

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 73: Apogee

"Forget it, Twilight. I know what you're up to. The second I go in, you'll have your little minion Spike come and take Tom!"

"Tom?"

"Well, it's not going to work."

Once, I had met a mare. She'd leapt down upon a bounty hunter who'd been set on taking me to Deus. She'd been rude, assertive, and fearless in all things. She was a Reaper, one of the deadliest fighters in all the Wasteland, sent to find out if I had actually killed one of their own. In the depths of my home, I'd rescued her from the nightmarish fate of becoming a ceaselessly conscious, unending meal for cannibal raiders, and, over time, we'd become friends of a sort. She mocked me, questioned me, and even looked up to me. But she'd been in pain, and had wanted to die, and I... I wanted my friend to live. I could have found a way to kill her if I'd *really* tried. Found some means to end her eternal regeneration and give her the peace that life had denied her... but I'd refused. I'd been certain that life was always better. And so, she had betrayed me to my enemy for the promise of an end to her life only for it to be denied her yet again. This was a mare cursed with life.

Rampage.

Her pink eyes roamed over the three of us casually, her lips twisting in disgust. "Kill you," she muttered, as if the word suddenly tasted bitter in her mouth. She plucked idly at the carpet with her hoofclaws, scratching it like a manticore. She sighed and rolled her eyes. "I mean, of course it's 'kill'. Couldn't be to tie you up and toss you in a closet or delay you with a musical number. But let's face it, when it comes to consistency, Cognitum's got more than a few shorts in her processors, if you know what I mean." She paused and added, "And I really hope you do, because that's as far as I get with techie words."

We didn't answer. Behind her were the doors that presumably led to the tracks to our destination. Her casual smile turned into a small frown. "What? No banter? No comeback?" She looked at Scotch Tape and grinned. "Hey! You made it to the moon! Awesome. Is this cool or what?"

"You say you're gonna kill Blackjack, and you wanna talk about the moon being cool?" Scotch Tape replied flatly, not taking her eyes off the striped mare.

The corner of Rampage's eye started to twitch. "Wow. Heck of a girl. When did she become such a grouch? Must take after her father." She said the last with a grin at P-21.

"Thanks," he answered calmly, returning a casual smile and nothing more. Rampage smirked and waited a few moments, and then her lips melted in a frown.

"What the fuck happened to you two? Did Blackjack botch some mind magic or something?" She surveyed the terminal. "And where's Glory? Back in the rocket? I mean, I know she's not flying around out there," she pointed to the window and the moonscape. "And Boo? She's got to be somewhere around, right?" Rampage looked around the terminal, as if expecting to see the white pony appear from the air. I had to admit, I would have loved to have her with us.

"Boo's fine. Glory didn't make it," I said, forcing myself to keep my words as controlled as I could.

"Oh, you have to be shitting me? You left her behind? Fuck! She loves you, Blackjack!" Rampage said sharply. I shoved down the emotions that demanded I roar my hatred, pain, and sorrow at her. I had to stay focused. Even with the operative barding protecting me, Rampage could kill me in one

good slam. She scowled at me a moment longer, then lifted her head, eyes wide. "Holy shit... She's not... she's... is she?" I didn't answer. "Oh... damn... Blackjack, I'm so sorry!" And sadder still was the sincerity in her voice. I doubted that there were many ponies Rampage would talk about like that.

"I don't know. I hope not." I fought to keep the tremble out of my voice. "It's been a long couple of days," I continued, forcing myself to stay calm. "It's good to see you, though. I'm glad to see you're still alive." A wince and a frown crossed her face. "Let me guess: Cognitum's put off giving you your death till later?"

She sighed, scowling and rolling her eyes. "Yeah. She wants her capital restored and realm back and yadda yadda yawn," she said, slouching a little and waving a claw in a circle next to her dismissively. "I figure if she doesn't do it by the end of the week, I'm just going to rip her head off. Either she'll use her überpowers to eradicate me, or she'll get what she deserves and I'm no worse off."

"Or you could help us," I said.

Rampage chuckled, rolling her eyes. "She said you'd say that." She stared into my eyes evenly, then a touch of doubt entered her gaze. "Have you changed your mind about killing me? That would really simplify things. I'm sure you've worked out some kind of trick or gadget or... something. Some way to take me out by now."

"Not really. I was kinda hoping you'd join me and help stop all this," I answered.

"And why would I do that?" Rampage asked with a smirk.

"Because you've been jabbering with us instead of turning us into paste?" Scotch Tape suggested. "I mean, if you're going to kill us, shouldn't you have gotten started a minute ago?"

Rampage frowned. "Look, I missed you guys! I don't even like Cognitum. None of the ponies with her will talk to me. They're worse than Glory!" She winced as if struck, then managed a genuinely apologetic expression. "Sorry, force of habit. But unless you or pops over there are going to kill me, Cognitum's my best chance to check out, because Blackjack doesn't have the guts to give me what I want. What I fucking *need*!" She gave me an angry glare.

"That's right," I answered. "Because I know who you really are, Peppermint."

Rampage went completely still for a few seconds, her eyes wide as she stared at me in some sort of horrified gape. "...Oh no." I felt a little surge of hope rise as she shook her head. "No! No fucking way!" A smile crept on my face as she pointed at me and cried out, "Fuck you, Blackjack, and fuck your lame-ass Reaper re-names. I mean, Whisper? Peppermint? Next you'll tell me Brutus's 'real name' was Fluffy or... no. Fuck you." She stuck her tongue out at me and muttered, "Really, if you were going to make up a name, couldn't it have been from somewhere other than a candy wrapper?"

"You're Twist's daughter, Peppermint," I said as I started to walk around her. "Doof... Deus... is your father."

"Okay, now you're just being 'pop my head like a bloatspite' stupid, 'cause that's not true," her annoyance focusing into anger. "That's impossible."

"It's true, Peppermint," I said evenly, knowing this wasn't going to be pretty. "I touched his mind. He told me everything. He wanted me to look after you."

"The fuck he did! My..." she trailed off as cognition danced behind her eyes, and she shook her head hard. Rampage growled, "This is getting really fucking annoying, Blackjack. Deus! That guy was a jackass!"

"To you?" I asked sharply. "He was a twisted monster to most people, yeah, but was he ever to *you*?"

Rampage's eyes locked to mine. "Well, no... but that was probably just because... I mean... who the fuck cares?!"

"Deus did. About you. He wasn't scared of you. He didn't want to rape you. He wanted to protect you. That's why he stopped fighting for the Harbingers. That's why he followed us around as long as he did. It was the only way he could be around you," I said as I held my gaze. Some of that might have been guesswork, but it felt solid. "It wouldn't surprise me if he was involved in you becoming a Reaper, even. Why else would one of the top ten want to kill you at random? Doesn't it strike you as odd that you'd cross paths with a Reaper so soon after flopping out of the Core?"

"She heard that I was talking shit," Rampage answered.

"And who'd she hear that from?" I challenged.

"I... don't know. She tried to kill me, and when she couldn't, I killed her," Rampage stammered. "But I'm not this Peppermint! Why don't I remember it?"

"You had the memory removed. If I had to guess, by Priest. He would have been willing to help give you a chance at some peace." I couldn't prove it, but it made sense to me. "You locked it up in your old room at Miramare. I'm guessing without it, all the other memories in you crowd out memories of that life."

"I'm not Peppermint," Rampage countered sharply. "I'm Rampage. A killing machine! That's all I do! I'm a monster!"

"You're Peppermint, a filly younger than Scotch Tape. Think about every time you're disintegrated. It doesn't return you to being as you are now. It turns you back into a filly, and then you grow up into who you are now." I kept my eyes on her. Any second now.

"Shut up, Blackjack!" she shouted back at me, tears in her eyes.

I really wished I had the recollector right now. I pulled out the memory orb I'd retrieved from Twist's quarters. "This has it all. Twist trying to take you off the base. The bomb going off. Her shoving the phoenix talisman inside you. All of it." Then I realized that I might have something else. I pulled out the teddy bear and threw it at her. She caught it in her hooves. "You left that behind."

Rampage trembled as she held the teddy bear in her hooves and stared into its slightly forlorn face. "I've..." She brought it to her muzzle and inhaled the scent. "I... I know this... but..." She shook her head hard and glared back at me. "No! It's... you're trying to trick me! I know you're up to something, Blackjack. I don't know what, but it's not true! I... I'm not Peppermint. I'm Rampage. And I'm going to kick your ass to the mo- er... um... sun! Or whatever!"

Damn it, she wasn't going to make this easy on me. "Demand the recollector from Cognitum. See for yourself!"

"Yeah, right. And she's just going to give it to me? And you're just going to hang around here while I use it?" Rampage scowled at me. "Now shut it, get back on your rocket, and get gone. I'll take care of Cognitum. I don't want her to kill you three anyway. Well, maybe you, Blackjack, but only 'cause you're being a jackass right now!"

Okay. It looked like this was going to be the hard way, then. "Which soul was it that betrayed me, Rampage?" I snapped in return. "Was it the Angel? Yeah, I'm sure she'd love to stop giving 'peace' to the Wasteland! Or was Softheart a dirty cop all along? Or Razorwire? I'm sure she's really into siding with authority! Or was the Doc interested in stabbing me in the back? How about Shujaa? Was she really a traitor? Or was Twist the one who sold out her friends?" She shifted her whole body towards me, leaning forward, widening her stance, and flexing her powerful hindlegs like a four-hundred-pound steel cat. "That's right. She was a worthless, no good moth—"

Rampage tossed the bear aside and charged me with a scream. I teleported out of her path as she ripped past, materializing a ways back from her. She didn't turn. She ran right to the wall and then up it, did a twisting jump upside-down off the ceiling, and landed back on her hooves to face me with an ease as impressive as it was terrifying. "No bullets or bombs!" Scotch Tape screamed as I pulled out Sexy and P-21 drew Persuasion. "'Hard Vacuum', remember?!"

Shit... that put a kink in my 'reboot Rampage' idea. And she was already on her way back at me. "Stay back!" I shouted, then teleported to the other side of the room again. I needed a way to disable her! She rounded so fast it ripped up a massive burr of carpet, then tore back at me, tugging at her helmet's chinstrap. "Give it up, Rampage! Fast as you are, you can't teleport!" I said, and as a demonstration, I disappeared back to the other side of the room once again.

And got a helmet upside the head for my trouble. It banged into me with a huge clang and nearly knocked me on my ass, and the axelike blade at the brow only barely missed my face to rip a huge gash in my helmet instead. Worse, it kept me in place long enough for Rampage to pounce. "I'm going to kill you, Blackjack!" she screamed at me.

She was an emotionally ravaged filly having a tantrum in a body that could grind me into paste. She came down, and I rolled to the side to avoid being crushed. Her foreleg swept out to the side, ripping three furrows in my armor from spine to rump. Without it, my hide would have been shredded to ribbons. I flopped over again to face her as she rose for another strike, then blasted her in the face with a magic bullet. It slowed her down only enough for me to get to my feet again.

"Rampage!" P-21 shouted. She snapped her head towards him in time to spot him raising Persuasion and firing a grenade. It smashed into her forehead, bouncing off and flipping in an arc before her. She reached out and actually caught it as P-21 and Scotch covered their eyes. Rampage's body shielded me from the flash, but the bang made my ears ring. At least Rampage had soaked up most of that too.

Rampage shook her head hard, staggering a few steps and blinking her eyes. "Ow," she muttered, then refocused on P-21, narrowing her eyes as she recovered quickly. "Okay. Your turn."

"Blackjack! Boost me up!" Scotch Tape shouted as she ran to me, pointing up at the ceiling. P-21 was now backing away on the defensive as I levitated Scotch up to where she could kick open a panel in the ceiling and disappear inside. "Get her over here!" she said from above.

Easier said than done. As I watched Rampage, though, I realized that she wasn't fighting like she could have been. Where were the commando grips? What about the Proditor kicks and tricks? Police combat and dirty fighting were also conspicuously absent. If Shujaa, Twist, and Softheart had been helping, P-21 wouldn't have had a chance. As it was, he kept swinging, ducking, wildly backflipping, weaving, and barely keeping away from the wild claw swipes that threatened to rip him in half.

There wasn't anything for it. I raised Sexy, glanced at all that glass with space on the other side, and hoped that it was thicker than it looked, or maybe magic, unbreakable glass. Advancing towards her, I moved till she filled most of the spread and opened up with buckshot. Sexy let loose a thundering roar, pouring a storm of lead at the striped mare. The weapon was, however, less effective than I'd hoped. The Brood that she'd so easily chewed through below hadn't been covered in an inch of plate steel; much of the shot deflected off or pancaked on the metal. Even when exposed gaps were hit and penetrated, the shot was merely pushed out of the wound a second later.

But it did work in one respect: it shifted her attention from P-21 to me. I started to back away again as she advanced on three legs, the fourth raised and shielding her head to prevent me from rendering her vulnerable by pulping her face. Burst after burst cracked out, sending lead flying wildly and spiderwebbing the glass with errant shots. At least it was a little tougher than it looked! Overhead, between shots, I heard Scotch mutter, "Oh, go ahead. Make us suck hard vacuum. I always wanted a special death you just can't find on Equus."

"Sorry. You got that with the Joke, Scotch," I countered as I kept backing away.

"You're the joke," Rampage countered, now moving close enough to leap at me. I turned Sexy sideways just in time and watched her claws scrape at the metal. Thank Celestia for reinforced barrels! I wasn't going to lose this gun so quickly!

Then two wires dropped down. One touched her armored rump. The other touched her unarmored mane. The second it did, there was a sharp snap, a dazzling flash, and a reek of burning mane. Rampage immediately jerked sideways, spasming and flopping like a four-hundred-pound steel-scaled fish as half the lights in the terminal winked out.

Scotch poked her head out the hatch. "Did I get her?"

I advanced to the twitching form. "Looks like," I said as I pressed the gun to her forehead. "Time to reboot."

Rampage opened her eyes, tears running down her cheeks. "Please," she whimpered, "help my little girl."

I blinked.

Then Sexy went flying as her hoof moved faster than I could see, knocking it to the far corner of the room. Rampage swept around in a circle, hooking her barbed tail in my leg barding and jerking me right off my feet. She continued the motion, flinging me in the opposite direction of my gun. "Electricity? Really? Why not try and taze me, or use rubber bullets? Or fire? That works really well!" she said sarcastically, and then she was leaping at me before I could rise.

I imagined I was fighting a tiger as I tried to use my focus to get away from her, but she was on me like a tempest. Raking hoofclaws ravaged the rest of my helmet and nearly took off my face. Her razorwire-threaded tail whipped towards me, catching my flanks and tearing the gaps in my barding even wider. Then she reared up, and I reared up as well, blocking her plunging hoofclaws and really missing my augmentations. Her weight came crushing down as I backed up again and again.

"Blackjack!" P-21 shouted from the far side of the room, then hurled Sexy across the terminal towards us. Thankfully, the weapon could take a bounce or two, and, with his usual aim, it rammed into Rampage's side and knocked her off balance just long enough for me to catch it with my hooves and magic. I now had something heavy to keep between her and myself at least, but Sexy's mass also worked against me; while it was sturdy enough to be a shield, the weapon was too massive for me to maneuver.

Rampage leapt up, pushing against the gun, grinning ear to ear over it at me as her weight slowly shoved it aside. I blasted her with a magic bullet, but while it tore the side of her head away, her body began to repair the damage immediately. I reared up and planted my forehooves against the gun, trying to push back as I danced on my hindlegs. A second magic bullet to the face failed to go through her brain. The third missed completely as we whirled about.

Don't fall! If I fell, I'd be paste. I fought to pull my focus back together to teleport away again, drawing Vigilance at the same time. That really got her moving, pushing us both in a tight spiral as bullets flew wildly at her unarmored head. P-21 and Scotch Tape took cover as we danced around and around on our hindlegs, both pressing against Sexy as I struggled to land a shot that'd blow her brains out so she'd see reason.

"Hard vacuum!" screamed Scotch Tape, and I dimly heard an alarm sounding somewhere as the magazine ran empty. Enough! I had to put some distance between us! I just needed a few more seconds to tele—

She bit my horn! Bit it! I screamed as my focus shattered and I felt something crunchy happening atop my forehead. The pain was so bad that I almost collapsed, Vigilance bouncing away. My

shoulders hit the wall behind me, and something crinkled. Suddenly, Rampage stopped biting down as the crinkling deepened, a sound like cracking ice. I looked up at her, my vision swimming with tears of pain, and spotted her staring past me with a look of trepidation... and awe.

Then we were blasted through the window.

Instantly, I was covered head to hoof in a wrongness. My skin burned as we tumbled out together into the void. Instinctively, I tried to hold my breath, as if we were underwater, but when my back struck the cool dust, the air was blasted from my lungs in a vapor. I felt the dull impact of Rampage beside me, both of us kicking up glowing clouds of dust that settled on us as I looked up at the line of windows a story above us. A metal plate had dropped down, covering the ones we'd punched through. I stared up at the sight of P-21 and Scotch Tape looking down at me through one of the intact ones, mouths moving. My heart thundered in my ears as I lay back in the dust.

It would be so easy to simply stay down and rest. It was so beautiful here. The moon was full of song. P-21 and Scotch Tape could finish. I could just... rest. I turned my head to lay my cheek on the glowing dust and gravel and pressed my bloodied horn to the gleaming surface, listening to that wonderful song as time seemed to stretch out.

Get up, Blackjack...

I don't want to.

Get up, Blackjack!

Five more minutes!

Then I heard it. The distant cacophony of echoing screams. A muffled concerto of pain. I lifted my head, coated head to hoof in moon dust, and stared up at Equus above me. The planet looked sick. Maimed. Bleeding and dying. I pushed myself to my hooves as I felt my consciousness failing fast. I stared up at it, my eyes feeling dry and itchy.

Will you leave its fate uncertain? Will you leave the fates of your friends for others to decide?

I turned and saw Rampage rising to her hooves, chunks of white dust and gravel tumbling off her armor. Her face twisted in torment as she clutched her head, lips moving silently in a scream. There was nothing I could do for her here. I stared up at the world above. So small. So sick and injured. Could I do anything that would help?

Where there is will, there is hope.

Where there is hope, there is action.

Where there is action, there is possibility.

Possibility. Not certainty... too much to hope for. I wanted to sigh, but I was feeling pretty numb and wobbly. I closed my eyes, drew in my focus, and teleported back into the terminal, collapsing in a heap under the banner. My whole body tingled from head to hoof as I sucked in air... wonderful, wonderful air. My whole body felt tight and swollen, my eyes burning horribly as if buckets of sand had been poured in my face, my head immediately pounding as my heart rate picked up again. Tears poured down my cheeks as I struggled to clear the grit. The moon dust coating me made my horn tingle like it was plugged into an electrical socket.

"Blackjack! Here!" P-21 shouted as he put a healing potion to my lips. I drank it down eagerly, then coughed and breathed a little while longer. Huh... I couldn't taste the potion at all.

"How come you didn't explode? I thought you were supposed to explode on the moon," Scotch Tape asked, actually sounding slightly disappointed.

"Sorry to disappoint," I said, working my tongue and stiff, swollen body. Was there something wrong with my mouth? I didn't want to not be able to taste Sugar Apple B... damn it, P-21... I slowly pushed myself to my hooves and tugged my ruined barding off. Rampage had pretty much shredded most of it. Damn, I'd been lucky to have her on my side. We walked to the windows and looked out for her.

"Where's Rampage?" P-21 asked. I felt a frisson of fear. There was no sign of her down at the rents we'd left in the moon dust.

The window exploded in my face amid a loud bang and gust of wind, Rampage's hooves hooking into the carpet before she could be pulled back. With my head still spinning from my own return, I wasn't able to brace myself in time, and the exhausting air sent me tumbling into Rampage's glowy hug. Scotch Tape and P-21 dropped to the floor, wedged in between floor and wall before they could be blown over as well. The steel shutter slammed down over the window, blocking the escape of air. "Peppermint this," Rampage hissed as she started to squeeze, eyes bloodshot and bulging as she dribbled moon gravel all over me.

I had no tricks left. Then P-21 was there, swinging Persuasion's barrel like a truncheon and striking her again and again across the face with it with a loud 'poing' noise. "Ow! Ow! Stop it! Quit it!" she yelled, relaxing her crushing grip on me as she raised a hoof to deflect the wild swings.

Scotch Tape raced by with the banner from the ceiling and pulled it over Rampage's face, yanking it tight. She lifted a hoofclaw and slashed at the material, ripping a hole in it. P-21 fired a grenade straight at her face, the impact filling the air with a resounding *crack* as she went reeling. I managed to pull out of her grip. I assumed P-21 had loaded a dud as he had with the Legate and wheeled. I could have shot her in the head again, but I'd had enough.

She ripped the banner in two and then looked straight into my eyes. I leaned forward and jammed my moonstone-coated horn into her brow. "No, *this* is Peppermint!" I hissed. Without the recollector, there was no way she could experience the memory in the orb.

So I gave her mine, transferring a memory of a memory into her mind. It was like dumping a cup of flamer fuel into a smoldering fire. When the memory entered her consciousness, it set light to everything else. A filly didn't have a lot of memories in general, particularly underneath all the experiences she'd had since waking in the Wasteland. 'Not a lot' wasn't 'none', though, and suddenly that simple little memory was drawing up others inside her that had lain dim and dark in the depths of her mind. Shujaa giving rides on her back. Twist baking her a six layer birthday cake. Said cake toppling like a felled tree when Peppermint tried to eat the bottom layer first (Who'd miss it? It was the bottom one, after all.). And dozens more. The memories, thoughts, and emotions of the filly at Rampage's core lit up, the quickfire searing through the brambly depths of her mind.

"No!" Rampage sobbed as she released me and fell on her side, clutching her head and writhing as though in physical pain. I scrambled back as quickly as I could, flopping while I watched the armored mare flail like Tenebra in the midst of an epileptic fit. Her claws raked at her head as if trying to physically scrape the memories out of her skull, and, failing at that, ripped and shredded at the ground. Finally, she collapsed on her side, sobbing brokenly, blood and tears mixing in the sparkling moon dust covering her and tiny bits of carpet drifting in the air like feathers.

"She wanted me to live. Mommies die for their babies. But I didn't. I killed my baby, Mommy. I killed her," she choked out through helpless sobs. I approached slowly as she muttered, "I'm sorry, Mommy. I am so sorry."

I knelt down and stroked her gently. "Shh... shh... It's okay, Peppermint."

"Don't call me that, Blackjack. I'm not Peppermint anymore, and I'm not Psychoshy," Rampage said as she looked up at me morosely. "She wanted me to live, Blackjack..." Rampage blubbered. "She

wants me to live... but how can I? I killed my own baby. I... I *fucking murdered my own daughter*, Blackjack. How do I come back from that?"

Gee, where had I heard that before? She embraced me, and I braced myself as she wept. "I know it hurts, Rampage," I said gently, waiting as she held me in her hooves. "And I know that you don't want to go on, but I need you." Her sobbing continued as the embrace tightened around my shoulders. *Keep the anger in check, though.* I struggled to keep my voice even. "I need your help." Her sobbing slowed, and I waited, rage condensing to hate. "We need to save the world." Show your fucking face...

Her weeping stopped. "No," Rampage breathed as her hooves tightened around me in a crushing embrace. Then she lifted her head, stared into my eyes, and smiled. "We need to give it peace!" There you are!

And I looked straight into her eyes, vacant as the corpse of a dead star, and pressed my horn against her forehead and unloaded... something... straight into Rampage's mind. It wasn't any kind of spell, per se. It was to mind magic what a balefire egg was to precision. As she started to crush me, I rammed a white-hot lance of rage, frustration, fear, and will straight into the pool of Rampage's mind. The Angel was like an oily blot smothering the flames I'd ignited. With fiery rage and hate, I poured every bit of magic I could squeeze through my horn into her head. There was no 'mental spell matrix' or 'envisioning then actualizing' like Twilight's books taught. This was me wanting nothing more right now than to rip, burn, gnash, tear, and obliterate that foul, bilious madness inside Rampage. White light poured out of Rampage's eyes as I pushed everything I could into her.

The Angel recoiled. I advanced. The Angel hid. I pursued. The Angel threw images of Glory's corpse at me. I denied. The Angel promised peace. I mandated action. Deeper and deeper, hotter and hotter, my will burned after her. It would help me kill Cognitum. I didn't want it. It would help me kill the Legate! The Eater itself! Just stop. I refused. It threw the sensation of serene peace at me like a choking blanket.

"You want peace?" I shouted into Rampage. "Have it!"

I dug down all the way to a hard little knot that I couldn't push into, and seizing every bit of that slimy, acidic, poisonous thought, I pulled. I ripped. I consumed. I eradicated. With mental ferocity that outpaced the ruin of any balefire explosion, I tore every last bit to splinters.

Then my horn burned out with a pop, and we both fell again. The moonstone that had stuck to my horn had turned inky black. It fell freely around my hooves, and I watched as it disintegrated, releasing a black shadow that was swept away with a tiny pathetic scream upon an ethereal wind.

"What did you do, Blackjack?" Scotch Tape asked in shock. She waved her hooves in the air. "I mean, she was all 'Grrr!' and then you went all 'zap', and her eyes went 'wooosh', and then you were both 'Ohhh!'" And she slumped, as if momentarily winded by her question.

"I have no idea," I groaned, touching the blackened end of my horn and yelping as a crackle of electricity zapped my hoof. Okay, that was new. "I was just really... really pissed when I did it, think I overdid it, and whatever it was..." I glanced at the sooty black remains of the dust. "I think it worked."

At least, I hoped it did. Rampage was stirring. "Was it supposed to give me a splitting headache and make me feel like crap?" she asked as she sat up in a sulk, then slumped back on her rump. "'Cause if so, bravo."

"I went after that thing that killed Hope, Rampage," I said, trying to tap my horn and getting another zap and zing of pain through my spire. "Ow..." I winced, then looked at her. "Did I get it?"

"I dunno. You went away, and then I came back, and..." She rubbed her face with her hooves, looking tired and older as she stared out one of the remaining windows. "Mom would be so ashamed of me," she muttered.

"Join the club," I said, shifting and sitting next to her as I scrubbed at my temple. "I know just what my mom would think about me. 'Couldn't you have done better without the body count?'"

"Yeah, but you didn't kill your kid, Blackjack," she pointed out. Scotch Tape sighed, rolling her eyes, and trotted over to examine something by the tram entrances.

"Got my stable, though," I answered. P-21 growled, rubbing his own head as he gritted his teeth. "Most of it," I added.

"Oh, would you two just stop?!" P-21 shouted at the both of us, throwing his forehooves into the air. "Honestly! You pick *now* to whine about which of you more disappointed your mothers? I was born with a penis. I beat *both* of you for disappointed mothers!" he shouted as all three of us just stared at him. He noticed, turned red, and blurted, "Now is not the time for this!"

I looked at Rampage out the corner of my eye. "He's kinda got a point." I cracked a little smile, but she didn't share it. "Rampage, I really don't want to fight Cognitum, but I'd feel a lot better having you with me than not. It'd be like old times again."

"Old times," she sighed, then looked levelly at me. "I still want to die," she said with a small frown. Nearly a pout.

"I know." I put a hoof across her shoulders and hugged her to me. She pressed her forehead to my shoulder.

"But Cogs isn't going to actually turn it off and kill me, is she?" Rampage asked.

"Probably. It's not in her nature to throw away a tool she can use. Heck, she didn't throw out Dawn or Horse. I hate to imagine what her fridge would look like," I said, smiling at the utterly nonsensical but unsettlingly plausible idea. Then again, I hadn't been known for cleanliness either.

"I want to die. What I did... what she did for me... it hurts. I'm so angry it hurts," she said, almost in a whimper. "And I can't make it stop."

I nuzzled her as Mom had done me when I was a filly. "I know. But you can do it after we stop her and save the world," I pointed out.

"Promise?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"I promise," I answered.

Rampage didn't answer, and I waited. Time was running out, but if I pressed her, she'd just spend the rest of time sulking right here waiting to die. "Right," Rampage said half a minute later. "Let's do this." She rose to her hooves and trotted to her helmet. Jamming it on her head, she looked back at me and smirked. "Oh, and by the way, Blackjack? I *totally* would have kicked your ass if you hadn't broken out the freaky mind magic shit."

I lifted myself to my feet, looking at the tatters of my barding. "Yeah. No argument here," I replied, feeling as if I'd been stuck in a dryer with a load of rocks thrown in. I had moonstone tangled up in my mane. Stuck to my hide. Everywhere! It was making me feel decidedly weird, and I brushed off what I could, collecting it in a Sparkle-Cola bottle. The operative barding, on close inspection, was indeed a total loss; hopefully I'd find a decent replacement before too long.

We walked to the two doors, and I tapped the button next to the one for the Lunar Palace. "How many others does Cognitum have with her?" I asked Rampage. Another little spark of magic erupted from my horn. "Oww. What's the deal?" I asked, trying to stare at it as pain shot from the tip through the base and into my brain.

"Fourteen others. The best Harbingers she could find, along with a few mercenaries she rented. Talons," Rampage said dismissively. "Most of them are in power armor. Nothing I can't handle," she continued with a sniff.

"Right," I said as I scowled at the display over the double doors. It showed a shuttle moving from a crown-like icon to a rocket-like icon, which I assumed was where we were. I frowned at the display, then caught P-21 with an identical expression. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Oh Goddesses, if you two screw again..." Scotch Tape said in disgust. Rampage blinked at her in surprise, and she slumped, ears flat, and grumbled, "They did it right next to me while I was in the Perceptithing. I'm getting why Glory had issues."

"Seriously?" Rampage asked P-21.

"Your reset button is a bullet through the brain. Blackjack's is through her happy hole," P-21 replied with a casual smile and shrug. "I didn't make you crazy mares this way. I just work with that I have."

"Actually!" I declared to cut them all off, thrusting a hoof up at the display. "That tram, it's probably powered from the Palace, right?"

She frowned, then nodded. "Unless there's a big old reactor hidden under this terminal, probably."

"Then I'm thinking that stranding me in that tram car would be a pretty easy way to neutralize me. Either I get trapped in there till Horizons goes off, or she can just use a bomb and blow me to pieces in the middle of nowhere." I looked at my friends. "Even if I teleported away, I couldn't take any of you with me."

"Someday you really need to work out that little wrinkle," P-21 told me. I grumbled, mentally adding it to learning healing spells, finding some reliable barding, and stopping a superweapon from destroying the world.

"Huh, that's not a bad idea," Scotch Tape rubbed her chin as she considered me. "Did her chewing on your horn add a couple of IQ points, Blackjack?"

"Maybe," I muttered, reaching up to rub my abused spire, and getting rewarded with another painful shock. "Ow." I winced, then glared at the display, turned, and looked at the other door. That tram was already here. "What's in the Astrostable?"

"Dunno," Rampage replied with a shrug. "The blanks that helped build this place, I think. Cogs said she was sending a couple Harbingers to watch the place in case you tried to get in that way."

I grunted. Probable trap or possible ambush? I consulted P-21 and Scotch Tape, but they both gave shrugs of indifference. "Let's go through the Astrostable," I said as I watched the icon creep along above. "Scotch, can you rig that button to send the tram back when it gets here? Try and confuse her."

"So there's a way from the Astrostable to the Palace?" P-21 asked Rampage.

She shrugged. "Pretty sure. Those Harbingers weren't wearing space suits when they left."

"Rig it," I told Scotch Tape, then went and tapped the button to the other tram. The door hissed open, revealing a ten by twenty foot glass box with elegant polished aluminum filigree in a vaguely lunar motif on more or less every surface. Couches were arranged along the walls with a bench in the middle that seemed ideal for setting Sexy down for a good seeing to. Rampage had scratched up her finish badly, and I couldn't help but shoot the striped mare a reproachful look as I tried to buff it out.

Two minutes later, Scotch Tape trotted in and pushed a button, and the door closed. There was a tiny lurch, and the glass cart began to roll along the elevated track. The speakers crackled, and light classical music began to play. The four of us shared a look, as if not sure if we should laugh or shudder.

The tram certainly wasn't the epitome of high speed rail, but it soon became clear why the terminal had been built out in the open flat. As we travelled, the shining dusty plains became increasingly studded by larger and larger boulders. Milky crystals the size of houses began to jut up around the track. They only grew larger as the terminal shrank into the background, rising like great shining towers. The atmospheric classical was drowned out by a ghostly choir singing sublime ethereal notes in my mind. It brought forth memories of my friends together in Star House. When I paid more attention, the song faded.

"Look at the size of those things," Scotch Tape said, gawking as we moved past crystals the size of apartment buildings. The shimmery white stone had an opalescence to it, with rainbow colors crawling along the facets.

"Eh, they're rocks," Rampage scoffed dismissively.

I turned my head and studied the display over the door, which showed the rocket icon, a studded line, and a pyramid; the tramlike icon was creeping along what seemed horribly slowly. The tram had just reached the first stud on the line after three minutes. "How long is this going to take?"

"I dunno," Rampage shrugged. "Other one was like half an hour."

"Right," I said. There was one thing this called for! I pulled out the battered Perceptitron.

"Blackjack, are you sure you should be using that thing?" Scotch asked as she eyed the poor battered device. It sure had had a rough trip with me. Some of the talismans were chipped, and the wires were split and frayed.

"I need to know what's going on back home. Unless somepony can speed this thing up?" I asked, gesturing at the tram with a hoof, looking from one to the next. "No? Then I might as well use the time productively!"

"But you've been using that an awful lot today," P-21 warned. "Maybe you should just take it easy. The state that thing is in, it'll probably give you brain damage."

"No, I'm... won't!" I frowned at their various skeptical expressions. "Look, I can take it easy tomorrow. Right now, I have to know," I said stubbornly as I jammed it onto my head, entered in Goldenblood's tag, and the world—

Exploded.

I screamed as I flopped to the floor of the tram as fireworks went off from my horn, talismans popped and sizzled, and somepony started setting off balefire eggs inside my skull. Lights and voices blasted through my head as I took in images of a half dozen different ponies all at once. P-21 and Scotch Tape grabbed me, but that only made things worse as I gibbered, screamed, and thrashed in their grasp. I could see myself through both their eyes even as I saw so many other things. Finally Rampage did what she did best: she ripped the helmet off my head and stomped it repeatedly till the light show ended.

I rolled limply onto my side, my horn feeling... either numb from shock or tingly from a million different sensations. Or both. "What was that?" Rampage asked.

"Too much arcane device usage," P-21 said tersely. "Getting her horn chewed on. Using too much magic that last fight. Covering her horn in moonstone. All of the above? Take your pick." His voice echoed oddly, like it was sloshing around to the left and right inside my skull. "Are you alright, Blackjack?"

"Med-X," I barely whispered. Just talking made it feel like Rampage was still chomping on my horn. I tried opening my eyes, but what I saw was just wrong. It was as if I were looking at a dozen different images overlapping, each one slightly out of synch with the next. At least I could stop the distorted visions by clenching my eyes shut. The voices whispering in my ears were a different matter. They churned inside me, each one jockeying over the next.

"...sure that they're broadcasting outside the Hoof?" Homage whispered in my ears. "To whom? Why?"

"No idea," Windsheer replied. "The Enclave? Tenpony? The Cathedral? Your Lightbringer? Why would the Legate want everypony to see boring footage of the Core? There's nothing happening there. Ignore it. We've got more important things to focus on."

"They're coming again!" one of the cyberpegasi shouted as the words faded away.

The prick of the Med-X cut the pain immediately, and I relaxed. "Ooo, I really didn't need this right now." I could hear gunshots and shouts, but I had no clue who or what they belonged to. Somepony was screaming to run. Xanthe? I opened my eyes and looked up at the twitching images of my friends along with shadowy flickers behind them.

"She's bleeding out her ears and nose," Rampage said, curling her lip as if she found my weakness disturbing. "What the hell happened, Blackjack?" I wanted to answer, but as I lifted my head to do so, everything lurched and I gagged, then gave several dry heaves. The agony in my skull exploded anew, which only made me want to throw up more. Finally I just collapsed. "Oh, we are fucked," Rampage muttered.

"No, we're not. We talked about this. Scotch Tape and I will find some way to disable Horizons. Rampage, you can keep Cognitum busy," P-21 said evenly.

"Great. She's going to use her übercorn powers to punt me to the sun, I just know it," Rampage muttered.

"Look on the bright side," Scotch Tape said sarcastically as she put a healing potion to my lips. "That might kill you." I had to sip it carefully. What did it say about me that I was so experienced with pain that I knew how to manage this?

"Hey, yeah! That is a good point. I mean, I tried attacking her once or twice before, but my heart really wasn't in it," Rampage said eagerly. "I bet if I *really* try to kill her, she'll end me properly."

"Just... let me lie here for a while," I muttered. I'd pushed too hard. Tried too much. Now I had to deal with the consequences.

And the consequences, at this moment, were listening to a distant orchestra of horror composed of screams, gunshots, and explosions. The indistinct mumbling rose and fell like waves, sometimes merging into crushing unity that made me want to scream as it felt as if the silent, terrible weight of the whispers would blow my head apart. Then sliding out of synchronicity so that I could hear that soothing song of the moon and pick out individual voices.

"...don't like it! His tactics are changing. Becoming less general and more focused. He's mimicking our own strategy with the purple alicorns now. We barely pulled back from 99 before that group cut them off!" Storm Chaser said in my ears.

"So it's getting difficult. Adapt. Overcome. That's what life does," Goldenblood rasped. "Meatlocker is in the process of being overrun. Do the ghouls have a line of retreat?"

"We've got a tunnel secured. Hopefully the ferals in there won't bother them," Storm Chaser said as there were sounds of trotting and a distant chatter of gunfire. "We're moving everypony in the east into

the department stores around Fallen Arch, from the Collegiate to the old Boom refinery. Some scavengers bridged the gap into the Core. There're a lot of ponies wanting to go in..."

"No. Stop that at all costs," Goldenblood said sharply. "I don't know what's happening with that place, but I know it's a trap. Nothing good comes from there. I know. I helped build it."

The voices started to slide beneath the others, but Storm Chaser shouted, "Look out!"

I cracked my eyes open, catching a half dozen different scenes, but aside from a flash of stripes, I couldn't see any sign of whatever she yelled about. Instead, I saw Sagittarius blasting at a Brood tank rolling along the inside of a flooded underground garage, smashing over equipment and steamrolling over machinery and through great sheets of water. Behind it, on a raised platform, a dozen Brood laid out a raking fire at the power-armored Aries. The red-armored pony unleashed a torrent of flame. Her armor flaked away like bloody snow as they poured bullets back on the mare.

Suddenly, one side of the platform exploded, making the defenders lurch as a pink pony shape streaked through the foaming water. A turquoise pony lunged up, locked her hoof flipper things around the neck of one of the staggered shooters, and pulled it off the crumpling platform and into the churning flood water. A white unicorn who'd tattooed her left side in electric blue tribal marks stood on a table as lighting and ice blasted from her horn in two matching arcs, slamming into a golden tree as she laughed.

A half dozen battlefields swirled past my eyes, my ears roaring with a never-ending torrent of shouts, gunshots, and explosions. I struggled to focus on any one of them, but they kept melting away with every passing moment. My perception caught on certain scenes, though, and I struggled to latch onto them before I was yanked to some other.

I succeeded with an image of Toaster blazing like a comet as they struggled through a burning armory. No matter how much I might hate him, I had to admit that he was good at what he did. The scarred stallion burned a hole through the Brood defenders as Brutus and Hammersmith followed him. They were pushing their way towards the golden tree at the far side of the long room. It seemed as if its production had been ramped up, and it now popped out half-formed Brood that just tumbled into the converter, which was working double-time putting out malformed things that swarmed into the Reapers like a bloody tide. The malformed zebras piled on, and when beaten or battered aside, they simply hauled themselves back up again. I watched with horror as Hammersmith bashed one to the left, Brutus slammed one to the right, and they crushed a third between them. The bodies collapsed on top of one another, merged together, and sprang upon Brutus as a three-headed, six-legged profanity of flesh. Some of them had anatomy that no zebra or pony possessed: eagle claws, lion paws, and snake tails.

The sheer monstrous mass pushed the Reapers back foot by foot. Even the blazing form of Toaster disappeared beneath cooking striped carcasses that refused to die. I clenched my eyes shut, but that just brought the voices back in force. I heard heavy breathing and the close rattle of gunfire. "We need to go," Splendid said in serious tones.

"Go?" Grace replied. "Where do you expect to flee to, Brother?"

"Some of these alicorns have enough sense to know a good deal when it's offered. I've arranged three of them to teleport us to safety. We have more than enough money to purchase a place at Tenpony for the foreseeable future," Splendid said in calm, reasonable tones.

There was no answer for several seconds. I struggled to focus on that silence over the babble that threatened to spill forward. "It's time we left. There's nothing more we can do here, Grace," he said, his voice growing softer and lower. "We've done all we can. It's only a matter of time before the fighting reaches Elysium. Father wouldn't want us to die here."

There was a terribly long pause and then the sounds of hooves on marble. "Where are you going?!" Splendid shouted in alarm. "Grace!"

Then I heard, almost like a whisper, *"I will be the lady Father wanted me to be. I will be the noble that I've always pretended to be. But Goddesses, I am so scared. So terribly scared. But I can't run. I will be the pony I must be. For Father. For the Society. For my people."*

"Goodbye, Brother. Be sure to give Charm my love when you take her with you. I believe Tenpony will be a wonderful place for her to recover," Grace said calmly, with no animosity or bitterness. *Take care of her, Brother.*

"Grace? Grace!" Splendid shouted after her, his voice growing fainter and fainter as the sounds of gunfire rose. A door creaked open, and the noise spiked.

"Ma'am? What are you doing out here?" a stallion asked, surprise clear in his tone. "I thought... well... aren't you...?"

You thought I was going to run. To take care of myself. To abandon you... all of you... because that's what aristocrats do.

Grace responded primly, "Queen Blackjack appointed me regent of the Society. It would be improper for me to flee while it was still being contested. Somepony should have the good grace to stand with you at this hour of need. Now, if you please, good sir, could you explain how one goes about using this thing?" There was a gunshot and a yelp. "Oh my! Are you alright?" she gasped in alarm.

"Never... better... ma'am..." the stallion grunted with pain. "First... please put the gun down... ma'am... and pass me a potion, please?"

The din of battle faded away to a dull roar, the hum of the tram's engines growing. I cracked an eye open. In the periphery of my vision, flickers and images danced about, but I stayed focused on Rampage, P-21, and Scotch Tape over by the door. My head had a woozy, numb sensation, as if it were wrapped in layers of cloth.

The tram was now moving through mountains of moonstone that loomed like colossal tombstones over the track, jutting out at sharp angles overhead. To one side, towards the massive chasm, the pure white was tainted by streaks of dark purple, blue, and black. I could barely make out a low structure ahead of us, the top of the terrace built into the edge of the ravine.

"I can make the tram take her back to the terminal, and stay there. She can't fight like this," Scotch Tape insisted, pointing a hoof at me as she glared up at her father.

"Oh, yeah. Watch this," I slurred a little as I pushed myself to my hooves. All three watched with some alarm as I swayed. "Tadaa..."

P-21 and Scotch rushed to me, keeping me up. "Goddesses... what did you do to yourself, Blackjack?"

"What I always do," I muttered. "Now, I need to go kick... butt..."

"You need to go back to the rocket and let us do this," P-21 argued.

"No," Rampage suddenly contradicted with a scowl. "We need to get her to the Astrotable, stat."

"What are you talking about?" P-21 snapped.

Rampage stared into my eyes. "Blackjack, do you have any numbness, weakness, or paralysis? Blurred vision? Headache?" I made a muttered yes-ish noise to each. Rampage looked at the other two. "I think she's having a hemorrhagic stroke, or something very similar to one."

"A stroke? P-21 gives a great stroke," I said with a giggle, feeling a little drunk as I slumped against him, still bleeding out my nose and ear.

"How do you know?" P-21 asked.

"Six years of medical school and two years of residency," Rampage replied as she stared at me. She shoved a healing potion in my mouth, and I chugged it reflexively. That allowed the pain to abate a little, but I still didn't feel any better. "My field may be psychiatry, but I know severe red flags when I see them. We need to get her to the stable's medical station at once. Hopefully they'll have something more substantial than just restoratives."

"Doctor Octopus?" P-21 asked.

"Unless there's another medical specialist inside Miss Peppermint here, yes," she said tersely. "It's been an absolutely lousy few days for everyone concerned."

"You've been aware of what's going on?" Scotch Tape asked, a touch warily.

"Yes. It'd been rather difficult to maintain focus and push through the Angel's interference, but now that she's gone and dear Peppermint's back, I can address this. Drink another restorative draught," Rampage said as she put another potion to my lips. It barely made a dent in the pain. "I remember this happening to M.A.S. researchers pushing themselves too hard to meet a deadline. Burnout is a safety measure to prevent more severe damage to the unicorn. Some unicorns would try and push through burnout with talismans or drugs. The results were never pretty."

"Wasn't pushing past burnout..." I muttered.

"No, you were just using a highly experimental device too much with an injured horn while coated with highly magically sensitive moon dust. Completely different," he replied with soft sarcasm. "Also..." She suddenly leaned in and hugged me closely, but with care. "Thank you, Blackjack. Thank you, thank you, thank you," she whispered in my ear.

"Twist?" I murmured.

"I never meant to hurt my baby. I only wanted her to live. To be happy. I didn't realize what was truly inside this talisman. The ghosts trapped inside," she said with a snotty sniff. "I thought she could have a happy life. That's all I wanted. Please. Please tell her that," she begged me as she pulled back, weeping.

"Why are they all coming out now?" P-21 asked.

Rampage wiped her eyes, still holding me gingerly. Her tone returned to that of the doctor. "The Angel saw Cognitum as the best way to end the pain of the Wasteland. Even better if the Legate was right. Her desire was so great, she stood between Peppermint and the rest of us. The shock of knowing the truth and the mental attack Blackjack made on the Angel broke her interference."

"You weren't fighting right," I muttered weakly. "No special combat fighting things."

She gave me another potion. How many did we have left? I'm glad P-21 had insisted we load up on them. "It doesn't help that I remember things now too," Rampage muttered. "Now that all these ghosts are woken up and... ugh..." She rubbed her face with a hoof. "I can feel Mom inside me. And Momma Shujaa... and... now I can't really stop feeling them. And Mom wants me happy and Razor wants me to stop whining and... I'm not sure if I'm more me or less me than I was before you shoved that shit back in my head, Blackjack."

She was flowing more easily from one person to the next. I would have considered that an improvement, except that I couldn't really talk right. "S'rie," I muttered, but I wasn't sure if I'd meant to say 'sorry' or 'all right'.

The tram reached the station. Past the end of the tracks and the edge of the cliff, I could see that the chasm was studded with more and more moonstone monoliths. The further down I looked, the darker

the crystals were. On the floor of the chasm was an immense domed structure that glowed with a prismatic aura. A second inclined lift rose from that building far below to the base of this structure. "Come on, Blackjack. If it's got the word 'stable' in it, then it has a medical bay," P-21 said as he helped support me.

The door to the tram opened up into a foyer with a familiar immense rolling door in the far wall. Scotch Tape helped me drink another healing potion as Rampage hit the tab on the console. The lights began to flash as the klaxon sounded. The door behind us sealed shut, and then the huge round door slid away from us and rolled to the side. I wanted to hold Vigilance in my mouth, if only to shoot something in the direction of trouble. I wanted to be ready for anything.

But I wasn't ready for the sight of fifty white ponies in party hats facing us with bright star-filled eyes, grinning happily and shouting in unison, "Welcome to the moon, Princess Luna!" As horns were blown and plumes of glittery paper flittered into the air, I decided to get to the bottom of this mystery in the most effective and efficient method possible: I collapsed and passed out on the floor of the Astrostable.

* * *

The problem was that I wasn't really unconscious as I lay there, because my brain continued to work. It just wasn't working well. Whatever I'd done to myself had been a doozy, and my mind kept swishing round to things that just... well... didn't make much sense.

I saw General Storm Chaser and a squad of Enclave pegasi fighting against the Legate in the Skyport. He moved from one power-armored pegasus to the next like a force of nature, his hooves crushing, smashing, and tearing everything they came in contact with. Repeatedly their energy weapons struck him, but as quickly as bits of him were disintegrated or decayed into magical goop, the mass twisted in upon itself and reformed his striped body. Incinerated dust simply swirled back in and reassembled itself. At the edge of the battle, Goldenblood lay on his side, his legs smashed beneath him and his horn cracked off, trying to drag his broken body away from the fighting.

Then something finally made the Legate slow down: the terminal's dusty windows burst inward in a shower of glass and windblown rain, and magic shields shimmered into being between the zebra and his targets. Velvet Remedy and a dozen alicorns had come to the rescue. The shields exploded like crystal bubbles with every strike of his hooves, the alicorns grimacing when their magic was shattered, but they popped back as quickly as they were destroyed. As he turned towards Velvet with a half-grin, half-snarl on his face, her horn glowed, and somehow, then even he was staggering about as if in a drunken stupor. Now why didn't I have that spell?

But as I watched, the scene blurred and transformed to that of Ironmare Naval Base, the capsized remains of the HMS *Celestia* visible as a dark shadow beside the pier. A rusted cargo ship with the name 'Applejack' spray-painted on the flaking hull and the Applejack's Rangers' flag flying was moored with a stream of desperate refugees rushing to board. Behind them, a zebra tank rolled towards the shore, Steel Rangers firing volley after volley at the war machine as it crawled into firing position. All around me, ponies screamed and pushed, a few being shoved into the foaming waters.

The turrets belched smoke, and the sea near the *Applejack*'s stern kicked up two great jets of water. The froth didn't die down, though, the disturbance from the tank shells replaced with that from the ship as, unseen beneath the surface, the propellers spun to life. The ship began to crawl away from the pier, the gangplanks starting to turn and tilt and make the frantic ponies on them shove and shout even harder to be the last aboard. Whatever pony I was in skidded to a stop at the edge of the concrete as the gangplank dropped into the water before them and was lost between the hull and pier, a few ponies going with it. The despairing, crying ponies behind didn't stop, though, and their press sent the pony I was in into the salty ocean as the *Applejack*, laden with hundreds of lucky refugees, moved away from the end of the pier. Then the forecastle of the ship exploded in flame and shrapnel as the tank struck home.

Then from out of the smoke coiling over the waves shot a lean, blackened boat skimming across the water. The *Seahorse*, scorched and battered but not yet sunk, sliced towards the shore and came around in a hard crashing slew that sent a wave from one side of its stern and a water jet from the other. From an improvised turret atop the cabin, a grenade machine gun began its rapid bark, the fire flashing off the tank and shrouding it in smoke so that its next shots only fountained up beside the *Applejack's* hull. Machine gun fire chattered, both tank and Brood infantry firing on the annoying mosquito of a patrol boat as it launched a salvo of grenades into the infantry and then rocketed away across the water, dodging wildly.

A glow covered my body, and I was lifted from the cold water by a unicorn in some sort of fancy robes. Then I was stumbling back along the pier as Steel Rangers escorted those who hadn't made it to the ship towards the hulking remains of the naval station. "Get clear! Get clear!" a Ranger in power armor bellowed. "Move, you sorry gits! South! Get south! Move!"

"For Applejack!" cried others as they hurried towards defensible positions between the helpless and the advancing enemy; on the water, the *Seahorse* was coming around for another pass and showering the Brood with a rain of explosives. On land, the tank growled forward, turret lights moving in the smoke cloud as the guns tracked a new target.

I tried to see what happened next, but I couldn't hold on to it. My perception just swirled to another scene, the sea and refugees melting like wax and reforming into dingy walls and wounded people. Triage walked down a hall in the Collegiate, puffing hard on the cigarette as she snapped, "I don't care! It's a choice between saving a hundred lives now or maybe... *maybe* saving one life!"

A flash of white wing and golden mane, and the stunningly beautiful Morningstar landed in her path. "One life! One life?! How can you say that?! That one life is worth a thousand of the people you're wasting it on!"

"Those people are *my* people!" Triage shouted at her. "And that machine is my machine! And the call is mine, not yours! I'm not going to pull the plug and let you fiddle with the rejuvenation pod in the middle of this battle. Right now, that machine is the only reason we're losing hooffuls and not scores!"

"The science will work! The theory is sound, whether you understand it or not!" Morningstar screamed at her.

"And if the Hoof wasn't on fire right now, I'd be fully behind the peer review process but your timing is shit!" Triage snapped back. Ponies ran by, adamantly not looking at the pair. Many dragged stretchers behind them. Wounded cried out on old gurneys while ponies tried desperately to help them. "Every minute that machine's not working, ponies die! My ponies! Ponies we need. I'm not going to take the pod offline for a science experiment you're not even sure is going to work!"

"It will work! The wing was proof! Science can do anything!" Morningstar bellowed in her face. "What would Blackjack say if she knew how you were letting—"

Triage's horn glowed, and a clipboard slapped hard across Morningstar's face. The stunned pegasus shook her head, and the clipboard swung back and struck her again. It was enough force to send her crashing to the floor with a nosebleed. Triage glared down at her and blew a plume of smoke. "Either she'd say a thousand lives are worth more than one, or I don't give a shit what she'd say. Now get out of my way and get out of the Collegiate. I have to save all the lives I can before we all die."

I wanted to hold on to that. Maybe Morningstar would say more, but things were sliding away. I saw... was it Xanthe, Sagittarius, or Candlewick's battle? Maybe it was all three. I wanted to simultaneously charge forward and help all of them at once and cringe away from the sight of the fighting that I was helpless to end.

As if in response to half of my desire, I felt those horrible, violent visions fade away to be replaced by a faint glow beneath me and a comforting darkness above and around. The glow was peaceful and

calm, a blue-white illumination that drove the pain away bit by bit. It felt familiar... The same sensation I'd felt while lying on the dust outside the terminal. Sympathetic in understanding. Compassionate towards my suffering and the suffering I witnessed.

"Who are you?" I spoke into the glow.

"A friend who has come a long way," the illumination responded gently.

"Can you help me? I hurt myself. Badly, I think," I whimpered, feeling the sensation of being held.

"No. No more than I already am. I'm sorry," the voice said in soft sincerity.

"That's okay," I murmured, imagining I was nuzzling into Mom's embrace. "I need to go back, don't I?" The thought filled me with dread, and I heard the distant echo of battles growing.

"Maybe. Maybe not. I cannot tell. I know that this must end, though. One way, or another."

"I want to live," I whimpered, daring to look more directly at the massive ghostly white pony shape holding me. "I don't want to die. I want to fix things with Glory. I want a family with babies. I want to help Rampage get better. I want so many things now!" I sniffed and smiled. "Is that so wrong? To want to live?"

"No. But life is not easy. It struggles. Day by day, it struggles. How you face that struggle gives meaning to your life. It is only when things are at their darkest that you find your greatest strength. Life for life's sake is not always enough. It is *meaning* that makes you greater than you are, and sometimes that meaning is greater than life itself."

"It's not fair," I muttered, saying the dumbest and most immature thing a pony could.

"No. It's not. Not unless you make it so," the glowing pony replied.

"I don't want to pay that price," I whispered.

"Pity the few that do," it answered. "Pity more those who fear death and loss. Who hold life and the lives of others in contempt. Who have nothing to offer others but bile and vitriol and hate. They have made their lives a torment, and remain living only to inflict that torment on others. They have no other meaning."

"Like the Eater. And the Legate," I added. "And Cognitum. You think I should pity them?"

"Don't you?" the glowing eyes stared down at me curiously.

I closed my eyes. It would have been easier to hate my enemies, but I really didn't. There hadn't ever been one where I'd been glad they were dead. Well... maybe Steel Rain... but just because he'd been such an ass. "I guess. I just wish... I wish so many things could be different."

"Wishing is a start, but if you want them different, you must make them so," it said softly. "And to do that..."

"I have to wake up..." I said to it with a regretful smile, and did so.

* * *

I woke up on a table, lying on my side, my head hurting but feeling a little better. A green light poured down on me from a moonstone talisman mounted on a flexible swivel arm hanging from the ceiling. I heard Scotch Tape's voice from nearby. "...guys are the descendants of ponies who said 'buck it' in the last month after Goldenblood got the boot and snuck off Equestria and into this lunar stable?"

"Some of us are," a stallion's voice replied calmly. "Liaison Sapphire knew the O.I.A. was conducting regular launches transporting Flux to the Lunar Palace. She started sending members of the M.o.A. and O.I.A. that she trusted up here with each launch. She was our first overmare, too. She thought it was a terrible waste of a stable to just give it to blanks. Oddly, though, with enough time they stopped acting quite like mere blanks, even when the implants were off and they were supposed to be in a rest state. They became almost like normal ponies. You saw how they celebrated 'Princess Luna's' arrival."

"And nopony knew?" P-21 asked.

"I think, towards the end, that everything was such a mess that nopony knew precisely what was going on. Horse was in the process of purging the O.I.A. When Luna had Goldenblood arrested, that was when Sapphire thought it'd be best to leave. Of course, we all figured that Luna would come up here sooner or later, one way or another, so we might as well be friendly when she did. I have to admit, we rather thought it would be sooner."

"And so you guys just stay up here and... do what?" Rampage asked with a snort. "Spend all day wigged-out on moon dust?"

The doctor scrunched up his face evasively. "No! That's... rarely happens. Besides, the day-to-day maintenance of the stable takes a great deal of work. And there's meditation and philosophical discussions as well. Others enjoy astronomy, art, poetry, and monitoring signals from the stars or Equus," the stallion replied. I took a risk and twisted to look in the direction they spoke from. I might as well have been in Stable 99's medical bay, only everything was extremely clean and shiny. The air had a strange acrid tang to it that was a little unpleasant. The motion gave me a little bit of a headache, but far less than I'd experienced earlier.

"I've said it before. Stable ponies are just frigging weird, whether they're in the ground or on the moon," Rampage said with a shake of her head.

The stallion they talked to wore a medical coat and reminded me of nothing so much as a male Boo. His mane and hide were both pale pink, and he had eyes that seemed to glow faintly with stars.

"So... I gotta ask, Doc Comet. When's the next scheduled orgy?" Rampage asked, looking around as if expecting group sex to break out at any moment. "Come on. If this place is based on 99, it's got to have something perverted going on."

The stallion leaned away from her. "Uh, I just met you, so no. Thank you, but... no."

Rampage pursed her lips, then shrugged. "Eh. Probably for the best. I'm only a filly, anyway, so it'd be sick and wrong." She trotted away, casually fishing a tin of Mint-als out of her armor and shaking a mouthful into her mouth, munching them like they were candy. The pale pink stallion looked at the other two, mouth working silently in bafflement, but they just shook their heads.

"We should get going," P-21 said as they started for the door.

"Wait!" I groaned, half climbing and half falling off the table. "Wait. I'm coming."

"I thought she was out!" Scotch Tape hissed. "Wasn't she drugged?"

"Yeah. Blackjack doesn't really do the whole 'out for the count' thing," Rampage said with a sigh and a shake of her head over by the door.

The doctor trotted to me and shone a light into both of my eyes. From his frown, I got the impression I'd done something wrong. "How are you feeling?"

A very good question. The screwdriver was out of my horn, and I could move my head without a little ball of agony searing my brain. There were still flickers in the periphery of my vision, but I could ignore the whispers. "Better. What happened to me? Have I been here long? Did Horizons fire?"

The pale pink stallion consulted a clipboard. "Hemorrhagic aneurism of your temporal and visual cortex. Good thing your friend had you slugging down restoratives like crazy. You were slowly bleeding into your brain. The rejuvenation talisman stopped the bleeding, but you're looking at some scarring, plus complications from acute moonstone poisoning." He paused and then squinted at me a little skeptically. "Did you *actually* go rolling around in the stuff?"

"Something like that," I muttered, working my mouth. "Is that bad? My tongue feels numb."

"Your tongue?" He arched a brow. "No. That's just an effect of hard vacuum. Moonstone poisoning... well..." he coughed and stared into my eyes. "Are you hearing singing? Seeing time dilation? Uncontrollable extrasensory perception?"

I stared at him silently for a few seconds. "Maybe?"

"Yeah. That usually takes a few years of exposure to small amounts. From what your friends told me..." He consulted the clipboard. "You rolled around in the stuff, then did radical and uncontrolled mind magic, then used an experimental extrasensory perception device. I'm shocked your head didn't explode." He sighed and set the clipboard away. "Anyway. You're talking coherently and not bleeding out the nose and ears anymore, so I suppose that's as close to a clean bill of health as I can give. Normally I'd be bundling you up in a corner to bliss out among the stars while sticking you under that talisman for a few more hours."

"As for Horizons," P-21 broke in firmly, "no. It hasn't. We're going now. And you're staying here."

"Nope! I don't—" I tried hopping off the table but tripped over my hooves and tumbled to the floor, landing on my head. The impact gave me a dozen flashes from places that were decidedly not my head. "Ow!" I groaned as little stars shot across my vision. "We're not splitting up."

"She really is that bad," the doctor remarked. "I mean, from what you told me... she just had multiple microstrokes, and she wants to go fight?"

"Yep," Rampage said. "Tie her up and give her a good dicking. She likes that."

"No time for quickies now!" I waved a hoof at all twelve-ish of them. "I am not getting left behind. I'm coming with all of you and that is that."

"Blackjack, you've had a stroke," P-21 explained as I rose to my hooves.

"It's not the first time I've fought with brain damage!" I said as I swayed and thumped against one of the tables. "I have to go. The big glowy pony of light said so." I rubbed my temple and then noticed the incredulous looks on their faces. "What? You're doubting I'm seeing things now?"

"Not with eyes like that," Scotch Tape said as she pointed at a polished bulkhead. I stared at my own reflection and was immediately taken by the sight of hundreds of motes of light swirling in my eyes. I couldn't see them in my vision, but they gave my eyes a faint luminescent glow like Snails had.

"Well... fuck..." I muttered at my own reflection. "My eyes glow. Again."

P-21 simply nodded. "Yep."

"...kay. Well... it's not the first time. Still going," I declared, marching forward, a picture of resolution.

"Not the first..." the doctor said weakly.

Scotch Tape shook her head. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

"Yup. Doesn't matter. I'm marching right out this door and kicking her—"

"That's the supply closet," P-21 informed me gently.

I blinked at the door. "Right. I knew that." And turned to the other door on the far side of Medical.

"I can drug her," the doctor said, and I felt a little stab of fear that I might actually have to fight my friends on this.

"No. She'd get a spoon and defeat you. She's tricky like that," Rampage said with a sigh. I tripped over my own hooves and faceplanted into the floor in front of everypony... again. "Very tricky," Rampage repeated, solemnly.

"We don't have time for this," P-21 said as he trotted to me and helped me to my hooves. "Are you okay?" he asked as he lifted my face and stared into my eyes. I could see the glow reflected off his irises. "I mean *really* okay, Blackjack?" *Just tell me what you need.*

I gazed at him for what felt like forever, and licked my lips nervously. "I have to go," I whispered softly. "I can't stay here while you face her," I told him, trying to keep my head together as images flickered in my vision. "I can't stay here and see... what I'm seeing... and do nothing... I'll go mad," I whispered, trying to keep my fear as calm as I could.

P-21 returned my stare equally as long, then smiled and gave a little nod. "Okay." He straightened and looked at the others. "She's coming. Let's go."

"Daddy... sometimes, I think when it comes to Blackjack, you don't think so good," Scotch Tape grumped, then asked the doctor. "Is moonstone poisoning fatal?"

"Not in and of itself. Severe cases usually incapacitate the victim. It takes a long while to work out of the system, though," he said with a more concerned frown. "And you really shouldn't be fighting with a case as severe as yours."

"You, Triage, and Rover should write a book: Dumb Patients Fighting When They Shouldn't," I said as I took a seat and breathed hard. Then I regarded the doctor and gave him a sincere smile. "Thank you for helping me, Doctor. I mean it. And I don't think I got your name."

"Comet. Doctor Comet," he said with a small smile in return. Then he sighed and rose to his hooves. "Well, I guess I'll walk you to the tram down to the Palace. If you relapse, I'll be nearby."

Together, we walked out of Medical and into... 99, as it should have been. Stepping out into the hall, I was hit by a wave of nostalgia. There was a drinking fountain, right where it would have been in 99. Down there was a bathroom. In the other direction, a sign pointing to the atrium. Unlike 99, there'd been no Incident here. Stallions and mares walked past in stable barding with 'LA' on the collars talking excitedly of Equus being able to support spaceflight again. The blanks were harder to notice here, even with their white manes and eyes, as they followed along and nodded to conversations. The lights were steady, the air clean with the faint ozone tang.

"I know. Freaky, isn't it?" Scotch Tape said as she walked next to me. "I actually walked into some stranger's home thinking it was my quarters in 99. And they have similar recycler systems." Trust her to check that. One thing that was definitely different, though, was the clouds of mechasprites flying in little swarms overhead. I saw them dive into a trashcan, and, after some fearful chewing, fly out carrying small rods of aluminum and iron and a lump of carbon. "That's new, though."

"Hey! Do you eat your own poop and dead?" Rampage asked Comet.

He furrowed his brows. "We try not to think about it like that."

I laughed. It was like coming home... even if it was nothing like coming home. "I hear ya. Has Cognitum come here?" Our passage drew all sorts of odd looks from pale-colored ponies who kept their distance but seemed to regard us as welcome curiosities. Only a few had the starry eyed gaze that I did, and none were as bright as mine. I wished that I had more time to meet them and find out more about life on the moon.

"You mean the Princess? No. Not that it was that surprising. It makes sense she'd see to the Palace first. And our ancestors did flee here to escape her law at the end of things. Hopefully she's pleased by all the hard work that's gone into the Lunar Palace." He grew worried. "Of course, we've gotten alerts from the Palace security system since she arrived, but we're not involved in defense of the Palace."

"What is, then?" I asked as we walked.

"Robots," Rampage said with a yawn. "Turrets. Mechasprites. Pretty straightforward, actually. She's got enough firepower to get through it all eventually. I'm surprised the pair she sent over here haven't caused trouble."

"Oh, them?" the doctor said with a smile. "Yes, they were very assertive when they arrived. Made some rude and threatening declarations. It's a wonder how some moonstone and Med-X can pacify certain aggressive individuals, though. Hopefully the Princess can sort out the confusion when she arrives."

That sorting might involve body parts if Cognitum was in a bad mood. "Do you know about Horizons?" I asked.

"Project Horizons? Yes. It was Goldenblood's plan to restore Equestria by sending a magically infused moonstone to a certain location on the surface. I don't know the details personally, but I'm sure the Overstallion could explain it better," Doctor Comet said with another smile. I was sure he couldn't. Still, I couldn't miss the wistful look on P-21's face. I could easily imagine him here as a teacher. Or husband. I glanced back at his flank, where red and silver peeked through the flakes of blue.

"Not a bad stable, huh?" I said to him as we walked towards the steps to the utility sections. On the way, we trotted past something else 99 hadn't had: windows! How freaky was that? They looked out into the crystal-lined chasm in the moonscape.

"Will it be okay if Horizons fires?" he asked.

Oh, that was something I didn't want to think about! A stable full of good ponies, and... "Just more reason to hur--"

The hallway exploded before me, the tank rolling through the smoke and flames, treads churning up oil-slicked water. I raised my hooves and screamed as the crushing treads rolled over me.

Then I was aware of ponies holding and shaking me. "--bad idea!" the doctor was saying. "We've got to get her back to medical!"

"No! No. I'm fine," I said, shivering, sure that somewhere, somepony definitely wasn't. I picked myself up to my hooves. "Just a reason to finish this sooner than later. People need us back on Equus." I shoved my way out of their hooves so they couldn't drag me back.

We didn't chat again as we went down and down, reaching the reactor level and then a sign that read 'To Lunar Palace'. Trotting towards the tram doors, I tried to ignore the sounds of gunfire. It was all in my head. All in my head...

Wasn't it?

The tram doors slid open, and a pair of ponies in combat armor came into view. One levitated a disintegration rifle. The other wore a battle saddle with two miniguns. I blinked, not sure if they were Brood or not. Then Rampage dove atop me as the miniguns opened up with streams of lead. "Ow! Ow! Ow!" she hissed as the metal deflected wildly off her plate armor, bouncing every which way in a flurry of glowing shrapnel.

P-21 immediately sent a grenade flying towards the pair, but the unicorn with the disintegration rifle raised a shield of shimmery green magic just in time for the explosive to detonate outside it and blast back at us. More shrapnel flew around us, biting hide wherever it could penetrate. P-21's eyes blazed with rage at the indignity of eating his own grenade. Rampage lunged off me, racing towards the door as the smoke cleared to show the field still intact. Then two small holes formed in the wall of magic, and a rain of bullets poured through them and pushed Rampage back on the concrete floor.

I tele— Correction, I faceplanted into the ground as my horn sparked wildly and went dead. Worse, I suddenly had images of three cyberpegasi fighting hoof to hoof against Brood soldiers while Homage and Windsheer worked furiously on terminals. No! Focus! I looked past Rampage's legs as the unicorn created a third hole, lifting her rifle to point back down the hall at us.

Biting down on Vigilance with my mouth, my cheek pressed against the ground, I saw the force field flickering where it met the floor. I dropped into S.A.T.S. and targeted four armor piercing shots at her front left hoof. Two splashed against the field, but two ripped through and right into her forehoof. The mare cried out, faltering as blood spurted from her crippled hoof. She started to pull back, cradling it, and closed the hole she'd opened to fire through.

But not before Persuasion sent a grenade soaring through it.

The explosion flattened both ponies, the field popping like a bubble as the mare was slammed to the left and the minigun-armed stallion to the ground. He managed to get to his feet for all of a second before Rampage hooked her hoofclaws into the back of his neck and ripped his head from his shoulders. The mare tried to haul the disintegration rifle around to point at Rampage, but I put three more rounds into her before she could fire. The rifle clattered to the ground as I approached.

She wasn't a pretty mare. Blue-gray like Homage, but with a flat black mane. Her eyes stared up at me. *I'm hit. Fuck. Can't feel... can't move... fuck!* Her eyes widened as her breathing picked up, blood bubbling in her mouth. *No. I have to kill her. Russet will be okay if she dies. Everyone will...* Her body trembled as I gazed into her eyes, a tear cutting through the blood on her cheek. *Russet... my beautiful girl... I have to... have to... to...* Then she went slack, slumping over as her red bar disappeared from my E.F.S.

"Blackjack?" P-21 asked me, putting a hoof on my shoulder.

I jumped at the touch, looking at him and feeling his worry in his stare. "I'm fine. I'm fine," I lied, and he knew it. I tore my eyes from him, back to the mare. "Give me their barding. And see if you can rig that battle saddle to Sexy and me."

I turned to Doctor Comet. "Thank—" I started to say, and then I saw him lying prone on the ground. A bloody hole oozed in the pink hide of his forehead right where a unicorn's horn would be.

I bring the Wasteland everywhere I go. Xanthe was right. Help me, and it gets you killed. Face me, and it gets you killed. "Come on," I croaked as I stepped into the tram, dragging the mare by the collar. Rampage brought the other one. Once we were inside the steeply inclined tram and it had started off, I removed the mare's combat armor. A few holes wouldn't compromise it too badly. I pulled a picture from a pocket. It was just a charcoal sketch of the unicorn I'd killed and a small, smudged filly.

"Daddy, you should put on that other barding," Scotch Tape said in a small voice as she took the mare's rifle and fumbled with it. *He's going to die. Blackjack's going to die. Rampage is going to die. I'll be all alone.* "I wish I knew how to use this thing better." *I'm useless. I shouldn't have come.*

I glanced at P-21, felt the worry dripping off him, and then looked at Scotch. "Hey. It's not that hard. Find something to brace against. Point that end. Fire. Repeat. You'll be fine." I rubbed her head. "We're not going to die."

She stared at me. "Well... no duh. I knew that!" She gave as brave a smile as she could as she fumbled with how to reload the rifle. I tried to keep her from firing it by accident... though, for all I knew, the thing I thought was the safety was actually the trigger! Ugh... arcane magic weapons were just bizarre.

P-21 mumbled, "Do I have this on right?" I returned my eyes to him and started at seeing him wearing the stallion's scorched and dinged combat armor. He'd removed the miniguns; he really didn't have the frame or skill for the weapons anyway. Lacunae... sigh...

"You got these buckles mixed up," I said, flushing as I gently corrected the straps and got the combat barding in place. Aside from a big gap between the shoulders from Rampage's tear, it was mostly intact.

"What's wrong, Blackjack?" P-21 said as he hooked Sexy to my battle saddle. Unff... I really wished I had an earth pony's frame for this. I tried to use my magic, and from the blue stallion came words as if from an old stereo. *Just get through today. Whatever happens, get through today with no one else dead. Just get home, and everything will be alright. Get Scotch Tape home safe. Watch Rampage. Damn, Blackjack's ass is almost as nice as Calamity's. Get back safe.*

"I think..." I started to say, then stopped. What was there to gain by telling them that there was something else wrong with me? "Just... I remember back when my life was just patrolling through the stable halls and the occasional illegal poker game. I just have to wonder how much more weird my life can get."

"Well, we're on the moon. That's a good indication for starters," Scotch Tape said as she stared out the window. *I miss Mommy so much. I wish she could see this. I wish she could know what I did.*

I rubbed my horn vigorously and was rewarded with an electrical zap and a muting of my friends' thoughts. I had to stay focused. As the tram dropped down the canyon wall towards the shining dome at the bottom, the moonstone crystals took on the appearance of amethysts. Dark swirls of magic ran circuits around the spires. "Did anyone else hear that?" P-21 asked sharply.

Rampage rubbed her eyes. "Hear that? Did anyone see that?"

"Are you guys seeing and hearing things too?" I asked them.

"Whispers. Flickers. Like... I thought I saw Nightmare Moon and Princess Celestia," Rampage said as she looked at one of the dark purple crystals particularly close to the track.

"I saw something like that too. Nightmare Moon leading an army towards Princess Celestia's army," P-21 agreed.

"This must be what it's like to be Blackjack," Scotch Tape muttered. *It's scary. How does she handle it?* I rubbed my horn again, hard.

I looked at another dark purple monolith. "I think this is where Nightmare Moon was trapped for a thousand years. These stones... I think they're like giant memory orbs." I stared at the swirling darkness around the stone. My vision blurred, and I heard Princess Luna crying out. *Why don't they like me? I give them wonderful dreams and beautiful nights! I do so much work for them. Why is it always Celestia,*

Celestia, Celestia? Why is it always her?! “They’re not true memory orbs, so we’re not sucked into the experience. And... I think these are thoughts...”

“Why would Goldenblood build Horizons here?” P-21 asked as we dropped towards the Lunar Palace below. It wasn’t a perfect hemisphere; it had a slightly conical shape to it, like the little end of an egg. Most of it appeared to be huge crystal windows, the ones at the apex glowing brightly towards the planet above. I wondered if it was visible so far away, a glowing eye in a patch of shadow. The tram was dropping down towards the base of it.

“I don’t know,” I answered, and started to speculate. “Horizons was a trap. When Cognitum tried to deactivate it, she set it off. That’s probably why it had a countdown. It was trying to get a response from Princess Luna. I half bet that if nothing was sent, Horizons would have just gone back on standby. After all, there must have been megaspells and balefire bombs going off before I fired Folly. The only difference was that this time, Cognitum fell into the trap.” I studied the dark crystals. “I think that he put this here so that, if Luna ever did come here, it would be a sign she was actually Nightmare Moon. Princess Luna would never come here if she was sane. This place represents her very worst.”

Rampage regarded P-21 and Scotch Tape flatly. “Is it just me, or is a hornhead’s life really fucking weird?” I smiled at the simultaneous agreement in their thoughts, then smacked my horn again.

“Why do you keep doing that?” P-21 asked in concern. “I thought you were trying to recover from burnout.”

“Um... actually, I’m trying to stop reading your minds,” I admitted, shuffling a little. “Not all of them! Just... kinda... what you’re thinking at the moment.”

“You can read my mind?” Scotch squeaked in shock, then pressed her hooves to her temple. *Don’t think of having sex with Daddy. Don’t think of having sex with Rampage. Don’t think of having sex with Blackjack...*

“It’s not like that. It’s more just... words,” I said as I rubbed my horn to try and scatter it.

“Oh yeah, prove it. What am I thinking?” Rampage demanded. I glanced at her, stopping my rubbing and letting my horn tune in. *I’ll tell her she’s wrong no matter what. Goddesses, Blackjack is frigging weird sometimes, though. Still, if she’s wrong, maybe Scotchy won’t think she’s actually reading minds, because frigging weird!* “Well? It’s a number between one and billion.” *No, it’s not!*

“Uh...” I blinked at her. “Seven?” I glanced over at Scotch.

Rampage blinked as well, then pointed a hoofclaw at me and laughed loudly. “Hah! Wrong! I was thinking your butt is fat!” She snorted at me, rolling her eyes. “Reading minds. Yeah, right.”

I relaxed a little and smiled at her. “Yeah. Guess I was wrong. I’m frigging weird sometimes,” I said, robbing her of her laughter. “Just saying,” I added.

“So frigging weird,” she muttered, looking at me uneasily.

Too bad it’s not two way. That would be useful. P-21’s thoughts came with a warm tone that matched his smile.

I looked back and thought. *Yeah. I miss Lacunae.* Maybe it was just an effect of the moment, but I gave the thought a little added emphasis. I imagined I was pushing it out at him.

All three of them jumped as if simultaneously shocked. “Lacunae! You miss Lacunae! You thought it at me!” Scotch Tape said, then glowered at Rampage. “And you’re a liar.”

Rampage flushed and rolled her eyes. “Sorry, kiddo. You were kinda freaking out.”

It took a few minutes to work it out. Apparently, as long as they were thinking it at me, I could pick it up, and vice versa. The only limitation was that my friends couldn't think at each other, which was probably for the best. *You know what this is, right?* P-21 asked with a small smile as the tram reached the base of the ravine.

Yeah. I thought back at all of them with a small, hopeful grin. *An edge.*

* * *

The Lunar Palace rumbled like an immense turbine in bad need of a new bearing. As soon as the tram connected to the airlock, the vibration resonated under my hooves and into my teeth. Above it, a high frequency squeal keened out, barely within my upper threshold of perception. As soon as the airlock opened, a dusty miasma reeking of gunsmoke, ozone, and burnt candy blasted in my face. Beam turrets crackled as they spat magical death while sentry robots boomed their warning for trespassers to leave and be destroyed. The muted crumps of missile impacts paired up with the loud zaps of beam guns in an unholy orchestra of annihilation that made me wonder if our 'edge' wasn't nearly as big as I hoped it was.

Inside, the Lunar Palace was an immense open space dominated by a huge circular hole in the floor that emitted the white glow. From this angle, I couldn't see how far down it went, but it felt deep under my hooves. Four smoldering Ultra-Sentinels lay scattered around the rim. Above it was an elevated platform ring connected to the floor by four broad stairways. The ring was studded with perhaps a dozen beam turrets beneath and a dozen sentry robots above. In the center of the ring, over the direct middle of the shaft, was an even higher dais connected by walkways and topped with an enormous throne of moonstone and steel. A familiar golden mesh dangled from the top of the throne, and I felt my scalp itch at the sight of the thing. At the tip of the dome, a hemisphere protruded down from the roof, a cloud of mechasprites swirling around it like a miniature steel galaxy. Cables dangled down from the half-sphere to the throne.

Whoa was all I could think as I watched Cognitum and eight Harbingers fighting their way up the steps. Whenever they destroyed one of the robots, a swarm of mechasprites would fly down and start repairing it even as more fire pressed in from other sides. Cognitum had erected a blood-red magical field that protected her and only her as her two floating turret drones returned fire. I looked at the intense firefight, considered my friends, and then considered the battle again. *Um... thoughts?*

P-21 and Rampage looked around me, the latter almost climbing onto my back to get a good look. Scotch Tape moved around my legs and peeked into the room. Okay, they could have waited for me to move out of the way first! She gave a mental grunt, then pulled herself back into the airlock. When the door closed, she looked at the rest of us. "Okay. That's stupid."

Rampage clapped her hooves together. "Okay. Good answer. It's stupid. Can I go kill them all?"

"You'll be Peppermint-sized in two seconds with all those incineration and disintegration beams going off," P-21 told her.

"What I mean when I say it's stupid is that that room doesn't make any sense architecturally." She sighed, took off her saddlebags, took out some paper and a pen, and sketched the room. "So... like... why put an enormous platform over a deep pit with a throne in the very middle, out in the open?" She scowled and pointed up at the glowing hemisphere. "For that matter, why put a maneframe up there? There's no maintenance access, and if it fell, anyone on the throne would be smack underneath it! It's like somepony wanted this room to be the most impractical thing imaginable."

"Well, duh. That's got to be the controls, right?" Rampage asked. "Whoever gets to the throne rules."

Scotch Tape looked at me and P-21 flatly. "Did we have a throne in Stable 99?"

I glanced at him, and he shrugged. "She had a really big desk," I replied. "And controls. And a secret passage."

"Right! Because she used all those things! She was the Overmare." Scotch Tape gestured at the closed door. "Who is the person sitting in that huge fancy seat supposed to be ruling?" I thought about it a little, but a stable of blanks really didn't seem fitting. "It's not even all that defensible, because it has four nice big stairways leading up to it! The person sitting in the throne is exposed on all sides. Puts the person sitting in the throne out in the open right in the middle of a great big pit. And if something did happen to that dome, they'd be smack underneath that great big computer as it comes crashing down!"

"Shit," I muttered as I realized she was right. "Horizons was made to kill Nightmare Moon. This whole place... the throne... the glowing pit... even the name... it was all one big lure to Nightmare Moon's vanity."

"So, what's the plan here?" Rampage asked. "I rush into the middle and draw all their fire while Blackjack does whatever she does that makes her automatically win?"

"Tempting," I mused. "I'd really like to pull it off. But the priority is preventing Horizons from firing." Besides, Cognitum had taken my auto-win talent. I turned to Scotch Tape. "If the key to this place isn't the throne, then where do we need to go?"

Scotch Tape's eyes widened. "You're asking me to guess the layout of a superweapon on the moon?" *I can't do it. There's no way! Everypony is going to die because I can't...*

I reached out and held her hooves. "You can do it, Scotch. Just give your best guess. If it doesn't work, we can go with Rampage's idea."

Why am I always plan B? Rampage huffed in annoyance.

You're usually plan D or E, actually, but you're also the most reliable. I thought back at her. That seemed to brighten her up a little. I didn't add that was because that happened when the plan was the shit hitting the ventilator, but it was good to have her on my side again.

Scotch Tape's eyes worked back and forth. "It has to be beneath us, Blackjack. I don't know where or what Horizons is, but the mechanism has to be under our hooves. I just don't see anything we can reach in that wide-open, empty chamber than could control a megaspell."

"Okay. We go in there and find an access point to get down below. Find where it's fired from. Stop it or break it. Then we deal with Cognitum," I replied. We shared a look, then nodded in unison.

Back out in the Lunar Palace, Cognitum was a few feet closer to her throne. She stood composed, powerful, and cruel. A Princess in all but fact, but a cruel bitch of a Princess. A princess of hard data and harder contempt. Her gun pods flashed and blasted as the enemy fire splashed and flickered off her magical shield. Deadly crimson bolts blasted from her horn with crushing force. The mechasprites worked tirelessly to repair and restore the defenders, but the wedge of attackers kept ripping the turrets and sentry bots apart with their steady fire. Every now and then, one of her soldiers would fire a spark grenade far from Cognitum, sending a swarm of mechasprites tumbling down into the pit in the center of the chamber. I couldn't get close enough to see what was in that enormous hole, but I had my suspicions.

Keep your thoughts as hostile as you can. Yellow bars will stand out. I thought at my friends as we moved along the edge of the room.

Blackjack, who do you think you're talking to here? Rampage scoffed. *I'm like a dozen different flavors of hostile right now! I'm frigging infra-red hostile!*

We searched, but the walls were virtually seamless. *They seem to be molded like clay instead of assembled from pieces.* Scotch thought as we moved, tapping the grayish walls. *Is that metal or*

ceramic? We skirted the edge of the fighting, moving around towards the far side of the chamber. I could only hope the automated defenses would focus on the nearer, more obvious targets instead of us.

Grate in the floor! P-21 thought at me, and I ran to where he was pointing. Rampage hooked her claws into the grate, its bars spaced widely enough to admit mechasprites but strong enough to support sentries that rolled over it. Her body strained, metal scraping on metal, and then the bars snapped free with a loud crack and peeled up. Below us was about a ten foot drop.

Then a crackling red bolt of energy slammed into me, sending me flying away from the hole and into the far wall. The ceramic plates of my combat armor, as well as something inside me, crunched from the impact. *Ow!* I thought plaintively, but I hid my pain from my enemy. Cognitum walked to the edge of the platform, staring down at me as her mane snapped in an eternal wind. Thousands of tiny stars, little blazing red giants and cold white dwarfs, glimmered in that billowing magical mane. “Blackjack,” she said, her voice magnified by speakers in the hovering gun pods. “It seems Rampage wants to live forever after all.”

“Eh, you’re too much of a pussy to kill me anyway!” Rampage bellowed back at her. “Must be that body you’re in!” *How’s that, eh? Reverse psychology!* Rampage smirked back at me. Then a crackling bolt of crimson magic enveloped her and flung her high into the air. As she began to slow down, the magic suddenly flared and slammed her into the ground hard enough to make her bounce twice. *Ow.* A second later, a red aura illuminated around her, and as it grew Rampage burst into flame. *OW!*

I had to give her credit, I would have been screaming incoherently right now as my nerves burned, regenerated, and burned some more. I scrambled to my hooves, trying to ignore my own pain, as I faced Cognitum. From her horn emanated a red cone of magic that focused on me like a spotlight, and I felt myself start to grow warm. Really warm! *Rampage, jump to your left!* I thought. She sprang, somewhat ungainly, into the path of the cone.

Agh, fuck, Blackjack! You bitch! Fire sucks! she thought at me, or maybe shouted, it was hard to tell as I hit the ground behind her, peered at Cognitum, and fired a magic bullet right at her face! The spell was twice as hard to cast as usual, but I felt great that it worked at all, even if it just popped ineffectually off her magical shield.

Then for an instant I was a pegasus flying through the rusted remains of a factory or something with a half dozen Brood fighters on her tail, a dusky gray batpony at her side. She twisted on her side, threading her body through a space so narrow I felt it brush her belly. Stygius just teleported past the obstacle. As he reappeared, she actually leaned forward and kissed him with a midair smooch, then banked off as the fliers caught back up with the pair. Fortunately, the vision only lasted a few seconds.

Okay... that was bad timing. Luckily, it seemed Cognitum was in a monologuing mood. “Do you really think you can defeat me? I am the Princess of the Night! I am a thousand times what Celestia was. I live and walk again while my sister’s feeble mind and soul are bound to a hulk of metal and steel,” she crowed as she fired bolt after bolt of dark magic at me. The crimson energy crackled with electricity, arcing from Rampage’s metal armor to me and making my mane stand on end beneath the helmet. It would have been great to shout back that she was just a damaged mind and soul on a hijacked cybermare, but my jaw was clenched shut from the discharge.

Then a spark grenade went off against her shield. I glanced over to where P-21 was halfway through the hole, his hindlegs braced against the walls of the shaft as his forelimbs and mouth aimed Persuasion. The blue sphere of electrical energy crackled against the magic and evoked a scream of pain from Cognitum, making her rear up on her hooves. Her talismans flickered, but they didn’t die. Thank Celestia she still had that vulnerability at all, even if it didn’t shut her down completely as it would have me. “Kill them. Kill them now! This has gone on long enough!”

Four of her Harbingers ran down the nearest staircase, one of them with a missile launcher. Rampage wasn’t burning anymore but hadn’t regrown her eyes just yet, so I shoved her forward. *Move!*

Move! Missiles! I thought desperately as she staggered forward. *Left! Your other left!* One came streaking past and detonated behind me, a magical field flickering to life over those immense windows. F.A.D.E. shields.

"Stop pushing! I got my eyes back, Blackjack!" she snapped. Another of the four had a sniper rifle, a pegasus carried a gatling beam gun, and an earth pony rushed at us with a chainsaw clutched in his jaws and light machine guns on his sides... wait, how he pull that off?! Rampage paused at the sight of him. "Oh, hey! I think I know that guy! Didn't you use to run a gang called Buzzkill last year or so? Operated around Withers?"

Sniper rounds pinged off the floor much too close to my head for my liking. *Who cares! Get in the hole before that beam gun fillifies you.* It was days like this that I really wished LittlePip could be here. Or Calamity. Or Glory... definitely Glory... or somepony with some precision and range! But nooo, I gave away my own sniper rifle. It made me uncomfortable! Ugh...

Blackjack, are you meaning to think all that? Scotch Tape thought at me. I shut up my mental whining, rushed to the hole in the grate, and dropped down. Halfway through the hole, I felt a distinct lurch in my stomach as I went from normal gravity to lighter gravity, landing not nearly as hard as I'd expected.

Underneath, we entered a world of scaffolds and girders, wires and strange equipment. Glowing talismans sang their strange melodies to me as my brain swirled. I rolled out of the way a second before Rampage came flying down the hole at me, landing with a loud thud. *This way!* Scotch thought, waving at us from the end of a walkway... no, not exactly a walkway. Clearly, this sublevel hadn't been made for ponies to move around in it. This was more like a broad, flat support for a number of cables. Even in the reduced gravity, it flexed alarmingly under Rampage. Below us lay more of that diffuse white light, like glowing milk.

Quickly! Quietly! Carefully! I thought desperately as we moved from support to support, girder to girder, moving away from the hole. Now I was glad E.F.S. didn't show height.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" a mare taunted.

"Shut up. Spread out. Find them, kill them, and then we can go home," a stallion replied.

Spreading out was good. They must not have thought we were all a threat. *Scotch Tape, P-21, find some way to shut down Horizons. Rampage, you and I get to stop them.* Rampage rewarded me with an eager grin that was a disturbing blend of feral viciousness and foal-like glee. Being down here narrowed our odds quite a bit, and...

...That was a lot of Flux.

Below us was an incredible churning, swirling pool of the shimmery fluid. There was no way a few rockets brought that much Flux up here. Ten thousand rockets, maybe. I could only guess that somehow the Flux had expanded... or maybe they'd found some way to make the stuff... or maybe it just naturally broke the laws of nature out of habit. All I knew was there was a Maripony-sized lake of the stuff a few hundred feet down. And who knew how deep it was!

I really didn't want to find—

Then the world around me exploded. Thankfully, there was a girder between the blast and me, saving me from the shrapnel, but I was still knocked off the edge and into the air. I went flipping end over end, crashing onto a junction box of some kind several feet down and getting the wind knocked from my lungs. Above me, a petite orange unicorn mare in combat barding popped the missile launcher levitating beside her open and slipped another missile in. "So much for Blackjack," she chuckled.

She barely had time to take a breath before she was soundly smashed by the spiked wrecking ball that was Rampage. She sailed across the gap between girders and barely managed to grab onto

one fifteen feet down. "Let me guess," Rampage said happily, "your nickname is Boom-something, right?" She grinned down at the mare struggling for a grip. "Trust me, you're better off dead. If you live, Blackjack will just name you something embarrassing like 'Pillow'."

Rampage! I mentally shouted at her. *Unicorn!*

Huh? So wha— Rampage turned her head to look at the levitating missile launcher pointed right at her. *Aw shit.* The missile fired and detonated almost immediately, turning her into a spiked cannonball sailing away from us, some of her limbs flying off in different directions from her body. I only hoped she recovered or landed on something before she fell all the way to the bottom.

I pointed Sexy at the dangling unicorn and unloaded a burst, but just before I fired, she let go and dropped to the girder below her. A second blast glanced her; but she managed to get behind cover before I could really tear into her.

"MADAKADMARAKAMRGH!" roared a muffled voice around the grip of a chainsaw a second before the blood-red earth pony wielding it leapt down, motor roaring, chain whirring, and guns blazing. I didn't have time to shift and blast back, barely managing to jump sideways off the junction box. Crazy landed and didn't even stop shooting, pelting himself with ricochets and bits of metal. He continued to scream into the grip of the chainsaw as he twisted, walking his fire after me.

There was nothing for it. I needed to telepo—

Charity stood atop Chapel's stockade, wearing combat armor that looked as if it had been magically shrunk to fit. The walls had been reinforced by skywagon hulks and bits of scrap metal. Atop the guard towers, filly and colt fireteams crewed machineguns and miniguns set into pivoted braces. As many adult stallions and mares stood along the walls as the young ponies. From down the hill, a dwindling stream of refugees raced as if their lives depended upon it. "I need three-oh-eight!" a stallion shouted, and a colt raced to the post office, coming back with an ammo crate balanced on his back.

"Here they come, kids," a mare muttered as along the hilltop the dead trees swayed and crackled. Then the Brood emerged as a solid wall of dark shapes. Suddenly their tactic didn't seem simple. It seemed terrifying. Above the Brood on the ground were fliers. Amidst the Brood on the ground, unicorns put up shields. "Shit, where did they learn that trick?"

"It doesn't matter," Charity said. A shot rang out from the defenders, and she shouted out, "Ten caps from any moron who doesn't wait for them to come in range! Wait!" In unison, the Brood advanced down the hill towards Chapel. From behind the defenders came screams from refugees, who began to move across the bridge and into the Core. "Damn it! Stay out of there unless you want to die!" she shouted back behind her. Then from beyond the Core she spotted something strange: a long gray V of rapidly swirling clouds. It almost appeared to have a massive face covering one side of it.

Then a bullet pinged off her barding, nearly taking her off the wall. The yellow mare beside her caught her before she fell. "Easy there, kid," she said in alarm.

"Call me kid again, and you're paying double for your ammo," she warned, straightening and rubbing her sore shoulder before looking at the advancing Brood. "Wait for it!"

For ten horrible seconds, the Brood advanced, unchallenged, laying down a steady, withering rain of fire. There was a horrible inevitability in their advance, a casualness in their slaughter that made me want to shiver. Then Charity waved to a purple batpony colt who had his legs wrapped in bandages and was almost blinded by his oversized combat helmet. He gave a salute with his wing, drew a detonator from under his other wing, and gleefully depressed the shiny red button.

It sounded like the world's largest machine gun going off. From left to right, every ten feet along the Brood line, the ground exploded in a plume of mud, steel, and meat. In less than three seconds, nearly a thousand feet of Brood had the ground blown out from under them. "Thanks, Nomad," Charity

said to the purple batpony, who seemed stunned at what his little detonator had done. Then she turned back to the battle and murmured, "Over fifty thousand caps of C-4, though..."

"Worth it," the yellow mare replied.

With the detonation, chaos erupted as well. The Brood, rather than pulling back, reforming, and resuming that unified advance, now attacked in disorganized rage. "Fire! Ten caps per Brood!" The Brood fliers dove in, but the machine guns along the walls opened up in an earsplitting chatter of bullets. One Brood flyer swooped at the wall as bullets tore into its body, and when it landed atop the wall, it exploded with as much force as the bombs that had torn up the field. Charity rushed to one of the machine guns, the foals crewing it stunned by the close blast, grabbed the handles with her hooves, and mashed the trigger, pointing the gun towards the next Brood flyer sweeping in towards the wall. "My home is not getting blown up a third time, you get me?!" she yelled, barely audible over the chatter of the gun as two colts helped steady her aim in time to take the head off the lead flyer.

Blackjack! Snap out of it!

Huh? The intrusion of P-21's thoughts made the sight of Charity blasting away melt away, though the gunfire didn't stop. I found myself draped over a beam, forelegs dangling over one side and hindlegs over the other. "You gotta be kidding me," I muttered. Was my horn going to be doing this for good, now? A chainsaw motor roared above me, and I blinked as I became aware of hooves straddling either side of me. I glanced up to see Chainsaw holding the weapon aloft in his forehooves, ready to swipe my head clean off. Worse, I couldn't use magic or twist around to shoot him.

So I used gravity instead.

I dropped back off the beam, spreading my hooves wide and clipping his hooves out from under him as I fell one way and he, overbalanced by the chainsaw, the other. Of course, now my problem was more of the falling-to-my-death-impaled-on-some-spur-or-hung-from-wires sort rather than the imminent-decapitation-by-chainsaw sort. My legs flailed wildly as I hoped to catch something, anything, before I either splatted on a girder like a bloatsprite or tried swimming in Flux. Who knew what that much would do to me? Heal me? Turn me into one of those fat blanks from Hippowhatever? Give me super powers?

While the screaming did nothing, my swinging hooves got caught in some black cabling strung horizontally across a gap. The cable jerked and started sliding through the brackets that had been holding it, but the extra drag started gently slowing me. Fortunately, something at both ends must have held, and the slowing ended in a stop instead of the cable joining me in my fall. Unfortunately, it left me dangling in the middle of space by one foreleg tangled in the point of a taut vee. "Okay. I've dealt with worse," I muttered as I tried to swing myself to the nearest beam.

Then the pegasus with the gatling beam gun dropped down a parallel shaft to mine, snapped his wings out, hovered with his weapon pointed at me, and opened fire. Swinging spared me from a few shots, but plenty more scorched and scoured my barding. I managed to hook my hindlegs around the cable and get Sexy out to point at him, upside down, though, then bit down on the trigger rig and gave a new definition to the term 'wild fire'. The shots made the pegasus bank sharply out of the field of fire, but suddenly, with all the jerking around, one of the ends of the cable gave. I just had time to clutch the cable and Sexy to my body, and then I was swinging down between the girders. The pegasus, clearly an overachiever, flew after me.

Suddenly I was whipped up as the cable snagged on something and was wrenched from my grasp, my leg coming free from the tangle, sending me flipping freely through the air again. The low gravity gave me a momentary sensation of being a pegasus as I sailed along. Then I smashed down on an honest-to-goodness walkway, acutely aware of a multitude of aches and pains as I struggled to my hooves. Low gravity didn't mean none.

The pegasus popped into view at my side, hovering next to the walkway, and I tried to turn to face him even as the crimson beams scorched my hide and drew black lines of soot on my barding. *Ugh, this would be so much easier with my magic!*

Then the pegasus exploded, a grenade shredding his wings. The ruined limbs flailed desperately in the air, struggling for purchase before a second grenade found him and sent him screaming down into the abyss below. I scanned my surroundings and spotted P-21 and Scotch Tape at a terminal set on a rail on the walkway about fifty feet behind me. *Awww, she doesn't have her magic.* Scotch Tape thought sarcastically. *However will she get by?*

For a filly who I can still paddle, you're awfully snarky. I thought back at her. Where were Boom Boom and Sniper? *Rampage?* I thought at the striped mare. *Where are you?* A second later, the girders a ways away above me and to the left exploded. *Ah, there you are. Carry on.*

We looked like we were halfway between the floor of the Lunar Palace above and the Flux below. The walkway seemed to make a circle around the central core, passing by all sorts of strange equipment. As I trotted over to my friends, I also saw an access stairway leading up to a hatch we hadn't had time to find. *Tell me you have good news.* I begged.

We have good news. Scotch Tape thought back as P-21 resumed typing on the computer. *The good news is that this place has only the basest Stable-Tec programming security. That's about it for the good news.*

Horizons is going to fire, Blackjack. P-21 thought grimly. *Technically, it already has fired. The Flux reaction just hasn't completed. And it's going to complete in the next fifteen minutes, which is good enough to hit the Core just like Cognitum and the Legate want. It's autocorrecting the F.A.D.E. fields it's using to aim at the Tokomare.* He tapped the keys rapidly. *There's some sort of buffer talisman or safety spell that's slowing the reaction down. I'm refreshing it as often as I can, but it's buying us literally only seconds each time.*

What about Goldenblood? Is he fighting you? He looked blankly at me. *He's supposed to have copied part of his head into the machine running this place.*

You mean 'Goldenblood_kernel'? P-21 thought back at me, still typing rapidly. *It's here, but it doesn't seem to be paying as much attention to us as it is to... gotta refresh!* A deep thrum sounded underneath us, the light shivering. *It's not paying much attention to us. Mostly on Cognitum. It's fixing any attempts I make to mess with the system, though. I'm lucky I can discharge the failsafe talismans and buy us time. Backdoor access just isn't helping us as much so far. I need root access to really rip into this system.*

Shit. *Can you aim Horizons to miss the Core, at least?*

No. Something like that requires you to use the mind interface on the throne. Of course, the second you do, the F.A.D.E. targeting fields will go off and trap you inside the firing tube. He gritted his teeth and typed some more. From below came an odd sour note, and the Flux turned a little more rainbowish. *And there's someone else in the system already messing with things who's not making it much easier. They keep trying to jury-rig the F.A.D.E. fields to hit the Core. If you stop them, I might be able to get us a few more minutes. If we can just delay things an hour or so, Horizons won't be able to correct the aiming enough, and it'll just hit somewhere to the east of the Core.*

Someone... shit. *I'll find him. You two keep buying us time and see if you can find some way to stop this thing from blowing up the world. Maybe take the fields down. Be creative. Stalling to save the world... well... whatever worked.*

Then P-21 staggered, blood fountaining between his shoulder blades. He dropped, eyes bulging as he collapsed to his haunches, his eyes still on the computer terminal. "No!" I screamed, turning Sexy towards the girders above, switching to explosive slugs, and going to town as I screamed mentally at

Scotch Tape. *Healingpotionhealingpotionhealingpotionnownownow!* I couldn't lose him. Not him! Not now! Not ever! Sexy screamed along with me as I sprayed the upper girders where I guessed the sniper had taken the shot from.

Ohnoohnoohno! Scotch Tape thought back just as fast and desperately, her hooves fumbling on the potions before pouring one, then another, into his mouth. His throat worked weakly, and I burned with the wish that Glory was here. She'd know what to do with a gunshot! All I could do was *give* gunshots. "Drink, Daddy! Come on!" she begged as she gave him a fourth.

Finally, he stirred, pulled himself up, lowered his head, and vomited a slurry of blood and healing potion onto the floor. *Need to refresh...* he thought, then pulled himself back up to the computer and typed the series of commands again. The thrum sounded again, and he coughed up some more blood. "I think the bullet it still in there," he said, grimacing. "Feels like a shaft of metal straight through me."

"Hold on. I'll find him. Maybe he has root access. Then we'll get this taken care of," I said in a rush. *I love you.*

He looked back at me, in obvious pain, and smiled. *I love you too.* He smiled a little wider. *If only you were a stallion, Blackjack.* Then his smile faded. *Take care of Scotch Tape, no matter what.*

I will. I promise. I replied, then leaned forward and kissed him firmly. *Just a little longer. We'll get out of here, and everything will be sunshine and rainbows. Promise.*

Then Scotch Tape fired her disintegration rifle up at the rafters. "Will you two stop thinking at each other and get going? I think the sniper is still up there!" She fired again and thought, *Hee! Blackjack and Daddy sitting on the moon. He's gonna make her...er... damn it.* And she fired another burst with renewed vinegar.

I swept my eyes around our surroundings. There were my friends. I was guessing that that rapidly moving yellow bar was Rampage up above. That left one yellow bar thataway, on the other side of the great big... enormous... glowing...

Oh. That must be Tom.

It was hard to overlook a small mountain hovering in the middle of the shaft, but it was so big I'd missed it in the confusion. The moonstone was shaped like a multifaceted teardrop and was suspended in the center of the walkway ring and a loop of talismans. The only thing I could compare it to size-wise was the *Celestia*. It pulsed with a steady, warm illumination. Something seemed to swirl around inside as I watched, but I couldn't tell if it was a trick of the light or not.

I made my way around Tom, keeping my eyes open for Sniper or my target. The sound of fighting was growing ever quieter above me. Cognitum would be down here herself any second. I had to find him... and he didn't make it hard for me. As I trotted around the curve of the giant moonstone, I spotted the yellow stallion sitting before a terminal, his eyes focused on the screen as his hooves worked the keys. I trotted right up behind him.

"Hello, Blackjack," he said without turning from the terminal.

"Hey, Dealer," I replied as I sat next to him. "So. Been busy?"

"None of us really have time to chat. If you were smart, you'd get out of here, get on your rocket, and go back to Equus," he said, eyes on the screen. "Or you could just kill me."

"That'd be a waste," I replied. "After all, you went through so much hard work to get that body back." That made him pause a second. "You have to help me stop her, Echo."

"And then what? The Wasteland stays poisoned and polluted forever? Hope that six heroes magically make everything better with their friendship?" He typed faster than I could follow, even faster

than P-21. If they worked together, maybe they could do something. "Has the Wasteland changed pony nature, Blackjack?"

"This is not the time, Dealer," I replied sharply. "I just watched my dearest friend nearly get killed. End of the world shit going on. You know that Cognitum is fucking crazy."

"Maybe. Or maybe she's exactly what we deserve right now," he countered as he continued to stare at the screen. "Two hundred years of savagery and butchery. Two hundred years and we're still fighting wars. I've seen all the same slaughter you have, Blackjack. Is the fate of the world to continue being a post-apocalyptic nightmare?"

"Of course not. We make it better!" I countered sharply.

"Just like Luna and the ministries did?" he asked as his hooves worked the controls. I could have yanked him away, but if I did, I could probably write off any chance of his help. "Two hundred years, and the most we have to show for it is the same mess we had after the bombs fell. You might think this Lightbringer is going to make everything all right, but that's exactly what everypony thought when the ministries were announced. 'Oh, Luna is taking over. Everything will be different!' And it was, only it was *worse!*"

"What about what I'm trying to do, Dealer? I'm trying to make the world a better place. And stopping Cognitum from achieving her goal is definitely a big plus in my book," I shouted, wondering if this was a hopeless cause.

"She's what we deserve!" he shouted, turning away from the screen and looking at me with anguish in his eyes. "We fucked up. We fucked it all up! We deserve a monster like her to rule over us. To punish us for taking two centuries and still not setting things right!"

I sighed and rubbed my face. Echo sure had spent way too much time around Goldenblood. "You don't get to make that call. Neither do I. But nopony deserves a shittier life. Not me. Not you. Not even Cognitum, even if she's causing all this mess. Everypony needs a chance at a better life, and if they blow it, another chance. Nopony deserves a worse life. Ever."

He stared at me, and I couldn't tell if he was marveling at me or pitying me. Maybe both. "How do you do that, Blackjack? Be so right and so wrong all at the same time?" He stopped typing and sat, closing his eyes. "I just wanted to live, Blackjack. I didn't want to fade away inside that nothingness. I felt it happening ever since we first left 99. Like slowly bleeding to death." He gave me a stricken little grimace. "And I knew you'd forgive me, too. That made it so much easier and so much worse."

"Yeah, well... I lived. I'm here. And now you get another chance to do what's right," I said as I stared into his desperate eyes. "Help me stop Horizons from firing."

"I—" he stammered.

Now, I've had a lot of experience with things messing around in my head. Sad to say, but I've become a bit of an expert on outside sources intruding on my mind. From the Goddess's relentless pressure to machines playing with my perceptions to supernatural thingies gibbering in my brain, there'd been no lack of experiences with things reaching out and making contact with my head. So I really shouldn't have been as shocked as I was when a stallion's rolling deep bass voice boomed out, *NO! HORIZONS MUST FIRE! THE EATER OF SOULS MUST DIE!*

It knocked me right off my hooves, and from the sight of Echo, he'd heard it too. It had him curled up fetally, a nosebleed starting to drip out of his yellow nostrils. "Too loud!" I thought and shouted at the same time.

OH. SORRY. I'LL TRY AND TURN DOWN THE VOLUME. the voice said with a lower rumble. *HOW'S THIS?*

Well, it wasn't *quite* splitting my head open this time. I thought I could handle it, at least. "Better. So... who are you?" I frowned. There was something familiar to this voice. "I've heard you before."

YES, IT'S NICE TO FINALLY MEET YOU FACE TO FACE. The voice chuckled. I turned, looking left and right, then behind me at the massive moonstone. Only this time, the light that had swirled within had coalesced into a gargantuan glowing pony-shaped outline... an alicorn-shaped outline. Well, that raised a couple theological questions I didn't want to think about at all right now! The pony's eyes were ovals filled with bluish light. *CALL ME TOM.*

(Author's notes: Okay. In order to prevent a sixty page chapter, it was best to end here. Hope it was okay. This one was a pain to edit, but I'm glad that all my editors put in the time and effort to make it better. I want to thank them for their hard work at making sure this ending is everything I planned it to be. I hope it turns out alright.

Thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria in the first place, and thanks to everyone for reading as far as they did. Next chapter is the showdown with Cognitum. I hope It's decent too. I look forward to reading people's feedback on Cloudsville, FimFic, or Reddit. Let me know what I did wrong.

Also, if folks want to help out, bits would be very welcome now. I'm not going to be able to do the teaching abroad thing... and the IRS decided that there's a problem with my tax return, and are sitting on it till it gets resolved. (Someone used my SSN to file their taxes). So bits to David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal are very much appreciated. It's the difference between paying rent and not these days. I'm working on getting a Patreon account going. I have no idea if it will work but I can hope...

Anyway, thanks for bearing with me. I hope it all turns out okay.)

Hinds: Just thought that I'd clarify, for anyone who was wondering, the design of the Luna Astrostable and why our recent edit of Chapter 19 to change the design did not change it to what is seen here. Out of universe... Let's sum it up by saying that there was much confusion and miscommunication. In-universe, changes were made; Stable 90 already showed both the readers and Blackjack, after all, that what was seen in Chapter 19 did not always correspond to the reality.

Heartshine: I don't have any clarifications, but a little bit of praise for Somber, as he accidentally did a clever. This was a really... interesting chapter. The ability to feel the moment of death of one of my enemies is one of my own worst nightmares.

swicked: Special thanks to Heartshine for teaching me, if you ever feel a bit too excited while looking at Stonehenge, just eat a whole raw potato and those less than double-holy thoughts with clear up in a snap.

Heartshine: Just trying to help swicked out when he needs to study.