

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 75: To the Last, Part One

“An exercise in rhetoric.”

There were no words for what I felt. Everything within me had been yanked inside out and scraped raw. I wished I could be like Scotch Tape, sobbing my eyes out, or Bastard, sitting cold and composed in his couch, a thin trail of smoke drifting through the air from the cigarette clutched between his pursed lips. That was probably some kind of safety hazard, but I really couldn't care less. I'd just lost two more friends in the worst possible way, one forever and the other abandoned on the moon. If the Astrostable had survived... if it hadn't collapsed into the crater or been buried by rubble, there was some chance that she might find it. I had to cling to that hope. The alternative would drive me mad.

P-21... don't think about it... don't think about it... please don't... I gritted my teeth, feeling myself shake. No. I had to keep it all together.

I needed distractions, fast. So I could not think about... P-21... Rampage... no, damn it... No! Glory was alive, damn it! I wouldn't believe it was otherwise until I saw it with my own eyes! She was alive and we were going to... we were going to... no. I had to keep it together. My people needed me...

I scanned frantically around the cabin, looking for anything that could occupy me and not remind me of... I glanced at my hooves and found what I sought. What the heck had happened to me? I'd thought that Cognitum was the one who had altered my body when she'd inhabited it... a sort of evil renovation. But alicorn souls seemed pretty darn powerful... Now I had to wonder if it had just been an effect of having Luna inside her, an evil, Nightmare Moon version of what had happened when I got my body back. Speaking of which, now that I had a moment's peace, I could figure out what had happened to me.

Parts of my body were still synthetic, but I couldn't tell where machine ended and flesh began. The magic that had transformed me transcended anything that could be designed. I felt alive, entirely alive, not like clunky metal fused with flesh. My body was armored in places, but it didn't cover me from horn to hoof. The design was sleek and fluid, with tiny shooting stars and crescent moons. Talismans gleamed in my 'armor', but what their functions were I couldn't guess. I turned my hoof from side to side, seeing through gaps in the plate armor the intricate gearwork within, listening to it whirl and click softly inside my limb.

My E.F.S. still had all the old energy and health displays. I fished around in my old saddlebags, took out a garnet, and sucked on the gem, enjoying the sweet and sour fruity taste for a second before it melted away with the familiar surge of energy. Okay, I couldn't see Princess Luna eating rocks, so clearly there was some of the old me in here. Maybe all this alicorn-ness was like a special suit of alicorn barding, and when I got my old soul back, I'd revert to just flesh and metal Blackjack? The magical projection could—

Wait... when had I thought like that? I rubbed my brow, then turned my head, looking at my reflection in the window. My eyes still had the tiniest flickers of red light within, but now I worried about things bigger than just physical alterations. I had Luna's soul inside me, but what precisely did that mean? I didn't have Luna's memories or magic. I couldn't begin to imagine how one raised the moon. Our commonality had allowed us to share this body without that horrifying sense of corruption and violation I'd initially felt, but in its place was... something inexplicable.

I carefully drew out the figurine of Rarity, and I turned it over in my hooves. There was a piece of soul in each one. Each piece subtly nudged me in different directions. Little hints and impressions. They didn't stop me from being me, but they might affect my decisions or outlooks in elusive ways. So where

was my soul? Cohabiting in this body? Left behind in the blank? Was some Blackjack-ness keeping me... me? Or was Luna slowly tugging me towards being more like the ruler of Equestria she was two centuries ago?

The fact I was wondering these things at all scared the fuck out of me, and the amount of stuff I was trying not to think about was reaching unmanageable levels. I'd given up so much... lost so much... This didn't feel right. These weren't my thoughts. I didn't deserve these wings. Just like Luna had felt she hadn't deserved the throne...

"This is going to drive me crazy," I muttered.

"Yeah. That's how it started with her," Bastard murmured, taking a long pull off his cigarette as he examined the bore of one of his pistols. "When the Harbingers hired me, she was pretty upfront. A million caps for a few days' work. Oh, and killing you. That too." He gave me a supremely smack-worthy smirk, but I abstained – more from heartbroken lethargy than actual restraint – and he continued, "But the longer we were in the rocket, the nuttier she became... like convincing herself she had to do stuff. Rationalizing it to folks who already thought she shat moonbeams or who couldn't care less so long as they got paid."

"Great. That makes me feel so much better," I said, and latched on my next bet for not thinking about things. I asked, "What's your story, Bastard?"

He shot me a momentary scornful look, then snorted out dual rings of smoke. "No story. I kill ponies for money. I owe a lot of money to some folks who will collect my head if I miss a payment. It's that simple."

"Oh." I felt vaguely disappointed. And annoyed...

"Not everypony is the Lightbringer or Security," he said with a thin smile. "I'm just trying to get through life the best I can."

My lips curled in a frown. "So you'll kill a foal for caps?"

"I kill a target for caps," he replied calmly. "If you don't like it, take it up with whoever hires me. I'm just the messenger." He paused, pursing his lips. "And generally, no," he added. "Foal-killing is rarely worth it in the long run. Low pay. High revenge factor. Now, killing the foal's parents... sure. I've definitely done that before. Nothing ridiculous, of course. I don't do those 'rape and dismemberment' deals. Too messy and likely to go wrong."

"So glad you're a *professional* murderer," I muttered darkly, wondering if it was a mistake to save him. I didn't know what he was thinking anymore, but I wasn't about to admit that.

"Call it my way of fighting the Wasteland," he said with a smirk. "I honor my deals and keep everything nice and civil. I avoid collateral damage whenever possible, and strive for neatness and brevity." He paused, looking a little pained. "It was really tough breaking that deal with Cognitum. That's going to leave a bad taste in my mouth for a long time."

"You could have died and kept your honor," I pointed out.

That earned another smoky snort. "Yeah. Except I'd be, you know, dead. First rule of being a professional is to survive. Jobs go south. Plans go wrong. Dying for anything is something only morons do."

My telekinetic backhand knocked him out of his seat, across the cabin, and into the far wall. "Fuck!" he hissed, clenching his nose and grimacing. At least he was smart enough not to draw his guns.

I saved this— this— this *bastard* and lost P-21 and Rampage? Rampage hadn't been a saint, but... "What was that for?" he cried out indignantly.

I jerked him over to me. "You're not a 'professional'. You're a raider with a sense of hygiene," I spat in his face.

"So when I break a contract to save my life and help you, I'm scum, and when I don't, I'm a corpse? Nice," he replied evenly.

That was a kick to the nethers of my righteous indignation. When a pony would do anything to survive, they were scum, but if he'd honored his deal with Cognitum... ugh... I couldn't handle this. "I just lost two very dear friends and a pony I'd have liked to have given a second chance. One of them," I growled out, pointing at Scotch Tape, "was her *father*. Don't you dare call any of them morons."

"Duly noted," he muttered as he glared at me over his askew glasses. "Now, are you going to kill me, knock me around a little more, or give me one of those second chance thingies?" he asked evenly. I glared into his insolent eyes and... damn it... What was happening to me? I was upset, sure... but I wasn't really going to kill him for insulting my friends, was I?

Was I? I stared into his teal eyes, seeing myself reflected in them and the silent question hanging in the air between us.

I am not an executioner...

"Sorry," I muttered, releasing him. If he insulted them again, though...

He straightened his glasses and rubbed his bleeding nose with the back of a forehoof. "Yeah. Forgot that you do that whole... friend... thing. I got vaccinated for that years ago." He considered me and then added. "Guess you were pretty close, huh?"

"Yeah. We were. And are." I'd never forget Rampage. I'd get her home, even if I had to bring down the moon to do it.

"Well, glad that worked out for you," he said with a shrug as he finished off the cigarette and stubbed it out on the upholstery. "I'll honor our deal. Get the kid back safe. Keep her alive till the day after tomorrow." He pushed back the sleeve of his coat to reveal a PipBuck. He checked something. "Let's see. Armor piercing ammo. Need to pick her up some barding. Then play bodyguard till this mess is over." He chuckled. "Then I get paid and get some persistent bastards off my ass."

"You know, we might all die in a few hours," I pointed out. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"Should it?" he answered, as if the very question surprised him. "I don't want to, if I can help it, but it's going to happen. I die when I die. That big rock today, a raider's bullet tomorrow, a mark's bodyguard next month, starvation next year, or old age in who knows how long... something's going to get me. Why sweat the details?"

I grunted, then leaned over to where Scotch lay strapped into her couch. Her face was turned away from us. No flying through the air with hooves waving on this trip. She clutched the battered black hat in her hooves. Had that really been just hours ago? The young mare might have been asleep, or was simply alone in her grief. "Just take care of her," I told him, the edge in my voice present through our entire exchange now gone. He grunted once and nodded.

I stared at him for a long moment; something else was amiss, but I couldn't put my hoof on what. He was scum... no, that wasn't it. I was giving him a second chance. That was so me. But there was definitely something... something... something about him... He was a killer... no... he was... he...

"What?" he asked with a frown. Suddenly I levitated him to me, pulled off his glasses, and examined him closer. He was handsome in a somewhat underfed-looking way, athletic without being bulky. Really, he had a frame similar to Stygius, P-21, and Glory... and... and... Now he started to look a bit alarmed. "Fucking what? If you're going to hit me again, get on with it."

Fucking... that was it! I wasn't sexually aroused or interested in him at all! There wasn't that little part of me wanting the comfort and bliss that came with sex. I mourned P-21 because he was my friend, not because I'd lost a lover. There should have been... something! Sure, it had taken me a few hours to get with Stygius, but that was coming off of sexual trauma, and I was worried about killing him. I should be snogging Bastard. Flirting with him, at least... but... nothing. He left me cold. My emotional reset button wasn't just not working, it appeared to have been removed completely.

"Nothing," I answered as I released him, averting my eyes to my blank body lashed to her couch. He shook his head and drew another cigarette, lighting it. I didn't know if the lack of sensation was a good thing or a sad commentary on my character. I added it to the growing list of things I didn't want to think about right now... and my head was getting a little too full. "Have you... have you ever felt like you're not yourself anymore?"

He took a long pull on his cigarette, then exhaled. "Nope. Can't say that I have. That sounds to me like a hell of a personal problem I'm glad I don't have. Like pregnancy. Or being an alicorn. Or being batshit insane, on top of all that." He pushed off me and sailed back to his seat.

"Thanks," I muttered dryly. Unfortunately, that left me right back where I started. And his little quip... my babies... I could still feel them inside me. Little pokes and kicks. I had to not think about... not...

Damn it! Thinking about P-21 made me choke up. Thinking about Rampage made me want to hit something. Damn it... why couldn't I just win for once? One solid, inescapable, undeniable, Blackjack-gets-what-she-wants win without paying for it in blood and tears? Why? It wasn't fair. Just once... Just...

Crap, I was crying. Great, shuddering sobs that curled me over and sent tears drifting through the cabin again. First Glory... no! Not Glory! Glory was alive! She was. She had to be. She was going to hold me in her hooves and tell me everything was going to be okay. She'd figure all this out. And I'd never, ever, stray from her again.

Enough. I couldn't take it anymore. I used my magic to untie my blank body and brought it to me. It'd been able to see P-21 even when I wasn't 'home'. Maybe I could use it to get away from myself. Just for a little while. Just until I worked out what I was going to do.

I turned over my blank face. This was my face, but not mine. So young. So... innocent. Had I ever truly looked this way before? I could almost imagine that this was myself dreaming... heh... I was even drooling a little. I held my blank body close and pressed my horn to hers. To dream... but who knew what nightmares I might see?

They couldn't be worse than the nightmares I was living now. I dove into the first window I saw, it and all the others now annoyingly opaque, and let the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood lay broken on the hard granite stones of Mount Hoof, right at the edge of the nearly-sheer-sided great granite knob located at the south end of the Core. To his left, water poured over the spillways of the Luna Dam. Below, more blasted out from the outlets of the hydroelectric plant at the base. Above them loomed an S.P.P. tower, with pegasi whirling and dueling with Brood fliers while cyberponies maintained a withering fire from the access ring near the umbrella hood at the top. To the west, I could see Chapel in a desperate fight against the Brood as the dark horde advanced, was

repulsed, and advanced again. To the east, I could see smoke and flashes amidst Scrapyard's mountains of junk. That wasn't all that far from the Collegiate. The Nightmare Citadel to the northeast was on fire; I could only hope that its defenders had taken refuge in the stable before a unicorn found a way to teleport in.

The most disturbing thing of all was the sight of a massive dark vortex over the Rainbow Dash Skyport. Three Raptors were whirling and maneuvering around the monstrosity of storm clouds and air, and as I watched, it reached out a twisting arm and sent claws of lightning raking at one of the war machines, tearing away dark cloud and blasting burning lines along the hull. To the northwest, I thought I saw Megamart on fire. And southeast, it looked as if the Brood were sweeping along the banks towards Elysium. Hopefully Splendid and the others had gotten out. I didn't begrudge them their flight.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" the Legate purred. The powerful zebra stood with a hoof on Goldenblood's spine. The ghoul's limbs were missing, but he felt only a dull discomfort from each of the broken stubs. "This world should die with a roar. Not a whimper. I'm so glad you've managed to give me an invigorating fight. It wouldn't have been fitting had you all simply submitted to the inevitable."

"So glad our battle could entertain you," Goldenblood rasped under the crushing hoof.

"Oh, you don't understand. It's not the fighting I'm savoring. It's the despair. Truly nothing is more precious than the utter abandonment of hope. I pray we'll be able to hear the wailing all the way up here," the Legate chuckled, then paused and asked, "Have you given up hope, Goldenblood?"

"Blackjack will stop you," he swore.

"Oh?" The Legate sounded amused.

"Nothing has stopped her. Nothing will stop her. She cannot give up," Goldenblood answered, and then the hoof twisted, making something in his body crack. "You should know. Your own prophecy says that she will defeat this city."

"Yes... prophecy..." the Legate purred. "I'm honestly not sure myself if the prophecy of the Maiden of the Stars is true. Oh, it was unquestionably useful. It kept my own superstitious people aligned and allied. Earned me respect and cooperation. But is it true? A Maiden of the Stars, coming down to destroy this heart of sin? Did I predict it, or simply construct a convenient lie?"

Suddenly, the hoof on Goldenblood's back lifted and wrapped around his neck. He hauled Goldenblood into the air, turning his face towards the east. "What do you think?" the Legate hissed into his ear.

There was the pale image of the moon, faint in the daytime sky, and next to it a brilliant blue star. At first barely visible, it gleamed as it grew brighter and brighter. "She failed," Goldenblood whispered. "She failed to stop my creation."

"Indeed," the Legate laughed. "The Eater will catch it as it falls into the well we've carved into the earth." He gestured to the Core. "The moonstone will be slowed by the friction and caught in our web, leaving the spirit easily digestible. Food, in all forms, comes down to the preparation."

The blue glow grew and grew. Goldenblood watched the eager grin on the Legate's face for several minutes. Then the zebra's eyes narrowed in concern. "What is happening? Something is wrong! It should be slowing in the atmosphere already! Dropping into—"

The blue spot grew brighter and brighter in the sky but then streaked overhead and disappeared out of sight behind the eastern mountains. The Legate grabbed Goldenblood by the head and turned

him, squeezing his skull as he demanded, "What did you do? The moonstone was supposed to embed itself!"

Goldenblood smirked as the Legate stared at him, then the sky, then at him, and then up at the sun. The Legate's grip relaxed a little. "Oh, clever pony. The trajectory loops. I thought it'd be a straight path."

"Of course," Goldenblood rasped. "Trottenheimer worked out the math. I thought it was supposed to be a straight line too at first."

"I see. So it will orbit the world, then the sun... the moon... Oh, he was a clever pony," the Legate hissed.

"Yes. And wise as well," Goldenblood answered. A moment later he added, "You worked all that out quite quickly, just from seeing it once? It took me an hour with charts after I was told."

He reached up and tapped the blood-red rings that decorated his face. "My people have a special relationship with celestial bodies. Ages in the past, my tribe were oracles and prophets, though the stars are not always straightforward with their knowledge, or favors." He stretched a hoof towards the skies. "With every pass of the sun and moon, the spirit will grow more powerful. The stone will increase velocity with each pass. Maybe poor dying Equus might lend some power, too. The kinetic and spiritual energy will build until the final trajectory will bring it..." The Legate paused, lowering his forehoof.

"Straight down. With a velocity far higher than that of a straight shot," Goldenblood finished. Then he asked, "Is that despair you're feeling?"

The Legate threw him aside, glaring at the spot where Tom had disappeared over the western horizon. "Finishing off this pathetic world shouldn't be this difficult," he muttered, his eyes narrowing. "I'm not beaten yet. I still have one last contingency." He glanced over at Goldenblood, and his confidence returned. "After all, I couldn't be sure that Cognitum would succeed."

"What are you going to do?" Goldenblood asked.

"What any good leader does at times like this," he said as he gazed back out at the Core. "Get help." I waited for him to elaborate, but all he did was look down at the Core and smile. Was it me, or did the distant tempo of the fighting and screams increase?

Goldenblood didn't answer for several seconds. "You won't succeed. Somepony will stop you."

"The last refuge of the powerless." The Legate chuckled. "Well, perhaps. Perhaps your alicorns will rescue you. Perhaps, somehow, Horizons will fail, and my plan will be thwarted. But none of you have the capability to defeat me. And I will try again and again until the end of time. Even if I have to kill every living being with my own hooves."

oooOOOooo

I pulled myself from Goldenblood's mind. A contingency? What was it? Help? From whom? Who did he have left to get help from? I needed more information. I had to know! I pushed my way into another mind.

oooOOOooo

"We're boned," a tiny blue colt said as he and a half dozen bloodied Zodiacs clustered in a cramped hole blown out of a wall, waist-deep in water. I was able to identify Sagittarius, Aquarius, Virgo, Pisces, and Capricorn. I didn't know who the white pegasus in the black combat armor was, nor the wounded zebra in the cloak.

"We're not dead yet," Sagittarius said as he leaned out of the cover of the hole. The chamber they were in was twenty feet tall, with intermittent pillars spaced out here and there. Rusted construction equipment jutted out of the water that covered the floor and lapped at the walls. On the far side of the room, six Brood tended to a damaged golden tree that trickled rainbow sap into the water. Four other unicorns maintained a shimmering shield protecting them as they worked. A hulking tank sat between the Zodiacs and them, its dented and blackened armor plates popping and twisting back into shape as the repair talismans worked.

"We're out of explosives," the blue colt said sourly. "Those damn Brood blew themselves to pieces getting the C-4 away from the tree. Cancer's scrap metal and Aries is probably roadkill. Gemini and Taurus are keeping the Brood reinforcements outside at bay for now, but eventually even that schizo is going to run out of magic. They're going to have that tree repaired and popping out reinforcements in *here* soon. The Flux in the water is probably giving all of us tentacles as we speak. But that's fine, because the frigging tank is going to kill us all long before they sprout. Oh, and we're out of explosives. We're boned."

"Hate to say it," the white pegasus said, "but we should withdraw. Regroup. Try again later."

"No, Libra. We were barely able to get in here the first time. We've almost scrapped that tree twice. We just have to finish it off. Screw the tank," Sagittarius said as he jabbed his hoof out the hole.

"Get me a new chassis! I'll show that striped monstrosity what for!" a piece of equipment on Virgo's PipBuck squawked as a red talisman flashed on the device.

"Hush, Crabapple," Virgo said with a frown. "If we could get you installed in the tank, our problems would be over. We could use that tank to take out the tree, the Brood, and everything else."

"Use the tank..." Sagittarius murmured.

"We tried that," Libra said. "Remember? When we got between the tree and it, it just moved out of alignment and opened fire." The white pegasus glowered out of the hole. "I'd thought the Brood were supposed to be dumber than an Enclave general."

"Zodiacs don't care if the target is a genius or dumb as hammers, we take it down," Sagittarius murmured. "If we can't get it to shoot the tree... can we get it to shoot something else?"

Aquarius's eyes widened and he leaned over to peer at the vehicle now patrolling around the tree, moving through the churned-up, muddy water. "This is a bad idea," the colt muttered.

"Will it work?" Sagittarius asked.

"It's going to get us blown to pieces," the colt said, glowering at him.

"But will it work?" Sagittarius repeated.

"Will what work?" Virgo asked plaintively as she dug through her bag for robot parts and started to wire them together. "Will someone please tell me what's going on?"

Aquarius was silent a moment, then groaned. "Ugh... Yes. Maybe. You're betting against Equestrian wartime engineering." He turned to the zebra. "We'll need some smoke on the water, Scorpie." The zebra mare arched a brow but then quickly began to dig through pouches lining the inside of her cloak. She dropped various materials into an empty Sparkle-Cola bottle, which began to spew a stream of mist.

"I'll get it started while you fill them in," Sagittarius said as his horn glowed and manifested a compound bow. "Don't take too long."

The green unicorn leapt out of the hole, kicking and jumping as he surged through the water to take position next to one of the pillars. He waited for a count of ten, then drew an arrow from the quiver on his back. Aquarius was a smart kid. A little negative... but he knew shifting forces. He was a great Zodiac. Sagittarius would take his 'maybe' over anyone else's 'definitely' any day of the week. The arrow ended in a bulbous grenade, and with practiced care, he fired it straight at the back of the turret. The detonation was decidedly underwhelming.

The turret swiveled towards him, and he dove to the side behind the pillar. The twin cannons roared, and the blast sent both him and the water surging away, stunning him. The turret shifted, orienting on him.

Then a mouth bit the back of his neck, and he was surging sideways with a great spray of water as the cannons fired again. "I got chew!" Capricorn said through a mouthful of mane.

Libra streaked along the perimeter of the flooded garage, streaming the thick white mist from the bottle around her neck. The cannons tracked Sagittarius and Capricorn while the machine gun pods blasted a line of high-caliber rounds after the white pegasus. Sagittarius and Capricorn took cover behind one of the pillars, and he floated out his bow, shooting a bolt of green magic at the tank. It replied with an annihilating blast that nearly turned their cover to rubble. When the pair surfaced from the frothy water, Capricorn murmured, "I don't like this plan."

The mist started to thicken enough that the edges of the room became lost in a haze. All their previous attempts to assault the tree behind the tank had been for naught. As Libra swooped behind the tree, the machine gun fire stopped, but one of the unicorn Brood blasted at her with lightning, forcing her to keep going. As soon as she was clear of the tree, the machine guns opened up again. From the opposite side of the room, Aquarius fired a pistol from behind another pillar. The turret rotated around and oriented on the colt. The cannons fired again, but he was gone, riding on the back of Pisces as she darted along the water like a missile. "It's working!" the colt shouted.

A small ball-shaped robot with two propeller blades and a small beam gun swooped into position and, hovering, let crimson beams slash at the tank. The red talisman set into the bot's front crowed, "Death from above! This is perfect! I got him now!" The turrets swung towards the robot. "Oh sparkfarts..." The two rounds slammed into the pillar, and the robot disappeared in a cloud of shrapnel. The red talisman went flying through the air, then was seized by a pink magical aura and yanked behind another heavy block of concrete. "Viggy!" it shouted tinnily. "I need another chassis!"

"They don't grow on trees, you technocretin!" the filly shrieked. "Most AIs protect their chassis somewhat, you know!"

"Bah! Plug me into a pocket calculator, a servomanipulator, and a balefire egg launcher, and I'll show you squishies how to win a fight! You're all way too obsessed with retaining your fluids," the robotic stallion shouted out.

Libra dropped the bottle and rolled sideways through the air, twisting her body as she spun and aiming her light machine guns right at the tank. Hurling sideways along the beams, she strafed the war machine with her own fire. It returned with thunderous blast after blast, tearing holes in the walls, ceilings, and pillars as it tried to swat the pegasus out of the air.

A Sparkle-Cola bottle flipped through the air from nowhere and shattered against the tank. The fluid immediately burst into flame, spreading over the cameras and sensors. The tank roared in a frenzy as it blasted again and again, careful to avoid the tree but ripping into everything else with high explosive rounds. The noise deafened Sagittarius, and all he could do was take cover under the water for as long as he could hold his breath.

When the fire stopped, the air swirled with smoke and mist. The flames on the tank had been extinguished in the tempest. Sagittarius felt as if his body had been stuck in a dryer with some big heavy rocks. Something inside him was grinding together, and as he forced himself to his feet, he immediately coughed up a slurry of blood and foul water, slumping against a stub of concrete jutting from the foaming pool. Capricorn floated nearby, unconscious or... no, she was still breathing.

Then he lifted his eyes and stared at the two barrels of the tank. Behind it, a platoon of Brood and unicorns stood in ranks around the fully restored tree. Identical smirks rested on all their faces. "You're finished," one unicorn wearing Silver Stripe's face informed him flatly. The other Zodiacs were picking themselves out of the rubble of the shattered and blasted pillars.

A resounding crunch filled the room as a massive crack ran down the center of the roof of the flooded garage. The grinding noise rose as rocks and pebbles pattered down. The Brood and Zodiacs alike turned to stare up at those ominous slabs. *Try and fire those cannons again. I dare you*, he thought. "Libra? Scorpio? Either of you alive?" he asked aloud.

"Yeah?" the blond pegasus answered as she emerged from a pile of concrete, her scorched feathers bent in wild directions. The zebra emerged a second later from that mysterious space that zebras and P-21 hid in.

"Get everypony out," he said as he drew an arrow from his quiver, stepping out and immediately drawing the eyes of every Brood and the tank as he loaded it into his magical bow.

Pisces screamed for him to come back and Virgo sobbed, but Sagittarius didn't look back. The unicorns' horns flared as they pushed up on the slabs overhead. He drew back the arrow, water dripping off the grenade at the end. Then lines of fire were punched through his battered body as dozens of bullets ripped into him. He loosed the arrow as he fell, his vision darkening as the roaring barrage concluded.

As he collapsed into the churning water, the crack overhead exploded, and the two gargantuan slabs slid down like an immense house of cards collapsing in slow motion. Through the gap, for a moment, he could see the floor above, and the floor above that, collapsing as well, dropping rusting construction equipment down upon the tank, the tree, and the Brood. Then, as he started to slip beneath the waves, everything going black, the green unicorn smiled.

oooOOOooo

The memory window winked out before me, and I was left staring at the void in my old and empty mind. Sagittarius was gone. I looked at the lingering pools of thought. How many others would I see wink ou— and another one disappeared right then! I gasped. Who was it? Calamity? Velvet? Whisper? Someone I'd known was gone, and... I switched my attention from one pool to the next. How many minds had I been connected to in the first place? I hadn't been able to precisely inventory them. Another pool winked out, and I screamed in that vast nothingness. Stop dying! Please stop dying. Please...

There was nothing for it. I found the nearest mind and threw myself into it. I had to know. I had to...

oooOOOooo

"We failed," Xanthe muttered as they sat in a muddy pit together. While Xanthe's armor was still intact, her mane wasn't. Only a few long strands remained. Her stomach clenched, and she retched but brought nothing up. She glanced at the three ghouls. "Any ammo left? At all?"

"Sorry, all out of corpses," Snails said mournfully. "Those skeletons didn't work out so good."

"It's okay," the zebra said, glancing over at Carrion.

The ghoulish griffin's armor was wrecked, functional only in the sense that it still clung to his desiccated frame. "Guns are dry. Explosives are gone. Sorry. I don't see how we can accomplish our mission at this point."

Xanthe shoved herself to her hooves, staggering a few steps as she cried out, "We can't give up!" She managed all of three steps before collapsing on the muddy floor of the ruined bunker. She clenched her eyes, trembling and muttering again, "We can't give up." She looked back at the others. "The Maiden is counting on us. Everypony needs us to take out this bunker!" She turned desperately from one to the next. "We can try to get some more ammo from the Brood! See if we can rupture the Flux tanks again! Or maybe... maybe I could try that vent. Maybe they haven't mined it a third time!"

"Xanthe!" Carrion croaked, helping her out of the muck. "Enough. We're not going to be able to do it. The Brood know their bunkers are under attack, and they're reinforcing them. We probably got hundreds of those bastards between us and that stupid tree." Xanthe swayed and clutched her stomach. "And you're not going to last much longer one way or another," the griffin added. "How much RadAway do you have?"

Xanthe clenched her jaw, tasting blood in her mouth. "I... ran out fifteen minutes ago," she whispered, like uttering a shameful confession.

"Uh-oh," the stealth suit quipped in a worried, foal-like tone.

Carrion sighed. "All right. Let's backtrack to that drain. It should get you out of here, at least. Maybe they can send in a second team."

"No!" Xanthe said sharply, rising to her hooves. "We're not going to give up! The Maiden wouldn't give up! She may have cursed me, but I can't give up! Because the only way you can ever lift a curse is by doing the right thing! The Legate's evil, and these Brood are monstrous, but I can't give up! I'd rather die than give up!" Then her guts gurgled, and she coughed. "Even if I really, really don't want to become a ghoul." She gave the others a weak smile. "No offense."

"None taken. And you probably won't. If everypony that died of radiation poisoning became a ghoul, Equestria would be a nation of undead," Carrion answered.

Silver Spoon stood away from the others, staring down the dark tunnel they were hunkered in. "Ghouls," she murmured. Then she turned back to the others. "The Brood aren't ghouls too, are they? I mean, they're like cyber zebra unicorn pegasi thingies with all kinds of crazy powers, but they're not ghouls too, are they?"

Xanthe, Snails, and Carrion shared a look. "Uh, no. They're not ghouls too," Snails said dully.

"Right! 'Cause that would be, like, totally cheating," Spoon said brightly. "So, what if we blew up the one place they can't go?" The blank faces remained, and she snorted, rolled her eyes, and explained, "The reactor thingy. Duh!"

"Blow up a reactor?" Xanthe said lightly. "But reactors are heavily shielded. This one is obviously breached, but you'd still need a tank to blow it up."

Silver Spoon snorted. "Well then, we get inside the reactor first, and *then* blow it up! You don't need to be so totally geek about it."

Xanthe took on a softer tone. "Silver Spoon, it's an operational reactor. It's on. It's a huge conflux of magical energy. I know you absorb radiation, but even ghouls have a limit."

Silver Spoon snorted. "Well, duh. That's what I do when I hit my limit. I make stuff explode! So I'll just make the inside of the reactor explode. Simple."

"But... you'll die..." Xanthe said dully.

Silver Spoon turned away. "So? I die. I'm, like, already dead. And anypony who'd care is dead too. So, like... what's the difference?" She sniffed, glowing green tears trickling down her cheeks. "I miss back when all I had to do was find Tiara. I wish I could have found her. She'd... well... she'd miss me. She'd be rude about it... but she would."

"I'll miss you," Snails said as stared back at her.

"And me," Xanthe added, trotting over and hugging the glowing ghoul. She suddenly shuddered as her stomach clenched, then pulled away.

"Hrmph," Carrion grumbled. "I'll... miss having a walking bubble of healing following us around," he said as he averted his eyes.

"Thanks," Silver Spoon said as she looked down the hall. "I don't really know the way, though. What if I get lost?"

Xanthe took out a tool and shakily removed the PipBuck from her hoof, and for an instant, everything went dark. Then the most amazing thing happened: my vision filled with an emerald-lit view of one world superimposed over another. One world seemed to be made of shadows and ugly black stone. The other was of shimmering, jade-colored light. Xanthe was a crude zebra-shaped block nestled within a suit of glimmering lights. A handsome verdine griffin stood superimposed over a crumbled black body. Snails seemed a twisted snarl of light fused with the dark body. The hallway was at once a broken and muddy ruin and a shining and polished piece of structure set in its prime.

Was this what every ghoul saw, or just a shining one like Silver Spoon? Either way, seeing the ugly real world imposing on such delicate, if illusive, beauty, I could understand why so many would inevitably go mad. Silver Spoon examined the PipBuck on her hoof, and it appeared like a disgusting coil of foulness studded with horrible glaring lights, showing the PipBuck mapping tool. "Okay... so... this way?" she asked, jabbing a hoof down the hall.

"Maybe one of us should go with her?" Snails asked in his slow drawl.

But Silver Spoon shook her head. "I'll be fine. There's no reason for two of us to... you know," Silver Spoon trailed off. She stared at the lanky, mangled-looking unicorn and then leaned forward, kissing him lightly on the cheek. "I'm... you know... like... sorry... and stuff..."

"Yeah. Sorry, eh," he murmured. "Real sorry..." He opened his mouth and closed it again before lowering his star-filled eyes.

"Hate to be the crotchety asshole here, but if we don't get her out of here and some rads out of her system, we're going to be either Team Ghoul or Team Looking for a New Zebra," Carrion said from next to the sickly zebra. "If you're going to do this, then you should go do it."

"Right. Right..." Silver Spoon took a few steps back from the others. "I just... I..." she stammered.

"Thank you, Silver Spoon," Xanthe said with a gentle, honest smile. "I'm sorry we couldn't find Diamond Tiara."

"Well... it's not surprising she rushed on ahead of me. I was, like, always catching up to her and stuff." She swallowed and turned away. "G...goodbye, all of you."

She tore herself away and raced through the emerald-lit world for several seconds till she could disappear around the corner. Then she pressed her forehead to the wall and sniffed. "Goodbye..."

She consulted the map on her PipBuck and kept searching around for signs that read 'Utility', 'Maintenance', or 'Reactor'. She passed other ghouls wandering aimlessly, but the glowing outlines nodded their heads respectfully as she passed. The grotesque mockeries that were their bodies were hardly noticeable. Then a mare called out, "Hey, Silver Spoon!" The voice echoed through the hallways of the ruin.

"Tiara?" Silver Spoon called out, her ears perking up as she turned down a side path and trotted several feet. "Tiara? Is that you?" Hope echoed back at her, and then she stopped short. "No... no, Tiara's dead. She's dead. She's gone." She clenched her eyes shut. "I... I have to do this. I'm the only one who can." She sat down, raising her eyes to the ceiling. "Oh... but I don't want to. I'm scared. I wish Tiara was really here..."

"Hey, Silver Spoon!" the mare's voice echoed again, but Silver Spoon covered her ears and shook her head, backtracking to the hall and continuing to follow the signs and the map. Again and again, the mare called out, and Silver Spoon's whole body trembled in response.

Finally, she reached a hatch with a rusted sign above it reading 'Warning: Reactor. Do not open while in operation.' She looked at the PipBuck, then at the door, squinting to read the gross reality through the shimmering green dream world. "This is it..." she said, and she put her hooves to the wheel and heaved, her body straining. "Come on!" she shouted as she grunted, her body feeling very warm and bright, but the hatch didn't budge.

"Damn it, you stupid door! Open!" she shouted and reared up, slamming her hooves against it. Green light flared around her hooves, and the black horridity crumpled a little as her strike left glowing marks in the metal. "Open! Open! Open!" she shouted, her hooves digging and melting her way through the metal.

"Hey, Silver Spoon! Over here!" Tiara called out to her again and again. "Hey, Silver Spoon, let's go have some fun with those blank flanks!" "Hey, Silver Spoon, let's go get drinks after work!" The ghoul's body felt as if it were on fire as she struggled, loops of necrotic magic like tiny solar prominences erupting from her mottled gray hide only for the holes they left behind to heal instantly. Silver Spoon bowed her head as she continued to dig, glowing tears melting pits in the floor as she shone like a tiny green sun.

Suddenly, the hatch gave way, and inside was a chaotic storm of magic roaring between several crystal talismans. The color flickered and changed, twisted... coalesced... forming into a pink mare with a purple-and-white-striped mane. A delicate crown lay perched on her head, and she wore a bright red dress with gems studding her ears. Her lips twisted in a cocky grin, but there was warmth in her eyes. "Hey, Silver Spoon. There you are."

Silver Spoon stared. "T...tiara?"

"Of course, you dummy. Who else?" The pink mare spoke with more fondness than malice as she smiled and nodded over her shoulder. "Come on. Let's go paint the town red."

"Yeah... I'm coming..." Silver Spoon whispered as everything grew brighter and brighter by the second. A smile crossed her face as she stepped closer to that mare, the real world melting away as everything transformed into light. "Tiara. I found you," her voice whispered.

oooOOOooo

The white pool exploded before me, the name echoing in that vast emptiness that was my blank head. I'd wronged Silver Spoon, tricked her twice and used her for my own ends. I was glad she'd been

happy at the end of things... but it also raised so many more questions. Another window winked out before I knew who it might have been. I couldn't help myself. I mentally sent myself to the next window and let myself melt away. If I couldn't help, then I had to know. Had to watch. Had to flagellate myself as a witness to these horrors.

oooOOOooo

The Reapers reaped a bloody batch of Brood. No hiding. No tricks. No strategy. Just brute force and bloody determination carried them along as they butchered the enemy on all sides. Toaster slammed one against the wall of the bunker before a dozen of the hellish appliances blazed to life and incinerated the pinned cyborg. Then the scarred earth pony pulled away, the sizzling body stuck fast to the toasters before he spun with surprising grace and flung the flaming torso into the face of two more before springing upon them with maniacal glee. Still, even his powerful frame was slick with sweat, and his vicious blows moved with ominous inertia.

Hammersmith and Dazzle fought back to back, the unicorns wielding their weapons with their magic and bodies. No pony who witnessed those two would ever accuse unicorns of weakness. Hammersmith shoved a Brood up only to bring that colossal metal mallet down as if he were driving home a railroad spike. Dazzle, her rifle gone, dodged a blow by a Brood unicorn's blade and sprang forward, grabbing the Brood around the neck and then slicing right through her head with a crimson beam before she could teleport away. A second unicorn appeared on Hammersmith's back, blade raised, point aimed at the base of his skull. Her magic sent the dropped blade from the first cyberunicorn flying up and deflecting the strike. Without looking up, the immense mallet whirled over his head like a steel cyclone and sent the Brood flying. Another crimson beam turned the enemy into drifting dust.

Overhead, Storm Front fought with cool precision against a dozen Brood fliers as he led them ahead, flipped long enough to bring his sniper rifle to bear, and blew a hole in one flier's head, then darted through the hole left in the enemy formation. He shed blood and brass as he flew, but wore a smile as he whirled overhead.

Of them all, Brutus was at the front. An enormous blank mutant, augmented and twice his size, brought down a hoof almost half as large as the black stallion's body. Brutus rose up and caught the giant's descending hoof against his own, his powerful frame straining against the weight. Then, he shifted suddenly to the side, and the giant's foot dropped awkwardly and it staggered. Brutus didn't hesitate, planting his forehooves and kicking out with a massive applebuck at the giant's ankle. With an explosive crack, bone and wire erupted from the ruptured limb as it folded. Brutus, his forelegs still planted, turned around and gave a second mighty applebuck at the other forelimb, which struggled to maintain the monster's weight. His legs struck the side of the knee, and the limb twisted as tendon and wire gave under the force of the beast. The giant fell before him, and Brutus rose up and slammed his forehooves against the skull again and again till there was a third, mighty crack and blood gushed from various orifices.

Candlewick poured a stream of blazing yellow at the Brood as they flooded down the ramp and teleported in. So many rushed forward that they became a blazing mass, burning slower than they died. The wall of burning dead barely kept them at bay long enough for the others to keep from being overwhelmed. "These guys seem really pissed off! Did something happen?" he shouted over his shoulder.

"Yeah, they realized they better send all their fuckers on us!" Toaster bellowed in glee before leaping on a pile of Brood and rolling about like a pig in a heap of burning bodies.

"Maybe this is the only tree left," Dazzle yelled as she swung the blades and continued to blast beams of magic.

Candlewick looked back at the golden tree. So much Flux was being pumped into it that the arcane device had swollen grotesquely. Brood weren't popping out so much as dribbling out like runny roadapples, being seized by unicorn Brood, and having augmentations shoved into their bodies with gory sprays of blood. Usually there wasn't time for more than a jagged spur-like plug stabbed in at the base of their skulls; the new Brood were being sent at the Reapers as soon as they could walk. The reinforcements from outside were far more effective than that slurry of zebra oozing like sap.

The scarred pony in the firepony hat turned to the Brood pushing through the burning wall of corpses and flicked a release on his saddle. The canister popped free, and he kicked it into the flames where the trickling rainbow fuel ignited and turned the container into a wildly bouncing rocket trailing fire. He reached under his coat and drew out another container, this one marked with a bright red stripe.

"What's that?" Dazzle asked during a gap in the fighting.

He slammed it home on his side and twisted it in place. "Toaster's special blend. Has an oxidizer mixed in along with magnesium powder." He tugged his hat down over his eyes. "If that's the last tree thing left, it's gotta burn." Then he pulled out Big Daddy's potion and popped the cork out of the bottle, looking down at the glowing white dregs at the bottom. "I don't have a clue what this is, but if it let Big Daddy take out a tank..." He upended the bottle and swallowed the last bitter dregs in the container. "Yech!" Suddenly, his insides gave a great lurch, and he choked, then whimpered, "I'm not sure I should have drunk that."

"What are you doing?" Dazzle asked, her eyes going wide. "Why are you... smoking?"

"I have no idea," Candlewick croaked as a warmth spread through him, wisps of smoke leaking out his nostrils and mouth. "I hate this. All this," he said as he pushed past Dazzle, staggering towards Brutus, the rousing giant, and the tree beyond.

"What's wrong with ye, boy! We need yer flame guarding our flanks!" Hammersmith yelled as the beefy bearded unicorn whacked another cyborg with his immense hammer, sending a halo of brain and skull erupting in every direction.

"I hate it. Hate him. Hate me," Candlewick muttered as he continued forward. "It's filth... I'm filth... it's all filth..." The flamer coughed as the tip ignited. The flame jetting from the tip of his flamer was a brilliant white, and sparks spat out before it. "And it needs to be washed away."

"Candle!" Dazzle shouted after him, but the earth pony in the red dragonhide coat and firepony hat rushed forward as the behemoth pulled its split skull back together. The scarred stallion jammed the flamer into the beast's enormous nostril and a great whooshing noise filled the cavernous space as tongues of fire exploded out from the monster's mouth and other nostril before blasting out its malformed side a few seconds later. As the beast reared up, Candlewick hooked his legs in the blazing nostrils and yanked up. The gargantuan Brood continued to roll away from the Reapers and fell on its back, flinging Candlewick like a comet over the heads of countless Brood.

"Burn! It all has to burn!" Candlewick shouted as he fell, the flamer sending a fiery plume ahead of him and making the Brood stagger back from the ring of hissing, snapping white fire. "Burn it all away!" he yelled as he landed in the pool of flame and continued the stream. He didn't wait for the fire to dissipate, rushing along as it seared his hooves and scorched his belly. The stallion raced along the burning road, his coat ablaze as he rushed right up towards the tree. Something leapt on his back, despite the inferno, but Candlewick just rolled in the burning flamer fuel and scraped the impediment off.

The golden tree, bloated and twisted, loomed up three times his height, and he rammed the nozzle right into an oozing orifice. The roaring disappeared as all around him the Brood surged forward, immolating themselves as they pushed into the fire. Dazzle called after him while Toaster whooped and cheered him on. The golden tree blackened around the hole he'd jammed the nozzle into.

Suddenly, knots on the surface of the tree swelled grotesquely, glowing bright red, and then exploded like blazing pustules, vomiting forth incendiary pus over his back and into the screaming, writhing masses of Brood. The glowing mouth of the flamer began to spatter him with chunks of molten metal as the blaze spread more and more. There was no pain, only a warmth that grew and grew as more and more burned away.

The great, bloated, technological monstrosity suddenly burst along the back, and a flaming rainbow slurry poured out in great splatters and tears. The fire seemed like a living thing now, and it spread out consuming all in its path. Tree. Augments. Armaments. Brood. But not Candlewick. Him it caressed like a lover, and the half of his vision on the side of the flamer disappeared. Still, he poured on the fire. More fire.

"Candlewick!" screamed Dazzle as hooves pulled him away, and she cried out as he glanced back over his shoulder, shaking her scorched hooves. "Stop! We've beaten them!"

"Your tanks are empty, laddie!" Hammersmith shouted.

"No. Have to burn it all away. Burn it all..." he said as the warmth grew and grew, spreading throughout him. Soon there'd be nothing left. He'd go out like Big Daddy, in a blaze of glory.

Dazzle lunged forward and hugged him, and she immediately cried out as her beautiful pale hide turned red as if she was embracing a hot stove. "Please. Come back! Please!" she sobbed, holding him to her chest as he felt his body sear hers.

Candlewick groaned and shuddered, his body shaking as he struggled to pull away from her before she was burned up too, but she refused to release him. Her tears sizzled as they fell on his face. Slowly, like a flame that had spent its fuel, the warmth began to ebb as he shook. Somepony was pouring water on him, but all he was aware of was Dazzle holding him and the horrible smell of burned ponyflesh. "I'm sorry," he croaked as the warmth was replaced by pain. So very much pain. He staggered and fell on his side, his sole remaining canister of special blend fuel slipping from its case and rolling beside him. Somepony was pouring healing potions into him, but all they did was increase the pain.

"Shh..." Dazzle said softly as her burnt hoof rubbed the side of his face with sight. "Don't talk. Don't apologize. You did it. Soon as the tree went up, the Brood pulled back. We stopped their reinforcements. Now just hold on. We'll get outside and fire a flare to signal an alicorn pick up. Get you to the Collegiate and thrash those eggheads till they magic you all better again." Storm Front, Hammersmith, and Brutus moved in close, watching in concern. The pegasus's feathers were burned around the tips, grounding him.

But Candlewick looked past them to where Toaster watched the gathering, a nasty smile on his face. Candlewick could only see out of one eye, but he glared straight at the scorched and battered stallion. "No," he croaked loudly, tasting blood. "Don't you fucking dare, Toaster!" The scarred stallion's eyes went wide as Brutus and Hammersmith whirled on him.

"Do what?" Brutus asked as he glared at Toaster. The appliance-bedecked stallion's eyes popped wide as everyone regarded him.

"Nothing!" he said, grinning at Candlewick and struggling to keep it from a snarl. "He's fucking crazy after that shit, right?"

"He planned on finishing all of you off and taking--"

"You fucking idiot!" Toaster suddenly screamed. "We could have had it all, bro!"

"Bullshit," Candlewick spat, at him. "*You* could have had it all. That's all *you* care about. All *you've* ever cared about. And when this is all over, I'll make sure every damned Burner knows it." He slumped against Dazzle. "You make a shitty leader, Toaster."

"Get out of here," Brutus rumbled as he loomed at the other earth pony.

"No one's going to follow you after they hear what you wanted to pull here," Storm Front added.

Toaster's pupils contracted to pinpricks. "No. Fuck you. Fuck all of you!" He hit a talisman on his chest, and the toasters began to jet their flame. "Annihilate! Incinerate! Obliterate!" Time seemed to slow as he raced forward, his toasters lighting up one after the next, forming the corona that would take out at least one of them before he was put down. His hoof flailed at his side as Toaster closed the gap, racing like a flaming meteor straight at the prone Candlewick and Dazzle. The unicorn tried to blast him with her magic, but Toaster ignored the injury in his maddened state.

Hammersmith brought the mallet down in an overhead blow, but Toaster ducked to the side and embraced the unicorn, the toasters blazing as he smashed his armored head into Hammersmith's unarmored horn. The unicorn roared in agony as a crack ran right through the base of the spire and every bit of him not protected by his plate armor ignited. As Brutus came in behind Toaster, he received a blazing applebuck kick to the face, knocking the stallion back long enough for Toaster to release Hammersmith and give Brutus a flaming body slam. Storm Front frantically dug through the scorched debris, looking for ammo.

Toaster shoved Brutus aside and then lunged straight at Dazzle. The prone Candlewick seized the canister beside him in both hooves, smashed the end down on the platform between his hind legs, letting rainbow fuel leak out, and then flung the cylinder right into Toaster's face.

Toaster's special blend went up like a fireworks factory, and as his eyes burned away, Toaster's course sent him racing off to the side. He screamed, or perhaps laughed, as he thrashed his way around the room, slamming his blazing body against whatever surface he encountered, including the floor. "Annihilate! Obliterate! Immolate!" he screamed wildly, thrashing as his mane burned away, then what remained of his overcharged-appliance armor. "Infurigate... in...blasty... gate..." he trailed off as the flames died, the blackened body taking a few more feeble steps, chunks of bone peeking through the charred muscle. "Fuck..." he rasped, giving a smoky cough. "Bro... why...?" he choked out before he finally collapsed.

"Bye, bro," Candlewick muttered.

"Come on. Let's get out of here," Brutus rumbled. Hammersmith picked up Candlewick with his levitation, not wincing at the crack in his horn, and set him carefully on Brutus's back.

"Hell of a day," Storm Front muttered.

"It's not over yet, laddie," Hammersmith replied, walking over to the smoldering body. "This is for not paying yer bloody bills, you sodding slag." The steel sledge came down, pulverizing Toaster's immolated remains. Suddenly, the smoking remains exploded, showering the bearded pony with steaming bits of gore and bone. Hammersmith blinked, then picked a curved bit of skull out of his beard. "You bloody blazing son of a bitch," he said as he scraped the gore off his face. "You just had to explode one last *bloody* time, didn't you?" Together, the Reapers walked out of the smoking tomb.

oooOOOooo

"He lived. They lived," I said as I pulled myself out of my blank's mind. Bastard looked over, vaguely baffled, but Scotch snapped her head around at me, her eyes full of wild hope. Immediately I

stared at her, my smile fading and with it I watched her crumple anew. "Not..." The light died in her blue eyes as she slumped. "I'm sorry, Scotch."

"I just thought... since you and Glory survived so many times... maybe..." Scotch murmured hollowly.

I carefully moved over to her couch and put a wing around her. "I'm sorry," I repeated, not knowing what else to say. "I meant some other ponies. They killed all three bunkers... but... I thought..." I shook my head. "I wasn't thinking..."

The young mare turned from me. "It's just... it's Mom all over again. I wasn't there when she died. The Overmare ordered her recycled before they told me she was dead. I just... I just went home, and Rivets was there telling me I was getting moved to C shift. It was like she never existed in the first place."

"She did, Scotch. And I know she'd be proud of you. P-21 was," I said as I gave her a little hug with my wing.

"I wish it hurt. I don't feel anything. Like the feely part in me is broken or something," she said as she pressed her cheek against the window behind her seat. "It's not fair. You came back two times... three?"

"I've kinda lost track myself," I replied with a sad smile. "I wish they all could."

"He should get to come back once," she said, and then the young mare leaned over and pressed her face to my shoulder. "I want him back," she sobbed loudly as I held her in my hooves. I nuzzled the top of her head, fighting to keep myself together. I had to keep it together. I couldn't fall apart now, couldn't afford to slip onto that mattress and wallow in grief. Maybe it was Luna, or maybe it was me, but I only let a few tears slip down my cheeks and gave a snotty sniff before I beat back that terrible welling of emotion inside me. But Scotch, at least, could weep. I envied her that.

I glanced over at Bastard, glaring at him, challenging him to make one dismissive snort or snide smirk. All he did was blow a stream of smoke and look away from us and out the window at the approaching planet.

When Scotch calmed, she rubbed her snotty nose and bloodshot eyes and errantly blew the former in my wing. Cognitum's fancy schmancy rocket had gravity, unlike the other one, preventing snot meteors from floating all over the place. My mane stood up on end... but hey, I could live with a little snot. "Sorry," she said, wiping her muzzle on the back of her foreleg.

"Oh, that's alright," I answered lightly, "I was due." I wiped the wing off on the velvet upholstery, trying to keep my disgust from showing. Yeech! It wouldn't come off! What was up her muzzle, a glue factory? Finally, I managed to get it off, but I left a half dozen or so small white feathers adhered to the seat. Scotch Tape gave a little smile, but it came nowhere near her eyes. Bastard just shook his head with mute disapproval. "What! It's sticky! I don't know how Glor—" I stopped as my mental workings went 'clunk'.

Scotch Tape came immediately to my rescue, asking, "Did you say they took out the bunkers? Isn't that good?" Her eyes were still wet with tears, but she was clearly trying to be brave.

I gave mental thanks to my fellow 'Don't Think About It Club' member. "It... it means no more reinforcements. He's still got thousands of troops, but now that's all he has." It was still more than we had defenders. Way more. "He also has this great big storm thingy over the Skyport. It looks like a tornado with a face."

"A Tempest?" Bastard blurted in alarm. "Where the hell did he get one of those?" Scotch Tape and I shared a flat look, then simultaneously turned to him, brows arched. He colored a little. "I banged a zebra mare once on a semi regular basis a long time ago. Leave me alone."

We again shared a look and shook our heads. "Give us a little more than that," I prompted. "What is it?"

"A zebra weather control fetish with an air elemental spirit stuck inside it, usually in a bad mood. They were supposed to be the next step in superweapons. Put them on a missile and unleash them to rampage all over pony lands like megaspells. Think a constant, sapient balefire bomb."

I'd much rather think of almost anything else. I'd seen two balefire bombs way too close for my comfort. Also, that wasn't what I'd meant. "How do I beat it?" I asked.

"With difficulty. I have no idea, really. Xulu only knew because she was a shaman, and she only knew because the spirits were terrified of what was happening during the war," he answered with a shrug, then stabbed a hoof at me. "And that's it. Don't ask me more than that. I'm boring. I'm plain. I'm just a hitpony who gets paid to put bullets in people. Got it?" He stabbed the lit end of the cigarette at me with a note of alarm in his voice. "I am not a hero. Not special. Not interesting. Understand?"

Now I had something to distract me. "Well, I don't know. Now I have all kinds of questions about how a hitpony and a shaman ended up together." I glanced at my blank body. There were all kinds of things I needed to check, but I also needed this. What if I jumped in and saw Homage die? Or Charity? After feeling Candlewick's burned body, even I needed a moment or two.

He clenched his jaw, pushing his glasses up and looking out the window. "Come on. Please?" Scotch Tape asked.

"No," he said sharply, scowling at the young mare. "Look, not everyone has a great big story behind them. So just live with that, because I'm not saying more."

I rubbed my nose. "I don't know. Knowing my talent for gathering weird people, you're probably two centuries old after escaping a M.o.M. stasis spell because you were caught trying to assassinate Twilight Sparkle for the O.I.A." He stared at me for several seconds, and I grinned. "I'm right on one of them, aren't I?"

"No. You just must have known some pretty freaky people." The reply wiped the grin from my face.

I had known a lot of exceptional people, but also plenty who hadn't been. And some who might have seemed not-so-exceptional who had been more than I could have imagined. "Guess I do," I muttered, my momentary elation smashing back down to reality.

"And a lot of them tend to die," he continued flatly, making me turn my face from him as I gritted my teeth, fighting to keep myself together. "No thanks. I'm glad I'm alive, but I don't want to follow you around. That's just... too dangerous." He turned away on his seat.

"That Bastard," Scotch Tape muttered, the young mare glowering at his back, then up at me. I kept trying to keep focused, but thoughts and memories kept rolling through my head. P-21. Rampage. Lacunae. Discord... kinda. So many people had suffered and died to help me, taking bullets that should have finished me off. Scoodle had merely been the first. How many others had died, or were dying, because of me? "Blackjack?" Scotch Tape asked in alarm. Dusty Trails. Big Daddy. Charm hadn't died, but had come close. Silver Spoon. If I hadn't used her, she'd still have been alive in the boneyard... it was my fault. It was all my fault. Scotch Tape's eyes went wide as things started going black. "Blackjack!" she cried out. Dealer... he'd died so perfunctorily I'd barely noticed and hadn't thought of it till

now! Slaves killed in Fallen Arch. Reapers killed by Rangers. Rangers by Reapers. My sister! My stable! I couldn't stop it! Couldn't stop it! Stop! Stop! Stop! Stop!

"Breathe!" Scotch Tape yelled in my face, the word sounding like it was coming from underwater as the rocket's interior faded to black. Finally, it all stopped.

* * *

When I came to, I was still in the rocket, with my head throbbing and feeling... on the mattress. I could hear Scotch Tape and Bastard arguing in the distance. Next to me was my blank body. I clenched my eyes closed, pressing my face into the padding of the chair. I wanted my old rocket back, funky smell and all. I wanted to go back to Star House with my friends. To 99! To Canterlot!

I didn't want to think about what had happened. It'd been ages since I'd had an attack like that, and as I thought about it, guilt roared at me to suck it up and deal. There was too much riding on this! Too many still counting on me. Too many who'd died for me! What kind of scum was I to lie here like this, feeling overwhelmed and wanting nothing more than to retreat to when my life had been whole and simple and so much easier to face? I crushed myself into that mattress, and piled more mattresses atop me, wanting to be mashed to oblivion.

I levitated my old body to me and embraced it, pressing my horn to my old brow. I had to hide. Take a disguise. Go away till I was safe and in control and could do what everyone demanded I do. I couldn't be in charge of Equestria right now. I couldn't save the Wasteland now. I didn't want this. Anything but this. So I touched my horn and let everything swirl away, picking a pool and disappearing inside.

oooOOOooo

The defense was in shambles, but it persisted. The Rainbow Dash Skyport had become a hot point. Brood pushed along the ground while winds whipped the defenders along the fortified walls. Overhead, the Tempest roared continuously as three Raptors wheeled and banked. Their plasma cannons seemed woefully ineffective as they struggled to avoid two lesser vortices that the Tempest swung like lightning-clawed limbs. One of the three had suffered terribly, trailing smoke and limping away as the Tempest howled and flailed at the other two.

"Wow. Feels just like the old days," Rainbow Dash croaked as she landed in the middle of the Skyport. She darted in, silent as a ghost as she made her way to the command center... but it was a wreck. Something had exploded in there, and I couldn't help but imagine a Brood unicorn teleporting in with a bomb and out with Goldenblood. She raced outside, where teams of unarmed ponies clustered around the main terminal, flapping their wings furiously as they clutched whatever they could.

"Keep flapping!" a soldier bellowed at the civilians. "We've got to keep up a counterclockwise spin or that thing is going to suck the roof right off the building!"

Rainbow Dash raced up to the armored pegasus. "Where is General Storm Chaser?"

"Who the fuck are you?" the soldier asked in shock, looking at her in bafflement. Of course, he must not know the purple power armor with flowy cape.

"Where is General Storm Chaser, Private?" Rainbow Dash barked in the precise tone to make the blue stallion stiffen up. "Report!"

He instantly saluted. "Ma'am, she relocated to the *Castellanus's* radio room when our command center was destroyed. Chains of command have broken down all over the valley, and we're just trying to

keep things together here. The Brood have made a big push over the last ten minutes for some reason, and that Tempest is tying up all our air support! We're grounded over almost half the valley."

Rainbow peered up at the three. "I see the *Cyclone*, the *Sleet*, and the *Rampage*. Where're *Blizzard* and *Sirocco*?"

"No idea, ma'am. Probably bolted. I've got my orders to try and counteract that wind, but we're barely making a dent," he said over the gale.

"No surprise. A Tempest can generate ten thousand wingpower without breaking a sweat. Damned megafetish," she said before turning and running towards the downed Raptor beside the terminal. "Sometimes, Fluttershy, I really wish you'd have talked to us before making your damned megaspell matrix. Frigging Goldenblood..." she muttered as she raced towards the machine. The propellers along the top were turning faster and faster. "She can't be thinking of taking this thing into the air now. It's not even skyworthy in a calm!"

She must have cloaked, because she slipped right between the two sentries at the gate. The *Castellanus* lived once more, her interior illuminated sporadically by various flickering light sources as her deck groaned and moaned underneath her. Pegasus engineers worked furiously to bang away at the mechanisms while others were taking some boxes on and removing others. More than once, the guards and workers gave a double look, as if catching a glimpse of a ripple of cloaked cloak, but they all rushed back to their work, too busy to start chasing ghosts.

"Get those pumps working!" a familiar voice yelled. Chicanery stood in a rumpled suit that looked like it hadn't been cleaned in weeks, an oversized helmet perched on his head, next to a hole in the floor plates. "No, no! If the breaker's no good, then it's no good. Don't electrocute yourself trying to get it in." He popped his head up and started at the sight of the cloaked blur, then reached for a boxy, battered beam pistol and pointed it right at her, jaw working.

"The safety is on," Rainbow said as she decloaked, and at her appearance he relaxed a little. "Good eyes, though, Chicanery. What are you doing here?"

He rolled his eyes. "I've asked myself that ever since the skies blew up," he said after holstering the gun. "It was a choice between helping here or cowering in the terminal waiting to be made, you know, terminal." He turned and peered down the hole. "No! Nevermind who I'm talking to. If you can't get that pump powered directly, then wire it to a spark battery. We only need it for a few minutes!" He returned his pale eyes back to her. "While video production is more my thing, I spent two years working as an electrical rigger for lots of propaganda projects. Lighting. Sound system. Stuff like that."

"I'm looking for Storm Chaser? Bridge?" she asked with a toss of her head.

"CIC. Flight bridge is too thrashed. But I don't understand why she wants us to get this thing fixed for fifteen minutes of flying. We're going to need more than that, aren't we?" Chicanery asked with a worried frown.

"Not if she's doing what I think she's doing," Rainbow Dash said as she peered down the hall. "Listen. Do me a favor and hang around outside the bridge for a few minutes, okay? If the ship takes off, get out an emergency hatch, but I might need some help."

"Um, sure," Chicanery said with a worried frown, then leaned over and shouted down, "Look, when you get that pump going, go talk to Calliope outside. He's probably got more things for you to do."

They walked quickly along a hall, with Rainbow Dash gesturing with a wing for him to hang back. In the bridge, a number of cables ran to a terminal in front of the captain's chair. It was also filled up with dozens and dozens of boxes and crates. The gray mare sat in the seat, typing on the terminal as others worked around her. She looked like hell, her uniform stained and splashed with blood and her mane out

of its normally neat bun. "That's it. I have attitude control now," Storm Chaser shouted at an engineer over the rumble. "The reactor's already starting to overheat," she then muttered as she stared at the screen and hit a button. "Everypony out," her voice boomed over the intercom. "You have two minutes to get your feathers off this ship!"

"Ma'am! We don't have the control uplink established yet. It'll take a few more minutes!" one of the engineers called out. Rainbow Dash carefully opened up one of the crates and was greeted by the sight of dozens of glowing green orbs nestled in padding.

"I've got it. I'll get off the second it's live, and the *Rampage* can guide her straight down that thing's gullet," Storm Chaser said as she worked the controls. "Everypony out! Move!"

As the last engineer left the room, Rainbow Dash grabbed him from behind. "Wait a minute. Just stay right there." And then she turned and stepped inside. "So, when did you become skilled in information networks, General?"

"You," Storm Chaser answered, looking over at Rainbow Dash in shock. "Did you jam their network?"

"Homage was working on that when I left. I came as soon as I saw the Tempest. She got a report by alicorn that the bunkers are all down. Survivors are being evacuated to the Arena and University," Rainbow Dash said as she looked around at all the boxes. "You're turning the *Castellanus* into a fireship."

"That's the idea," the general replied tersely.

"Good idea," Rainbow Dash answered as she walked in front of the general. "And since you don't have the fifteen or twenty minutes it'd take you to set up the link, test it, and get off safely, you're going to fly the ship yourself, aren't you?"

"It's my responsibility," Storm Chaser said, keeping her eyes on the screen. "I can't order somepony else to do this."

"Big Daddy is dead," Rainbow Dash rasped. The gray pegasus lifted her head in alarm, staring at Rainbow. "The Reapers who survived gave Homage the news." She slowly approached the mare. "You're the only mare with any strategic leadership experience left. You are not flying this mission."

Storm Chaser didn't look at her. "I'm not sure my leadership is worth much anymore. I made a critical mistake and underestimated my enemy. We lost Goldenblood, and that Tempest has pinned me down here."

"So your plan met the enemy and fell apart. He learned a few tricks with unicorns, which he probably took from our alicorns, and pulled out a trump card. I saw what you had those boys doing. If you had a half dozen more Raptors, you could probably take out that Tempest without sacrificing one, too. You're doing what a general needs to do," Rainbow Dash replied.

"It's not good enough!" Storm Chaser cried out, tears on her cheeks. "Don't you understand? Ever since I came to this damned place, I haven't been a good enough leader. Too many mistakes. Too many things I allowed to get ahead of me. Ponies have died because I couldn't do what needed to be done! The Enclave failed. I failed." She shook her head, then bowed it. "These ponies don't need me. They need a leader like you."

"Me?" Rainbow Dash reached up and removed the hat and helmet, frowning down at Storm Chaser.

"You're a Ministry Mare," Storm Chaser said with a smile. "You're Rainbow Dash. If you stepped up, I know you could turn this around. You can do anything!" she said with a grin, taking Rainbow's hooves in hers.

"Yeah. I am pretty awesome," the ghoul replied as she leaned down towards her. "Except you're forgetting one thing: I failed too." Storm Chaser's smile faded as doubt entered her eyes. "I fucked up one end to the other. I gave my loyalty to Equestria, when I should have kept it with my friends." She glanced at the boxes. "I failed to really lead the pegasi when I was needed most. Ran away instead. I failed and I died... and I failed at that, too." She sighed and brushed back her hoof, shedding a few strands of mane. "These ponies don't need a leader from the past. They go with me, they're headed in the wrong direction. They need a leader who can carry them forward. Somepony they know and trust."

Storm Chaser closed her eyes. "I'm not sure I can save them."

"Maybe you can't. We're outnumbered twenty to one. We've cut off their reinforcements, but there're still a whole lot of enemies left. And if we don't have somepony pulling things together and telling people what to do, we're not going to get anything done." She slipped the helmet onto her hoof. "And because we're running out of time and I really don't want to argue—"

Rainbow brought the helmet around, striking Storm Chaser in the temple and staggering her in her seat. The mare wasn't quite knocked out, but she was dazed. "Chicanery, come quick. You've got some duct tape, right?"

The white pegasus trotted back in, his eyes wide. "It's standard issue for engineers. Why?" he said as he pulled out the roll. Rainbow Dash seized it, looped it round one hoof, and tore off strips with her teeth, leaving bits of her wispy rainbow-hued mane in the adhesive, then wrapped it around Storm Chaser's hooves and covered her mouth. By the time the mare had gathered her wits enough to start resisting, Rainbow was finishing taping her wingtips together behind her back. Chicanery watched it all with a hapless expression. "Oh, I am so dead."

"Eh, could be worse," Rainbow replied as she dumped Storm Chaser across his back. She undid the clasps of her armor and pulled herself out of it, then piled armor, hat, helmet, and cape on top of the glaring general. "Get her out of here. I'll fly this mission. There's never been a better flier in the skies than me, Raptor or not." She patted the heap on the straining stallion's back. "Get the suit to somepony who'll use it. Won't do for Mare Do Well to just disappear from the Wasteland."

"Grandma..." Chicanery began to say before Rainbow covered his mouth with a desiccated hoof.

"Reactor's heating up. Do awesomer than me," she said as she looked into the angry eyes of the General. "You can do it. Reestablish your lines. Use the Raptors for support once the skies are clear." She leaned in and rasped, "Don't give up. Not on yourself. Not on anypony." The general's angry eyes softened a little as Chicanery ran out of the room.

Rainbow Dash flew over and landed in the captain's chair. "Been a while..." she said as she stroked her hoof over the armrest and gave a little bounce, the chair squeaking. "Oh, yeah. This was the one with the squeaky seat." She reached over, tugging the terminal connection closer. On it was a diagram of the Raptor, much of it flashing bright red with alerts. "Okay. Activate interlocks," she said as she hit buttons on the armrest of the chair. "Dynatherms connected. Infracells are up..." She frowned and hit a different button a half dozen times. "Up! Get up, you damned infracells! Good." Then she pulled over a wheel set on the other arm. "Megathrusters are go!" she said as she pushed a tiny knob to the top of its track. The entire ship began to rumble, and she grinned. "Let's go, *Castellanus*!"

The Raptor groaned and shrieked, lurching back and forth as it clawed for altitude. "Come on! Up ship!" On the front viewscreen, the wall around the Skyport began to loom near, and Dash pulled back on the wheel hard. "Get your ass in the air!" she shouted as the *Castellanus* rose enough to just

barely clear the top, making the defenders stationed there dive for cover as the keel skimmed over them. The ship immediately dropped into the midst of the Brood besieging the Skyport. "Oh horseapples!" she shouted as twisted the wheel with her hooves while her wings pushed buttons and knobs. "Really wish I had time to brush up on this!" she yelled as the *Castellanus* twisted sideways. "Lift, damn you! I know you got one last good flight in you, *Castellanus*," she hissed.

The whole airship rumbled, the feed from the ventral cameras disappearing into static as the vessel ground a furrow through the attackers, the vibration nearly bucking Rainbow into the air as the seat squeaked wildly. Finally, the ship lurched back into the skies, the display for the keel flashing red. "Well, good thing I'm not planning on landing. I think I left the landing gear lodged in that one's ass."

The *Castellanus* rumbled, the vibrating deck plates making the crates of arcane high explosives jostle ominously and shift slowly across the deck. In front of her, on the main screen, she watched as the Tempest raked its claws along one of the other Raptors, the lightning blasting furrows along its armor, shearing off one of the propellers that whirled madly atop the vessel, and sending it soaring off into the wild blue yonder. "Hang on, guys. I'm coming," Rainbow said as her mane fell out around her lap like snow. "Figure it's about time I caught up with you girls," she murmured with a small smile.

"Come on, Dashie," Rainbow Dash said to herself in a ghoulish imitation of Pinkie's voice. "It'll be fun! We'll all have our own ministries. I'll be the ministry of parties!" "But Pinkie, I'm already in the air guard," she murmured in her normal voice as the ship rattled and hummed around her.

Back in the squeaky imitation of her friend, she continued, "But think about it, Dashie, you could be the Ministry of... um... Flying? Or weather? Or... just being awesome! You'll be the Ministry of Awesome, and I'll be the Ministry of Fun, because I'm going to make sure everypony has so much fun!" She slumped in her seat, closing her eyes. "Wasn't as much fun as we thought, was it, Pinkie?" A tiny pink pony inside her wept and shook her head.

The ship howled as she looked up, the Tempest's enormous scowling face turning towards the new enemy. She jerked the wheel hard, her wings flipping the knobs and dials. "Could really use a bridge crew right now!" she shouted as the ship suddenly rolled to the side, the crackling claws sweeping past it with a noise like a thousand buzzing hornets ripping the hull. A momentary weightlessness lifted her from the seat as she snapped the wheel forward, and the heavy crates of munitions thumped ominously.

"Should have been focused on the rest of you girls. Shoulda stopped Fluttershy from making those damned spells. Shoulda pinned Pinkie down till she got help. Shoulda made Twilight pull her head out of her research notes," she grunted as the *Castellanus* corkscrewed up past the face of the Tempest. Within its mouth was a single glowing star around which the gale whirled. "All my fault. I was too busy fighting and having fun and not taking care of all of you!" she shouted over the growing rumbles as the ship leveled out. She flipped a switch and shouted, "This is the *Castellanus*. I don't know if you can hear me, but the Tempest's talisman is located inside the mouth. Take a shot while it's focused on me. *Castellanus*—" The ship jerked as something exploded below decks, setting off an alarm and slamming Rainbow's head into the monitor. Black, tarlike ichor dripped down between her brows as she focused at the screen, bringing the *Castellanus*'s nose in line with the Tempest's mouth. "Hold it together just a little longer, you glorious old bird. Hold it together."

The ship seemed incapable of slowing as it rocketed towards the Tempest. The enormous sentient twister spread its whirling arms wide in preparation to rip the ship from the skies. "I remember when you came off the lines. EAF-009. First Raptor rigged for command. Earth pony engineering, unicorn magic, and pegasus cloudcraft working together. Wish it could have been for something that didn't kill... but you're a damned fine old ship, *Castellanus*. We're going to get inside that thing and blow it all to hell. Just like the old days..."

Smoke and steam were filling the bridge as the ship rumbled and the crates shifted and wandered over the deck plates. Rainbow's left wing reached into a compartment and drew a plasma pistol, pointing it at one of the crates of balefire eggs. "You were wrong, Lightning Dust. I wasn't ever ashamed of the pegasi. We did what we had to do. I just wish we'd done something else. I hope we can show everypony that pegasi can be trusted to work the skies again. We can... I know we can..." she said as her eyes narrowed and her hooves tightened on the shaking wheel.

The Tempest's claw swept in from the left, and she pulled the wheel up at the last second, curling over the crackling energy. "Too slow..." The other claw slashed in from the right, and she dove beneath it, screaming propellers tearing into the cloudy limb as it passed under. "Still too slow!" As she raced for its mouth, the surface of the Tempest suddenly flashed, and a third limb erupted from under the maw, reaching straight for the bow of the Raptor. But just as fast as the claw emerged, Rainbow Dash twisted the wheel, and the claw ripped past, shredding the ship's hull but not stopping its advance. "Hah. Didn't know I've seen that trick before, did you?" she crowed as her wings tightened on the trigger.

Then the open maw, with the Tempest talisman within, disappeared, and Rainbow blinked as she stared at a solid whirling wall. "Haven't seen that trick..."

The *Castellanus* plunged into the wall of the tornado. Instantly, everything in the bridge was slammed to the right, and Rainbow struggled to keep her grip as the *Castellanus* was swept around and around. The viewscreens offered nothing but a nauseating display of the world tumbling around and around, over and over. Crates, boxes, and bombs went thrashing around her as the whole ship tumbled up the cloud wall, one metal ammo crate smashing one of Rainbow's wings with a sound like splintering kindling. More metal smashed into her, and it was a miracle nothing went off. Or maybe just good firing safeties. Did a missile explode if you dropped it?

With a final shriek of metal and wind, the ship was ejected from the whirling storm and sent flipping end over end out into the air. Despite it whirling in ways that made me want to puke, Rainbow managed to stabilize the ship against all odds. The ordinance stopped bouncing off the walls and ceiling and settled to rolling around the floor. Rainbow Dash curled up against the wheel, one foreleg studded with her own bones jutting from the mottled blue-gray hide. One of the pegasus's eyes didn't work, and something thick and cold ran down her cheek. The terminal before her showed every section of the Raptor flashing red. Alarms blared on every deck as smoke swirled about her. Only two viewscreens remained active, and in one she could make out the Tempest with a corkscrew-like trail of black smoke running around it. She clenched her eye shut. "Come on. Just... one... more... stunt..."

She hugged the wheel to her chest and pulled back, groaning as the controls fought her, and the *Castellanus* responded with a slow, juddering motion. The vibration of the ship took on a deeper, more visceral resonance as the ship began to tear itself apart. The *Castellanus* spiraled up and up, shaking and smoking. The skies dimmed as the Wasteland and valley below became a smoke-veiled, bloody eye. In the dim distance, she could see the blue glow of Tom near the sun, and she smiled. "Let's show them what a Ministry Mare can do."

And she lunged forward, and the *Castellanus* responded. The deep groan was replaced by a growing whine as it started to dive. The pitch increased as the Hoof began to rapidly fill the viewscreen, and she centered the nose on the whirling vortex. Something on the ship exploded, the controls lurching against her broken body, but she kept the wheel locked in a death grip. Flames blew out a control panel beside her, but she didn't take her eye off the tiny glowing mote in the heart of the Tempest.

"Hold it together!" she said as the ordinance shifted back towards the wall behind her, the speed of the dive increasing faster and faster as she battled to keep control. "Just a few more seconds!"

The *Castellanus* disappeared into the whirling apex of the tornado and dove down the heart. It was impossible to tell if the winds were tearing the propellers and controls away or if they were tearing off under their own power. Then a colossal crunch rang through the Raptor, accompanied by screaming

metal. Suddenly the front of the bridge exploded inwards towards her and the hoof-sized glowing talisman imbedded itself in the center of the viewscreen. The diamond talisman seemed to possess a glowing eye that bulged as it stared up at Rainbow Dash and the layer of ordinance pressed to the wall behind her. On the last remaining screen, the ground raced up to meet her.

The Ministry Mare of Awesome grinned at the shrieking talisman and called out, "I call this one the Rainbow—"

oooOOOooo

The pool in my blank's mind exploded in a rainbow-colored flash. She was gone, and in the back of my mind, six tiny speechless ponies held each other, a tiny pink pony and yellow pegasus sobbing against each other while three others comforted a tiny, stunned, blue pegasus. Then said pegasus cheered how awesome it was, and my brain got awkward. I did my best to shove them all out of my mind. Rainbow Dash had gone out as she'd wanted, helping others, saving Equestria. The only way it could have been better would have been if it'd been saving her friends.

I smiled in that great, empty void. "Thanks, Rainbow," I murmured. Going out like that wouldn't be half bad...

I needed to know more. Did she kill the Tempest? I sought another mind that could give me some answers and slipped inside.

oooOOOooo

"Ow. Ow. Ow." Every step from this mare trotting through the familiar halls of Stable 99 elicited an 'ow' as stabs of pain ran through her bandaged body. "Come on. Where are you?" Crumpets muttered as she limped along the maintenance halls. "How bloody hard is it to find a sodding great purple..." She rounded a corner and spotted Psalm sitting at a table in Atmospheric Maintenance Three. In three months, nopony had cleaned up the cards scattered around the table or the IOUs that were spotted with blood from when ponies had sheltered here from the crazy infected ponies. A few months hadn't erased the nightmare of two hundred years. "...turkey," she finished weakly.

Psalm sat at the table, staring down at the assembled sniper rifle on resting on it. Her purple eyes stayed locked on the matte black finish, the enormous scope the size of a hoof. Crumpets sat down outside the door, slumping against the doorframe a little. "Bit for your thoughts?"

The purple alicorn lifted her head to see Crumpets, then returned her gaze to the weapon. "You should be in bed."

"Sheets make me itchy. Actually, being trapped anywhere makes me itchy. Made life as a Steel Ranger a bleedin' slog. Always wanted to go on patrol just to stretch my bloody legs." She winced as she examined at her bandaged leg. "Now me legs really are bloody, and we're both stuck here while everypony else is gettin' stuck in." She paused and tilted her head. "But I'm guessin' that's not what's goin' on in that big pointy head of yours."

"I'm a coward," she muttered as she stared at the gun. "I should be out there helping, but I'm too..." She clenched her eyes shut. "Scared..."

"Scared of what?" Crumpets said as she limped over to sit beside her. "I've never been a fan o' hatin' on fear in general. Like, there's these things back in Trottingham called water goblins. Look like a ghoulish crossed with a fish. If you lean too far out from the fanboat, they'll pop right out of the water and chew your bloody face off. Scare me shitless." She waited for a reply. "Am I chattin' to meself here or what? I don't want to do a bloody interrogation, but a response would be nice."

Psalm looked at her, and the corner of her lip curled. "You can barely walk."

Crumpet patted her shoulder. "Aye. And many a foolish hornhead underestimated an earth pony's capability to thump somepony actin' like a leatherhead."

The purple eyes fell again. "I'm afraid of turning back into what I was. A murderer." She rubbed her face with a wing. "I don't want to be that again."

Crumpets frowned. "You're *still* stuck on that rubbish?"

The alicorn didn't answer for several long seconds. "I don't know anymore. I'm not sure of anything. Once, I was completely sure. So certain that I... I made horrible mistakes. Now I don't trust myself to do the right thing." She clenched her eyes shut, then hissed, "I hate this gun. I hate that it still exists. It's like a part of me that I can't get rid of! It reminds me of... so many people I killed." She grabbed it with her magic, pressed the butt against the floor, and started to lean her weight against it. "I want to destroy it forever!" Then she paused, and released it. "But... I could help people I care about... if I was just... if I could just..."

"Kill again?" Crumpets suggested in an arch tone. "You really still think what we do is murder?" Psalm gave a tiny nod, and Crumpets let out a sigh. "Bloody hell, only one thing for it then..."

Then she smashed her hoof right into the purple alicorn's face. The blow not only nearly sent Crumpets down but floored Psalm. Crumpets lifted herself to her hooves, standing over the dazed alicorn as she pulled herself together. "Ow. Bloody nora. Now, let me lay this bollocks to rest right now. Was Big Macintosh a murderer?" Psalm stared at her for several seconds, then shook her head. "What about the rest of your squad way back when?" A shorter wait, then another reluctant shake of her head. "Is Blackjack a murderer?" I was glad to see another tiny shake of her head. "How about me?" Now a frown of comprehension as she furrowed her brows.

"No. None of you are... were..." she said as she glanced up at the bandaged mare. "But... I..."

"You... might have been," Crumpets said evenly. "I don't know what you got up to with the O.I.A., but it doesn't sound anything like what we do. Soldiers don't want to kill. Not good ones, anyway. We do what we have to do, and sometimes that involves killing people trying to kill us." Crumpets stared down as Psalm closed her eyes, tears on her cheeks. "That's not it, though, is it? All this 'not wanting to be a murderer' shite... that's not what's really bothering you." Psalm didn't answer, and Crumpets sighed. "It's him innit. That big sparklin' moron."

Psalm immediately lifted her head. "He is not a moron! He's good and noble and gentlestalliony and..." She trailed off again, averting her eyes.

"He fancies you, you know," Crumpets said with a small smile.

"He's too good for me. I don't deserve— ow!" Psalm yelped as she was kicked by the bandaged mare. "What was that for?"

"Because it seems to be the only way to get through to ginormous pillocks like you two," Crumpets replied. "Yeah, he's a good stallion, and he likes you. Accept your good fortune and don't think about what you deserve, you big bloody turkey."

"He doesn't like me. He likes... her," Psalm murmured as she sat up. "He likes Lacunae."

"And you're not her. I mean, she was a moanin' misery like you, but she got off her arse and did something to help. Even still, he likes you too. You got that whole 'alicorn mare of good breeding' vibe going that's right up his alley. And you can fight. And you care. That matters more to him than anything," Crumpets said as she jabbed Psalm's chest. "What he likes is what's in here. And if it don't work out, at

least you tried.” Crumpets took a deep breath. “But you definitely ain’t worthy of ‘im if you sit and sulk in here while he dies out there!”

Psalm stared at Penance for the longest time, then bowed her head. “Luna wasn’t able to forgive me before she died...”

Crumpets put her hoof on Psalm’s mane. “The only forgiveness you really need is from ponies who love you, and yourself. So, what do you say? Are you a soldier who is ready to help her friends, or an ex-murderer who cares about nothing else than hiding from her own conscience?”

Psalm regarded Crumpets and then gave a little smile. “Okay.”

Crumpets grinned. “Are you sure? ‘Cause I could give you another lump or two.” Psalm blinked and rapidly shook her head. “I really wouldn’t mind.” Now Psalm gave Crumpets a somewhat annoyed glare back. “That’s the ticket. Now let’s get out of here!”

The alicorn balked. “But you’re wounded! You need to stay here until they can heal you some more. The next batch of potion should be ready in a day or two.”

“Buck that. If that nurse offers to give me one more ‘oral physical’, I’m going to scream. I don’t mind the attention, but not in the middle of the medical bay!” she said, her cheeks burning. “Besides, Rangers don’t hang out in medical when there’s a fight going on.”

“Where should we go?” Psalm said.

“The rally point was Megamart,” Crumpets replied. “Let’s go. They should have a healing potion or five there, too.”

“Shouldn’t we get your power armor?”

“No. If we get anywhere near medical, I just know Nurse Sexual Healing will try and give me a sponge bath. With her tongue. In front of everypony.” She gave a little shudder. “And she wasn’t even a Stable 99 survivor. I think there’s just some kind of perverted aura to this place or something.”

Psalm smiled and pulled Crumpets close, lifted Penance and slipped it under her wing, and then teleported—

Straight into hell.

The roof overhead was mostly gone, with just a thin ring of rooftop along the edges; Steel Rangers and Reapers were perched on it and firing down at the assaulting Brood outside. The rows of formerly-orderly stacked scrap were now filled with wounded ponies. Pegasi, grounded by the absolute fury of gunfire saturating the air, remained perched out of harm’s way. A gaunt old stallion walked along the rows with three more unicorns and a half dozen earth pony medics applying healing spells and helping with the injured. In the middle of the store, now on the ground, surrounded by walls of sandbags, and firing in high arcs over the walls, Gun boomed again and again, the noise barely blunted by the makeshift bunker.

“Oh, bugger me,” Crumpets murmured in shock. “I didn’t know it was this bad!” Then she hobbled up to the old unicorn medic. “I need healing. Now!”

“They all need healing, young missy! You’ll have to wait your—” He was cut off as she grabbed him by the head and glared into his eyes. “Uh... I think I can squeeze out a little more healing magic before my horn pops off. Hold still.”

As the cool magic washed through Crumpets’s wounds, Psalm went through the wounded and collected ammunition and a few more weapons. “Where’s Star Paladin Strong—?” Crumpets started to

ask. Then wall of Megamart exploded and collapsed, screams and gunshots ringing out as Brood started to push in. "Nevermind."

"Fall back!" a familiar voice bellowed over the fury. "The innocents are already evacuated. Fall back to the Arena! I'll buy you time!" In the breach in the wall, a huge stallion rose up, fighting the Brood with shattering blows of his armored hooves.

Crumpets rushed to Psalm. "Arm me! Quick!" she snapped.

"Hold still," the alicorn instructed, lifting her in a magic field, and then she wrapped Crumpets up in combat armor and strapped on a battle saddle with a single scoped markspoon rifle. "I hope this will do. I didn't have a chance to ask your preference."

"It's fine. Let's hurry before the idiot is overwhelmed!" Crumpets snatched a satchel of supplies from one of the earth ponies before racing after Psalm.

As Megamart started to evacuate, the two joined a faltering defense. Anypony who could carry things was hauling wounded and supplies out, some earth ponies all but covered in ammo boxes and weapons. The four ghouls crewing Gun kicked out the sandbags and depressed the barrel as Brood began to appear on the tops of the walls. The artillery roared, and the Brood disappeared as swiftly as they appeared, along with almost half the remaining wall.

As they raced towards the breach, the mares cut down any cyberzebra that climbed into view or unicorn that flashed into being around them. Psalm moved like a ballet dancer, swinging the rifle from one Brood to the next, the bullets tearing through eye sockets and out the back of skulls. And when one bullet didn't work, a second one would take the other eye. "Please, forgive me for being afraid," Psalm murmured between every shot. "Please, forgive me for being late. Forgive me for the blood on my hooves. Forgive me for being me."

"You have issues. You two are really made for each other," Crumpets muttered as she fired off round after round in Psalm's wake, protecting the alicorn's flank as they rushed towards the huge musclebound stallion. Half his armor had been blown from his magnificent marbled frame, but still he fought on, struggling against the horde. One stomp lobbed a rock into the air, and he kicked it with the force of a grenade right into a clump of cyberponies. A Brood unicorn appeared behind him, razor-sharp blade ready to tear out his spine, only for him to stomp a shockwave that erupted under the unicorn and knocked it straight into the air with a hoof-shaped spur of rock under it. Then he hooked a foreleg around the spur, ripped it from the ground, and flung it into the face of another Brood who was taking a bead on him. His magnificent body, even glazed in sweat and blood from a dozen scrapes, seemed to sparkle in the midst of the carnage.

Psalm rushed towards him. He spotted her, and his eyes were dragged away from his enemy as he gazed at her. They widened and softened as for a moment the battle was no more, and he stretched a hoof towards her.

Then his body jerked as a half dozen bullets tore into him. Psalm stared, frozen in place as he staggered, more rounds biting into him as he reeled back and then crumpled. His magnificent body no longer sparkled as it collapsed atop the mound in the breach.

"Damn it! Damn it! Fuckin' damn it!" Crumpets shouted as she rushed forward with Psalm. They reached him, and through the breach they could see dozens... hundreds... perhaps thousands of Brood moving towards the evacuating building.

Stronghoof looked up at the pair of them, his mustache speckled in blood. "My... love..." he murmured over the chaos before he went limp.

Psalm stared for what felt like an eternity, bullets whipping past them, catching her mane blowing in the wind and snatching feathers from her wings but miraculously missing her body. Then she turned towards the gap and let loose a howl that echoed from one corner of the battlefield to the other. "NO!"

Penance rose up on her left, and on her right, she lifted a weapon from a fallen defender. She shook the mortar dust off the tool, a few small pebbles that had lodged in it clattering to the ground, and pulled the trigger. The motor whirled for a moment, and then the minigun began to sing. Its tongue of flame reached out and sent a line of burning metal death at the approaching Brood while Penance cracked again and again. One unicorn attempted to teleport behind Psalm, but she seized the mare, blade and all, and hauled her in front of herself. A bullet blasted the cyberunicorn's brains out, and her body caught some of the rounds that poured in at Psalm. The alicorn made no attempt at summoning a shielding bubble, ignoring the bullets that got through to hit her. When the minigun ran dry, she drew two more rifles from her collection and continued to fire. Her magical focus and accuracy staggered the enemy as she protected herself with the mangled corpse until it was too shredded to do more than spatter her with blood.

Crumpets, meanwhile, tore pressure bandages from the satchel and pressed them to Stronghoof's wounds. "Mental. Both of you. Bloody, sodding, leatherbrained mental!" she shouted at him. "You're perfect for each other!"

Psalm didn't seem to register the words as she yanked over another Brood body for a shield and cycled its gun into her floating collection, then began building a wall of gore when the individual reinforced corpses were no good at protecting her. A unicorn attempted another teleport, this one with four frag grenades in tow. The stems were pulled, but Psalm grabbed the Brood in her hooves, magically clustered the grenades together, and shoved the unicorn and grenades against the wall, the former covering the latter. The explosion showered her in gore and metal, but she hardly broke stride as she returned to slaughtering any who approached the gap, the alicorn awash in the blood of her foes.

Crumpets finished packing off Stronghoof's injuries and getting a healing potion inside him, but that was all the satchel held. "Okay. He's stab—" She was interrupted by a hoofshattering boom as Gun exploded. The Brood weren't just trying to break through here anymore; while Psalm and Crumpets had been busy, three other holes had been blown in Megamart's walls, and they didn't have the alicorn defending them. "We've got to get out of here!"

Psalm was silent, the only answer coming from her guns, barking again and again, Penance's barrel sending out precise death as she tore more weapons from her enemies and used them as well. "Forgive me, Luna. Forgive me, Stronghoof. Forgive me, Big Macintosh," she muttered over and over again, in a trance, her eyes not even focused on the enemy before her as she slew them, her face streaked with tears as she repeated the words over and over again. Bullets bit into her from both directions now as the Brood who had breached the walls swarmed in behind her.

Crumpets, hit once or twice by errant shots, pulled herself in front of Psalm and shouted in her face, "Evac! We need to evac now! Now, you sodding dodo!" She struck Psalm in the face again, but the alicorn didn't stop fighting. "Damn it! Are you a soldier or a murderer?! Soldiers obey orders to pull back!" she screamed in Psalm's face.

Then a bullet thudded right into Crumpets's spine. Her entire body went numb as she slumped down Psalm's front. At last the purple alicorn glanced down at the two ponies at her feet, then she stared at Penance. "I'm... I'm..." she murmured as she bled. Then a Brood launched himself over the wall of corpses she'd laid, guns firing in a frantic effort to end her. Psalm's horn flared as she swung the gun with all her strength, smashing it across the Brood's face. The delicate talismans shattered as the scope's lenses smashed, the barrel breaking off where it met the frame of the gun. The spray of gems, metal, and blood seemed to hang in the air for an eternity. Then Psalm lifted the two ponies and curled her wings over both of them. Her horn flashed—

And then the three were dumped in a pile of mud. "Help!" Psalm shouted at the top of her lungs. "Please! They need help!" Hooves thundered towards them. "They need help. Please... save them..."

"We've got them. Let them go. I don't know where we're going to put them, but we'll find somewhere! Now let them go!"

And as Crumpets slipped into darkness, she muttered, "About time, you two great... big... dumb..."

oooOOOooo

This pool didn't wink out so much as fade away as I emerged from it. I'd gone on a rampage similar to hers and come back. I could only hope that when I met Psalm again, she'd be at peace with her decision. And another wonderful, unique, named weapon ruined! Why couldn't ponies take care of... a tiny orange pony stared flatly at me at my thought. Okay, so I might have ruined a gun or two... three... four... okay...

Of course, as a tiny purple unicorn pointed out, Psalm had ruined hers on *purpose*.

Stupid, smug brain ponies who called me on my shit.

Grrr... I studied the remaining glowing pools. There were maybe two dozen or so— minus one as it winked out before my eyes. My mind was getting dimmer by the second...

Okay, not helping. I moved to the next and slipped my mind inside.

oooOOOooo

I almost wished I hadn't.

Chapel was dying. Again.

The defenders were in a fight for their lives as the Brood advanced inexorably towards the stockade. They no longer simply allowed themselves to be blasted to pieces. Now they moved in shifts, one battalion pouring on suppressive fire while the other shuffled forward a few dozen yards, stopped, took cover on the ground, and began laying down fire so the first one could advance; then that one would gain ground and stop, and the cycle would repeat. The defenders, however, were clustered behind a shambled stockade of wood and scrap metal, much of it burning and blasted. The defenders who weren't shooting were screaming. Screaming for ammo. Screaming for help. Just plain screaming.

Flames now licked over the rooftops of the proud homes that had risen recently, filling the air with smoke as fire greedily consumed all the progress that Scotch Tape had authored. The toilets she had been so proud of now blazed like a pyre, collapsing slowly in on themselves. The post office roared, ablaze as the pre-war structure finally succumbed to the fate it had evaded two centuries prior. The refugee camp beside the river was a mass of panicked people with nowhere left to flee, and so now they fled to the last mad refuge before them, the gates of the Core.

And in the midst of it all, Charity wept. They were bitter tears, slow to shed. Charity never gave anything for free if she could help it, and so she gritted her teeth and focused on the clipboards in front of her as colts and fillies raced to her. "I need four heals and X!" one of the colts shouted.

"Take two boxes of each from the red cache! Tell them to stretch them out!" she said, pointing at some boxes. The colt nodded, the oversized combat helmet on his head wobbling, then rushed to the boxes, tossed two on his rump, and raced off. She pulled a pencil out from behind her ear, flipped to a page on the red clipboard, and made two tiny tally marks next to an icon of a Med-X syringe and a purple vial.

"I have six who need three-oh-eights!" one of the fillies yelled.

She flipped through the clipboards. "Take two ammo boxes from the green pile!" she yelled, flipping to another sheet and making another note.

The gray filly raced to the crates and a minute later shouted, "There are no three-oh-eights!"

Charity looked down at the list, then over at her. "There should be at least twenty!"

"Well, there's not!" she yelled back.

Charity raced to the stack, her eyes scanning the boxes of ammo. She picked up a box between her hooves, gave it a shake, and tossed it aside. "Damn..." Five more. "Damn!" She threw empty ammo crates over her shoulder, setting aside a few that were still full of bullets. Most of the pile, though, was of empty ammo boxes. "Damn it! Who's been taking the three-oh-eights?" she screamed out into the roaring battle. "There's supposed to be a fucking system!"

"What do you want me to do about it?" the filly asked, wide-eyed.

She turned to the stacks, glaring at the boxes of ammo with numbers squiggled on them in chalk. "We still have five-five-six mils, right? Grab six varmint rifles and two boxes of five-five-six and get it back to them!"

"Varmint rifles?" she asked, as if she hadn't heard her right.

"It's that or frigging throwing our turds at them! Now get moving before I dock your hazard pay!" she barked, shoving her toward boxes of arms as she scribbled on a clipboard levitated in front of her with a pencil in her mouth.

A second later, there was a loud pop, and the clipboard, its center suddenly bulging towards her, flew into her face and snapped her nose. She bit her pencil in half from the blow and fell back, holding her bleeding muzzle with her eyes clenched shut in pain.

When she opened them, the boxes of arms and ammunition were splinters, and all that remained of the filly was a bloody lump a few feet away from the crater where they'd been. The other foals who were waiting for supplies had scattered out of sight in the smoke.

Charity shook as she sat there, staring at the smoldering hole. Her whole body tingled as if it'd been electrocuted. Beside her, the clipboard rested face down, a smoking chunk of shrapnel embedded in its back. As the shock faded, she became aware of other stinging grains imbedded in her hide, dripping blood as she struggled to speak. "Stupid... stupid..." she said, her voice tightening, and then she pointed a hoof at the bloody lump. "There's a fine for dying, you moron! You..." She sat down, lifting her head as tears streaked down her bloody cheeks, the taste of copper in her mouth.

It was coming apart. The defense. Her business. Her home. Her future. She'd been clever. She'd be careful. She'd taken care of her people. Invested in infrastructure. Was planning on diversifying with the increased trade. In five years, she'd buy out the Finders completely. In twenty, she'd be setting up armed stops where Wastelanders could buy arms, food, medicine, and a safe place to rest! "I was supposed to be a damned success!" she shouted, then coughed and choked on the blood.

Then she was slammed on her face as a stallion trampled her. He started grabbing ammo boxes and stuffing them into his saddlebags. "Hey! What the fuck do you think you're—" she started to shout before he kicked her in the face, flooring her. As she lay on her side, clutching her face, he rushed off, but he wasn't the last. More ponies were grabbing what remained in the stores and running off.

"Wudderu doin?" she asked thickly as she grabbed at the adults taking everything they could, only to be shoved away again and again. She drew her 5.56 pistol, but before she could fire, there was another blow to her head, and then someone bit down on her gun and snatched it away too. "Stup... Umn churge her..." she muttered weakly as she turned and looked at the stockade. But the stockade seemed barely defended at all anymore. With all the obscuring smoke in the air, it appeared only a few dozen foals remained, firing what they could and scrounging for ammo among the fallen, coming to each other for aid.

"Oh dear," croaked a voice as the dry, taut teal pegasus ghoult trotted to her. "This won't do at all. I should call the Royal Guard. Beating up a filly! Have they no shame?" Harpica drew out a discolored teal handkerchief and began to clean Charity's muzzle. "There there. Once you're cleaned up, we'll see Master Vanity. He's quite nice and will see to it your parents are notified."

Charity glared up at her, tears now trickling from her eyes. Then she gritted her teeth, hissing as she suppressed the urge to snap at the poor deluded ghoult. Behind the teal ghoult, Charity could see ponies streaming over the bridge and into the Core, racing for the only protection that remained. Then she bowed her head. "You should dake your kids up to the bountains, Miss Harpica. Show them dhe reservoir. I'b sure they'd enjoy it."

"Oh, I couldn't do that, darling. You need help," she said as her filmy eyes turned towards the advancing Brood. "You know, I think those fellows are up to no good. Someone really should tell them to behave."

"Please, Miss Harpica. Goh. I'm sure dhe guard will be here soon. I bow your foals probably would love a little trib to dhe lake, after being coobed up for so long," Charity said with a crooked smile.

"Well, if you're sure." She stomped her hoof. "Children! Chil... children..." She turned back, her eyes focused on Charity, and a look of growing horror covered her face. "Oh, no. This... this is the real one, isn't it?"

"Im sowirrie. I dust wadded... rou should go... prease..." Charity bowed her head and wept. "Noh churge. Jus goh."

"Shhhh..." She kissed Charity's brow with leathery lips. "It's alright." She straightened and frowned at where children fought for their home. "I wish this was that other place." She turned and started towards the stockade.

"Wudderyu gonna doh?" Charity asked thickly.

"What I've always done. What Master Vanity told me to do," she said softly, barely audible over the crackling flames and gunshots. "Take care of little ponies."

Harpica launched herself into the air, winging her way towards the soldiers. "Dho..." Charity muttered, watching her and then starting to stagger after her. The filly coughed and snorted the sticky blood from her nostrils. "No." She ran faster, through the wisps of smoke that choked and burned her eyes, tears streaking the soot and blood. "No!" she cried out as she raced towards the stockade, following the pegasus pony trailing teal feathers that glimmered in the air before they were eaten by the hungry flames. "No! No no no no!" she screamed as she ran up the ramp to the top of the stockade, where dozens of young ponies stood firing at the approaching Brood alongside a few dozen adults who hadn't fled. Apparently some of the adults had stuck around after all. "No!" she yelled as she lunged after the ghoult, stretching a hoof out to her. "I can't afford your life!"

The mare paused and looked down at her with a gentle smile. "Go," she said, and then she flew out towards the Brood.

Harpica wasn't Rainbow Dash. She didn't streak like a blue thunderbolt, tearing apart Brood with her bare hooves, but inexplicably the Brood stopped firing. As one they tracked the lone, emaciated, desiccated mare, as if trying to figure out precisely what she was doing as she flew over them. "Charity?" asked a ghoul colt serving as a bipod for a living colt gunner. "What is Miss Harpica doing?"

"Trying to buy us time so we don't all die on this wall," Charity replied, gritting her teeth.

"Lucky," one of the mares murmured, a broken heart pendant dangling from her rifle. "You should get going. Let us buy your lives with our own." The blood red mare seemed positively pleased at that idea.

"What have I told you about that, Riproar?" another ghoul pegasus rasped. She was a sickly chartreuse with a flimsy blue and red mane and tail that were only bits of stubble. "We die when we die. We don't rush to it." She gazed at the stockade, then back at the dour mare. "What do you think? Can we fight here?"

"Maybe for five minutes. We should pull back to the city, Heartshine," she said, her eagerness transforming into dour resignation. "We can kill these Brood for hours with that choke point."

"No!" Charity snapped. "Blackjack said to stay out of the Core at all costs." She scanned the hillside, but the flank of the Brood was positioned to cut off any retreat towards Star House. Two dozen ghoul children might have made it. A hundred ponies, young and old, had no chance of evading detection. There was only one building which wasn't on fire: the chapel itself, its steeple rising up through the smoke. "There. We can go in there. It should hold enough."

"Oh, good," the beefy red mare said brightly. "We can die in ten minutes rather than five. Well, at least we won't have to travel far for the funeral. They have those thingies in churches, right?"

"Riproar," the ghoul said in a mildly reproachful voice. "You know better."

"Yeah, yeah..." She sighed, then turned and shouted, "Back to the building with the big pointy tower on the roof. Move it! Grab whatever ammo you can, but move!"

Heartshine nodded and pressed a button on her battered PipBuck. "Halfhearts, retreat to the chapel. Protect the little ones. The time to return to your other halves is not yet come," she ordered into the broadcaster, then hefted an oversized magical beam rifle to her shoulder. "Survive and fight. You can join those you've lost when the day is through."

But Charity wasn't running. She watched as Harpica flew over the heads of the Brood with odd little swooshes that might have been bombing runs if a pony had only a vague idea what a bombing run was supposed to be and was set on doing one without the explosives. Instead of lighting her up, though, they only took a smattering of potshots here and there, bullets biting off bits and pieces of the mare as she swooped back and forth. Maybe it was their interconnectedness, or maybe it was that they had no idea how to react to something like this, or perhaps the Legate was somewhere laughing his bloody stripes off at the ancient mare's deranged antics, but whatever the reason, she bought priceless seconds for the young ponies and Halfhearts to pull back from the wall.

"We've got to go," a gruff filly's voice said behind Charity. She opened her mouth to protest, and the powerful half-dragon Precious slipped out of the smoke, heaved Charity onto her back, and ran for the chapel.

"No! Damn it! Go back! I can't pay her back for this if she's dead!" Charity yelled as the dragon filly wrapped her long, scaly tail around Charity's neck to keep her from leaping off. "Let me go! I fucking hate owing ponies!"

Then the Brood must have registered what was happening on the wall, because there was a great crackle, and Harpica was simply gone. Dusty tatters, bone chips, and feathers drifted on the smoke as the Brood poured after the retreating defenders.

Unicorns blinked into place between Precious and the chapel, each with their silver blades and an accompanying trio of gun-wielding Brood. The dragon filly opened her mouth wide and spewed out a torrent of jade-green flame without even breaking stride. Bullets glanced off her scales, but one blade opened a shallow wound from shoulder to haunch. Precious whirled, her prehensile tail keeping Charity on her far side as she breathed another incinerating gout of fire. Still, she had only one mouth and had Charity to protect, and the unicorns were teleporting to flank the dragon filly. A bullet caught Precious in the knee, and both Precious and Charity fell to the ground, smoke swirling around them.

Then it cleared, and a trio of Brood aimed their assault carbines at Charity's face. Charity stared up, the back of her mind running a tally of all the debts she owed and was owed, despite the danger surrounding them, and finding her uncomfortably short at this moment. Even as she drew her twenty-two pistol, she knew it was futile. Still, these bastards couldn't afford her submission.

Then the air behind the Brood shimmered as four-legged things pounced. Jaws closed on the backs of necks, and augmented spines were ripped from the flesh they supported as cybernetic canines materialized from the haze of war. The augmented attack dogs worked with their own horribly efficient pack tactics, one pair seizing forelegs in their jaws while a third disemboweled the immobilized cyberzebra. As soon as they'd butchered one, they disappeared back into the smoke with shimmers of their cloaking talismans.

"What's going..." Charity began when a shadow loomed in the smoke, and then the veil parted to reveal a massive black-armored canine. "On?" The blood-smeared cyborg leaned down and sniffed at the filly. "Okay. Please don't eat us." Precious let out a long, threatening growl of pain. "Don't," Charity cautioned her. "I think they're... um... well... on our side." The large canine wagged her tail and let out a metallic chuffing noise. "Can you carry her?" She pointed through the choking smoke to where the chapel's spire poked up into view. "Take her there?" The dog gave a whine but wagged her tail again.

"I can walk!" Precious said, trying to take a step and collapsing. The canine scooped up Precious almost as neatly and easily as Precious had carried Charity. "This is ridiculous. We're only buying ourselves a few minutes at the most. Might as well have died at the wall. Less running."

"Shut up and let her save you. I'll be right behind you," Charity said. The canine leapt off in the direction of the chapel. Charity rose and took one look back at the home she'd made as it blazed. The numbers in the ledger in her head shifted. She was still in the red, but at least it was a little less than a few seconds ago. Now if only she could get some last-second improbable save like Blackjack managed when her rump was in the fire.

Then the Brood appeared, striding confidently out from the smoke all around them.

Dozens. Hundreds. They walked amidst the burning buildings like a legion of shadows. Precious had been right. Running was just delaying the inevitable, but what else could she do? Harpica had bought them all a few invaluable moments. How much time could one filly buy, and what would it be worth to all those who had taken refuge in the chapel?

Maybe that'd finally put her in the black?

"Hey, you! All of you!" Charity bellowed at the approaching Brood. "You owe the Crusaders and associated inhabitants of this community damages for bodily, material, and emotional harm! I'm going to sue the stripes off your asses!" The Brood didn't fire, though there were more than enough guns on her to turn her to red foam. "You hear me! I'm gonna sue you so hard your grandchildren are gonna need a

mortgage to buy a box of Abronco Detergent!” She slumped a little and muttered, “Damn it. How does Blackjack make it look so easy?”

As one, the Brood suddenly halted, the red glow of their eyes matched by the searing glare of Chapel burning around them. Then they did something truly monstrous.

They laughed.

A thousand armed zebras laughing in perfect unison.

“Shoo, little girl,” one Brood said.

“Run along,” another continued in an identical tone.

“Tell the others to flee,” a third murmured as they all grinned at her.

“Back to their fortress.”

“Their sanctuary.”

“Their only hope.”

Charity gaped at them all. “You... you want us in the Core?”

“Oh yes,” a number of them said as one. “We need more children. Children always worked wonders for me when prompting powerful fools to action.”

“Been so very hard not to eliminate you all. But time is passing. So go,” one said with an imperious gesture at the city. “It won’t be long now.”

Charity licked her lips but didn’t take her eyes off the soldiers as the ground began to vibrate under her hooves. “I’d rather die.”

The smiles disappeared just as simultaneously as they had spoken. “So be it,” they said as a hundred guns focused on her at once. But the shaking was increasing, accompanied by a growing rumble.

Charity peered around, asking in alarm. “What the hay is going on? What are you doing?”

But whatever it was, they didn’t seem to have a clue either. The Brood looked around the smoky battlefield as the rumbling and screeching reached a fever pitch, then suddenly cut off. From behind Charity came a thump and a hiss of air that blasted away the smoke around the filly. Suddenly the guns weren’t on her but on something else. Something big. And from the gaping expression on their faces, something unpleasant. She turned, expecting to see a giant dragon or something.

What she beheld was two words written in bright red paint: MEGA DEUS. The immense black and white tank had clearly been battered something terrible, with numerous holes punched in the armor. Had something taken out his repair talisman with a lucky shot?

She took one look at the cannons and machine gun turrets pointing over her and hit the dirt, clutching her hooves over her ears.

Then Deus roared.

The cannons made entire ranks of Brood simply vanish in a cloud of metal, bone, and blood. The machine guns tore into the assembled cyberzebras like great, immense scythes. The Brood tried to scatter, but whatever cover remained was on fire, and Deus wasn’t about to let them get away. While the

Brood around them flew apart into red mist, a small hatch in the bottom popped open, and the speakers cracked and boomed, "Cunt cunt!"

Charity wasted no time, pulling herself into the war machine. Smoke swirled inside the cabin, but not as bad as outside. The cable-like spinal column and braincase sat inside the jar. As soon as she was inside, the hatch swung closed and the tank lurched forward. "Yeah! Get them!" she said as she pulled herself into the driver's seat and strapped in, looking out through a tiny armored slit at the scrambling cyberzebras.

And Deus did what he did best. The tank let out a booming "CUUUUUNTI!", and the mayhem was squared. The turret above her worked as it automatically loaded shell after shell. Sprays of shrapnel transformed the Brood into great bloody gobs as the tank lunged forward. Some tried to respond with missiles, but Deus either poured on the fire at the launchers or raced into the smoke and out of view. Still, the vehicle definitely lurched with occasional impacts from grenades.

"Take this, you striped fuckers!" Charity shouted. "I bet you wish you'd settled your debts now, don't you?" she yelled as they ripped through the Brood battalions like a thrashing, grinding wrecking ball. They moved in a crescent back and forth around the chapel, the tank never letting the Brood swing around and attack the structure directly. From the rooftops, the Halfhearts added their own help, the rifleponies picking off every attacker they could when the smoke from the burning structures cleared enough to give clear shots. A Brood loaded head to hoof in explosives dropped two dozen feet from the tank before he could make his suicide attack, felled by a Halfheart's bullet.

Suddenly something struck Deus hard enough to make the tank rock, and he rang like a bell as he lurched hard to the side. Charity's straps yanked hard as she was jerked around inside like a rag doll, her ears ringing. "What was... oh..." she said as she stared through the thinning smoke...

...at three more tanks.

Their turrets flashed, but Deus was already in motion... in reverse. A second later, the ground in front of him erupted. As soon as it did, Deus was racing forward, bouncing through the crater and nearly flying into the air as there was a second detonation where he'd just been. The three were sweeping in, and Deus now ignored the Brood infantry as he raced into the burning wreckage of Chapel. He didn't stay on a straight line for longer than two seconds, weaving this way and that erratically as two tanks swept out to the sides of the town while the third pursued directly. "I hope you know what you're doing!" Charity shouted.

"Cunt," Deus replied tersely as he looped around the blazing post office and suddenly turned around sharply. Then his superchargers roared as the treads ripped up the ground, the tank charging the wall of the post office.

"Wait! That's my—" Charity began, but Deus was already rolling up the crumbling walls and onto the collapsing roof, the air suddenly becoming blazing hot as he rolled right through the inferno, smoke drifting through the holes in his armor. He didn't stay there, though. As the already-weakened roof collapsed under his weight, he rode the flaming wave... right into the side of the pursuing tank. His barrels were nearly touching the joint between the turret and hull of the enemy tank. His cannons boomed, and Deus was thrown back into the rubble of the post office as the tank exploded into flame, turret flipping end over end into the air. As the air in the cabin became unbearably hot, he tore off the blazing ruin and past the burning hulk. Through a tiny, grainy monitor, Charity could see a cloak of soot and embers being drawn along behind him.

"Yeah!" Charity shouted. "You can do this! You're going to get free washing and buffing at Chapel for life!" Deus let out a happy growl even as he was being shelled by the pair of tanks that hadn't pursued him into the flaming settlement.

The other tanks were spreading out, trying to position themselves so Deus's mad weaving couldn't evade their fire. He jerked and swerved like a spasmodic wagon driver having an epileptic attack, and yet he was able to precisely tie together his shots so that each blast went true. Each shot tore holes in their armor... yet seconds later, their repair talismans were bending the armor plating back into shape. An angry growl filled the cabin. Only a perfect hit on their repair talismans would let him finish them off... well, that or killing the Brood driving the damned thing.

Charity just hung on for the ride. "You've got to get closer!" she shouted over the roaring engine and the screeching treads. Deus growled an agreement, twisting to the side and diving at the stockade. He smashed through the burning barrier, racing along the blazing structure as impacts from the far side sent steel and embers fountaining out around him. A skywagon in his way was rammed, followed by a metallic chewing sound. Then he made a tight loop, blasting out a section of wagon and racing out over it with a resounding clang that nearly snapped Charity's shoulders.

They were out much closer to the second tank, maybe only a few dozen yards. Its turret whipped around as Deus tracked his to it. In three horrifying seconds, the two twin-barreled tanks ripped into each other with brutal force. Charity's ears screamed with piercing tinnitus, the filly partially deafened and concussed as the fury of the exchange tore into the battling war machines. And just like that it was over... the zebra tank was a burning lump of metal.

And Deus's turret had been torn clean off.

Charity looked numbly up at the jagged hole where the turret had once been, at the blue sky hazed by red-lit smoke. "Can you repair that yourself?" Deus's engine let out an annoyed growl. "Don't worry..." she murmured as the smoke cleared. "I can cover it... make a payment plan... for service rendered..."

Deus gave a sort of mechanical chuckle as he turned, orienting his hull towards the remaining tank. That tank wasn't moving on Deus. It was heading straight towards the chapel. "They're either going to push us into the Core or kill us," Charity groaned as she wiped her muzzle, blood smearing her hoof. "Why? Why do they want to do that?"

Deus just sat there and let out a single, low motor growl that I imagined as 'I don't know.' The remaining tank could have blown the chapel apart with its cannons, but instead it languidly strafed the front of the structure with its machine guns. The Halfhearts and Crusaders weren't running, though. They opened fire from the windows and rooftops whenever there was an opening. Suddenly, the escape hatch in the cabin floor popped open, and the motor gave a more urgent growl. "What?" Charity asked. "I don't understand..."

Then the cabin speaker crackled with Deus's deep, synthetic voice. "C...c...c...go..." It sounded as if he was tearing off one of his own limbs just to say that simple word. "...c...unt... c... go..." One of those last impacts must have knocked his speech center back into place.

"You're going to ram it and self-destruct, aren't you?" Charity asked. "It's too close to the chapel!"

"Go," Deus rasped in his deep, pained voice. "I... C... C... I... will... take... cunt... of... it..."

Charity stared at the speaker, then at the brain inside the cracked jar. The braincase lay slumped against the side of the container, knocked loose in that last exchange. "Go..." Deus begged.

"Why?" Charity asked. "We're all going to die anyway," she whimpered.

"Shhhh..." Deus replied. "I... had... a... c...c...child... once... F...f...f...lees... should... I...I...live..." He repeated, "Go..."

Charity started down the hatch. The speaker gave one last crackle. "I... was... a... good... pony..."

She paused, then gave a small smile. "No. You *are* a good pony."

Then she was out, and Deus carefully rolled away from her, paused for a few seconds, then turned. She sat on the grass, watching as he began to roll towards the remaining tank, picking up speed. The turret pointed towards him and let out a blast, but he swerved at an angle, still accelerating. Another blast and another last moment swerve in the other direction. Back and forth he tacked, the remaining tank trying in vain to finish him off. The shells exploded near Deus's tracks, trying to cripple the war machine.

"Go..." Charity murmured. "Go. Go!" she called out, as if her cries could speed the smoking hull of the Reaper on.

A shell hit him head on, and Deus staggered as his front armor indented, cracked, and flew off, but he could not be stopped. With a resounding clang, he rammed the side of the tank as it started to pull away. The cannons now extended too far over the rear of Deus to hit the smoking tank directly, and the enemy tank was tilted up on one tread by the force of the impact.

But Deus didn't stop. He kept pushing. The tank's treads flailed back and forth as it struggled to break itself free, sparks flying where metal scraped on metal. The tread on the ground slipped and sprayed clods of earth as it was shoved along, foot by foot. Yard by yard...

Towards the river.

Charity raced down the hill after them, passing by the chapel as the occupants of the bullet-riddled structure spilled out. The filly stared as the tanks struggled down the steep, muddy bank. The Brood tank's cannons fired wildly, spraying both with mud like thick clumps of gore. As the tank's tread reached the swirling waters, though, a unicorn appeared atop it with an anti-machine rifle aimed down into Deus. There was a resounding bang.

The Brood unicorn's head exploded. Riproar lowered her smoking markspony rifle with a nod.

Then they were in the river, and the current caught them. For one moment, the Brood tank almost seemed to float, but then Deus gave it one last push and turned it over. Treads sprayed water in the air for several seconds as it floated away, but then, with an eruption of bubbles, it abruptly disappeared into the stream.

Charity stared at Deus, half submerged, her eyes round as she held her breath. "Come back," she whispered ever so softly.

But he didn't. He slipped into the churning waters of the river. There was a brief spray of resistance as he blocked the course, and then was also lost from view.

And so passed Doof the Marauder...

From the battlefield, the Brood were rising and reforming ranks, but the survivors of Chapel had had enough. The Halfhearts and foals charged the survivors. Cyberdogs tore into the Brood ranks, and a bandaged and very pissed off Precious blasted the cyberzebras with emerald fire. The Halfhearts ripped into any Brood unicorn who appeared and cut down clumps of enemies. The colts and fillies who had made Chapel their home for so long rallied as well. They may have been children, but that didn't stop them from using whatever weapons they could to tear the Brood apart before they could organize and consolidate their forces.

In a bloody fifteen minutes of frantic fighting, it was over. The hillside was littered with corpses. Nothing remained of Chapel save burning rubble and the eponymous bullet-ridden building. The Brood, at least here, were gone. The survivors looked at each other for a moment.

Then a musical note rang out, the deep and soulful melody of a contrabass. Adagio and Allegro worked the music as the tiny purple Sonata began to sing. "Sweet Celestia, full of grace. Help us find our rightful place. Help us grow up big and strong. Laughing and singing all day long..." As the fillies and colts sang, the adults joined in, awkwardly mumbling lyrics they didn't quite know.

But not Charity. She walked towards the smoldering remains of the town and found one of her clipboards. She scrutinized the precise little numbers in red and black and shook. There were some costs that were just too high. Some that numbers couldn't possibly cover. But Charity had to be tough, because if she wasn't, she wouldn't last long. As the song ended, she turned to the others. "Okay. Fan out. Collect any arms and ammo you can off these deadbeats. I'll start a running tally. If they try and hit us again, we'll have something to hit back with. Move it."

The others moved into action, but Charity lifted her head and gazed up into the clear sky and the rising pillars of smoke. "Thanks," she murmured, then sighed and got back to work.

oooOOOooo

I let out a mental sigh of relief. Chapel was alive. Well... okay. It'd need a whole ton of repairs. But Charity and the Crusaders were alive, along with the Halfhearts. I wondered where the cyberdogs had come from. The tunnel that'd passed by their lair hadn't been far. Maybe Charity had some Apple blood in her? Maybe they were just protecting ponies who needed help. Or maybe they were just preemptively dealing with something that would ultimately seek to destroy them as well.

I popped out of my blank's mind to tell Scotch Tape the good news. She wouldn't be happy her toilets were gone, but she could always rebuild—

"I hate Blackjack!"

That was what Scotch Tape sobbed as I opened my eyes but didn't move a muscle. She sobbed brokenly across the rocket from me, and I barely turned my head to spot the young mare curled up with Bastard, the latter looking thoroughly uncomfortable with this situation as she wept into his shoulder. He held her like he might hold an open barrel of Flux, afraid that one wrong move would make a bad situation even worse. "She doesn't care! He died, and she didn't even shed a tear! She just went right into that head as if he didn't matter at all!" she cried into his neck. "I hate her so much!"

"Yeah..." he muttered, then gave her shoulder an awkward pat. "There there, and all that. You know, this really isn't my thing..."

But Scotch Tape went right along. "She left him! She didn't even try to get him free! She left them both! She doesn't care about any of us!" she shouted as she wept.

That's not true. It wasn't. I just... I...

"You know the place was going to... like... *explode*, right?" Bastard asked slowly.

"So what? She's been exploded before! She could have found a way... done something... she's a fucking alicorn now! You're telling me she doesn't have some kind of magical Princess Blackjack bullshit powers she could have used to save him?!" Scotch demanded as she clutched his jacket.

"Fucked if I know," Bastard replied. "Look, I just want to get out of this tin can, see tomorrow, get paid, and move on with life. So if you feel this way, why don't you take it up with her next time she's outside her head, or whatever?"

Scotch Tape didn't answer, choking and sobbing. "Goddesses, I'm so terrible... how can I hate her... but I do! She left him! She left both of them! And she doesn't care... she doesn't..."

Bastard spotted me looking at them with tears running down my cheeks. His eyes went wide as he looked at me over his glasses, and suddenly he grinned. "Hey! Looks like Blackjack's awake! Now you two can have a nice heart to h—"

But I couldn't. Because I was a coward. Because I couldn't face what I felt or heard. Because if I stopped, it would crush me like a great wave, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to get up again. So I disappeared into my blank's mind instead. I ran. I hid. I refused to talk. Refused to think about it.

I was just like Blackjack in that way.

Or was I just like Luna like that?

I didn't care. I found a pool and left my pain behind.

END PART ONE

(Author's notes: I'm incredibly sorry that it's taken so very long to get what we've gotten done. The chapter is simply so long and there was no natural breaking point. Add to the joy of medical woes of me and a kidney stone and it just seems we weren't able to get it done. My greatest regret is that I wasn't able to get all of Horizons finished before EFNW. The chapter simply had too much going on. I know that I could have cut out entire scenes and put them in an epilogue, but I wanted to show the events in the hoof.

In other news, the entire editing team is going to be coming to EFNW with me at the end of May. I'll also be moving out of Vegas and back to mom's at the same time, and be unemployed till I get a teaching job elsewhere. So bits donated to David13ushey@gmail.com would be extremely welcome right now and deeply appreciated. I also have a patreon at <https://www.patreon.com/Somber> ...and I would DEEPLY appreciate help with improving it. Seriously. It's horrible...

Finally, I'd like to thank everyone who's stuck with me patiently for all of Horizons. I'd like to thank Kkat for creating FoE, and my EXTREMELY hardworking editors for the hours and hours they've poured into the story. Also, one final bit... if you love FoE and want to write stories for it... do. Don't let Horizons intimidate you. Tell any and all stories about the wasteland you want. Stick with it, and work at your story to make it the best you can. Thank you.)

Editor's note (Heartshine: I'm just glad that we were able to get this chapter split. It's been a ton of fun seeing all of Blackjack's friends this chapter, even though different points of view have been sort of difficult on the editors. Progress gets hard when we have slightly different narrators, and everyone has slightly different ideas of how they'd be responding. That said, this chapter is fun! Even if Somber keeps breaking the poor Raptors. Q.Q I'm going to privately hope that Somber is able to move up here to Portland. For reasons. That have nothing to do with me dating him. Nope. >.>)

swicked: Hey reader! Have you ever wanted to meet Somber? Conversely, have you ever wanted to know exactly where he is, so as to be as far from him as possible? Well, now you can!

Coming to Everfree Northwest: Somber! And the rest of us! But mostly Somber!

He'll even be on a panel (yes, they gave him a guest pass, so he's even all official and junk)! Ask questions! Demand answers! Whatever, really.

I'll be the one in the LSP ballcap. See y'all there.

Hinds: By the way, the ESS-A1 doesn't actually have artificial gravity. It's just flying a full Brachistochrone trajectory, and Blackjack is out of it during the turnover.

Bronode: My head's full of metal cubes. That is all. And my thoughts now need to be refined with a belt sander.