiny bits of red and silver peeking through the cracks. “What... don’t you want to see it?”

“Yeah, Daddy. How could you not want to know?” Scotch Tape asked, then frowned. “I really don’t think it’ll be a toilet or penis cutie mark. I mean, it probably won’t be. I can understand how you’d be nervous, though.”

He pulled his eyes from it and looked at the both of us, then gave a little smile and shrug. “I don’t need to know. I am who I am. It doesn’t matter if it’s something good or something bad. It makes no difference to me. So don’t worry about it,” he told both of us.

“But—” we began in unison.

“Don’t worry about it,” he repeated, calm and low and sure. We both deflated.

“Ugh...” I muttered, slumping a little as I took the helmet from Scotch Tape. “I guess I should peek in on other ponies. See how things are going,” I said as I jammed it on my head.

“Why don’t you spy on Cognitum?” Scotch Tape asked.

“Because right now she’s probably doing the same thing we are: sitting on her ass waiting to arrive. I can’t just hang out in her head for hours waiting for her to say something interesting. Besides, I’m curious how the fight is going for those bunkers. How Stable 99 is doing. Chapel. You know... stuff!” I entered in a PipBuck tag, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Fluttershy Medical Center had shifted from hospital to warzone and back several times while I’d known it. In the latest cycle, for a while it had been a hospital and shelter to those wounded by the Brood attack. Now it was reverting back to a fortress, keeping the Brood at bay as they pressed in on three sides. Within, purple flashes blinked in and out as alicorns worked tirelessly to bring reinforcements to the center and teleport the wounded away to the Collegiate. A tank out on the periphery had ignited the

upper floors, but the fire had yet to make its way down. The stout tower resisted collapse, and it would take some time yet for the defenders to be overcome.

Candlewick lowered his binoculars, and the besieged building transformed into just a blazing candle in the distance. The hilltop the Reapers occupied was behind enemy lines. Below, the very slopes that I'd once seen Big Macintosh and the Marauders fighting so valiantly to defend were once again swarming with hostile striped forms. They'd excavated the face where a rusted tank had once flipped free, and now two streams poured into and out of the earth through the hole where it had been interred. On one side of the hole, a line of soldiers raced to the surface and out to the battlefield in three different directions; on the other side, tributaries fed a river of haggard Remnant zebras hauling in slain Brood.

"Miserable bastards," Candlewick muttered.

"Takes one to know one, don't it, Bro?" Toaster chuckled as he put a hoof around Candlewick's neck and pulled him into a chokehold. "Well, you're a bastard. My daddy actually married Mom. Think he actually liked her... before I cooked his ass, anyway. He burned real pretty."

"You're fucked up, Toast," Candlewick said as he forced his head free of the grip, scowling at the older pony covered in faintly smoking cooking appliances.

Toaster grinned broadly at the younger stallion. "Yeah... fucking hot, ain't it?"

Toaster, though, was eying the rest of the group. Big Daddy and Brutus spoke with Storm Front while a scruffy-looking unicorn stallion in heavy plate armor adorned with spikes swigged from a flask nearby. Dazzle and a green alicorn listened in to one side. The scarred buck lowered his head. "Remember, Bro. You and me get out alive. That's it. Once we take out these cyberstripes, you burn them. Burn them good. We'll be the last ones standing on the heap of ashes."

"That's Big Daddy you're talking about, Toaster!" Candlewick hissed.

"Shhh!" Toaster retorted, grabbing him in another headlock, this one much more crushing. "Keep your voice down. I'm tough enough to go a few rounds with him. Brutus too. That's why they wanted me along, after all. All that muscle and skill doesn't mean shit when you're on fire. Burners know that. And Burners stick together. We do this, and I'll make sure you have a dozen unicorn mares to fuck, if you want. But we got to do this right."

"Fuck. Security--" he began, but the headlock tightened so Candlewick could barely breathe.

"Security's either going to kill that zebra, or that zebra's gonna kill her. Either way, we burn whoever is left. Glass 'em if we have to. You got a canister of the good mix, right?" He relaxed the grip enough to gesture to the flamer tanks pressing down on Candlewick's back. Candlewick struggled to nod. "Good. That shit'll maintain three kK. No zebra or unicorn'll be a problem wearing a jacket of glass. Save it for the end."

"But when she gets back--" Candlewick gasped.

"Then she'll have to deal with us. We'll be in charge, not the Reapers. If she doesn't like it, we can glass her too." Toaster chuckled. "Everything burns."

"I don't know," Candlewick muttered, glancing over at where Dazzle was checking her beam rifle.

Toaster followed his gaze, and then his eyes snapped back at Candlewick, the two yellow orbs blazing. "'Cause of her? A fuck Filly? I mean, come on, a fuck's fine, but we're talking about FIRE!"

Burning your enemies! Past allies! General areas! Turn up the HEAT! Rain down the napalm and boil the earth! Yeah! Woo!" Candlewick gritted his teeth, and Toaster stopped. "Bro? Fire?"

"Not everything is about fire, you ass—" Candlewick started to say. Toaster grabbed Candlewick's coat and reared back, hauling Candlewick off his hooves and glaring into his eyes.

"*Everything* is about fire, you pussy." Then he tossed him away. Candlewick lay on his back, Toaster glaring down at him. He regarded the smaller stallion with a speculating squint, then lowered his voice and continued relentlessly, "You know why she looks at you? Pity. Fucking pity. She doesn't like you. She doesn't respect you. I'm your brother. The Burners are your family. We don't pity each other. We burn the world like it burned us and leave nothing but a scar behind us. Let those Fillies and Halfheart pussies moan about emotional pain. We live in pain. We deal with it together, and we got a chance to move up and take the Reapers down. It'll be the Burners who are the biggest baddest bastards in the Wasteland. But only if you keep your head on straight, Candle."

"You two coming?" Storm Front shouted at the pair, waving a wing at them.

"Yeah, yeah. Keep your feathers on," Toaster said, releasing Candlewick and muttering under his breath, "That fucker's gonna be extra crispy." The scarred stallion returned his gaze to Candlewick, stern and unflinching. Then he grinned and patted him on the head, turned, and trotted towards the others. Dazzle looked over at Candlewick with a warm smile, and the stallion tugged his firepony's cap. When the pair joined the group, he nodded to the scruffy rust-red stallion in heavy full plate armor who had to be the second buffest unicorn in the Wasteland. "Heya, Hammer. How's it hanging?"

"Over yer head," the unicorn replied in a thick, odd accent, levitating the massive mallet towards Toaster. The unicorn's powerful build carried the weight of the reinforced metal armor casually. "Still using my armor, I see," he said as he eyed the scarred earth pony.

"I always wear the best, Hammersmith, my man. Always the best."

"You planning on paying me for it anytime this year?" the unicorn said sourly. Toaster laughed, but it wasn't shared by anypony else. He turned his gaze to Big Daddy and gestured to the bunker below. "The others?"

"We need some of the top ten to watch the Stadium," Big Daddy replied. "The rest will be on the lines wherever that scarred son of a bitch needs them. I might not trust Storm Chaser as far as I can punt her, but Goldenblood doesn't have a stake in this beyond winning." He shrugged. "He's not going to sacrifice surfacers for fliers. I can respect that."

"So Fluttershy won't be coming?" Dazzle asked with a little frown.

"Psycho's retired. She's got her batpony now, and they're fighting for their castle," Big Daddy said, shaking his head. "All I know is, if they get married, that gray squeaker better be able to survive a fight at the nuptials. I won't give her away to some jackass who can't go three rounds with Daddy."

"So, we doing this or what?" Toaster scoffed.

Big Daddy stared at the pair for several long seconds, his sunglasses betraying nothing of the eyes behind them. "Alright then. We got no map of the inside. No clue their numbers and forces. So we're going to rip a hole right through 'em and keep ripping till nothing's left. Toaster's our center. Hammersmith, you'll back him up. I'll be on the right, Brutus on the left."

"Aww, what's wrong? Getting too old to lead the charge, Big Daddy?" Toaster said with a chuckle and a barely concealed sneer.

"What's wrong is this is bigger than our usual pissing match, Toast. I need you. Every miserable bastard here needs us to pull this off. So you're our center... unless you're not up to it," Big Daddy countered.

"Heh, naw. I'm good, BD. Real good. I want to get these cyberstripe fuckers ashed the same as you," Toaster said with a nod. He glanced at Candlewick. "Right, Bro?" Candlewick turned his eyes away.

Big Daddy shook his head and looked at Candlewick, Dazzle, and Storm Front. "You three will back us up. We'll need you to clobber anything that we can't reach. Candle, I'm counting on you to light up whatever groups you can." The directness of the old earth pony made the scarred stallion swallow and nod. Big Daddy nodded back.

He turned to the rest. "The Reapers have always been the biggest, baddest motherfuckers in the Hoof. If some of us fall, it's only so the stronger can rise to be the greatest of the greats and the strongest of the strong. Gorgon, Deus, Grim, Blitz... they might be gone, but I just know that Candlewick, Dazzle, and Storm Front will shine all the brighter." He gestured down the hill with a hoof. "Reapers!" he bellowed. "What do we do?"

"We reap the weak!" the others, save Toaster, bellowed in unison. Then the seven ponies charged down the hillside towards the bunker's entrance.

As Toaster led the charge, the toasters that adorned his armor began to glow brighter and brighter. Midgallop, they began to blast jets of flame in all directions away from his body, turning him into a fireball on thundering hooves. The zebras hauling dead Brood dropped their corpses and tried to run, but one pair was too slow to avoid being crushed beneath Toaster's blazing hooves. The Brood whirled at the flaring sight and aimed all their guns at the charging stallion. "Burn, motherfuckers! Burn!" he screamed, and then he laughed maniacally as he slammed into the Brood lines. The scarred stallion wrapped his blazing hooves around the one he'd hit, and the cyborg gave the closest thing to a scream I'd ever heard from them. Toaster tossed the flaming corpse, ammo starting to cook off and spray flaming shrapnel, at another group and laughed again as he looked around for his next victim. The crowd hadn't had time to start firing yet.

Some of the Brood backed away, beginning to fire sporadically at the devastating charge, but others darted inwards with familiar zebra commando swiftness. "Oh no ye don't, laddie!" Hammersmith roared, grabbing one thrashing cyberzebra in his hooves and throwing it to the ground in front of him. "Fore!" he yelled, and the immense hammer swung around, the talisman in the sledge discharging on impact and sending the Brood's head flying off down the hillside. "That'll teach ye ta come ta our home, ya slarmy slags!"

The Brood started to pour heavier fire at the pair, but Big Daddy and Brutus were there. The old earth pony employed his own zebrasque fighting technique against the Brood, striking like a missile with hoofblows that shattered whatever bone they landed on while at the same time twisting out of the way of Brood bullets like a sapling in a high wind. Brutus simply ignored the injuries he was sustaining. I didn't know him or his fighting style beyond the fact he was enormous, but though bullets tore into his hide, he simply grunted and broke the nearest Brood with his hooves. With calm, stoic devastation, he advanced to the next Brood in range, reared up, and brought down his hooves with a bloody slam. And again, and again, variations on the theme. I was reminded of Big Macintosh in battle, standing against the tide as if incapable of giving way.

Behind them came the crack of Storm Front's rifle. Maybe sniping was an Enclave specialty, because with each shot of the steel blue pegasus's hunting rifle, heads jerked and Brood went down. Not permanently, maybe, but the time it took for their regeneration talismans to restore their bodies was time that could be used to put them down in a more permanent fashion. Dazzle's beam rifle fired three beams per shot, the crimson lines blazing into the Brood and dusting one here and there. Candlewick clenched

his teeth on the grip of his flamer and gave a twist, and from the muzzle emerged a wet sucking noise, a 'Fwoosh', and then a stream of flame arcing into a cluster of Brood. The blazing fluid splattered everywhere, spreading the inferno and transforming the enemy into fiery silhouettes.

In less than a minute, the Brood at the base of the bunker had been annihilated. "Keep pushing! Inside!" Big Daddy roared.

"Hah! That's what she sai—" Toaster was retorting when from the ceiling of the tunnel dropped a black door, slamming into the ground and nearly taking Toaster's head off. "Fuck," the stallion muttered, and then reared up, bellowing, "No motherfucking door is going to stop the Toastpocalypse!" He rammed his blazing hooves into the metal. The impact scored smoking lines on the surface, but the door remained otherwise undamaged.

"I can get it," Dazzle shouted, rushing to a terminal recessed beside the door. She banged the side of it several times and then started to type with her horn. "I'm going to need a minute."

"Take your time, bitch," Toaster said as he wheeled about at the Brood reinforcements. The dozen or so they'd killed at the doorway were nothing to the horde that spilled in from every side. The toasters mounted on his armor flared as he charged into the closest bunch of attackers, but this time he lacked his earlier devastating momentum. Two Brood seized him on either side, heedless of the burning, crackling flesh of their bodies as three more poured rounds into him. The bullets found gaps in his armor, and blood began to flow and smoke between the flaring cooking appliances from hell.

Brutus, as implacable as before, rammed into his own attackers, but now the cyberzebras piled up against him in a growing mound. Like a toppling mountain, the black stallion collapsed backwards with the Brood piled atop him. They'd added something new to their arsenal, too: silver knives were drawn from scabbards and plunged downward, rising bathed in crimson.

"Git! Offa! Me! Ya! Bloody! Gits!" Hammersmith roared, the whirling sledge impacting with each word as he shoved and kicked the Brood trying to swarm him. The stout unicorn barely kept them at bay, knocking knives and hooves away. He could do nothing about the bullets biting into him, and even his thick metal armor began to buckle under their onslaught.

Storm Front's rifle barked as sharply as an automatic, the armor piercing rounds ripping not into Brood but at their non-regenerating firearms. A calm smile lingered in the corner of his mouth, a half heart charm dangling from his forehoof. That smile didn't waver as he was hit once, then twice, by enemy return fire.

Candlewick swung his flamer around in a fountain of fire, arching over the heads of his fellow Reapers. The Brood charged the stallion, and Candlewick made them melt like shadows in midday under the relentless blazing plume.

Then there was a flash, and in the corner of his eye appeared a unicorn Brood. Silver flashed, and a lance of searing pain pierced the dragonhide he wore and plunged straight into his chest. The unicorn twisted the blade and withdrew it, blood pouring out his side and rushing up his throat as the glittering, impossibly sharp blade flashed for his spine in the grip of the unicorn's magic.

Then Big Daddy was there. The bony old earth pony moved so swiftly, so surely, so beautifully that Candlewick could barely follow him. He knocked the blade away with a flying kick, and when he landed, his rear leg swung out in a great wheeling kick that snapped her horn clean off. As that leg passed, his other hindleg hooked her neck, which was then pinched between his limbs. Big Daddy's entire body corkscrewed, and the mare's neck gave a mighty crack. As she went limp, he rolled forward and launched her still-twitching corpse at the knot piling on Brutus.

"Drink a potion, son," Big Daddy rasped before almost casually continuing his fight. Like a tornado, he ripped into the Brood with a storm of kicks, blows, bites, and strikes that they could neither

recover from nor react to swiftly enough. Candlewick withdrew a potion and hurried to choke it down before he drowned in his own blood, and he still spent several seconds afterward coughing and retching up crimson. Big Daddy bit down on one captured knife and held two others in his fetlocks, whirling and slicing with graceful abandon. In a space of five seconds, five attackers pressing Hammersmith fell in greasy arterial sprays. Then the blades flung from his hooves found the eye sockets of Brood shooting at Storm Front. He tore into Brutus's assailants as they started to recover from the corpse flung upon them; any neck that met his hooves was snapped, and any rib soon impaled a lung or heart. In Big Daddy's hooves was death.

It was almost reluctantly that he came to the aid of Toaster, finishing off the shooters and giving the blazing stallion a chance to rip free of the immolating Brood. Healing potions were drunk, but it was clear that the Reapers were going to have a much harder time than their initial charge suggested. "Time, Dazzle!" he snapped.

"Half a minute. I almost got it. Down to these five!" Dazzle shouted, not breaking her stare off the terminal.

"We don't have half a minute," Brutus said gravely.

"What? More stripe fuckers?" Toasted called happily. "Bring them on! I'll incinerate all the—" and he fell silent as the roaring of an engine and the clatter of caterpillar tracks at speed became audible. A moment later, a massive tank, double-barreled turret already starting to take aim, roared over a berm and into view. Spotlights immediately locked on the bunker door and the ponies gathered there. "Fuck," Toaster muttered.

"We cannae fight that," Hammersmith agreed.

"Brutus," Big Daddy said, not taking his eyes off the war machine as he shrugged off his saddlebags and extracted a single black bottle carved with zebra glyphs.

"Yes?"

"Finish it, son," Big Daddy said tersely, tossing the bags to Brutus and then taking a long drink from the glyph-marked flask. He grimaced, clutching his chest. "Damn zebra potions. Always taste like ass." The flask fell to the ground, dripping something luminous.

"Yes, sir," the huge black stallion answered. "They do, and I will."

"Good boy." With that, Big Daddy charged. He made no effort to hide or screen his motion, and it was as if every gun was drawn to the grayish-white pony. The tank opened up with its machine guns, and Big Daddy leapt over the stream of bullets as it raked towards him, then dove under as it raked back. As he moved, he seemed to glow in the storm of fire and metal, and neither seemed quite able to touch him. The cannons roared, and he vanished in a cloud of dust and smoke.

Candlewick strained to see as the dust fell to the ground. Then from the sky descended the pony. The bony old stallion was now all aglow, as if his body were suffused with light. He hung in the air, rear hoof outstretched. Then he impacted the tank with all the force of an artillery shell. He disappeared in a flash, the turret crumpling and the cannon barrels twisting skyward as the war machine let out agonized metallic shriek like a mortally wounded beast. A moment later, it exploded in a detonation that knocked all the Brood around it flat, a brilliant green mushroom cloud rising from the wreck and showering them with radioactive debris.

For one second, in the midst of that wreckage, a glowing pony stood. He didn't appear old and feeble, but strong, confident, and... tired. His eyes reached across the battlefield and met those of the Reapers, and he smiled ever so slightly in approval. The glow became more and more luminous,

consuming him completely. Then he bowed his head and disintegrated in a cloud of tiny sparks that faded from view, swept east on an intangible wind.

"I got it," Dazzle croaked, the blast door rising.

Brutus turned and stormed through like an avalanche, crushing the Brood on the far side and slamming them against the walls as he cried out in rage, in anguish. Hammersmith gathered up some scattered silver knives with his magic, then followed without a word. The sledge crushed any Brood that remained moving after Brutus. "Lucky," Storm Front muttered, turning away and following the pair in. Dazzle hesitated for a second, staring at Candlewick in concern. Then she also followed them inside.

"Could this get any better, Bro?" Toaster asked with a chuckle, trotting past him into the dark doorway and towards the sound of additional battle.

Candlewick's eyes lingered at the wreckage of the tank, and then he walked to where Big Daddy had dropped his flask, picked it up, and examined it. Something like liquid sunlight glimmered at the bottom. Carefully, he replaced the stopper in the bottle and slipped it into his dragonhide cloak. He gave one final look at the place Big Daddy had stood, as if expecting to see the old stallion telling him to get his ass in gear, then disappeared into the bunker.

oooOOOooo

I couldn't speak as I broke the connection. Big Daddy... no, it couldn't be. I'd thought... I'd hoped... I'd thought that the old stallion could have survived anything. "Goodbye, Big Daddy," I finally said quietly. "I wish I could have been a better Reaper." Then I imagined him throwing me through the air for the weakness of that thought. He'd want me to be strong. A Reaper had to be strong.

I ignored the throbbing in my head, picked another PipBuck tag, any tag, and let the world disappear once more.

oooOOOooo

There was no way I could mistake the sight of the rocky tunnel leading into 99. I hadn't travelled it all that much, true, but the two times I had had left quite an impression on me. The bones were gone, though, and somepony had put down metal plates to form a flatter floor. Also new were the heavy canvas curtains that concealed the stable door. A pile of a half dozen cyber unicorns lay in a heap to the side. It was rather chilling to see the blood leaking from their bodies transform into rainbow sludge as it crept from the corpses. Was that what happened to blanks after they died? They just... liquefied?

I was in a mare in Steel Ranger power armor, and I could see the appeal. The movement was... odd, but the feeling of being removed and protected from the world around me was comforting. The motion wasn't quite as smooth as an augmented pony, but I could feel where this mare's hooves ended and the armor began. That heartbeat was a real comfort as well.

Suddenly there were a pair of flashes as two more Brood unicorns teleported in. The mare in the power armor turned towards the closest attacker, which closed with a silvery blade plunging down from above as the unicorn charged in from beneath with an IF-33 Applebuck 12.7mm pistol. The other unicorn charged for the sheet blocking the passage.

The pistol's bullets struck with the sharp ping of armor piercing rounds, but that silver blade was far more worrisome. The mare threw herself away from the descending edge, and it sliced smoothly into the metal floor plate with little difficulty. She stomped a rear hoof down on the guard as the unicorn started to withdraw it, ignoring the bullets, even those which punched through her armor and bit into the hide beneath. With the blade temporarily eliminated as a threat, the Steel Ranger twisted, tracking the second unicorn still firing as it moved towards the sheet. The automatic shotguns at the Ranger's sides

unleashed a storm of flechette rounds, and in less than a second, the Brood dropped as a heap of bleeding meat.

However, the first wasn't finished. Its horn glowed, and from the body of the second came a flash of silver as a blade was flung right at the power armored mare. She tried to jump aside, but the reaction from the armor was too slow, and the blade guided by unicorn magic corrected for what little dodging she did manage. At the last moment, she raised her forehoof, taking the blade smoothly through her foreleg and stopping it from tearing straight into her chest. The Ranger thus distracted, the unicorn left her blade and teleported to where the second had fallen and raised a hoof to push the canvas aside.

The sheet exploded towards her face with a crushing impact that smashed the unicorn's snout into her brain, and she went flying back. The curtain parted, and through the gap strode Star Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof. His helmet off, no pony could sparkle so beautifully. His lone spectacular curl of mane was all a stallion like him needed. "Looks like the Stronghoof sense of timing is still spot on, eh Crumpets?"

"Indubitably, sir," Crumpets said with an edge of sarcasm, hissing through her teeth in pain as she kept the slammed unicorn from withdrawing the blade. "Though, personally, I think it might have been a teensy bit better if you had emerged a few bloody seconds earlier."

The Brood unicorn rose to her hooves, and two more flashed to flank her. A pair of silvery starmetal blades rose along with pistols aimed at his head. The trio wasted no time, opening fire and advancing as one. "Hrumph, hardly a challenge!" Stronghoof said as he stomped the ground and a metal plate flew up into the air to catch the bullets and starmetal blades. With lightning reflexes, the powerful unicorn slammed the plate with his forehooves just as it started to fall, sending it instead flying down the tunnel and into the faces of the trio. "You are facing the Stronghoof implacable hoof technique, one that has been passed down for—"

The trio flashed behind him, two firing rounds into his rear as the third made for the curtain. Stronghoof's nostrils flared. "Oh, so you are that kind of fiend, eh? Well then, look upon—"

This time he was interrupted by Crumpets ripping apart the third with flechettes before it could reach the curtain. "Will you stop bragging and finish them before they get inside? If they take a peek inside the stable, then they'll be teleporting in all day long!" She twisted to strafe the remaining pair, but they flashed back down the tunnel, drawing their silver knives from where they'd fallen with the floor plate.

"Hrumph." He blew out his mustache as they charged once again. "I suppose the style is wasted on these mindless monsters." As one glittering blade drove straight for his chest, he slammed a hoof down; his horn glowed, and a thick pillar of stone erupted from the exposed tunnel floor to intercept the blade. A powerful blow from his forehoof sent the top of the stone column rocketing towards the unicorn, who managed to blink aside a moment before impact and pull the blade from the flying boulder as it sailed through the air where she'd just been. Then she resumed charging towards him as if nothing had happened. "Oh, nicely done!"

Crumpets staggered to her hooves, unable to put her weight on the left foreleg without fiery pain lancing up it. "Please don't compliment the enemy, sir," she groaned. She tried to unload another barrage at the last unicorn, who was making another dive for the curtain. She disappeared behind it, and Crumpets unloaded her magazines, shredding the fabric and sending the canvas tumbling down upon her. Behind it lay the open stable door with only a thin bedsheet concealing the interior.

Of course, I couldn't teleport somewhere I'd never been before. The Brood were trying to get inside my stable, and... crap, they were trying to get inside! I'd saved the ponies of Stable 96 and given them my old home, and the Brood were trying to violate it. But of course they were. I'd escaped! Returning to find 99 rendered into a tomb once more... No! I wanted to teleport there myself!

The remaining unicorn closed with Stronghoof, silver blade swinging at him as the pistol in her mouth fired again and again. Stronghoof gave ground, protecting his uncovered head from bullets with his armored forelegs and barely dodging the swings of that silver edge. Then the blade sliced neatly through the lock atop his head. His eyes popped wide as he watched the length of perfect golden curly mane tumble through the air. Then they flattened in cold rage. "You dare defile the golden lock of my ancestors, a masterpiece of equine maneosity?!" he bellowed as he rose on his hindlegs and flexed. With a pinging of metal, the armor went flying off, slamming into the face of his foe as a corona of sparkles enveloped his muscular form. "Gaze upon the product of generations of noble breeding, foul creature, and—"

The unicorn stabbed the blade deep into his gut.

"Oooh," Stronghoof winced, and then his unarmored body moved in a flash, his forehoof swinging upwards with such force that, when it caught the unicorn on the chin, her head impacted with the solid stone above. I didn't know if the skull lodged in a crevice up there or had simply adhered to the roof, but the body remained hanging there, twitching spasmodically. He carefully withdrew the silver blade, unleashing a slurry of blood with a wince. "Ah, what kind of battle is this where the enemy doesn't appreciate their foe?"

"I don't know, sir. But we need to get you a healing potion right away," Crumpets said as she limped to the door. "Then we've got to seal the stable. If they get in, we'll either have to leave defenders, evacuate everypony, or come back to a slaughter."

"I agree," Stronghoof said with a nod. "The fighting above has gotten fiercer as well. We should fall back to S.P.P.-13 soon. But not before we see to your injuries as well, Crumpets." Medical ponies began to slip out with bottles and vials. One levitated a healing potion over towards Stronghoof and Crumpets.

"I'm fine," she said as she bled into her armored boot. "Right as rain, sir. Just give me a hand with this bit of nothing, a potion, and I'll be ready for more action, sir!" she said as she held out the impaled hoof. His horn glowed, withdrawing the blade... and with it quite a bit of blood. "Oh... my," she muttered weakly. "That's... quite a flesh wound, sir."

"Appears positively arterial, young lady," Stronghoof said as he used his magic to help remove the helmet from her head. Only after she'd drunk a potion did he imbibe one himself. I could still feel the blood flowing from the half-healed gash.

"I think she needs surgery," one of the stable ponies said.

"I'm bloody well fine!" Crumpets objected, but when she heaved herself to her hooves, the world suddenly slipped out from under them, and she crashed to the floor.

"I think not, Paladin Crumpets," Stronghoof said. "Once you're recovered, you're more than welcome to join..." and his voice trailed off as he looked at the stable door. Crumpets closed her eyes as he said in a breathless voice, "Milady."

"You're hurt," Psalm observed from the door. Crumpets sighed and watched as she emerged to stand before him.

"As if so minor a wound could stop such a fine specimen of equinity—" he started to say, but as he flexed, he winced in pain and struggled to maintain the pose.

"You should have surgery for that, too," the medical mare said to Stronghoof as she started to remove the boot from Crumpets's armor. "Those damn silver blades are nasty business." A spatter of

blood poured out from Crumpets's uncovered wound. "Damn! Get her another healing potion and a blood pack." Crumpets shivered as a chill feeling began to creep up her leg.

"I cannot take time out to be healed," Stronghoof retorted. "Somepony must help the forces outside to fall back in an organized manner."

"Well, at least drink another potion," Psalm told him, levitating a second one to his lips. He blushed profusely as he drank it. The dark purple alicorn smiled gently as she watched him.

"Thank you, dear Psalm. I feel fitter already." He turned to take a momentary look at Crumpets. "My dear, could you please make sure she gets to surgery? I have no doubts regarding her valor, but I fear she may try to rejoin us prematurely."

"I... suppose. Yes," Psalm murmured as the medical ponies finally extracted Crumpets from her armor and wrapped cloth tightly around the wound. She was immediately given another potion as the white cloth stained crimson.

"Stronghoof... please..." Crumpets begged. "Don't... don't send me away." Both of them stared at her with uncertainty, and I could feel her cheeks burn as she added sharply, "I mean, you need me, sir! Otherwise, you'd be distracted by your own damned sparkles."

He gave her a kindly smile. "At ease, soldier. You've done your duty," he told her with a smile, then nodded to Psalm.

Psalm trotted beside her and the medics. The world disappeared in a purple flash, and then they reappeared in 99's medical ward. I almost didn't recognize it, given the presence of so many injured Steel Rangers and the lack of any abused stallions. Psalm levitated Crumpets easily, carrying her over to an unoccupied bed. In a trice they had her laid out and a bag of blood feeding in through an IV. A doctor in bloody scrubs shouted that he'd be ready for her in five minutes.

The nurse tersely instructed Psalm, "Keep direct pressure on that artery, understood?" The alicorn nodded, her horn glowing and the bloody bandage compressing around the leg. Crumpets hissed, gritting her teeth as fire erupted up her leg. The nurse prepared a syringe of Med-X, but Crumpets shook her head hard. The nurse dropped the syringe back on its tray. "Fine. You don't want it? I'll save it for somepony who does." Then she trotted to an adjacent table.

Crumpets lay there for a long moment, so long I nearly left her, but I wanted to hear how Psalm had been doing, and about the state of 99. Finally, Crumpets glanced up at Psalm. "He loves you, you know."

"I know," Psalm answered, not taking her eyes off the bloody bandage. "I don't know why. I'm not her."

"He knows that too," she replied, breathing quickly as the hoof throbbed. "You're like his Princess. You're big and beautiful and kind and... perfect for him." She pressed her lips together tightly for several seconds.

"I'm not—" Psalm began to say.

"Shut up," Crumpets interrupted. "That doesn't matter. The fact is, he loves you. So I have to ask you... what are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, sounding startled.

"I mean, are you going to get off your rump and help, or hide down here and let him put his arse on the line all alone?" Crumpets asked, glaring up at her, tears blurring her vision. "I've always watched

his back. I've always been there to try and back him up, and now I'm not. You were supposed to be some kind of soldier, right?"

"I was a murderer, once," Psalm answered, lowering her eyes. "I'm not going to be that anymore."

"Didn't know we were murderers, then," Crumpets snapped.

"No! Not... not you. Me... I was..." Psalm stammered. "I don't want to be one again."

"Oh, well, isn't that nice of you," Crumpets retorted scornfully. "Thousands of people fighting and dying, but you don't want to. How lovely."

Psalm frowned, scowling at the wounded mare. "You don't know what you're talking about..."

"Don't I?" Crumpets snapped. "I've been up there, fighting. I've friends down here, bleeding, and more up there dying. Sure. I don't know anything."

"I don't want to kill anypony anymore!" Psalm shouted, getting a stern look from a nurse.

"And you think I do?!" Crumpets yelled back. "I don't like the killing any more than you, but being stuck down here while people I care for need me? That's way bloody worse." She clenched her eyes shut. "He's out there, and I'm in here. I can't do anything till this is fixed," she said, indicating to her bloody leg. Then she glared up at Psalm angrily. "But you can, but you won't, because you don't want to."

A nurse came over to their bed. "Thank you, I'll take care of her now," the mare said, looking sternly at Psalm.

Psalm backed away, staring into Crumpets's eyes with a pensive, haunted expression. Then she disappeared in a purple flash. The nurse pressed the needle into her IV port. "Here. A little Med-X and moonstone to take your mind off those horrible knives." And as the drug entered her system, this time without resistance, the world slipped away.

oooOOOooo

"Damn it," I muttered, pulling off the helmet. At least I hadn't seen anyone I knew die, but this was almost as bad. Crumpets. Psalm. Was there any kind of good resolution there? Psalm didn't want to kill anymore, but I could also understand Crumpets's scorn for remaining inside where it was safe when she could have fought for them. And Stronghoof... ugh... when I got back, I was going to have to take him aside and explain how a mare like Crumpets obviously felt about him, "strictly for the mares" or not, and a mare like Psalm probably didn't. Unless Crumpets really didn't... or Psalm *did*... but...

"Ugh," I groaned, taking in the vision of the moon. "I'm not sure which is preferable, life and death struggles or emotional drama."

"I'm going to go with 'neither'," P-21 replied. "What did you see?"

I filled them both in on what I'd seen at 99, the Reaper assault on their bunker, and Big Daddy's fate. As I talked, Scotch Tape leaned over and snagged the Perceptitron from me. "My turn!" she cried out triumphantly, jamming it on her head. I didn't feel much urge to take it from her. "I wanna try out a unicorn this time." The details of what was going on were a little less interesting to a filly like her, I supposed.

"I don't know if I should be amused or horrified at how happily you two violate other ponies' privacy," P-21 said lightly.

Scotch froze in the process of connecting the helmet to her PipBuck. "Do you really think I shouldn't, Daddy?" she asked, her eyes heart-achingly big.

He glanced at me, and I gave a little shrug. "World might end in a few hours," I pointed out. He sighed and nodded to Scotch.

The filly smiled and finished hooking it up. "I wonder if I'll be able to feel what it's like to do magic," she speculated as she jammed it on her head.

"Good luck," I said. "I don't feel it unless I burn out my horn. That just feels like a migraine." We settled back in the couch as Scotch Tape floated in front of us.

"Wow. Noble ponies sure do a lot of boring talking and arguing. Just do what she says!" Scotch Tape said to nopony. "No, you shut up! She's in charge, you moron. You see this crown thing on her head?" the filly continued as she pointed at her noggin with a hoof.

"I'm guessing she's in Grace. Or else I've picked up some really strange PipBuck tags," I said to him.

"I'm glad you chose her. She really seemed to care more about ponies," P-21 said. "I hope she does make the changes she promised."

"She will. One way or another," I said with a smile. "She's my cousin. Kinda... But she won't give up."

Scotch Tape gave us a very entertaining ten minutes where she insulted various ponies who were apparently arguing with her about evacuating to Tenpony Tower. It was sort of nice to snuggle up with someone and watch Scotch go through the motions of perceiving others. P-21 was right about the privacy thing, of course, but the fact was that it was either the Perceptitron or sitting around in a rocket for several hours doing nothing. At least this way I could stay in touch.

Finally, Scotch Tape sighed. "Yeah. Get out of here. Shoo. Bunch of yellow cowards!" she said, waving her hoof. "Honestly, I thought you weren't supposed to argue with the pony wearing the crown thingy!" Then she stiffened. "Wait, what's that? Look out!" She cried out and raised her hooves defensively. I started, levitating her closer to me, wondering if I could just yank the helmet off... or would that be bad too?

"Boo?!" Scotch Tape gasped, and I froze. "What is she... wait... no, Boo, Blackjack isn't here!" Scotch paused a moment. "It's me. Scotch. We're in the rocket!"

She's talking to Boo? I nearly took the helmet then and there, but I didn't know what that would do to her. P-21 gave a worried frown and shake of his head, and I backed off. "How is she talking to Boo?"

"It's Boo?" he suggested with a shrug. "How does she do any of the things she does?"

"Wait! Slow down, Boo! What was that about Glory?" Scotch Tape said. "No! Boo! Slow down! I don't know what that is! Boo!" P-21 reached over and twanged my horn, snapping my focus before I could snatch the helmet. Scotch Tape started nodding. "Okay. Okay. But what about Glory? Boo! No! Call off those guards! She's a good pony! Damn it!"

She disengaged the helmet and pulled it off. "I just talked to Boo!" she said in a rush, then stared at me clutching my horn. "What's going on?"

"Nevermind that," I said sharply, eyes watering. "What about Glory?"

“Oh! Well... um... it was kinda hard to understand her because she talked so fast! She said something about Glory being found... but I couldn't really understand more than that. She said something about saving Goldie, and that there was something called a Tem...something. But it was going to come and be really bad. Oh, and the Legate is apparently pissed and is going to use the Brood and Temthingy to kill everyone in the Hoof before you get back. Then the guards came and chased her off.” Scotch Tape blinked, then added, “Oh. And spy on Cognitum... or... don't spy on Cognitum.” We both stared at her, and she snapped defensively, “Hey! She's not the easiest mare to understand when she's talking that fast!”

I could only hope that I could find somepony referencing Glory. I put the Perceptitron on and starting going from pony to pony. Goldenblood. Triage. Storm Chaser. Rainbow Dash. Mayor Windclop. Candlewick. Sagittarius. None of them were talking about Glory! I pulled the helmet off and gritted my teeth. Finding Glory was good, it meant she hadn't just been disintegrated by the bomb, but... Was she okay? Was she hurt? Was she... damn it! “I'll just have to hope that Boo pops in again and I can ask her questions myself.” If she'd shown up with Grace, the next nearest place would be the Grimhoof bunker. Xanthe and her team were handling that one. If Boo wanted to give me a message, maybe she'd find me there. I tapped into the zebra's PipBuck tag and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

When I popped into Xanthe's body, I hadn't expect it to feel so... normal. I mean, given what it'd been like the last time I was in a zebra, experiencing how Shujaa fought and moved, I expected Xanthe to be more... something! More flexible, maybe. Instead, this was just a healthy mare's body wrapped up in a suit of stealth barding that was a little bit more snug than I was comfortable... actually, it was perfectly snug. Just in all the wrong ways.

Goddess, how I missed Glory.

Xanthe, Carrion, Silver Spoon, and Snails had been given the bunker under Grimhoof Army Base to eliminate. The reason why was immediately clear, Xanthe's PipBuck letting out a constant low-level crackle from the radiation detector. This place clearly showed signs of severe damage and slapdash repairs. Many of the walls were visibly buckling, and there were even places where earth protruded through gaping rents. Water dribbled from the severed ends of hoses and out of conduit penetrations in the walls and transformed the floors into muddy subterranean trickles illuminated by whatever flickering lights still functioned.

“Need more,” Carrion rasped painfully as he pressed against the wall, holes punched in his power armor oozing a fetid mix of tar-like fluids. Silver Spoon, half hiding behind him, clenched her eyes and gritted her teeth. The sickly green glow shining through her skin flashed brighter, and Xanthe quickly stepped away as the crackling of her PipBuck immediately spiked. The armored ghoul griffin let out a sigh of relief.

“Uh oh,” the suit chimed, then let out a hiss. A cool sensation spread up Xanthe's hoof. “Better now.” Xanthe moved away from the pair, and the fourth of the quartet, the skinny unicorn stallion with faintly glowing eyes, shifted next to her. A small drink tube protruded up from the corner of the collar, and she sucked down that wonderful sharp rancid orange RadAway.

“Do you have enough?” he asked in a phlegmy voice.

She consulted her PipBuck. Five more doses of Rad-X, six more of RadAway. “I'm fine, Snails. More than a dozen of each.”

“Uh oh,” the suit said, a little more sternly. Snails furrowed his brow.

"I'm fine," she pressed, then looked around the tunnel, then down at two slain Brood. "You're sure they don't have a soul you can use?"

Snails pointed his horn at the bodies. Green and purple magic seemed to foam along it for several seconds, and then he shook his head. "Nope. Sorry."

"It's okay," Xanthe said, sighing as she looked down the tunnel. "We'll find a way in to the tree. There's always a back door. A vent. A maintenance conduit. Something. We just have to find it."

"We might not be able to, Xanthe. We might just have to push through the front door," Carrion said. "Hit them hard and fast, get inside, and shoot anything that's gold and tree-ish and popping out Brood like crazy." His miniguns whirled a moment, and he checked the ammo boxes. "Can you top me off, Silver?"

The glowing ghoulish blushed a little more greenly and started digging belts of ammo from her own saddlebags and connecting them to the ends of the belts in his magazines. "There you go." He returned an bashful smile.

"The four of us can't shoot our way through," Xanthe said as she ran a hoof through her mane, then stared at the dozen black and white strands left caught on a protruding bit of the suit. "Oh."

"Well, we don't have to be four," Snails said absently as he stared at the two corpses. He glanced up and saw the others staring at him intently. "Well, it's a trick, but Ms. Rarity didn't like it one bit."

Xanthe glanced at the baffled Silver Spoon and then at Carrion. The ghoulish griffin shrugged. The zebra sighed. "Well, if you think it will help us..."

Snail's horn flashed with black magic, and this time it seemed to soak into the two slain Brood. The magic stopped, and suddenly the bodies jerked. Muscles moved and bulged, and the forms of broken flesh and metal began to lift to their feet. The dead talismans in the corpses glowered to life with pernicious green and purple flickers, and the flesh began to... rearrange. It wasn't healing, per se, so much as the graying meat stretching to patch the holes in the hide. When it was over, two cyber zombies, their eyes filled with green lambency, stared down at the two of us, their striped hides and armor now bulging and twisted around the augmentations.

Carrion stood behind Xanthe, grabbing her shoulders as he stared at the pair. "No matter what happens, don't let him do that to me," the griffin muttered.

"You sound just like Ms. Rarity, eh," Snails said with a roll of his star-filled eyes. He regarded the zombies, then said, "You two can go in first." The pair moved like marionettes, and I could barely make out an ephemeral thread of light connecting Snail's horn to them. They trotted down the hallway with Snails behind them, and then he turned and looked back with a bright smile. "Coming?"

"Tiara always said there wasn't something quite right about him," Silver Spoon muttered as they grudgingly followed.

Snails frowned back at her. "Oh yeah? Well, Miss Rarity said I'm just fine how I am, eh!"

"Well, Tiara said 'Miss Rarity' was never a good judge of character," Silver Spoon replied with a snort.

Snails glowered. "Miss Rarity would tell her to take that back!"

"Well, Tiara would tell her to make her!"

Xanthe leaned over towards Carrion and whispered, "Um, I think this is the part where the Star Maiden would tell Miss Rarity and Tiara to get a room..."

A minute later, they rounded the corner and came across a staging area of some kind. The high-ceilinged chamber resembled a stable atrium. A pair of balconies ran along the second floor. Brood were walking out of a doorway to an equipment station where they donned their combat barding and took their weaponry and ammunition before heading up some stairs. There had to be at least twenty Brood currently busy in the room.

"We'll distract them!" Carrion hissed. "Get to the tree! Set the charges! Go!" He flew up to the balcony as the Brood began to react with that silent unity that always unnerved me. Those that had weapons immediately brought them to bear on the six intruders while any who were unarmed moved to address that. The power-armored ghoul flipped over the rail of the balcony and used the concrete platform for cover as he began to spray fire from his miniguns.

The two zombies tore forward, firing wildly before slamming into the nearest Brood like battering rams. Bullets that hit the pair did nothing to stop the corpses. One's head exploded in a shower of decaying rainbow gore, and it merely made the body pause long enough for a head-like replacement to push out of the stump and let out an unholy scream. Even the Brood in the atrium showed something like alarm at the dark magic.

The unarmed Silver Spoon faced a dozen Brood arming themselves as the zombies and ghoul drew their fire. "You're like... totally... no good... grrr!" she growled as her green glow became a nimbus of magical flame. Screaming a battle cry of "You suck!", she launched a blazing sphere of crackling energy right into the ammo containers. The explosion was quickly followed by a cascade of pops, snaps, and bangs as the ammo started to cook. "You suck! And you, you stupid blank flanks! And you! And you *totally* suck!" she shrieked over and over again as she lobbed balls of radioactive death powered by more than two centuries of pent-up spite.

"Shhh. Hiding now," Xanthe's armor whispered as she raced along the perimeter of the room towards the passage the Brood were emerging from. More were racing down the stairs from above, stopping short as they encountered Spoon's radioactive inferno blocking their way but opening fire as best they could. A few tried to jump through the fire, but they fell spasming as the blaze seared them. Even the Brood paused to evaluate the threat of her ghoulish flames.

They were going to do this. They were really going to do this! As two more armed Brood guards raced through the large door, she slipped inside. It was just like Hippocratic Research: a massive golden tree with branches dropping fleshy fruit. Barrels and barrels of Flux were being poured into funnels at the tree's roots to feed the production of Brood. A hole in the ceiling gaped over a hopper for some sort of industrial equipment, and a body tumbled in. The hopper made a horrible, wet, grinding noise and unloaded a slurry of rainbow goo out one end into a barrel and a revolting fleshy pulp out the other into a heap of wire-laced gore. Opposite the grinder was an augmentation pod, this one without sides; Xanthe had a perfect view of the raw Brood within being calmly sliced and implanted with squirming black wires and glowing talismans.

Grinder, pod, and tree all had a half dozen emaciated zebras supervising them. Over half were ghouls, operating frantically. Bomb collars around their necks signaled their allegiance clearly enough. Xanthe snuck over towards the grinder, hiding amidst crates of reeking pulp and dodging the notice of the ghouls who extracted talismans from the gore. Several of them had the trademark appearance of taint contamination: warped bones, tiny growths on the limbs, eye tentacle penises, and the like. Beyond the kind of radical cyberization that brought me back from the dead the first time around, I doubted there was anything anypony could do for them at this point.

Creeping around towards the back, where something large lay covered with a tarp, she moved behind the immense golden tree. Digging in her saddlebags, she withdrew several blocks of C-4 and

started to position them along the back of the tree. I didn't know much about explosives, but I guessed she had enough to blow the bottom off the damned thing.

Then there were two flashes behind her. "Uh oh," warned the armor, and Xanthe spun to look at two unicorn Brood with silver blades staring down at her. She clutched the detonator in her hooves as she stared up at the two. Then they did something more chilling than anything I'd seen from the Brood before.

They smiled.

The silver blade of one sliced through the detonator. "None of that now. You vermin have been causing us enough trouble today," the Brood unicorn said as the severed pieces tinkled around her hooves.

"You... you can't talk! The Brood don't talk!" Xanthe protested as she backed right up against the golden tree.

The mares glanced at each other, then gave a pair of identical little smirks before facing her again, pointing their blades in unison at the mare. "Oh, we don't?" said one.

"Things change," said the other.

"Improve."

"Adapt."

"Overcome."

Xanthe's eyes switched from one to the other and back again. "Then... then you don't have to do this! The Legate... he's..."

One unicorn tapped her temple. "With us. Always with us."

"He is our will."

"Our soul."

"Our purpose."

"But with us, he doesn't need to dictate everything we do. He can delegate. We can achieve his will," the last one said.

"But... what does he want?" Xanthe asked as she stared at the two blades poised to skewer her.

Once again, a glance at each other, and then as one they looked back at her, matching smirks on their faces. "To sail the cosmos with the corpse of this planet as his vessel, attended by the souls of all living things, consuming star after star, world after world. Forever," they said in unison. "Not that it matters. This was merely a test of our linguistic abilities."

"These peons are poor interactive subjects," one said, gesturing to the wretched ghouls.

"All they do is cringe," the other agreed.

Xanthe swallowed hard. "Oh. I'm... sorry to hear that," she murmured weakly.

"Yes, well," the two said, then paused and glanced down at her. With a flash, the silver blades fell upon her. Xanthe raised her hooves and screamed in terror.

The suit 'screamed' in pain, "Owie!" The blades, which should have cut right through her legs, had stopped after cutting only an inch or two of fabric. That was enough to slice her a little, but not nearly enough to maim her for good. The two were actually so shocked that Xanthe was able to dive between them, roll forward, come to her hooves, and start running back around the edge of the room towards the exit.

"I'm sorry. We'll get you fixed, I promise!" Xanthe swore. Then there was a purple flash as one unicorn appeared in front of her. Xanthe cried out, falling back and sliding on her back under the horizontal sweep of the blade. Magic bullets flashed from the unicorn's horn, slamming into the stealth suit and knocking the zebra rolling. Another flash and the other unicorn appeared over her, stabbing down as Xanthe rolled inside the cut. The edge still scraped against the barding along her shoulders, the suit giving a little whimper of pain.

Xanthe rolled to her hooves, now making straight for the exit as the wretched ghouls cried out and tried to get out of her way. "Maiden of the Stars, please lift your curse from me and let me-- AH!" she shouted as one of the talking Brood appeared in front of her. The unicorns flashed again and again, and I was astonished to see Xanthe each time manage to, if only barely, tumble, fall, and skitter out of the way. One of the wretched creatures, probably half mad with taint, charged her with its three shoulder tentacles flailing, shrieking madly. It seized her for two seconds, wrapping tendrils around her shoulders as it gibbered incoherently in her face. She screamed back at it in a panic.

Then one of the unicorns appeared, grinning triumphantly as she slashed across at Xanthe's unprotected head. Xanthe twisted her head back, and the blade passed over her and sliced right through the head of the ghoul. Xanthe lifted her head back in time to receive a few spurts of rancid blood and a horrible gurgle from the neck stump, then screamed again.

"Hold still!" the two Brood demanded in unison as Xanthe danced towards the exit on her hind legs with the corpse still clinging to her torso. Each time they chopped at her, she whirled to intercept the blade with the body, crying out in panic as she barely avoided being cut. The blades tore bloody, rancid bits out of the corpse, spattering all three of them with foul ichors as Xanthe whirled and hopped and twisted with each appearance.

"Please, lift your curse. Please lift it! Pretty please!" Xanthe begged as the twitching chunks trapping her finally detached. She pushed the torso from her, the tentacles still reaching for her, and screamed before throwing it into the face of the unicorn that had just appeared next to her. Dropping down on all fours as the Brood unicorn tried to free her face, she raced for the exit.

The other unicorn, unmolested by tentacles, appeared in her path, and Xanthe slid to a stop so abruptly that her legs slipped out from under her and she landed on her back, staring at the tip of the blade inches from her face. She let out a whimper and clenched her eyes tight. "Good... b...b...bye..." crackled the suit.

Then it was bathed in blood.

The unicorn above her danced in place as two miniguns ripped right through it, tearing deep bloody furrows in its augmented hide. As the glow around its horn died, Xanthe's hooves snapped up and caught the blade before it fell into her face. She was barely able to move it aside before the hot, bloody corpse collapsed upon her. "I am really sick of her curse..." she muttered flatly.

The remaining unicorn cut the tentacles from the torso and tossed the pieces away. Her synthetic eyes took in the sight of the four companions. Snails gaped at her, then at the slain unicorns. "Hey! Lookie there, eh! She's got a soul! Kinda..." He squinted over at her. "Kinda like a cheap knockoff, actually."

The unicorn disappeared, a flash lighting the space behind the tarp-covered heap. Carrion shoved the body off Xanthe. "Are you okay? Did you get the bombs planted?"

"I think so," she said weakly as she pushed herself to her hooves and wiped the blood off her face. "She killed the detonator, though."

"Right. Silver?" Carrion said.

The glowing ghoul nodded, reached into her saddlebags, and withdrew a detonator that looked like it had spent twenty minutes in a microwave on high. Carrion took it in his hand, and the top popped right off with an anemic, electronic crackle. He covered his face with a wing, groaning. "Should have thought of that... Okay, don't worry. I've got an egg timer. Xanthe, you know how to rig that up to the bombs, right?" Carrion asked. Xanthe nodded. "Good. Then we just have to deal with that last one."

"Like, why do you have an egg timer? Isn't that, like, cannibalism or something?" Silver Spoon asked, wrinkling her nose.

"I... you... you never know when you need a timer. Like now!" Carrion retorted.

The unicorn stepped out from behind the tarp and gazed at them all flatly. "How are idiots like you thwarting us? How can *you* be impeding us at all?" Her horn glowed as she pulled the tarp off the large heap.

...The large, *moving* heap.

I'd once seen immense pony blanks, mutants or malformed copies, in the base under Hippocratic Research. This was much worse. The immense zebroid monstrosity appeared like slab after slab of meat attached nearly at random to a dragon-sized frame. The entire thing was covered in metal plates that looked as if they'd been welded to the hide beneath. Its mouth spread far wider than any equine's ever should, revealing row after row of metallic and ivory fangs. The scream it unleashed shook the room around them.

"I'm gonna need bigger guns," Carrion said as he and the others backed away.

The biomechanical nightmare surged around the tree, pulping any ghoul that got under its immense hooves as it raced right towards the four. In unison, they fled back out into the staging area with the monstrosity close behind. One of the zombies raised its gun, firing impotently into the thick plates only to have the maw close down and snap it up, chomp it down into a slurry of rancid fluids, and swallow the revolting morsel whole.

"I really hope you have a magic trick we can use against that thing!" Xanthe shouted as they retreated back towards the smaller passage they'd emerged from.

"Go away! You're ugly! You're fat! You smell!" Silver Spoon yelled as she backed away, hitting it with explosion after explosion of green energy. The blasts barely knocked the massive monster off its stride.

Snails clenched his eyes closed, and the dark magic crackled. The blood from the slain coalesced in the air before him, then formed into an immense red blade. It flailed at the abomination, but the impacts barely slowed it. Back the four fell as it snapped at the blood blade and bit the length in two, shattering the spell.

"Run! We have to run!" Silver Spoon shouted as they fled down the smaller tunnel.

The unicorn mare's laughter pursued them. "Run all you like! You'll all die in the end. But we shall live forever!"

oooOOOooo

I left Xanthe and thumped my hoof against the wall in frustration, being rewarded with a stinging pain in my foreleg. "Ow," I muttered, pushing the helmet back to glare out a window. Another choir... *another* fucking choir! If I'd been there, I could have teleported onto that monster's back, planted a bomb made by P-21, and blown its head off! Or maybe just died. Anything would have been better than watching and being helpless to change things!

"What's wrong?" P-21 asked immediately.

"Xanthe's team had a setback. The Brood are getting... smarter." And worse, what would that mean for Storm Chaser's predictions? As the Brood began to delegate and organize and act with finer precision, would our defenses remain adequate? The reinforcements had to stop, their cohesion had to be smashed, only it didn't seem like we were any closer to accomplishing either of those things! "Also, no Boo," I added, glancing at Scotch Tape.

"I'm sorry, Blackjack. I was just really surprised by her, and... well... Like I said, she's hard to understand when she doesn't slow down!" Scotch Tape apologized, ears folding back.

I sighed and looked back out the window towards the now much larger moon. "It's fine. I'm just... here. And it seems like everything important is happening back there. I wish I could get some hint that Glory was okay. That... that they're going to win it back there. But..." I sighed and shook my head.

"We'll make it, Blackjack," P-21 assured me. "No matter the cost."

I stared at the moon. "Hey, Scotch, do you think Cognitum's at the moon yet?"

Scotch frowned and tapped her PipBuck for a few seconds. "If she's not, then she's really really close."

"Right," I said as I selected the tag. "Then this is the time I should go in and see what she's up to. If I'm lucky, we'll hear her plans right before they disembark." Scotch Tape started to say something about Boo, but I didn't listen as the world swirled away once more.

oooOOOooo

Cognitum sat in her rocket in what looked like some sort of plush passenger area. From the velvet couches and silk lined straps, it was clear that this was made for comfort. Perhaps an escape plan for Princess Luna and Princess Celestia? Something commissioned by Fancy Pants or Blueblood? Some other plot or plan I hadn't discovered? Ugh... the thought that there could be even more secret crap made me tired.

Somewhere in the background I could hear ponies murmuring to each other, but otherwise they flew in silence.

I took a moment to focus on the body I occupied. It was... strange. Unlike any memory orb I'd ever lost myself in. There was something interfering with the contact now, like background static. It plucked at me. I couldn't hear anything besides silence and faint whispers as Cognitum stared straight ahead at a screen showing the moon. I'd never picked up thoughts or emotions before from a memory orb, but now I did. As we moved ahead, I felt a growing, surging sensation of dread and longing. It was like standing too close to a fire, and I couldn't pull away.

I'd been inside her once, and it hadn't been anything like— The moon. It was huge in her screen. And as its pearly radiance filled her, that swelling emotion grew. It pushed at me through the connection. Cognitum had the soul of Princess Luna... Princess of the Moon.

And then her voice shivered through my mind. "Hello, Blackjack. So, you survived."

"Yeah. I do that," I said, wondering if I should break the connection or not. "I'm going to stop you."

"So you say. Pity. You must have successfully commandeered a rocket, too; I doubt you'd be in range for this otherwise. Do tell me you killed the Legate for me. I'll make you a countess if you have."

A countess? *Seriously?* "Sorry. Afraid he's not the easiest of people to kill."

"True, though I'd hoped you'd find some way to vanquish that nasty fiend for me, or he you. Ah well, no matter," she replied. "I'd like to make a deal with you. For your babies."

I didn't trust myself to speak.

"Abandon whatever fool plan you have. I will restore the Core and the Tokomare, control it with EC-1101, and restore civilization to my realm. I will give you your children, and let you, P-21, Glory, and the others go. It's a big world, and you can find your place in it. Or, if you've come to your senses, I will allow you to serve me as a lieutenant. You can ensure that I am a good leader. Help me to do better. Help everypony."

Nnnngh... "You're forgetting the Eater of Souls. What you're doing is going to set it free," I countered.

"That zebra nonsense again. The Tokomare is not an abomination from beyond. It is a machine. It will do what it is commanded to do. No more, no less," she replied primly.

"A machine? It's spoken to me, Cognitum. It called me the Awakener!" I said in frustration.

"Princess Luna. And it has not to me. Ever. I was in that place for two centuries... true, with marginal senses for much of it, but still. If it was to reach out to anypony, it could have done so to me long ago. So what am I to conclude: that an eldritch abomination summoned by the zebras lurks underneath the Core, or that you are trying to stop me from doing what I wish because you fear the annihilation of the world through Horizons?"

I grunted in frustration. How could I prove what I knew? Cognitum demanded proof, and I had none to give. "I can't risk it, Cognitum. You have to find some other way."

"*Princess Luna.* That is the last time you will address me by that other name, Blackjack," she said primly. "I will not let my realm rot. I made a promise to myself, my people, and my sister that I would see Equestria through the war. I mean to do so. I will not subject my Equestria to five centuries of suffering as my sister did after I was banished. That is the height of immorality."

"Five centuries?" I balked.

"That is how long it took for ponykind to recover from the collapse following our conflict. Five centuries of fighting off all kinds of beasts and monsters. Five centuries of losing community after community, city after city. Even our home was left behind when Celestia relocated to Canterlot." Her voice turned even harder. "I will not let anypony keep me from protecting my subjects. Not you, the Legate, or the stars themselves will keep me from achieving my dream."

The iron determination in her mind crushed against me. "You have my terms. Accept them, and you will have your children, and I my realm, and our people will have the future they deserve. Do not be selfish, Blackjack. Be wise." The world then filled with static as I was ejected from her mind.

oooOOOooo

Getting ejected from the Perceptitron was rather akin to being shot in the head, and I'd know. I curled up in a ball and waited for the sensation like a red hot wire being drawn through my skull, from temple to temple, to subside. I kept my eyes closed and waited, jaw locked. I knew pain. I waited. It took me a while to register P-21 and Scotch Tape holding me and talking at me. I focused on that bar of fire. Slowly, bit by bit, it cooled off. Finally, I lifted my head enough to look at the pair.

"Note: don't go in the mind of a goddess who can smack you back out," I croaked.

"Are you okay?" P-21 asked at once. Funny. Did that word even apply to me anymore?

"No. I just informed her that I'm coming after her," I said, knowing that the element of surprise was one of the few things I had had, and now... "She's going to be ready for us."

"Well, can we alter our flight plan or something? Arrive before she's ready?" P-21 asked, looking at Scotch Tape.

The olive filly shook her head. "I wouldn't want to risk it. If something, anything, went wrong, then there's a whole lot of space to get lost and die in. It's not as simple as 'point the rocket at the moon'."

I flopped back, breathing slowly. The first time I'd been in my old body, it hadn't felt different. Now... the moon seemed to be empowering her. What would she be like once she got there? Would spark grenades even do the trick anymore? "When we get there, the two of you have to focus on disabling Horizons. Whatever else happens, we can't let it fire." Even if Cognitum was right and the Tokomare was just a machine, it didn't matter. It had evil literally emanating from it. No good could come from that thing, and I didn't care how a smarter pony might argue about 'What is evil?'. It was wrong, and when this was over, I'd devote myself to tracking down silver rings, tossing them under the Core, and burying the whole damned thing with a great big 'Warning, radioactive tainted poisoned Enervated area. Go away.' sign on top.

"What about getting your body back?" P-21 asked.

I closed my eyes, the lingering pain still throbbing in my temples. "I'm not sure I can do that anymore. She was aware of me inside her. No pony's done that before. She's..." I glanced up at him and admitted the horrible truth. "I don't know how to beat her, P-21. Before now, yeah. Grenades. Delete. Swap bodies. Now..." I took a deep breath and stared at the floor. "Now it feels like the fucking Legate."

Both of them embraced me. "I believe in you, Blackjack," P-21 said.

"You'll find a way," Scotch Tape echoed.

Damn it. Ignorance really was bliss. "Yeah. Sure. But just the same, stop Horizons." I lifted my head and gazed out at the moon, growing larger and brighter than it ever was when seen from the ground. *Just in case I don't*, I added silently to myself.

* * *

Two hours later, the moon filled the lower halves of all four windows. The surface was comprised of grayish white moonstone plains with immense crags of the rock thrusting up in faintly more luminous mountain ranges. The entire surface glowed with a spectral light, casting strange shadows out into the darkness. Earlier, Scotch and I had figured out how to get one of the screens to show the view behind the rocket. Before the autopilot turned the ship around to start the landing, Equus had been reduced to a hoof-sized circle behind us, and the sun was an even tinier glowing bead disappearing behind the disc of the planet. Now I stared at a cratered landscape punctuated by the occasional crystalline ridge.

Below us, I could see our destination: a square pad, Cognitum's rocket already perched imperiously in the center of it, sitting on a flat, open plain. Two lines on the moon's surface ran off from the pad at an acute angle to each other, one plunging straight into an abyssal crevasse of deep purple and black crystals and the other running to a terraced structure built into the edge of the chasm. I watched a little train streaking away from the landing platform along one of the lines, headed straight for the dark gorge, as we came in for a landing.

I owed whoever had designed the autopilot a drink. The thing led us straight and true to the large, flat structure. Rockets fired for the last time in the flight, and we grew heavier in our couches as the ship began to slow its fall onto the platform below. The machine rumbled beneath us as it dropped foot by foot and then, with clanks and thumps as the landing gear touched down and took on the ship's weight, settled neatly on the pad beside Cognitum's rocket. A tower rose from a marked-off square on the platform, and a tube extended outwards to meet the hatch of our rocket. Something banged down below, and the engine went silent.

"Here we go," I said as I stepped to the hatch, bouncing slightly in the low gravity. I flipped open the catches and grabbed the handle.

"Wait!" the pair shouted simultaneously, Scotch Tape launching herself at the hatch controls across the cockpit and faceplanting two thirds of the way to them.

P-21 stared at me as I pulled it open and I stepped out into the tunnel. "What?" I asked in mild annoyance. Without speaking, he pointed a hoof at the 'Warning! Hard Vacuum!' signs mounted here and there all over the interior of the tower. "What? So it's clean," I said in mild annoyance.

"That means no *air*, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape said into the deck of the cockpit.

"Oh." I blinked, then said as cheerily as I could, "Well, it's open now. Let's go."

"I don't know which is more likely to kill us," P-21 muttered as he helped Scotch Tape to her feet. "Cognitum, or Blackjack's lack of vocabulary." We crossed to the tower, through a hatch, and onto a spiral staircase. There was a single red bar scrolling across my E.F.S. as we twisted around and around. At the bottom was yet another hatch. I pushed it open and carefully poked my head through; on the other side was a corridor with, right in front of the door, a stretch painted with caution stripes. Signs warned of 'Caution: Weight Increase' and 'Caution: Weight Decrease' with arrows pointing in opposite directions, however that worked, but there was no sign of anything or anyone hostile. I crept out as silently as I was able and made my way down the hall, my weight indeed increasing back to what I was used to on Equus from one end of the caution-painted area to the other. Scotch and P-21 following me, though I had to look back to make sure the latter was there, I approached the lit doorway and the red bar at the hallway's end.

'WELCOME PRINCESS LUN' proclaimed a banner across a large lobby. Windows along two walls afforded a view of the beautiful lunar landscape. I marveled at the equine architecture, mosaics, and sculptures depicting the dark Princess of the Moon. It reminded me of the design in the Nightmare Citadel, but with more stainless steel and moonlight and less obsidian and shadows. Despite the banner, nearly everything was empty and spotless. No dust, but a dry scent scratched at my nostrils. At the far wall were two signs: 'To Astrotable' and 'To Lunar Palace'.

Between the signs was the red bar.

It walked forward casually, footfalls heavy on the carpet. It walked without fear, with confidence, with certainty.

After all, what did a mare who could never die have to fear?

“Hey, Blackjack. Long time no see. You’re looking good,” Rampage said casually, the blades of her armor gleaming in the moonlight like cold stars. “Fraid I have to kill you now.”

(Author’s notes: I am so very sorry for the tardiness of this chapter. Just about everything that could go wrong, short of losing an editor, went wrong. Car problems. Dog eating a roach poison tablet. Losing 21 pages stored on a flash drive. Plague. Medical scares regarding my heart. Christmas. Yeah. But it’s here, and I’m sorry that it’s so terrible.

If folks are wondering why I did the chapter as I did, I want the end of Horizons to be more than just Blackjack. I hope that, even if people don’t care much for the secondary characters of the fic, that they can respect what the characters are attempting in pulling together and working together. If you didn’t enjoy it, I apologize.

As usual, I want to thank Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria,

[Somber’s mother’s machine decided to punk out at this point; he plans to finish the note later. Don’t forget, any donations to david13ushey@gmail.com through Paypal would be greatly, *greatly* appreciated.]

Editor’s notes:

swicked: Somber has informed us that extensive technical explanations in the editor’s notes are NOT appreciated. Ergo, we have convinced the engineer (well, one of them, anyway) of our number to forgo a lengthy discussion on tank mechanics.

You are welcome.

Bronode: I figured out why photon torpedoes are called photon torpedoes. But I’m not allowed to explain it. So take that, I guess. Also, anything involving interphasic anything is bullshit.