

Author's warning: There is a consensual sex scene between a minor and an adult in this chapter. The author does not condone this behavior in real life. The scene will be flagged for individuals wishing to skip said material. The author apologizes if lack of this warning offended people earlier.

Elysium fared little better than Chapel. The country club was a bit sturdier than the wooden church, but not by much. The dozens of defenders faced off against a similar advance of Brood across the golf course. Grace stood on a balcony flanked by two rifleponies who were firing down at the advancing ranks. She'd had the sense to put on a combat helmet and some barding. She stank, her stomach was empty, and she ached from horn to hoof, but she was still standing. Far to the south, she could see a massive green inferno burning where Grimhoof Army Base had stood.

And at the moment, she was quite cross. "What are you talking about?" she shouted into the broadcaster on her hoof. "I don't need a surrogacy spell! I need a Raptor, immediately! The skies are clear, so where is our air support?"

"The *Rampage* is giving support to the Arena," Triage's voice answered, "while the *Cyclone* is protecting us here. The *Sleet* is too damaged to help. They're going to try and get clear of the valley before their engines burn out completely."

"Oh, I see how it is. Protecting yourself and the thugs and leaving us to twist in the wind!" Grace retorted. "Then making some asinine pretense of Blackjack needing a surrogacy spell! What kind of idiot do you take me for?"

"An overbred one," Triage snapped back. "Let me fill you in, Princess. This comes from Storm Chaser: Megamart is gone. The Skyport is evacuated. Meatlocker is gone. That frigging castle is on fire. And Chapel's gone too. The refugees there ran into the Core, just like they weren't supposed to. Goldenblood got taken, so that ghoul is probably a corpse right now. So shut the hell up about your air support. I don't have it. It's left guarding a few thousand refugees here and at the Arena who didn't have the luck to get into a megastable or underground plantations."

"Well, then a surrogacy spell is moot," Grace replied grimly. "I won't be alive to receive it." She paused and glowered at the broadcaster. "How could she possibly know that, anyway? Blackjack is on the moon!"

"Look, when it comes to shit regarding Blackjack, I don't fucking pretend like any of it makes sense. They could tell me Blackjack was a stallion with a dick ten feet long, and I'd just nod and ask if she broke her legs in the process or not. I'm just passing on her request to you. She says Blackjack is going to need a surrogacy spell and that you're the best candidate we have. I can do the spell. I just need a new oven for the buns," Triage said tartly.

"My oven... is not for... for... ooooooh!" She stomped a hoof down on the ground. "If you want to use my oven, you'd better save the bakery from being demolished, understood?"

"I'll pass that along to Storm Chaser. In the meantime, you might want to withdraw back here to the University. We've got a whole ton of Brood coming down on us. It's time to circle the wagons, so—" Triage started to say.

"No," Grace replied brusquely. "Come and help, or leave us to our defenses. I'd prefer the former. I'll expect the latter." Then she smacked the broadcaster with her hoof and took a deep breath, closing her eyes as she composed herself. "I need a moment," she said to the ponies with her.

"A moment is all we have, ma'am," one of the two rifleponies replied evenly. She nodded and started for the door. "Ma'am..." he went on, and she looked back at the unicorn soldier. "We're not going to be able to hold here longer than half an hour. Once they surround this place, it's all over."

Grace stared at him silently for a few seconds. "Thank you. I will bear that in mind. Please, keep the enemy at bay."

She walked through the balcony door into a bedroom covered in dust and chips of rock. She moved over to the vanity and levitated a cloth, wiping away the dust. The mare looked as bad as she felt, sweaty and drawn with a bandaged laceration over one eye. She removed the helmet and bowed her head.

"They're quite correct, you know," a stallion said, and she opened her eyes to see Splendid standing there with a purple alicorn behind him. "This place is lost."

"This place is our home," she said as she stood and faced him.

"It's a building. Once a relatively nice building, but a building nonetheless." The white unicorn trotted towards her. "It's not worth dying for."

Her eyes shifted over to the alicorn. "So, am I supposed to be leaving now? Abandoning my responsibilities to these people?"

He trotted towards her. "These people are lost if they stay here. Give the order to retreat. Let them stand at the Collegiate. And let me take you to Tenpony. Royal Mint here is charging me a leg's worth of bottle caps to get you clear of the battle." He paused and gave a smile. "You'll like it there. It's even nicer than here at Elysium. I've secured adequate quarters for Charm and ourselves. She's even already begun showing improvement in her therapy with Doctor Helpinghoof, and I've made connections with important ponies within the Twilight Society who've been keeping a close eye on the east of late and know all about Father and our lineage." He put a hoof on her shoulder. "It will be a pleasant life. Maybe not as much pageantry as you'd like, but a good life."

She brushed his hoof off her shoulder. "And what of my responsibilities here?"

"Soon there will be no 'here' here!" he hissed back. "This place is done! It's unfortunate! It's regrettable! But it is reality! You need to wake up and accept this. Nothing here is worth your life."

She stared at him, her eyes narrowing. "Oh? What is my life worth, then? Fancy clothes? Good food? An ancestor I never knew who happened to be related to a Ministry Mare?" She shook her head. "If we are more than just our wealth, now is the time to prove it."

He stared at her for a moment, as if not able to believe her. "Are you serious?"

"I—" she began, but he grabbed her, turned her towards the door the balcony and jabbed a hoof out over her shoulder.

"Do you have any clue what's going to happen here if you don't leave?" he asked, his voice low and urgent, then motioned to the alicorn. "Royal Mint here took a look before we came in. They're encircling this place as we speak. You're going to be cut off any minute. For all we know, you already are. Maybe if you withdrew now, you'd be able to fight yourself clear. Maybe."

"Then they'd stop focusing on us and cut their way into the plantations!" she replied, facing him. "They might have been made by Stable-Tec, but they're not stables; the Brood could get in easily."

"That's right. And every single pony in there is probably going to die," he said grimly as he turned to her again and stared into her eyes. Hard cobalt clashed with sky blue as he went on, "Because that's what happens to peasants during war."

"Brother..." she half whispered in horror.

"When all this is over, we'll come back, get some more workers, and restart. The plantations aren't going anywhere. The Brood aren't demolishing the Hoof. There're plenty of ponies all across the Wasteland who'd be glad for the opportunity. They'd be grateful. So there's no point to throwing your life away, Grace. These people won't appreciate it anyway."

"How can you say that?" she asked, aghast.

He leaned towards her, eyes narrowing. "What? Do you think you're being noble? That they'll be grateful? They liked you because of the food and money and ease you gave them, but this? Half of them will be glad to see us die, just so they could kill the other half to pick over the remains. They're not worth your life, Sister." He rose, his amiable smile returning as he took a deep breath. "Now. Let's get back to Tenpony. A shower and a change of clothes and you'll see things better."

"A shower sounds lovely, but not if it's in the blood of my subjects." She put her helmet back on her head and trotted towards the doorway. "Goodbye, Brother. I hope you have a good life in Tenpony. I don't think you should return."

"Grace, you're being a—" he started to say when she whirled, pulled an elegant .357 revolver from her holster, and pointed it right at him. He looked at the alicorn. "What are you doing standing there? Do something!"

"I was paid for transport. You can't afford my sibling rivalry rates," the purple alicorn grumbled.

"You're being—" he started again when her magic drew back the hammer, silencing him once more.

"Goodbye again, Brother. Do give my love to Charm," she said evenly. "But do give up trying to sway me into cowardice. Go."

"You're certain." He stared at her, then sighed and rubbed his face with a hoof. "Such idiotic idealism..." He shook his head and then looked at the purple alicorn. "Give her the... present."

"You... I know how much it's worth!" the alicorn gasped. "You can't—"

"Something I've learned is that you can't tell King Awesome's children what they can and can't do," Splendid told the alicorn with a frown.

"You were lucky enough that that Harbinger contacted you," she replied, "and luckier still that he was asking so little for it." Splendid waved his hoof as if it was no matter. "You promised it to those Twilight fellows."

Splendid sighed and gave a wistful sort of smile. "Yes, well, it's a squandering sort of day." The alicorn muttered something but took out from under her wing a long package wrapped in burlap and tied with twine. Splendid levitated it towards her and set it on the ground at her hooves. "Perhaps it will be of some use. I had hoped... ah, hope..." He shook his head. His lips pressed into a tired smile as he slowly backed away to the alicorn. "Goodbye, Sister. Do try not to die. I am rather fond of you..." he trailed off. "Let's go," he said with a nod to the alicorn.

With a flash, the pair disappeared, and she lowered the gun. "Goodbye," she said, cracking open the gun to reveal the empty chambers. She fished some rounds out of a pocket in her armor, filled the cylinder, and then flicked it closed with a satisfying click; a small smile lingered on her lips. Then she lifted the bundle with her magic, a tingle ringing through her horn as she undid the knots in the twine. The cloth fell away, and the light shone silver off resplendent unicorns etched into a basket hilt and an elegant, slightly curving single-edged blade. She held it aloft, the light catching and sparkling along an edge that shamed any steel that would call itself razor. "Brother..." she breathed, a tear on her cheek as she beheld it. Then she smiled and bowed her head. "Thank you, Splendid."

With revolver and sword flanking her, she trotted back out towards the two soldiers. "How are we doing, gentlecolts?"

They shared a look. "Ma'am. We've Brood in the hills between here and the University," one of them said. "We can't pull back, and they're pressing in on all sides."

Grace stared at them. "How many defenders do we have?"

"A hundred sound fighters. Three hundred, if you include the wounded."

She closed her eyes for a long moment. What was the measure of a pony? The blood in her veins? The money in her vault? The power she commanded? The respect she received? Noble. Was Splendid right? Was 'noble' simply something a pony was, like 'tall' or 'thin' or 'comely'? She opened her eyes and stared out at the Brood advancing across the golf course like a black tide. What is my measure? What is my worth?

She tapped her PipBuck broadcaster. "Attention to all defenders of the Society. This is your princess. The enemy bears down on us, but we cannot run. The enemy is without mercy or compassion, but we cannot cower and fear. The enemy is powerful and determined to annihilate us, but we cannot be defeated! Beneath us lies the greatest treasure of the Society. Not plantations or talismans. Not crops and fungible goods. People. Stallions. Mares. Foals. Every single of them desperate for us to stand and fight. To protect them. To show our enemy that it is neither guns nor numbers that make us strong. It is neither caps nor gold that is our wealth! It is our common bond. Our unity. Our community. Our Society. We will not run from its defense. We will not cravenly grovel for mercy from an enemy that has none to give. Defenders of Elysium, I implore you. Fight! Fight, and I shall fight with you! Stand, and I shall be beside you! Die... and I will fall next to you." She paused and swallowed, then finished, "But we shall make our foes pay dearly for every life they dare touch! Society! For Blackjack! For my father! For your princess! Fight!"

She tapped her PipBuck again. "Well... I suppose it's all in the care of higher powers."

One of the two unicorns cleared his throat, and she regarded him. "Ma'am, I overheard your brother... telling you that you should go. I got to say..." he trailed off, flushing. "I got to say, I'm glad you stayed, but I wouldn't have blamed you if you'd gone. I'd go too, if I could have taken the missus with me. You didn't have to die with us."

Her lips curled in an easy smile. "I die in good company, sir." She frowned as she looked at the Brood. The black lines of troops had stopped their advance. "They're... get down!" she shouted, leaping at the stallion and knocking him to the ground.

The Brood fired a barrage of bullets that filled the air with the sweet tang of blood and shattering lead. The other stallion, the one she hadn't knocked to the floor, was struck a dozen times in barely a few seconds, his body jerking like a puppet on a string as bullets found a half dozen gaps in his barding. Then the strings were cut, and the body collapsed in a bloody, still heap of meat.

The moment the gunfire stopped, two unicorn Brood teleported onto the balcony, silver blades raised. With a speed and accuracy that would have done me proud, Grace reacted, her own blade flying

up as if seeking the two Brood with a bloodthirsty eagerness. It connected with the sword of the first and spiraled up the blade, knocking the Brood's weapon aside. As the silver sword curled around past the hilt, it whipped across the Brood's neck, taking its head clean off. Grace nimbly darted aside as the other Brood switched its attention to her and swept its blade back and forth after the unicorn, cleaving nothing but thin air as she danced away, living up to her name with effortless aplomb. Then the silver sword came in, blocking the Brood's weapon, and Grace darted her revolver into position and smoothly put a bullet in each of the Brood's eyes. As the creature collapsed, she pared off its head for good measure.

"I'm going downstairs," she told the soldier, who was staring at the three corpses on the balcony with wide eyes. "Good hunting." He just nodded dumbly, then lifted his rifle and began firing.

Grace trotted in and down. Who knew fencing lessons would be useful? To think she'd resented Father for insisting they learn proper swordsmanship technique. As she walked into the ballroom, which was packed with wounded soldiers employing what few healing supplies that remained, a ripple seemed to pass through the air. She didn't pause and regard them, or ask, or implore. She simply passed by, and as she did, others were drawn after her like iron filings to a magnet. Ponies who could barely walk were helped by those who could. Any who could wield guns readied them, and those who couldn't grabbed whatever bars or sufficiently vicious detritus they could manage in their mouths.

Grace walked right through the front doors and up to the semicircular sandbag barricade raised outside the entrance. One of the defenders turned around to reload and saw her standing there, mused and exhausted and triumphant. "Princess!" he cried out, and a couple more glanced back. Then the first slammed the fresh magazine in and turned back to the Brood charging the barricade. "For the princess!" The other defenders, those who'd seen her and those who hadn't, echoed the cry and faced the enemy with renewed vigor. Even the wounded fought as she stood there like a bright light they couldn't... wouldn't... let be snuffed out. Grace herself snapped off revolver shots at any Brood that reached the sandbags, stopping only to reload or to cut down the would-be assassins that teleported in to assail her.

They were only a few hundred against a thousand or more. One by one, the defenders fell, and the cries of the survivors became more desperate. But not one stallion ran. Not one mare faltered. They fought on, even if the cause was hopeless, to prevent the princess from falling with them. At their posts they lay, proud and unashamed in death or wretched as death tarried to take them. The sheer pressure of so many Brood forced the defenders back from sandbags and up the stairs to the shattered, gold-leafed doors, and yet no pony broke and fled. Even as the enemy pressed them back.

She spotted a young, pale blue stallion curled up inside the double doors to the country club, weeping, clutching his rifle as he shook, completely overwhelmed by the fate befalling him. For a moment, just a moment, their eyes met. Fear in his. Calm dignity in hers. The latter prevailed, and for an instant, the corner of his lip lifted.

Then the bullet struck her, and she was falling back. The hammer blow, the shock of pain, the sudden weakness as the body lost the ability to act properly because of the abuses its flesh had suffered... I knew them well. A second bullet struck her uplifted foreleg as she struggled for balance. A third bit one of her hindlegs, and it gave out beneath her. She fell, rolled onto her back, and lay there, staring at the ceiling.

"Princess!" he shouted as he rose up and rushed to her, crouched over her, then glared out the doors, raised his rifle in a distinctly zebraish posture, barrel braced against his knee, and fired with the scream, "You bastards won't touch her!" He roared in defiance to the countless and indifferent enemies. Bullets bit into his barding, but still he fired. Rounds found flesh and spilled his blood, but when his gun ran dry, he just slapped another magazine in with a bloody hoof, refusing to fall and let the Brood finish her off.

All to save his princess, for a pony would do anything to save their princess, whether she was one or not. It was the principle of the thing.

And as she lay there on her back, struggling to breathe, that soldier's roar seemed to magnify again and again, only this time the enemy was shaken by it. And from the access ports that led down to the plantations came a ripple as the enemy was pushed back, with the cries of 'Princess!' and 'Princess Grace!' breaking over the gunfire.

Workers... the ponies that her brother, and father if she was honest, called serfs once... poured out of the shafts and into the enemy. Some wielded industrial saws and sledgehammers, others sickles and axes, and some attacked with nothing more than sticks. They were all products of the Wasteland, though, and labor had made each of them hard and tough since she'd increased their rations. They crashed into the Brood and actually pushed them back in hoof to hoof combat and bloody melee.

Grace struggled to rise as two mares rushed to her. "Stay still, Your Majesty. We'll take care of you."

"Nonsense!" she spat, feeling something burning in her chest. "Give me a potion and get me back on my hooves!" She would tolerate no argument. Eventually they gave her the potions she needed, and she turned to the young blue stallion. Wounded, but he was still among the living. "Take care of him," she said, then charged out the door to join the melee.

Her silver sword flashed brightly in the afternoon sun, and the workers flocked to it, crushing any Brood in their path. Still, the Brood regrouped and pressed back against the struggling mob. Grace moved in a bubble of death, and any Brood that entered that bubble was split and split again by the silver sword while her revolver sought out any eye that came too close. But the enemy had guns too, and bit by bit, she was worn down along with her people.

Then from the ridge came a horrifyingly familiar boom of cannon. The roof of the country club exploded, showering the battlefield with tiles and ruined masonry. Another damnable tank rolled up behind the Brood, twin cannons ripping apart the upper floors of the structure with blast after blast, rubble crushing pony and Brood alike. How were they to repel such horrible, callous power?

Something struck her from behind, and her hindlegs gave out. There was a blinding flash of pain, and she screamed as her hooves clutched her forehead, blood rushing down between her eyes. The silver sword fell at her side, the revolver thudding into the grass... her severed horn landing beside it.

"Got you," a Brood unicorn said at her side. Grace turned and stared through eyes half-blinded with blood, refusing to give the enemy the satisfaction of fear and defeat. And the Brood wasn't waiting either as the glowing blade was raised to cleave her head off.

Then the ground exploded as a massive claw tore out of the earth and through the torso of the stunned cyborg. Its eyes were round with shock as the gnarled fingers curled around its spine and pulled, her body folding in two with a resounding wet snap as she disappeared into the earth. Then the owner of that claw emerged. Gnarled, monstrous hide the color of mud and studded with wiry tufts of fur. Maw overfilled with uneven jagged teeth. Huge oversized beam pistol that would be a rifle in any other hand and in such a state that it appeared to be one misfire away from exploding. The hellhound rose up, and the Brood backed away.

Then he threw back his head and let out a bloody howl.

And it was answered from the earth itself.

Sinkholes erupted, sending Brood by the dozens tumbling to a grisly death. Arcane weaponry fired with heedless abandon into clusters of Brood and hellhounds alike, the latter seeming injured to all but direct hits by the weapons. Massive claws shredded cloned meat to gory tatters, and fanged jaws

ripped and tore the cyberzebras' heads from their bodies. And when the hellhounds faced organized resistance, they disappeared into the earth only to reappear directly under their enemies for renewed slaughter.

The tank gave a mechanical squeal as the ground below its rear collapsed, its treads clawing at the dirt as it struggled to escape the growing pit. It failed. Metal shrieked and the cannons gave one last impotent blast as a half dozen hellhounds stood around the mouth of the pit and sprayed blazing red beams at the trapped vehicle. It exploded, vomiting glaring green flames in a crackling mushroom cloud that didn't trouble the hellhounds a bit. Elsewhere, hellhound beam guns sliced through two or three Brood, and when the overcharged weapons failed to fire, they doubled as bludgeons and complemented jagged claws well.

In fifteen minutes, it was over. The ground was pockmarked with sinkholes and carpeted with bodies, Brood, pony, and hellhound alike. The Society survivors clustered around Grace, somepony yelling for healing magic or a potion. Another told her to be still, but she couldn't stand even if she wished. Her hindlegs didn't appear to be moving as they should. The hellhounds stood there too, coated in gore and bloody foam, panting their rank breath as they loomed over the broken unicorn, as if not sure whether to halt their slaughter here or continue till only their own remained.

Grace pushed herself as upright as she could, staring up at the one who had saved her. "My apologies, but I'm unable to rise and greet you properly, good sirs." She made an awkward bow of her head. "Welcome to the Society. I'd have a proper repast prepared for your welcome services here, but I'm afraid that our kitchen is in some disarray. So sorry."

The hellhound blinked, then knelt. "Your home wrecked too?" he growled, still looking down despite his kneeling. "Our home blew up again. Always getting blown up." He glared over his shoulder at where the green flame still roared out of the earth to the south.

"Indeed. Ours is little better, I'm afraid. It's quite a mess, as you can see," she said evenly despite swaying a little. "Still, you are welcome to stay here as long as you like. I'll order refreshments."

"You're... giving us permission... to stay?" the hellhound asked haltingly, his body still oozing blood from numerous punctures in his hide.

"Yes. After all, it may be a horrible day, but that's hardly an excuse to be uncivilized," she replied, managing to maintain her even tone despite feeling distinctly woozy.

The hellhounds stared in shock for several seconds, claws twitching, weapons ever so slightly raised.

Then the first hellhound threw back his head and laughed. "Refreshments! Very funny! You're a very funny pony!" The laughter was contagious among the dozens of hellhounds, and the few Society defenders left armed grew slightly more at ease but appeared vaguely insulted by their mirth.

Two unicorns came to her side. "Ma'am, we need to get you to the Collegiate. You're badly injured."

"Yes, I think that would be best," Grace replied. "See to the hellhounds and take care of our own. We surely have stores enough to keep them well fed. And if not, there's no lack of Brood..." She gave a little shudder as the world spun.

"But... the hellhounds, ma'am. How are we going to be able to make them leave?" one of the unicorns asked as they carefully levitated her without jostling her body much.

She looked back flatly. "What makes you think we ever will?" As she was borne away, some of the defenders took up the cries of 'Princess!', 'Grace!', and 'Victory!'. She didn't have the heart to correct

them; while it had been a victory, it would not be enough just yet. There were still plenty more battles to fight.

The page that follows is the one flagged in the warning. Please skip to the next break if you do not wish to read such material.

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I hoped they'd get Grace to the Collegiate. I wondered what Triage had been talking about, though. No pony should have known about me being pregnant except for the ponies who'd been present when I'd gotten my wings. And how could they know I'd be returning in my old body? Just one of many things to ask Triage when we finally arrived. But now... I couldn't put it off any more, could I?

Time to face the music.

I slipped out of my blank's mindscape, not wanting to see Grace's pool disappear ominously. At this rate, everypony I knew and cared about would be at the Collegiate. "Sco—" I started to say when my mind suddenly hit a lurch.

There was Scotch Tape on a couch. More accurately, there was Bastard on a couch, with the young mare on top of him doing what plenty of young mares in 99 did to relieve stress and anxiety, his forehooves resting on her hips. As my brain started again, I noted the following: She wasn't in obvious pain or discomfort. He wasn't bound, in tears, or unwilling. They both seemed to be getting something out of it. And that part of me that hadn't been interested in him in the slightest earlier now let off a warm purr at the sight of them together.

"How is he?" I asked from my seat.

Bastard's eyes shifted over to me. "Hey, what's up? Oh, and before you shoot me, this wasn't my idea."

"Yeah, I figured that," I replied. Scotch was adamantly not looking at me, her face composed as she continued to move atop him. "I'm sorry," I finally said. Bastard just continued doing what he was doing, and to his credit, he wasn't slamming her. "I didn't want him to die. I didn't want anypony to die."

She gritted her teeth and started to move twice as fast atop him. "Blackjack," she said between pants, "do you mind saving it till we finish? This is taking a little more focus than I thought." And she was pissed, and trying to deal with sexy feelings and pissed feelings all at once.

"Wait," Bastard said with a wry arched brow. "You don't mind me rutting your underaged... whatever?"

"Quit treating me like a fucking kid," Scotch interrupted before I could answer. "I was supposed to be on the queue months ago. I've got my implant. I want this. I need this. It's happening." Her outburst earned a look of wide-eyed surprise from Bastard. I supposed I really *couldn't* mind after a retort like that. There was no denying it: she just wasn't a filly anymore. She'd already been a brave young mare in her own right when we'd left Equus, and while it'd only been a day since then, it felt as if she'd matured further months, even years.

"I, uh, so no, I don't mind," I added lamely.

"Okay... Cool, then. 'Fraid you were going to kill the fun or something," he said, rapidly regaining his composure. "Now, where were we?"

Having some good feelings, apparently. Though with everything that had been going on... I looked at her and tilted my head. "You're really sure—" I started to ask her.

"Yes, Blackjack," Scotch Tape snapped. "Just... come back later."

"Yeah. Right. Later." I watched the two for a minute or so longer, but it really seemed neither was forcing the other. A part of me that I wasn't sure was me protested my plan to go back into the blank. Really, would it be that bad if I watched a little more? Maybe gave myself a little...

Huh... Princess Luna a voyeur... Who knew?

I considered it a personal triumph to put my mind back into the blank and find another mind pool. Eenie, meenie, miney... that one.

oooOOOooo

Oh... well... At least now I *knew* he wasn't hurting Scotch, but this wasn't how I wanted to... okay, out!

oooOOOooo

Okay. Really should have looked more closely before going in there. That was a *little* too close for me. I quickly picked another mental pool...

oooOOOooo

Oh, come on! Now him?! Could I get labels on these pools? Maybe a 'Do Not Disturb'... huh... that was always an interesting feeling...

No! No! No! Out! As much as a part of me wanted to settle in for the ride... no!

oooOOOooo

Okay. I mentally painted great big red X's on both of those pools... and amazingly, an X actually appeared on each. Oh, sure, I figure out I can do that *now*... I sighed, examining the remaining two dozen or so pools. Which had I been in before?

...Or maybe I should stop running and hiding and peering and just... deal with what had happened to P-21 and Glory. But where could I start with that? Just thinking about it made this mental space feel colder and darker than the black void it was. It hurt thinking about what happened to Glory and P-21. It hurt thinking about Rampage and Lacunae, too. I didn't want to think about it. Think about how it had skewed my relationship with Scotch Tape. I'd saved her life, and honored my promise to her father, but that didn't make it hurt any less.

I sighed in that void, then glanced at the two pools I'd marked. Was this me, or was this Blackjack... or was this me, or was it Luna? Luna hadn't liked to deal with things directly either. She loved dreams and intimacy. Influencing rather than confronting. Great for dealing with others with finesse, but horrible for confronting problems. Blackjack hadn't been much better, running away from her problems one after the other.

It didn't surprise me that Scotch was doing what she was doing. After being dragged away from her father, she was asserting herself and trying to project maturity that she didn't quite have. She wasn't a filly anymore, but she was a very young mare. I needed to bring a little of that filly back... her optimism and hope above all. I couldn't let her become dark and jaded.

I sighed and considered the remaining pools. I could stay here, in this vasty nothingness that was my old mind. Or maybe this place wasn't my mind exactly, but someplace else? I really wasn't educated enough to know or even speculate much.

Ugh... I hated waiting. At least that part was still me.

...I might as well. I poked my mind into an unmarked pool...

oooOOOooo

Beep.

Oh...

Beep.

Oh, sweet Sister, no.

Beep.

Please... somepony help...

Beep.

Whoever this pony was, no. This pony was a ball of pain soaked in a lake of anesthetics that barely stopped the agony that came with each breath. The darkness was even more absolute than in my blank's mind. I thought this pony was on their stomach, but I couldn't tell more than that. The only things I could hear were a distant, intermittent beeping and whispers in the dark. Was this Rampage? Had she been rescued from the vacuum of space to the Astrostable only to be rendered like this? Maybe Horizons going off had done something to her talisman... or the moonstone... or who knew?

Beep.

"...need more Med-X..." somepony whispered, far away like from the mouth of whatever well I was in.

"I don't think there's any left..."

Beep.

I could almost place the voice, but a part of me didn't want to. I didn't want to know who this pony had been.

Beep.

"...should pull the plug... lost cause..." the first voice whispered.

"...told us not to... skies only knows why..."

Beep.

I couldn't stay here. I couldn't stay here and do nothing. It'd drive me mad!

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

oooOOOooo

Okay. Give me ponies fighting to the death or dying any day instead of... whatever that was! I didn't want to think about it. Being like that... no. That was a living death. That was sadistic!

I feared going into another pool, but if I didn't, I'd never get that horrible experience behind me. I could leave and just cover my ears till they finished, but... I stared at the pools. These were ponies I'd known, even if I didn't precisely know anymore who they were by looking at their shimmering disks of light.

Honestly, I'd probably be better off just taking a nap in the void.

Damn it... I put another X over the pool I'd just left and slipped into the one beside it.

oooOOOooo

This was more like it! This pegasus tore through an industrial network of canyons, whipping around rusting smokestacks and girders as Brood fliers sprayed bullets after her. She spun and banked, racing around corners so closely that her tail and wings flicked out clouds of rust in her wake. Below her, in the streets of the industrial northeast of the Hoof, the Brood were engaged in bloody street fighting with the Burners and Flashers. Blazing barrels were rolled off the tops of buildings, detonating on the Brood below and stalling their push towards the river. Flash Fillies moved from window to window, girder to girder, keeping up a steady rain of fire down and doing whatever they could to prevent a unicorn—

One flashed into being up ahead, behind a pair of mares crewing a gatling beam gun up on a catwalk that spanned the road. The pegasus I was in did a barrel roll and swooped across right above their heads. Her outstretched power hooves hit the unicorn's skull with a thunderous clap an instant before the blade fell. She dipped down and came up in front of the gun crew, pointing above her. "Fire! Up there!" Whisper shouted.

The Flash Fillies swung the gatling beam gun up and strafed the five Brood fliers, forcing them to break up. The pegasus's eyes narrowed. "Oh no you don't!" she shouted and darted after one that hadn't gotten as far away as the other four. All four hooves struck the Brood and rammed the flier right into a brick wall. She didn't even break stride as she looped around a second time and smashed it again, driving it into the edifice hard enough to leave a crater. She hesitated for one moment, eying the bloody mass plastered against the brick, and then rammed it three more times with her hooves, leaving only a bloody smear and jagged bits of metal.

She turned with a satisfied little smirk only to spot another flier taking aim right at her head.

Suddenly a pair of hooves appeared around the Brood flier's neck, and the rest of the dusky batpony emerged behind the winged Brood. He pressed his mouth to its ear and let out a scream that sent spasms through the cyborg's body. Then its brains dribbled out its nose and opposite ear canal. Stygius dropped the limp carcass into the chaos below, then smiled at Whisper and lifted his chalkboard with a heart drawn on it.

Whisper flew to him, and the two embraced, twirling in midair as the fighting raged around them. The sun was close to the horizon now, and the sky was turning red in the west.

"Is now really the time?" Tenebra shouted from the catwalk next to the gun crew, who were busy laying fire on a knot of Brood below. "There's fighting going on, you know!"

Whisper and Stygius parted before gravity pulled them too far, and both flew back to the catwalk. "Yeah, yeah," Whisper said. "You're just mad that I won't kiss *you* in the middle of battle." She pointed at

one of the two earth ponies with the gatling beam gun. "You there! You're Beam Burn, right?" she said, then gestured to Tenebra. "Kiss her."

The red earth pony mare's eyes shot wide. "Um... I'm straight, Fluttershy."

"Oh yeah? Well I'm straighter, but somepony's got to kiss her and it's not going to be me! I got my snogging buddy," she said as she gripped him tight and mashed lips and tongue and... ugh, why wasn't this doing anything for me? I got turned on watching two other ponies doing it, but not when I'm one of them? Stupid alicorn soul that only liked to watch! Why couldn't she be more like that unicorn trollop who screwed every... Wait. That was *me*! Argh!

The other, blue earth pony mare raised her hoof as she looked at Tenebra with an eager smile, but then the batpony mare stomped her hoof. "No pony is kissing me! This is no time to be kissing! There's fighting going on and... and..." She started to twitch, immediately pulled out a vial filled with some bluish fluid, and choked it down. Her twitching eased. "Ugh..." She wrinkled her nose. "Why does it taste like bubblegum?"

Stygius released Whisper and said something to Tenebra in his inaudibly high-pitched voice.

"Better," she replied. "Good enough to fight." She looked at the pair of earth ponies with the gatling beam gun. "Are you out of ammo?" The pair resumed firing, the pretty blue mare displaying a definite pout.

"You've got to work on your priorities, Twitchy," Whisper said as they walked along the catwalk, bullets from below zinging off the railings and pinging against the underside of the floor plates.

"My priorities!" Tenebra squeaked. "You're... you're... kissing! In the middle of battle!" A barrel bomb exploded down the street as if echoing her outrage.

Stygius spoke to her again, and her eyes went wide. He grinned sheepishly, tapping his wingtips together.

Tenebra reddened a bit, sputtering, "I-it doesn't matter if she's a good kisser! We're in the middle of the battle for the Hoof. We need to keep our priorities—"

Whisper moved so fast that she nearly teleported atop Tenebra's back. "You know what my priority is, Twitchy? I'm happy. I'm finally... finally... finally happy. I have someone who makes me glad to be alive. I have a future and a family to look forward to. I have a father who, as much as he is a melodramatic ass, is my real father who loved my mother," she said, stroking Tenebra's skull with a power hoof as she spoke into her ear. "Shit that you've taken for granted all your life. Plus, I've got a whole city of fucks to kill however I want. And it's fucking awesome, and I'm *happy*. *That's* my priority."

She let Tenebra up and even helped her to her feet again. "Just... people..." the batpony stammered.

"They die. Shit happens like that. But I'm not going to let it ruin my happy till it's someone I care about." The yellow pegasus paused, her mouth screwing up as if she felt ill, then said, "And I'm sorry for that... thing... that happened. Hope they can do something about it. But don't tell me my priorities are screwed up. This is the first time my priorities are close to normal." She took a deep breath and patted Tenebra on the back. "Still... sorry."

"Still rusty at the whole 'nice' thing, aren't you?" Tenebra muttered darkly.

"Hey, I'm used to breaking spines, not patting backs. Which would you prefer, Twitchy?" Whisper retorted with a grin as they stepped onto the rooftop of an old factory. The industrial center of the city was a crescent of bulky buildings a mile thick and stretching for three miles along the edge of the eastern fork

of the Hoofington River. From the rooftop, they could see hundreds of dark plumes rising all around the north, east, and west. The Citadel had largely burned itself out and was now sheathed in thick black and gray veils of smoke. Only the marble buildings of the University to the south and the Arena to the west lacked the telltale sooty columns that came with the Brood's advance.

"Not good," Stygius wrote on his blackboard.

Whisper sighed and rolled her eyes, then thumped his shoulder with a power hoof. "Come on. If I'm the optimistic one, then there's something wrong with you. What do you say we get out there, kill a couple thousand more of these cyberbitches, then get a bunch of our friends together and have a good, steamy rut?"

"I don't think I'm in the mood for those anymore," Tenebra replied, gazing away to the south.

Whisper rolled her eyes again. "Ugh, come on, ponies! I cannot be the only happy one at this party."

"I happy," Stygius scribbled on his board with a smile that didn't quite meet his eyes.

She grinned and kissed him firmly again. "I am so going to make you squeak tonight if the world doesn't end," she purred, and he flushed and gazed back into her eyes. He leaned over and gave her one final kiss on the end of her nose, and now she was blushing too. "Let's go get them."

"Mother and Father are a block that way," Tenebra said, pointing with a wingtip.

"Your father? He's fighting?" Whisper said with a grin. Tenebra gave a nod. "He's got his sight back?"

"Ehhhh..." she said weakly.

* * *

"OBLIVION!" King Hades roared, sending a sphere of shadow flying down the street at the mass of enemy Brood. The ten-foot-wide swirling orb of black fire consumed everything in its path. The powerfully-framed batpony gleamed with sweat as he stood with his wife behind a barricade of wagons that blocked a major street between a pair of factory buildings. The trio of fliers dropped down behind them as the stallion wiped the sweat from his brow. "Did I hit anything?"

Persephone critically eyed the channel cut along the front of a row of buildings. "Only a few, but I'm sure the enemy is quite intimidated, dearest," she replied as she reached up with her wingtips to his bandaged head and turned it a little to the side. "Try that way, my love."

"OBLITERATE!" he roared again, sending another sphere much more solidly into the mass of soldiers. To his credit, his magic sent the Brood rushing away like nothing else I'd seen. Not even the Legate wanted to charge his troops into a sphere of disintegrating darkness.

"Much better! Send a few more that way when you can, dear," she said, then turned to the three. "Ah, there you are, darlings!" She reached into her saddlebags, withdrew a blue vial, and passed it to Tenebra, who accepted it reluctantly. "Been having a nice flight out?"

"This isn't a flight, mother!" Tenebra said breathlessly. "This is a battle for our very survival! You and Father should be in the stable where it's safe!"

"And that's where my darling babies should be," she said as she smiled placidly at her children, who flushed and squirmed. "And my grandbabies too," she said, arching a brow at Whisper, who scrunched up her face indignantly. "If my little ones are at terrible risk, how can we do any less?" She

paused, seeing Hades had turned his head to listen, and reached up with her wings to aim him up the street again. "That way, dear."

"Oh, yes. Of course." He took a deep breath and strained, then bellowed, "ANULIATE!" and sent another sphere rocketing down the street. It dipped low, slipping into the roadbed. However, a second later, the street collapsed under the returning Brood with a great crumbling. "Heh. That got them!" He paused. "...Right?"

"Absolutely, dear," she answered, patting his shoulder. "Now, do be careful and aim the way you're facing... and do try to use actual words." She looked back at the three. "Go on and play. Take care that you don't get hurt."

"Yes, Mom," Whisper said sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

"I mean that, Whisper," Persephone said, her smile steady but her eyes ardent. "I look forward to your wedding once we've cleaned up. It will give all our people something to celebrate."

"A wedding, seriously?" Whisper tried to keep up the snark as she looked from herself to Stygius. "I mean... he hasn't proposed..." Stygius gulped and gave his disapproving mother a sheepish grin.

"Stygius Lethe Acheron!" she said sharply. He trotted forward, hanging his head slightly. "Why haven't you proposed to this young mare yet?"

He eeped and then waved his hooves in the direction of the hundreds of Brood marching towards them, the barrel bombs exploding, the glowing fire of beam rifles cracking and streaking through the air ahead of them, and the general signs of battle as his mother looked on with a tiny smile and a very unamused arch of her brow. He stilled, hooves stretched towards the Brood as his eyes went from one female to the other. Finally, he slumped and fell to his knees, mouth working on the piece of chalk, and then he used a wing to fish something gold from his saddlebags. When he turned back to Whisper, hanging on his proffered wingtip was a ring-shaped earring set with a large teardrop-shaped moonstone, and in his mouth he held a simple message.

"Love U. Marry Me, Plz?"

She stared at him for a moment, then gave a tiny nod, her eyes wide and glistening. Bullets pinged and zinged off the metal around them as he stretched up and clipped the ring to her left ear. The gem sent out dozens of tiny rainbow sparkles as the evening light reflected off its milky adulescence. She touched it carefully with a wingtip, as if confirming it was actually there. "Yes..." she whispered as tears welled in her eyes. "Yes!" she cried out as she embraced him tightly, making him squeak.

"Congratulations," Persephone said brightly once Stygius was released.

"Did something happen?" Hades rumbled, turning his head towards the rest of us.

She reach up, turning his head back. "I'll fill you in later, dearest. Just keep sending your magic that way."

Tenebra sighed but gave a small smile. "Yeah. Congratulations. You must be very happy."

"Happy?" Whisper said with a wide smile, and then she launched herself up in the air. Then, to the astonishment of everyone, including me and I think herself, she began...

...to sing.

*No one's happier than I
I feel like reaching up to touch the sky
I'm soaring through the clouds*

*I could sing out loud
I'm aglow and I know the reason why*

Everypony stared at her in astonishment, even, guided through hearing alone, King Hades, as the sweet, steady notes slipped out of her mouth and somehow carried out over the battle. Of course, she didn't just hang there singing. No, she fought as she sang, as if it were as natural to her as flying. She looped and whirled, and Stygius followed with her, the pair coiling and curling around each other, breaking apart to smash a flyer that moved to finish them off but seemed unable to hit them. And where was that music coming from? It seemed to follow her song, cutting through the rattle of gunshots and the boom of barrel bombs.

*No one's luckier than I
My happy heart inside is riding high
I'll tell the sun and moon
That the world is in tune
And my friends can all sing and laugh and cry*

Her song seemed to reach out to the ponies fighting, unifying them. A few Flash Fillies broke out in an accompanying melody, coordinating their beam blasts into sheets of fire that actually seemed to stymie the Brood assault through the industrial canyons. Now the pair almost seemed to ignore the Brood desperate to kill them as they whirled and danced through the smoking ruins. The bullets seemed to fade to the barest buzzing of bees as they passed by the pair.

*For I'm in love, and I know I'm loved in turn
My friends below can see how I yearn*

She held him close as they whirled higher and higher, her song reaching out, cutting through the cracks of bullets and the booming of bombs to reach every friendly ear in the area. As they rose past the top of a smokestack, she glimpsed a white flash on the catwalk around its brick rim, but the couple's spin quickly carried it out of view.

*For the day he takes me in his wings
Where I will laugh with the gift love brings
I don't mind telling you
That I know that it's true
There is no one who's happier than I.*

Then time seemed to slow as Stygius's handsome smile faded and his gentle eyes widened. There was a dark flash, and he disappeared only for his legs to wrap around her from behind. She turned her head in bafflement, but suddenly he slammed into her, knocking her into a sharp spin as a line of pain bloomed on her side. When she stabilized, a bloody graze marring her coat, Stygius was in front of her, facing her. His wings struggled to keep him aloft, and she gripped his blood-slick legs with hers. A tiny smile rose on his lips. They formed the shape of three little words, and then he was falling, blood glimmering like rain in a crimson halo around him. There was no music. No sound at all as he fell from her outstretched hooves, his yellow bar gone from her E.F.S.

Her eyes turned to the catwalk, and she saw three figures. Only one was armed. Only one was needed.

The Legate.

Flanked by two Brood unicorns, he pointed a zebra rifle at her with a calm, steady smile. Hanging from his back like some grotesque talisman was Goldenblood's grisly torso, his eyes staring

sadly at her. "Silence," he said. There was a flash, a single bang, and a numbness spread through her body. She fell down into the fire and smoke and chattering gunfire.

Her limp wings dragged through the smoke, slowing her fall as she tumbled down, blood flowing from her own wounds and the stunned sensation flowing through her. She stared up at the blue sky, the two unicorns, the mutilated Goldenblood, golden feathers and drops of blood falling around her, and the smiling zebra...

Then she struck a bank of old cables strung across the road, the thick, rubber-coated strands slowing her fall even more before they snapped and yanked right out of the wall. Her wings crackled like kindling under her. Then she landed in a heap in the middle of an empty street. It felt like an eternity that she lay there bleeding, thinking nothing... feeling nothing.

"Stygius," she whispered.

Slowly she turned, and now pain blossomed... but it was a distant pain. An abstract pain she felt only due to petty, fleshy trauma and broken bones. She stared up the street... down the street...

There, a gleam of purple and gray. She struggled to her hooves, blood dripping down her front and back, then staggered, step by step, towards her batpony. As she walked, coughing up red bubbles, Brood emerged. They didn't impede her passage, smiling as she closed the distance to Stygius. He lay on his side, curled slightly, a pool of dark crimson spreading out from him. She fell to her knees in the cooling blood, staring down at his faintly smiling face. She stroked his cheek with a bloody hoof, but he did not stir.

The Brood surrounded her. Softly, barely above a whisper, she began to sing again.

*No one's happier than I...
Because I'm going to die...
Now the evening's drawing nigh...
This happiness has bid me good-bye...
I'm all alone... my heart is overthrown...
There's nothing to do but...*

A barrel pressed against her forehead, and she looked up, hot tears on her cheeks. "Shhh," the Brood said as one... except for a few who wore strange, confused frowns as they watched the scene. "No more pony battle hymns." She closed her eyes and smiled.

A crack split the air. Hot dust swirled around her.

She opened her eyes as she saw the glowing red pile of embers settle down before her. A half dozen more fell, collapsing into piles of dust as Flash Fillies and a few Burners riding batponies descended down into the street. Persephone rode Hades, calling out, "Left, no, your other left, dear!" while others swooped down towards Whisper. Tenebra landed, her wings shaking as she withdrew purple vials from her saddlebags. Whisper stared past them up at the Legate, glowering down at all of them from his perch above. But she didn't linger on his eyes or the rifle pointing down at her. She looked past him at her father, his face solemn and mournful, his lips moving as he tried to say a word over and over again.

A bullet struck her thigh, auguring straight through. A second punched through her wing, taking a bloody clump of feathers and meat. A third slammed into her hip. She felt the blossoms of pain as her eyes remained locked on her father's lips, trying to make out the word he said over and over again while she waited to be reunited and happy once more.

Sing.

A pearly shield formed around Whisper and Stygius, the batponies, the Flashers, and the Burners. The Legate bore an expression of profound frustration.

"Oh no," Tenebra gasped, bent over Stygius.

"Which way is our foe, love?" Hades demanded, but the pale batpony was silent as she slid off him, her face streaked with tears as she fell over Stygius's body and started to sob. "What is it? What's going on! Love! Speak to me!" the king said with a hint of desperation.

The moonlight shield didn't block the bullets perfectly, but it deflected them and slowed their progress, and the magical energy weapons of the Flashers and Burners were unimpeded as they struggled to keep the enemy at bay.

Tenebra knelt next to her father. "He's dead, Father," she sobbed. "Stygius is dead!"

The large dark batpony knelt, sweeping his wing across the ground until it brushed Stygius's still face. "No. My son..." he whispered hoarsely. His wing dipped into the cooling pool of blood. "My boy!" he cried, and then he jerked his face towards the gunshots, roaring at the shooters, "You motherless bastards, you killed my son!" Tears soaked his blindfold as he summoned up a black nimbus around himself, the air suddenly growing chill. "DIE!" he roared.

The nimbus exploded up away from him, fountaining out the top of the moonlight dome before sweeping down like an inferno of black fire. It carried with it all the pain of a grieving father and mother, seeking out the Brood as if it had a life of its own. Wherever it touched, flesh failed, metal corroded, and brick crumbled. The cloud of black flame broke into great roaring snakes that sought out every single Brood, and then, as if sensing his presence, the serpents all seemed to orient on the Legate. His eyes widened in surprise before he winked away along with the two unicorns. As if sensing they'd been robbed of their vengeance, the tendrils of black flame assaulted the smokestack he'd occupied. The brick and rebar disintegrated under the ebony onslaught, tumbling down towards the street and continuing to decay as they fell. Not a single pebble or stone reached the clustered ponies below.

The burst of dark magic, or Stygius's death, or both, seemed to wither the stallion. The tips of his mane turned gray, and his powerful frame weakened. "Husband, no! I've just lost a son! I'll not lose a husband as well," Persephone cried out, holding him tightly around the neck. The storm of black flame seeking out the remaining Brood guttered as if starved for air, and died. Hades slumped against Persephone, his legs shaking as he sat down hard. "My love. My love..." she murmured as she held him.

Tenebra held a potion bottle to Whisper's lips, and she drank by reflex rather than any wish for the pain to ebb. "What happened to him?" she murmured as she stared at the king.

"The price for using dark magic in excess," Tenebra replied, reaching down to stroke Stygius's mane. "Poor Brother. You always had to be so damned noble."

Whisper gazed at Stygius. "I was going to be married. I was going to have a family. A real family..." She reached up to the earring with a trembling hoof, but the shaking was so great that the moonstone earring popped from her ear and fell, landing in the pool of blood. Whisper shook even more, staring at him. "Damn it. Damn it! I'm supposed to be... I want... why..." she stammered, her voice getting higher and tighter as her eyes burned. "What is the fucking deal?!" she screamed out to the sky. "Why couldn't he just live? Why the fuck does everyone keep dying on me? Why the fuck can't I get a damned break? Just once?"

"I don't know," Persephone answered softly, stroking Hades gently with one of her wings. Tenebra extended another potion to her, but she turned away.

There was still fighting going on, and close. More bullets and explosions to the south. She rubbed her face with a bloody hoof. "Fuck. Fuck fuck fucking fuck! How... why... what the fuck am I

supposed to do? All I wanted was to be fucking happy! Why can't I just have that! Just... have it?" She slumped. "Fuck... I don't even want to fight anymore. I just... fuck."

Persephone put her wingtip under Whisper's chin and lifted her face until their eyes met. "There's no need for... for dramatics dear," she said in a voice as brittle as glass. "The time for weeping will come later. You haven't lost everything. You still have us."

"But..." She stared at the batponies. "But... I... he's gone... I'm not. I mean..."

"You are still a part of us, no matter what's happened." Persephone brushed some of the blood from her face. "You might have a long way to go, my child, and your language desperately needs some refinement, but we will not forsake you. You're a part of our family."

Whisper looked from one to the next. "You... you mean it?"

Tenebra sighed, rolling her tired eyes. "I guess if I'm going to have a sister, it's appropriate that she's a bitch." But she wore a small joyless smile as she said it.

"Tenebra," her mother admonished in a weary voice.

"What? She just said a dozen obscenities in a row! I'm not allowed to call her a bitch?" Her voice hitched. "That's— that's hardly fair!" Tenebra protested, tears on her cheeks, the exchange drawing a tiny twitch to the corner of Whisper's lips.

"Ah, family," Hades rumbled softly.

Whisper reached over and took the potion Tenebra had offered earlier, holding it between her hooves, then drank it down. She tossed the empty aside and looked to the pale batpony. "But... how do I... after all that's happened?"

"I was told it's not what happens to us but how we rise to meet it. How will you?" she asked Whisper quietly.

Whisper sat there, staring at the little white stone gleaming in the pool of darkening red. Tenebra raised her hoof and tapped her PipBuck. "This is Bat Two. Is there anypony on that can give me a situation report?"

There was a pause, and then, "This is Homage. The Brood are pushing into the northeast from the north. It looks like they're trying to push everypony south towards Fallen Arch. Another group tried to push the Society and Collegiate north and west as well, but the former was halted. We've got some refugees in the Core. Nothing's happening, yet."

"Hades is out of action, and we've lost... my brother. We're clear of the Brood for the moment. What does Storm Chaser want us to do?" Tenebra said as she looked to the north.

"Withdraw back to Fallen Arch. Try and stop the refugees from getting into the Core. The *Cyclone*'s giving as much cover as it can spare. We're bringing help right away, but... damn it!" Homage swore. "Refugees are starting to go into the Core from the Arena too!"

"Maybe Blackjack was wrong. Maybe refuge in the Core is our only hope?" Tenebra asked.

"Blackjack's never wrong. Not about stuff like that," Whisper murmured as she carefully fished out the moonstone earring. The white opaline surface had become stained a dark red. She gazed at it. "If she says it's bad, then it's bad."

"Well," Homage answered, "unless she shows up in the next five minutes, there's going to be a whole lot of people in the Core. The defenders are barely holding the lines as is. I have help coming, but it'll be a few hours before they get here."

The stone turned over, balanced on the ends of her pinions. "He came for me himself," Whisper murmured. "Why? I'm nopony... He doesn't care about Fluttershy... he has my father... why come and kill me?" She closed her eyes, but the image of her father saying that word over and over again rose inside her.

Sing.

How could she sing? The joy she'd felt inside her that moment was gone. Everything that remained had collapsed in on itself, filling her heart with jagged shards of rage. She opened her eyes, looking at Stygius's limp body. The ghost of a smile still resting on his lips. She closed her eyes, seeing the Legate with her father there, smirking, killing them as if he were a colt playing a prank. Anger began to burn anew, fed by a purer fuel than she'd stoked it with before.

You could sing with more than just love...

Homage was saying something about the zebras and Velvet Remedy when Whisper touched her own PipBuck. "Homage. Can you connect me to as many ponies across the Hoof as you can?"

"I think so. We've got enough control for that," Homage replied. "Why?"

But Whisper didn't answer immediately. They carefully put Stygius across her back, and she held him without struggle. Then, she clipped the red stone back to her ear, the gem glowing in the sunlight, and started to walk to the south. As she did, every footfall made a percussive beat. One-one two three... One-one two three... Then, as before, music began to play along with each step. Was it coming from her PipBuck or simply because she was in that moment where there was a song she needed to sing?

*When all feels lost...
what remains... is most precious to us.
Hold. Hold on to love...
Hold on to life... Hold on to tomorrow...*

Maybe it was whatever magic she channeled in this moment, or maybe my blank body was throwing one last curveball at me, but I suddenly had images of ponies all across the Hoof fighting and struggling against the onslaught of the Brood. Of exhausted mares and stallions wanting the fighting to be done. Of terrified people seeking any shelter they could. Of soldiers crying out for bullets, bandages, or help. Of fighters struggling against exhaustion. And as she sang, the words reached them through radios and PipBucks, her hard notes cutting through the panic and mayhem.

*Rise. Hoofington Rise.
Don't let the fear crush you down now.
Rise. Hoofington Rise!
Stand for the light. Don't let it die!*

Amidst all the images, one of Velvet Remedy stood out. I couldn't guess why she was surrounded by zebras, but the black unicorn mare joined in, her voice low and smooth as she ignored the zebras watching her in bafflement.

*When hate burns on for too long
Everything's cast away now.
But, with friends near, loved ones so dear,
We can carry the day so*

Then, in unison, the pair cried out in harmony, Velvet with dozens of zebras and Whisper surrounded by ever more batponies, Burners, Flashers, and every other exhausted fighter tired of this day.

Stand! Hoofington stand!
Face our foe. Drive back the darkness raging!
Stand! Hoofington Stand!
Don't give up now!
Stand! Hoofington Stand!
Sing together to beat back this darkness!
Stand! Hoofington Stand!
Vict'ry's near, hold your loved ones closer!

As they sang, ponies who were running for their lives stopped and stiffened as if an invisible wind blew through them. They turned back towards the fighting. A purple batpony colt started back towards the fighting. Then another pony. Another. Solo ponies looked to each other. Pairs formed groups. Gangers and traders, the wounded and frightened, started back from the protection of the Core. Only the greediest and bitterest scavengers stayed behind, determined to loot whatever they could however they could. The music softened, and I was astonished that Whisper could sing so sweetly even when carrying Stygius's body across her shoulders.

You might feel lost and
wandering alone...
But others are here
to lend an ear
to make this place feel like home
So look! Look to the living, look to the loving,
laughing, praying, fighting!

The battered defenders around the Arena, fighting behind barricades and in the skies, turned at the sight of an army of reinforcements rushing in to help as the pair sang out, joined by dozens of others filling in however and wherever they could. Together.

Fight! Hoofington Fight!
Don't give up to fear and sorrow.
Fight! Hoofington Fight!

Don't give up hope...
for a bright tomorrow!
Rise! Hoofington Rise!
The time is now to raise your voices

Rise! Hoofington Rise!
Rise! Hoofington Rise!

And face tomorrow!

The song ended and the music faded away, but the sentiment raged on as my awareness returned to Whisper, bearing her slain love across her back, the red moonstone gleaming beside her left eye. "Homage. I need you to tell me where the Legate is. Now. He took my love from me. I'll be damned if I'm going to let him hold on to my father as well," she said as—

oooOOOooo

Suddenly I was back in the rocket... most of me. I made a number of undignified noises as I flailed my limbs and wings, trying to get my eyes to focus on Bastard in front of me, holding my blank body in his hooves. Eye control was re-established first, followed by motor function, and finally linguistics as I made a disjointed 'huh?' noise.

He peered at me from over the top of his sunglasses. "Oh. Look who's awake. Princess Not-Zoning-Out-Anymore-Till-She-Deals-With-Shit. It's a miracle." He levitated my blank body to a couch on the other side of the cabin, glowering at me, then pointed a hoof at Scotch Tape. The young mare was curled up on her couch again, staring at her hooves. "You two need to fucking talk. She's mastered the art of risky sex with complete strangers, and I'm pretty sure the second we touch down, she's going to graduate to booze, chems, and self-mutilation."

I looked at her sitting there all alone, then tore my eyes back to him. "I don't know what to say," I muttered lamely. "I'm not good with words." I put my magic around the blank body, ready to levitate it back to me.

He drew a pistol and pointed it unerringly at my blank's head.

"I'm good at causing fucking misery, but you're the master, Blackjack. 'I'm not good with words.' What the fuck is wrong with you? She's lost her father and her friends, and you're as distant as the fucking moon right now. She's so desperate for somepony that she's screwing me. Now get your ass over there and deal with it, or I'll fulfill my fucking contract and kill a Blackjack." And I knew, staring into his eyes, that he meant every word. I could stop him, or even kill him, but there was just one problem...

He was right.

A part of me was incensed that this churl was forcing the issue. How dare he? I could help Scotch after this was finished. There were all kinds of dreams that I could craft to address her loss. Talking... that was messier. If I could adopt a guise or persona, I could address this indirectly. Work around to helping her, and she wouldn't even be aware I was doing it. That way, if it blew up, I wouldn't be hurt. Blamed. Punished.

"Damn it," I muttered. Slowly, I shifted over to where Scotch sat curled up, her mane obscuring her face. As I sat beside her, she gave a tiny sniff, but nothing else. What was I supposed to say? 'So, how was he? Scale of one to ten?' or 'How are you doing?' or...

"Sorry," I said dumbly. I swallowed hard. "Sorry about your father. Sorry about Rampage. Sorry about... everything."

She didn't respond for a long while. Luna would have trotted off. Come back when she fell asleep and work some magic with her dreams. Explain herself. Work the situation till she came around. I had to wait, no matter how much I hated it. No matter how I saw P-21 lying there, impaled, and heard Scotch Tape screaming for him. "I wish I were a real Princess. I don't think I am. Not really. A real Princess would have saved them both. Somehow." I lifted my hooves, looking at the precision clockwork turning inside the intricate housing. "I couldn't do anything."

"Did you try?" Scotch Tape asked.

I closed my eyes, feeling tears on my cheeks. "I could have tried harder. Found some way to cut through the bars. Found some way to keep Horizons from going off. Something. Gotten him back to the Astrostable." I rubbed the cool metal across my eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry doesn't make it better, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape snapped at me, giving me a glare so like his that I almost saw dark blue eyes instead of her teal. "You're... you! You blow up huge towers and

survive balefire bombs! You do the craziest shit like it's nothing! Why couldn't you have done it this time? Some trick or some... something! Why didn't you?"

"Because I couldn't!" I shouted back at her. "What do you want from me?"

"A miracle!" she yelled. "What else are Princesses for? What else is a goddess for?" she asked as she wept, hot, angry tears dripping down her cheeks like molten angst. "You could have... you should have... why... why?" Now her voice choked to a whimpering pleading. "Why didn't you save him?"

"Because..." But I couldn't say more. How could I tell her that I'd promised him to keep her alive? Bastard was right. She was hurt. Damned hurt. Not in body, but in the heart. Anything I said could twist back and make her blame herself for his death, if she wasn't already. "He promised me that... that if anything should happen... I... I..." I licked my lips, then held my stomach. "I had to save my babies. *His* babies. After going through so much to get them back, I had to."

The lie worked. Some of the pain and anger dripped from her. Suspicion remained, but there was doubt there, too. She said in a breaking voice, "He told me... he told me not to let you... get down. That I'd have to keep you off the mattress... whatever that means. Keep you happy and focused. And I tried to pretend, but you... you didn't seem like you cared. Like it wasn't your fault."

I turned to the window, my voice faint as I felt my throat choke up. "I... I care... Please... believe me. I care..." It wasn't my fault, though. Not really. Between Horizons and his injuries... maybe if I'd insisted on bringing Velvet Remedy and her friends, she might have done something. Keeping the Hoof intact was more important, though. "I wish things had been better," I said, then gritted my teeth, trying to keep the panic from overwhelming me. "I wish... so many things..."

"I wish I just... aside from Daddy... that everything inside me was okay. That's why I did... you know... with him," she said, glancing over at where Bastard was adamantly not looking in our direction. "You've said how sex is your reset button. I hoped it'd reset me too."

"Did it work?" I asked with a tiny, envious half smile.

The young mare pressed her knees together. "It was okay while I was doing it, but I still couldn't forget. Now I'm sticky and sore, and that's about it. I'm not getting off this seat till I get a wet towel on my nethers." She closed her eyes. "I'm half amazed he did it at all, but he just asked me if I was sure. He let me set the pace."

"Because I didn't want the crazy moon Princess to pop my head like a zit if I'd done you bloody and raw," Bastard answered from across the rocket. "If you're old enough to seriously want it, you're old enough to seriously do it. Though that was in the top ten list of most messed up things I've done."

"I wasn't bad, was I?" Scotch asked with a frown.

He turned towards us, pointed his cigarette like an accusing finger, opened his mouth silently, and froze. He popped the cigarette back in his mouth and reclined back in the chair. "Nope. Not going to talk about it. Just going to file it under things I'm going to forget about today," he mumbled around the cigarette.

Scotch Tape drooped her ears. "I guess I was..."

"You were fine! Great! Fantastic, even! You're just a few years younger than I'd like, okay? I don't want to know where you learned how— You know what? This is us, not talking about it. Ever." He glared menacingly at both of us, but I simply smirked back, and Scotch Tape snorted. He levitated my blank body back to me. "Okay! Here you go. You talked. She's no longer looking like she wants to die. You can go back to doing whatever you were doing cuddling with this thing."

"I'm looking at what's happening in Equestria," I answered, taking the body in my embrace. "There's a lingering magical connection between this body and the ponies I've met." And the reality of what was happening in the Hoof came rushing back in on me like a tsunami. My smile disappeared. "It's not good."

"Tell me," Scotch Tape said.

So I did.

Ten minutes later I'd filled them in on everything from the razing of Chapel to the fate of Stygius and Whisper. The latter upset Scotch far more than the former. Toilets and towns could be rebuilt so long as the people survived.

"I can't believe that he proposed, only to get killed," Scotch Tape said as she wiped her tears. "That has to be the worst timing ever."

"If he hadn't proposed, she wouldn't have started singing, and if she hadn't sung, I don't think the Legate would have shown up himself to stop her. He was trying to kill Whisper. I think he was afraid of her," I replied as I looked down at the planet looming closer and closer. We were over the zebra lands again. I could make out the megaspells still raging and flickering in the midst of their Wasteland. I was responsible for this. They'd been my enemy and I'd wanted them defeated, but I'd never imagined that the weapons we'd wrought would continue to slay centuries later.

"Afraid? Of a little singing?" Scotch Tape said skeptically

"Don't knock ponies singing together," Bastard replied. "I don't understand it myself, but I knew folks who said there's a magic there beyond just casting spells. Think about it. People together just deciding to sing together, everypony knowing the words, everypony in unison, sometimes with music from who knows where... it's magic. And when it's done, earth ponies might have rebuilt an entire house in a few hours, or a unicorn in Canterlot's made connections with damn near everyone in the city. I don't understand it, but even I don't scoff at it." He paused and pursed his lips. "If I ever do burst into some silly song, though, shoot me, please. Especially if there's dancing involved."

We both regarded him quietly a second. "One day, you're going to tell your story, Bastard."

"Only with a gun to my head, Blackjack," he replied. "Actually, even then, I'd probably just tell you to pull the trigger."

I shook my head and looked out the window at Equus again, then asked, "How long do you think it'll be till we arrive?"

"Not long now. Within the hour, I think," Scotch Tape said as she examined the computer running the ship. "Are you going to go back in?"

"One more time, I think. I want to see what the Legate and the others are doing. We'll probably have to regroup at the University. So many are injured..." And so many gone, I didn't add. With one last look at the young mare, I added, "Are we good now? No more hating me?"

"I hate that Princess powers don't include breaking the rules so ponies we love can live. Otherwise, what's the point?" Scotch Tape asked with a frown as she fiddled with the machine, sitting quite uncomfortably next to it. "Go fast. When we're five minutes away from reentry, we'll pull you out again."

I nodded and pressed my horn to the blank's brow. It was harder, this time. Maybe the first break had weakened the magical connection, or maybe it was our distance from the moon. Either way, it

took me almost a minute to push myself into that dark space, and a minute more to find the last pool I needed.

Goldenblood.

oooOOOooo

"You seem tense," Goldenblood rasped from a table atop a building in the middle of the Core. Dozens of gem-studded monitor screens showing camera feeds from around the Hoof sat on other tables around some terminals next to Goldenblood. The Legate paced along the sheer edge, his face a mask of frustration. His unicorns waited in silent subservience, twenty or so Brood cyberzebras arranged in rings around the top of the tower. "Are things not turning out how the Eater told you they would?"

"I've taken your legs. Your jaw isn't as difficult to remove," the red-striped zebra said as he walked back and forth along the precipice. The looping orbitals on his face looked like deep ravines carved into his flesh. "Things just aren't progressing as smoothly as I'd like. That damned song. What is it with ponies and singing?! Everything was going wonderfully, and then they had to start caterwauling!" He jabbed a hoof down at the Core, and Goldenblood saw a few scavengers picking through the remains of the last ponies to try sheltering there. "There should be thousands down there! So much effort to draw so many of you wretched ponies to the Hoof so that I could herd them in here. Thousands! Stallions, mares, and foals. Especially foals! Instead, they fight on."

"So sorry our desire to survive doesn't align with your elaborate master plan for our complete annihilation," Goldenblood rasped. "I thought your victory was inevitable."

The Legate glared. "If the trajectory hadn't been changed, Horizons would have impacted through the crust and possibly reacted with the Eater before it could be devoured. Changing the trajectory was supposed to bring it straight down!" He grabbed Goldenblood by the neck and held him over the edge. Below was the pit leading straight down to the Eater. "The starmetal netting and magical fields would have easily captured it! But instead, it's taking the scenic route. The sensible thing would have been a straight shot!"

"Oh, so that little detail's still tripping you up?" Goldenblood asked with a chuckle, then started laughing.

"What's so funny?" the Legate demanded.

"Us," Goldenblood laughed. "The two of us with our ridiculously convoluted plans to kill everypony... me to save the world, and you to end it. It's hilarious!" The raw laughter prompted the Legate to slam him into the ground at the edge of the white building that I now identified as the M.o.I. hub.

"*Your* plans?! You were used! My master used you! I serve *willingly*. I will help it devour every last spark of life in the universe!" he shouted.

"Yeah. Brilliant life, that. You might have been better just having a family. I know I would have," Goldenblood quipped.

Then the Legate swept him up and shouted in his face, "Do you think I haven't loved?!"

Goldenblood stared as the Legate seethed. "I've lived for thousands of years. Thousands! Even as a Starkatteri and Proditor, I've found love. Passion. Joy, even! All it does is rot! One death after another. I've had wives turn into decrepit bags of bone and sinew. Lovers turn old and dull and fat. I've watched children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren die over and over. Violence! Disease! Despair! Again and again. I've endured centuries alone because it numbed the pain of one parting after

the next! Life is a curse! It is punishment! It is a joke! We live for fleeting years and then perish just so our offspring can do the same as well. Madness!”

He threw Goldenblood back to the ground with a snapping of more bone, then glowered down into the pit. “Life is a lot like you, Goldenblood. A rancid, festering corpse that, by some cruel joke of the universe, keeps struggling on, spreading pain and suffering. And I will crush it and you, you rotten little worm, under my hooves. I will end the joke and take my war to the stars so that they, too, can find the peace of nonexistence. I will destroy everything. I am the great cleanser, and this world is merely the first tiny baby step of my grand campaign. Do you understand? Are you even capable of grasping the scope of my plans? This is nothing. *You* are nothing. You pathetic little mortals just don’t realize it yet!”

Goldenblood simply lay there staring up at him monologuing. *I tried to kill everyone out of a misguided duty to Equestria. Destruction the only redemption I could conceive. How shameful. How petty. How foolish. But all this hate... this malice... Millennia of life, and this is what you desire?* “This is what you do with immortality,” he said with disgust. “Pathetic.”

“This is what every immortal does, eventually,” he answered, then stared at the setting sun. “Every immortal craves an ending. If we don’t get it, we’ll create it.” He then looked back down into the streets. “There’s nothing for it. Hopefully there’s enough. Pity. I really wanted more foals for this.” He raised his head and closed his eyes. A moment later the building started to tremble. “Now,” he breathed.

“What are you doing?” Goldenblood asked as the shaking grew. “You’re turning the Enervation back on, aren’t you?” he shouted in alarm.

“Don’t be silly. What a waste that would be.” He opened his eyes and pointed a hoof at a building across the pit as the shaking grew. A shriek filled the air from countless throats. Then the building erupted in a great fountaining of red gore. The viscous material poured out of the broken top, assembling into all manner of crawling, pinching, stinging monstrosities. Another building erupted. And another. Torrents of thick red goo surged out windows and through cracks and up grates. They turned into swarms of flying things with stingers and pincers. Collected into great spiders. Lumped into enormous, monstrous shapes that lumbered down the streets.

At the same time, swarms of mechasprites swept in and with their wings and lasers cut off those trying to flee. Those caught by the great oozing mass seemed to be assimilated by it, swelling grotesquely as they screamed in agony on the screens. The Legate watched the scenes with a look of profound frustration as the mechasprites seemed to jam augments into hemmed-in ponies almost at random, creating horrors that tried to totter or limp away before the red mass snared and consumed them.

“Come on,” he muttered at the screens. “Come on! Your time is almost up! Here I am! Look at what’s coming! You’re great and powerful and afraid! Give in to your terror! Use it! Use your great and overwhelming power before it’s too late! Use it!”

“What are you talking about? What are you...” Goldenblood trailed off. “Oh no... Celestia One...” And his eyes turned to the skies.

The clear and open air above Hoofington west of the Core seemed to shimmer, and golden lines of light began to coalesce into rings. Rings with their centers angled towards the setting sun. The golden rings began to spin. “Yes...” the Legate breathed as he stared at the light. “Yes. Yes! Do it! Do it!”

“No!” Goldenblood shouted... and then was blinded by an immense, blazing glow as the light of the setting sun focused like the beam of a magnifying glass, only to be interrupted by a field of magic surrounding the M.O.I. hub. The Legate laughed in glee as the energy poured into the shield with abandon, and the shaking suddenly increased.

"Yes!" he cried out, forehooves thrust to the heavens, his shadow stark and absolute as it fell across Goldenblood.

And it wasn't the only one. These weren't thin javelin-like beams of energy but rivers of fire in the sky. More beams blasted down from those rings, sweeping across the monstrosities pouring out of the skyscrapers. These weren't protected by shields, and the flesh incinerated with a horrible sweet stench of burning meat and glass. One by one, the beams of scorching light crawled through the Core and lit one building after another alight. Some disintegrated instantly, but others were reinforced enough that a casual brushing of the megaspell was only sufficient to turn them into blazing torches. Often, inexplicably, the beams struck magical fields that seemed to suck in the energy briefly before sweeping away to hit other areas of the Core, some with their own shields, some without.

And the Legate laughed in triumph, tears of joy streaking his cheeks.

The sun slipped down below the horizon, and the megaspell continued to pour on power for another minute or two before it winked out as well. The Core burned, but still it stood. Five minutes hadn't been enough to melt the city to its bedrock. Great heaps of meat sizzled like overcooked steaks while the mechasprite swarms had been rendered into bubbling puddles of slag. Half the monitor screens showed only static. All was still. All silent.

Then the lights came on. One by one, the towers that weren't aflame lit up. Green lines outlined and illuminated the streets below. Countless televisions and radios began to play old prewar tunes. The rotted remains of the lives that had lived here before lay naked and exposed and ugly for all to see. Along the wall and tower tops, talismans flashed and winked.

Nopony spoke. Then, "What did you do?"

"Harvested more energy in five minutes than I could have in years," the Legate said as he smiled out at the illuminated ghost that was the Core.

"For what?"

"This," the Legate said with a smile, and the towers began to shake once more. Only this time there was no relenting, the trembling growing louder and louder.

Suddenly, the side of a nearby tower exploded. A long, gleaming silver shaft erupted sideways from the obsidian monolith, sending immense black panels tumbling down into the street below. A matching shaft burst forth from the building on the other side of the street, and the two shafts met above the road. The fingers on the ends of each shaft enmeshed perfectly, and, with a hiss of gas, hundreds of bolts slammed into place to lock them together. This happened again with another pair of buildings. And again, and again, throughout the Core.

Then the shafts began to turn.

The skyscrapers began to move.

With a noise louder than I could have imagined, immense buildings were being shifted about. The unbreakable starmetal that was woven around the girders and through the beams and motors kept them intact as rotating shafts slowly screwed them towards each other, the Core compressing together and away from the pit in the center of Hoofington.

"F.A.D.E. shields take energy to block energy. You reversed it," Goldenblood said as the screeching died down, many of the buildings now flush against one another. Portions of their foundations were crumbling away, revealing a circular-patterned silver grid, wide holes between the thin wires, beneath them and the crushed streets.

"An ingenious application your M.A.S. was developing. I liberated a copy of the theory from the hub here half a century ago. Really, it was a pity you never involved Twilight in the Tokomare project. I just relish imaging what I could have accomplished with her curiosity and ambition."

He picked up the ghoul with one hoof and stood, looking out as the city slowly rearranged itself around them, the M.O.I. hub an increasingly isolated spire in the midst of all this transformation. "Nopony can stop me. Nopony can face me. I will end this world. I will save it from its misery. And I will do so to the next world, and the next, and the..." He paused as a green light appeared, streaking between the towers as they moved. "Wait... what is..."

That streak launched itself towards the M.O.I. tower, dropping down and following the crumbling remains of the streets, weaving around the lampposts that still jutted up alongside the crushed wagons like a blazing ball of fire. It reached the base of the tower and disappeared. A second later, a blazing green bird popped into view in front of the Legate and Goldenblood, the ghoul immediately feeling his broken body strengthen as the Legate gaped at it in bafflement.

Then the bird opened its mouth wide and sprayed a tight beam of flame right into the Legate's face. His meat immediately charred and blasted away, leaving a blackened skull atop his neck. He dropped Goldenblood at once, raising his hooves to block the flame as the Brood around him began to writhe, some firing at random and others collapsing. The torrent of flame ended, leaving a dark line of soot painted across the top of the tower. Black flecks of bone and meat immediately began to sweep back into his charred face and limbs, reassembling his head. In seconds, he'd be back together.

That was a few seconds too many.

From the air around the tower, shimmery fields dropped to unleash a platoon of bat-winged zebras. At the same time, a dozen alicorns, four of each color, appeared around the tower. Velvet Remedy rode one of the purples as she gazed down sadly at the Brood, then gave a little nod. At once the alicorns began to blast at the staggered enemy, even as she averted her eyes.

Lancer landed in a crouch, his wings folding behind him, as he fired three-round bursts into the heads of the unicorns. Majina, landing on the opposite corner of the rooftop, fired blowdarts so quickly that it was almost too fast to see her reload. Sekashi landed with her stick and expertly knocked out the legs of the Brood, leaving them for other fighters to finish off. All the while, the tower shook as more and more of the Core transformed around them.

A field of magic lifted Goldenblood, but before he could be pulled away, the half-reformed Legate grabbed him and yanked him back down with a guttural cry of "No!" As his eyes reformed in their sockets, he tied Goldenblood to the terminals with monitor cables. "You're mine!" His head restored, the Brood came to life and began returning fire at the shielded alicorns. Their healing talismans were already hard at work restoring their bodies as the zebra Brood faced their striped counterparts while the Brood unicorns countered the alicorn magic.

A few zebras unloaded barrages of spark grenades and some of the alicorns blasted with lightning, but the eruptions of energy were sucked away through the air and into golden metal rods set in the corners of the hub's roof.

The Legate charged straight at Lancer as the latter sent a pair of sniper rounds into the head of another unicorn. Then a stick jutted out, tripping the Starkatteri. To his credit, he recovered in a somersault and launched himself right at Sekashi. "The wife that got away," the Legate sneered as he punched right at her face. She just barely evaded what could have easily been a killer blow by deftly deflecting it with her staff. "Pity you found out about me."

"That reminds me... of a very funny story..." Sekashi grunted as she gave constant ground around where Goldenblood was tied up. "About a husband... who thought he was still married..." He hooked his

forehooves around her staff, and his head lunged in, smashing against Sekashi's face. Taking her staff, he shattered it in his grasp and tossed it aside.

"I always loved your stories," he said as he advanced at her on two legs as casually as walking. Then there was a drawn out 'ptptptptptptptpt', and he paused, then craned his neck to see a dozen darts imbedded in his posterior.

"You're a bad daddy," the zebra filly said, eyes narrowed as she loaded another dart.

He kicked out, tagging a monitor and sending it rocketing into Majina's face with such force that the filly was sent skidding towards the edge. Lancer scrambled to catch her before she careened off, but the little zebra went tumbling out of sight. Lancer cried out as he reached for her, only for the bloody and barely sensate filly to be safely lifted in a magical field.

Sekashi lunged at the Legate's back. "You—"

But he whirled around, and his rear hoof came up. It impacted with her temple with a sickening crunch. She tumbled to the ground, blood leaking from her ears and her head twisted almost completely around. "No more stories, Love," the Legate said as he brushed the darts out of his rump.

The side of his head exploded, his body jerking and the Brood spasming along with him. Brain and skull pulled back in before his head burst apart again. "Murdering... monstrous... damned..." Lancer hissed in rage as he advanced on his hindlegs, forelegs firing the rifle again and again. "Die!" Blam. "Die already!" Blam! "Die, you miserable excuse for a—" Click.

In a moment, the Legate was there. In the next moment, the impact of his hooves sent Lancer flying across the roof. He slammed into one of the four lightning rods, his body nearly wrapping around it as his bones cracked and splintered. The Legate kicked the sniper rifle over the edge as he approached his wounded son. "Always so ungrateful..." the Legate muttered.

Then the air above him shimmered, and a zebra mare landed between the two. She had striped bat wings, and a number of fetishes dangled from around her neck. On her back was another filly in a cloak, who jumped off and piped, "Remember, you can't beat him. He'll kill you if you try."

Adama stood between Lancer and the Legate as the filly ran to where Majina lay, pulling out a healing potion for her. "I can take him," Adama said as she glowered at him. Majina weakly drank the potion. "He's just a zebra."

"Sure. Just a zebra." The filly pulled out a roll of paper and studied it a moment. "Well, it's your funeral," Pythia said as she pulled back her hood. "Betelgeuse gives you fifteen thousand to one odds, but none of the other stars are taking him up on his offer. Well, except Sirius, but he's nuts."

"Pythia! You betray me?" the Legate said in shock.

"The others are running for their lives, but I just wanted to see how this would play out with my own eyes," the filly said as she held the dazed Majina close in one hoof and the starmap in the other. "You forgot the first rule, Amadi. We use the stars. We don't serve them. You're a bug playing with balefire bombs." The Legate whirled and kicked a monitor at the filly, who ducked a moment before it took her head off. "Okay. A really deadly bug, but my point stands!"

As his back was turned, Adama made her move. She seized the Legate around his neck, jerking backwards as she attempted to choke him. He kicked off the ground, flipping over her and bending her over backwards as she struggled to maintain the grip. His forehooves punched out to either side of her torso, and her ribs cracked under the onslaught. When she released him, he kicked her over by Lancer with a pleased smirk on his lips.

"Why do they never listen?" Pythia lamented, then put her hooves to her mouth and whistled – hey, how'd she do that?! – sharply to a nearby green alicorn who was trying to blast only cyber-augmented zebras. "Hey! You want to get his gun? Should be two floors down on the left side of the building caught on some fancy decorations. That'd be great!" The alicorn gaped at her, and Pythia waved a hoof at her in irritation. "Don't give me that 'freaky zebra filly' look! Just go get his gun! We're going to need it!" When the green flew down, she rubbed her temples. "Honestly..."

The Legate surveyed the carnage around him and laughed, a broad grin on his face. "Fools. You're all fools! I've won, and you don't even know it! But I thank you for the entertainment!"

"Momma," Majina said as she struggled to rise.

Pythia held her close. "Shh. Just stay here. A few minutes more, and it'll all be over. Or, you know... he'll kill us. Either way, should be interesting."

The buildings of the Core were rising up now, lifting into ever higher spires. Gears and cables all worked as the city seemed to heft up around the mile-wide space they'd cleared, the M.o.I. building still a lone tombstone amid the ruins. Thousands of shiny cables snaked down into the pit beneath the grid. Any buildings not in the process of movement lay smashed like broken toy chests spilling out their contents to the wind.

Wounded zebras were being withdrawn onto alicorns who now devoted all their magical power to their shields as the Brood organized and concentrated their fire. Pyrelight streaked around the rooftop, blasting little goutts of fire and sweeping past any Brood she could engage without burning others around her. The Legate practically pranced around the monitors, smashing any zebra who challenged him. "Soon. Soon," he repeated over and over again.

"Yeah, soon," Pythia said, and started counting down from ten.

The Legate paused as he looked at the two fillies. "What? What have you seen?"

"Seven. Six."

"Tell me!" the Legate demanded as he stormed over to the edge to face the pair of young ponies.

"Four... three... two... behind you," Pythia finished with a smirk.

The Legate turned just in time to see a flash of yellow that streaked across the roof.

Then his head disappeared. It tore completely off at the shoulders, broke into clumps, and went flying off over the edge. The Brood attack faltered, the cyberbeings staggering. Then his head pulled itself back together again. "What..." A second flash, a second obliterating kick that not only pulped his skull but knocked him rolling across the roof. Again, his head pulled itself back together long enough for him to mutter, "...was..." A third flash, this one sending his entire body flying into one of the lightning rods with such force the rod almost cut him in two. His head, still attached to the mutilated body, muttered, "...that?" Then his body reversed the injuries and pushed him off the golden metal rod.

Whisper hovered before him. "Me. You took my husband. You won't take anything else."

"Oh. The songbird. You're the one who convinced all my poor, despairing sacrifices to keep fighting instead of hiding in here." He rose to his hooves. "That was annoying. I'd put a lot of work into that!"

"Your face is annoying!" Whisper replied as she flashed forward again, but this time the Legate spun. She passed around his body, but instead of receiving his devastating kick, she was able to sweep clear before it landed. She streaked back in, her hooves a blur as they came in for his face, and the

Legate attempted another of his spinning dodges. This time, she adjusted, ramming her hooves in the opposite direction. His body rotated clockwise, his head, counterclockwise. She was still struck by his outstretched hook, being knocked back, but she furiously beat her wings to keep from bouncing and skidding across the rooftop.

His head pulled itself back around, and he set himself, legs spread wide, and grinned at Whisper. "Finally. Someone worthwhile. Why don't you sing at me a little while we wait?"

Whisper charged back at him, the pair blending together in a frenzy of motion. Meanwhile, Pythia and Majina rushed to where Goldenblood was bound. Majina kept looking over at the prone form of her mother, but Pythia looped her tail around Majina's neck and gave a little tug. "Not now. We have to get him free. The yellow one's good. Betelgeuse gives twenty to one odds, but she can't do it alone. Hopefully the other will get here before he takes her apart."

"What other? What are you talking about?" Majina asked, her cheeks streaked with tears as she looked at her dead mother. "We... can't you help her?"

Pythia sighed. "Sorry, but when your head is backwards, it's a little too late." She rolled out the map, studying the little marks and scribbled notes on it, then took out her pendant and gave it a tap. The pendant cast little moving spots of light on the map. "Okay. Certain doom. United in strength. Blah blah blah. Come on stars, give me something juicy," she muttered, then pointed a hoof at Goldenblood and glanced at Majina briefly. "Get him free at least. It'll distract the stripes off Amadi."

Majina hesitantly started picking at the knots in the cables looped around Goldenblood.

"You're Starkatteri," Goldenblood rasped at Pythia. "Why..."

"Long story short, because I'm not a tool," the filly answered. "Now. Do you have a clue what all this is for?" she asked as she swept a hoof at the looming towers, now half as tall as Shadowbolt Tower had been. They were mostly girders now, shed of the black panels that had hidden the machinery within.

And then suddenly there was a resounding 'zing' as all those hundreds and hundreds of cables dropping down through that foundation grate drew taut. Despite the lingering fiery hues that lit the evening, the wires that stretched from the tops of the towers down to the pit still managed to shine with a singular icy malevolence.

Goldenblood's eyes widened. "I do now," he rasped. "We have to go. Everyone--"

But whatever else he was going to say was lost in the shaking. It was so strong that only the Legate remained on his hooves. The M.o.I. tower itself wobbled ominously like a massive domino but, oddly, remained intact. Perhaps the presence of so many souls had fortified it somehow. The ground was collapsing around the pit, tumbling into the growing gulf with only the starmetal grid on the ground remaining behind. The ministry hub shifted with a booming thud as it came to rest slightly askew towards the pit, part of its foundation falling into one of the holes in the grid. A few Brood slid off into the void, but the zebra fighters saved each other from tumbling off the edge. The knotted cables kept Goldenblood from sliding off, and the two fillies clung to him. He would have held them if he could.

While everyone else was trying desperately to hang on, the Legate and Whisper continued their fight, barely acknowledging the shifting battlefield. "You're fast," the Legate said as he parried and instantly counterattacked with a whirling hit. "But I can feel you're getting tired. I can keep this up forever." His eyes narrowed as he blocked a blow of one of her power hooves, the stroke blasting his foreleg clean off only to have it return a half second later. "Why don't you sing a lovely little requiem for this world? I know I'd love to hear it!" he called out over the growing rumble.

"*You're* a requiem!" Whisper screeched as she laid into him with renewed vigor.

"Come on, you old ghou..." Pythia said to Goldenblood. "What's he doing? The future is one big tangled knot of shadow right now. I know she's a way out. And there's another. But I don't get what he's doing!" she shouted. "Right now, the Eater of Souls should die, along with the rest of us, but everything's shifting around worse than this city is!"

"He's bringing it up..." Goldenblood rasped.

"Bringing what up?" Pythia shouted.

Goldenblood just stared at her a moment, and her eyes went wide. "No, he isn't! He can't! Something that big... there's no way!"

"He's been at this for years. Who knows what he was doing in Hoofington during the war? The designs for the city were always odd. Strange additions and requests. Plans changing in the middle of the night. Everything was built so quickly, nopony put it all together. The Core was likely shut down, building up power for this. Celestia One gave him the energy he needed. Now he'll bring it up, and be able to align it perfectly to catch and devour Tom when it impacts."

A purple alicorn flashed in and landed near the high edge of the roof. Velvet Remedy and a zebra in a hooded cloak slipped off. "What's going on?" the mare asked in astonishment.

"No time," Goldenblood rasped. "Get everyone off this roof now. Once the Eater's on the surface, the Enervation will kill everyone. It might already be returning."

"No!" Pythia shouted as she consulted her map. "Amadi has to be beaten. Now. It's the only way."

"He can't be," Goldenblood objected.

"He has to be. If he isn't, it won't matter when the Maiden returns. Everyone she needs will be dead. He has to be stopped now," she said as she looked up at the cloaked zebra. "Are you her? Please be her!"

"If this must be done, then I suppose I am," the zebra said quietly. "Get the roof clear."

"No!" Lancer said as he limped over, hugging his rifle to his chest. "I need to see this finished. Please."

"The healing potions aren't working anymore," Adama said, leaning on Lancer and struggling to breathe. "We must go."

"I must see this to the end. I must!" he protested.

"Yeah. He needs to stay," Pythia said. "And that yellow pegasus, too. Hopefully the other two get here before it's too late." She looked over at Majina, who sat forlornly next to her. The younger filly continued staring at the still form of her mother sprawled awkwardly where it had caught on a cable. "She should stay with me, too."

"The stars showed you that?" Goldenblood asked.

"No, the fact she hurts did. Not everything is frigging stars," Pythia answered as she put a hoof around the filly.

Velvet Remedy turned to the purple alicorn. "Flash evacuation. Everyone except me, her, the fillies, him, and that yellow pegasus. That..." She froze as she seemed to take in Whisper for a moment.

Then she shook her head hard. "I mean... Come back for us when they're all clear, and I mean everyone." She gestured to the Brood.

"You're trying to save the Brood?" Pythia objected. "They're just meat puppets!" Velvet sent a stern glare down at her, and the filly relented. "Okay. Fine. Save the puppets. Whatever makes your stars shine." Then she gasped, "But leave me till the end, too! I want to see this. It's gonna be good!"

Purples and greens began teleporting in and teleporting away with clusters of zebras and Brood, clearing the roof. Velvet and Majina kept trying to extract Goldenblood from the cables lashing him to the roof. Meanwhile, the cloaked zebra walked towards where the Legate and Whisper battled. The pegasus had been grounded during the course of the fight. Her wing was bent at a painful angle where she'd been shot earlier, and her hindleg now bled freely again. Still, she stayed on the offensive, doggedly refusing to back down.

The Legate turned to the advancing zebra. "Oh joy. Another," he said flatly. "You know this is futile, right?"

"So you say," the mare replied evenly.

"I'm immortal, invulnerable, and invincible. No matter how skilled you think you are, you'll tire and fail, just like this one," he said with a gesture at Whisper.

"Shut up," Whisper countered. "You're the failure. You haven't killed me yet. And I'm still going to kill you."

The Legate sighed as the breeze snapped at the zebra's cloak. "Well then, let's get it over with. I'm sure it'll be bracing before I win," he said sarcastically, and then frowned. "Who are you, anyway?"

The hood was pulled back, and Xenith shook out her long mane. The scarred zebra mare leveled her green eyes at the Legate and said softly, "No one."

"Heh," the Legate said as he stretched and cracked his neck. "Finally, an honest opponent."

In a flash, he was on her, his leg swinging around in a kick identical to the one that had slain Sekashi. Her forelegs lifted, and she blocked the blow with her own forehooves, her body trembling with the force for a moment and then going still. The Legate stood there, precariously balanced on one hindhoof while she held his other hindleg. "Heh," she replied softly, and then flung her own body around and slammed him into the rooftop. She didn't stop, however, continuing the roll over him, getting her feet under herself, and slamming him again like a rag doll.

Xenith continued the onslaught like a force of nature. She made no battle cries, nor did she give him a chance to set himself up for a counterattack. As fast as his body tried to repair the damage, she simply inflicted it faster. She whirled and smashed him into the ground, twisted his spine like a rag, and beat him like a drum. Never once did she release him. She simply kept breaking him over and over again.

However, he wasn't dying. He was laughing.

Xenith paused for a moment. Just a moment.

The Legate struck; as his body restored itself, he was twisted like a spring, and all the pent up energy released at once. His body untwisted almost like a propeller, smashing Xenith's skull a half dozen times as he unwound and knocked her away. His body pulled itself back together as Xenith braced herself and refocused. "Was that Fallen Caesar? It was, wasn't it?" he said, grinning like an eager colt. "I thought that style was lost. It actually hurt!"

Xenith didn't reply. She launched herself at him, landed halfway, twisted, and blasted him in the face with both hindlegs. He continued back, planting his forelegs as they landed and flipping one of his own hindlegs up at her. The limb impacted with hers hard enough to make her grimace in pain. He continued the backflip and returned to his hooves facing her.

"And you're using Archimedes's Lever technique," Xenith replied levelly. "Control and conservation of force, returning it at your attacker. That is a lost style."

Now he looked impressed. "Are you Achu? Tell me you're Achu!" he said with a grin. "Ah, if only I weren't about to end the world. I'd take you as one of my wives in an instant. I have quite a few openings in my harem."

"No. I've had a bad husband, but at least he didn't talk as much as you," she answered evenly.

"Pity." And again he was on her, whirling and kicking and reversing and striking, his movement nearly a blur. Xenith blocked and counter struck, yet nothing stuck. The moment he was away, his injuries disappeared while hers remained. Again and again, they clashed and withdrew and clashed again. One time she tore his foreleg completely off, and she showed frustration for the first time as he pulled his body back together again. For him, though, the exhilaration seemed to be almost pleasurable.

Meanwhile, the rumbling grew more cacophonous. Plumes of dust blasted up out of the depths as a shrieking, scraping noise filled the valley like the screams of the damned.

"How can she beat him?" Lancer breathed as he cradled his gun. "I've never seen fighting like that, but he's still alive!"

"She can't beat him," Pythia said with a smile. "No zebra can."

"Whew. I think I'm almost breaking a sweat," the Legate said to the panting Xenith. "Time to end this, though. I want to thank you for a most enjoyable evening, how--"

Two power hooves smashed his head in, squeezing his brains from his face like pus from a burst pustule. "She's right. You talk too much," Whisper said as she shoved him towards Xenith. The zebra seized him in a hooflock, twisting him so his chest faced Whisper. "You've got a magical heart, right?" she said as his head pulled back together. "Let's see it."

Then she went to work on his torso, beating it like he was a punching bag. Back and forth, back and forth, her hooves worked on him, the power hooves blasting and snapping as she shattered his ribs and began to smash her way into his chest cavity. Xenith gripped him tight, his body spasming and writhing as he struggled to get free, shouting in pain as goblins went flying every which way faster than they returned.

"Yes! Yes!" Pythia said with a grin. "No pony can defeat him. No zebra can defeat him!"

"But together..." Velvet breathed.

Whisper gave a final blow, and the last bits of his sternum flew away, revealing the dark lump of rock with the starmetal controller screwed into its side. "Switch!" she shouted, whirling him around as his bits and pieces came flying back in.

Xenith didn't hesitate for an instant. She rammed her forehooves into his chest as Whisper held him tight. His eyes bulged as his flesh sealed fast around her hooves. The look on his face was one of dazed shock as Xenith and Whisper braced themselves. The two gave a nod to each other.

The zebra mare's powerful frame began to twist, her muscles, normally as slim as any zebra's, bulging as she applied all her strength. Whisper strained as she struggled to hold the screaming Legate

in place. Then the air was split by a grotesque, wet tearing noise as the stone was ripped from his living chest. His eyes were wide as he stared up at it in her upraised hooves.

"Shoot! Shoot! Shoot!" Pythia shouted at Lancer, beating at him with a hoof. "The control!"

He lifted his gun, sighted in but a moment, and fired a round that sparked off the starmetal box. A second. A third. Then the box went flying off and skidded along the rooftop and over the edge. An inky fluid began to spurt from the holes it had left in the heart. A moment later, a bandaged purple alicorn rose up, holding the box in her magical field. She soared over and landed next to the others, a white mare on her back.

"Nick of time now, right?" Boo asked as she scrambled off Psalm's back. Psalm passed the starmetal control box to Velvet Remedy. Boo carried something. Something long and thin and wrapped in a loose cloth. "Uncle told me all about needing to cut things close and stuff." She carefully removed the object and let the cloth fall. "I brought this icky thing."

The silver sword gleamed in her hooves.

"Yes! Supernova!" Pythia said, then nudged Velvet Remedy. "Quick. Take it!"

Velvet eyed the sword as she would a snake. "I'm not going to take that! I'm a healer!"

"Think of it as a super-oversized scalpel, and that heart is a malignant tumor! Quick!" Indeed, the heart and the Legate seemed to be trying to reunite. Tendrils of flesh from the jagged wound in his chest stretched towards the dripping black rock. The pair strained to keep them apart.

"That's not the same thing, and you know it!" Velvet objected.

"No one else can risk getting that close with that thing. One wrong slice and you can take your own hooves off with it!" Pythia said loudly. The building gave another lurch, leaning over even more. Psalm levitated Majina and Pythia onto her back.

"I'm not going to kill somepony just because I can. We can lock him up somewhere!" Velvet protested.

"He's not a normal zebra, Velvet," Goldenblood croaked. "He's sick. He is a sickness, lingering for centuries. Killing him would be a kindness to not only his victims, but himself too."

The heart began to connect, string by string, with his body.

"Besides, he won't die if you break that heart," Pythia said with a shrug as the shaking and shrieking increased, the building tilting a little more.

"Excuse me?" Velvet Remedy said with flat skepticism.

"Only the Maiden is able to kill him. Breaking the heart will just get rid of his restoration. He'll be perfectly mortal after that, and it'll be in the Maiden's hooves." Pythia stared down at the skeptical unicorn. "Honest! Swear on my stripes and the stars in the sky," the filly added, pressing a hoof to her chest.

"I do not like this city," Velvet said sourly as she made her way to where the three strained. "Not one little bit."

The Legate's eyes followed that silver blade. "No... damn you... meddler... chaos... It wasn't supposed to be like this!" he gasped as he reached out for the heart. Velvet raised the blade high.

"Do it!" Xenith grunted as the black ooze flowed down her forelegs.

"Finish this shithead," Whisper agreed.

Velvet carefully aligned the sword so as to not slice through Xenith's limbs. Lifted it once... twice... three times... then...

"Are you sure this won't kill him?" she asked plaintively.

Everyone stared back at her, and all except the other purple alicorn and Majina shouted in unison, "Yes! Do it!"

"Look, I'm a pacifist, okay?!" she shouted back.

"Then hurry up and pacify the fuck out of him!" Whisper grunted.

She flushed and brought the blade down in one blow. The black rock immediately cracked, the sword letting out a ringing note as the Legate screamed in agony. She struck a second time, the cracks spreading, black ichor spraying out of the widening gaps. Tendrils of flesh began to curl around the stony heart, his muscles starting to bulge as the black fluid suddenly ignored gravity and started to flow into the jagged rent in his chest. Finally, the sword dropped one last time.

There was a ring of metal on stone as the heart was yanked back into his chest cavity. Instantly, the wound closed. With a great spasm, he yanked himself free of the injured Whisper's lock, throwing her into Xenith. But he didn't talk now. His eyes bulged and rolled in their sockets as he stared at his straining limbs. He opened his mouth and vomited a slurry of blood and black gore as his body trembled.

"I thought you said it wasn't going to kill him!" Velvet shouted as she backed away.

"It's not," Pythia said with a gleeful smile. "This is much worse. Good job, by the way."

The Legate was bulging, swelling, growing. He fell to all fours, his skin splitting, regrowing, and splitting again. "What's happening to him?!" Whisper asked as she and Xenith backed away towards the others. "I thought you said this would stop his regeneration."

"That heart didn't regenerate him. It restored him. Kept his body locked in one state. Time was effectively stopped for his body," the Starkatteri filly said, grinning wickedly. "Now it's not. Now it's catching up on him. A thousand years of growth and injury and all the pains of the flesh, at once. Plus all the nastiness that comes with having a cursed lump of rock in your chest for a couple millennia." Understanding settled on Whisper's face, and she looked on in silent, cold satisfaction.

The Legate now reminded me of the enormous blue pony I'd once seen named Goliath. Only Goliath hadn't had extra little legs poking out of his normal ones. He hadn't had extra eyes in extra sockets. The Legate's body was growing all at once, with no order or control. His hindlegs slipped over the edge of the roof while his forelegs scrambled to hold on. He opened his mouth wide and screamed out, "Son!" Lancer didn't reply. "Daughter!" Majina hid her face. "Someone... help me!"

"I'm sorry," Velvet Remedy said in horror. Her horn glowed. "That should help your pain."

The Legate's maw twisted in a horrible grin, and suddenly his foreleg reached out, the little sublegs wiggling and trying to grab anyone they could reach. Velvet cried out, swinging her blade wildly. The weapon seemed to seek out the Legate's flesh, lopping off the legs as she was levitated, with Xenith, onto the alicorn's back. Whisper climbed onto Psalm. "Get my dad!" she shouted as she pointed at Goldenblood. Psalm's magic tugged the wires taut, and the floating sword sliced the wires in two. The ghoul began to lift toward the alicorn.

Then the enormous, bloody hoof of the Legate curled around Goldenblood and stopped him short. "No!" Lancer shouted as he and Boo were picked up by the alicorns. He started to fire into the ankle of that limb as it seemed to grow around the ghoul, but it was as effective as shooting a tree trunk. Psalm flew above Goldenblood as the building listed more and more, tilting over towards the middle of that immense pit.

Goldenblood, though, wasn't struggling. "Go," he said as he smiled up at his daughter. "Tell Blackjack I did better." Even if he didn't think he had.

The M.o.I. hub tumbled over into the pit, leaving the two alicorns hovering over the void that had been the heart of the Core.

The tower didn't fall far.

With the building lying on its side and pinning his legs, the Legate clutched Goldenblood as the tower rose back up in a great cloud of smoke and dust. Higher and higher towards the surface it lifted till it reached the level of the starmetal grate that had supported the city. Now, that metal grate yielded like soft butter to the thing beneath the fallen tower. The two alicorns backed away as the building continued to rise higher and higher on a nest of wires. An avalanche of mud and dust poured down into the vast pit below, water and unliving gore cascading into the depths. The gleam of silver and the glow of green started to peek through the muck sliding off in great sloughs. It was shaped vaguely like a ring, a massive storm of soul motes swirling around.

Then an eye opened.

An eye the size of a Raptor.

The immense mass shifted, and two enormous silver fingers reached over, grabbed the M.o.I. hub, and flicked it away like an offending speck of dirt. The white building arced out of sight as the immense towers of the Core slowly bent outward, their bases slipping underneath the dripping mass as they spread open like the petals of a horrible steel flower. Their outstretched tips glowed a brilliant green as a cloud of white motes began to swirl faster and faster in the center of the ring. With a great creaking and grinding, that eye lifted. Something like a mouth opened wide.

Goldenblood stared at that maw, that abomination that he had unwittingly served. *I was such a fool. I should have trusted more in Glory. If she could hold on after the space--*

And it let out a scream of Enervation that could be heard around the world.

oooOOOooo

Like a candle in a tornado, Goldenblood's pool disappeared. I floated in that void, thinking of his final thoughts. The remaining pools had grown hard as rock, and I couldn't push into them anymore. Right now, I couldn't care about that. I had only one thought, and a tiny ghost of a smile on my lips.

Morning Glory was alive!

(Edited note: Scotch Tape's age would be roughly 14-15 years old. I don't know how that translates in pony years, but it's younger than Bastard would like. EQG had the CMC's in a high school after all so, you tell me.)

(Author's notes: And that's the end of the chapter. Sorry it was so long, but that goes for Horizons in general. I'd like to thank my editors who have worked so incredibly hard to help finish this enormous

monster of a chapter. The stage is set. The final act is up. Blackjack will be back in the Hoof with the final face off with the Eater to save the world. But at what price?

I'd like to thank Kkat for Fallout Equestria in the first place, and all the readers of all the fics and all the writers who keep this story and fandom going. Huge thanks to Erin and the Wasteland Wailers for taking a peek at the songs and making sure they were okay. I hope they're okay... okay... they suck, but maybe someone with musical talent can make them not suck quite so much. I just wanted her to sing...

Also, a reminder that in two weeks I'll be at EFNW. They're even going to let me be on a panel. I'm be the ugly mess of a person at the very end picking their nose with all the zits.(Heartshine: Why would you mention zits!? EEWWW swicked: Because he doesn't care about your feelings, clearly.) Still, I hope I'll be able to meet people. It'll be nice to meet and talk with folks. In light of the upcoming trip, and me moving up to Oregon for job opportunities, tips are hugely appreciated through paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com , or, if you'd like to support me long term, I now have a horrible Patreon at <https://www.patreon.com/Somber>

Also... the things I have to put up with from my editors in the comments....

Edit: Also, FoE radioshow! Listen and enjoy! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcEa5s6cd6A>)

Heartshine: This chapter. So much violence. Is there a talky, peaceful solution? Or is this the wrong crowd? I don't even. I need Somber hugs.

swicked: That song (excuse me, battle hymn) was weird, right? Really, really weird. I mean here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XVLIUoR-rvk#t=26m25s>

So yeah, weird. I just... yeah.

Weird.

I... won't even comment on the second "song". Guh.

...IGNORE ME!

Heartshine: I rewrote the 2nd song to its present incarnation, and put it to guitar chords. :P Maybe if swicked is nice to me at Everfree I'll sing it for him.

swicked: I probably won't be nice to her at Everfree :D

Heartshine: Q.Q if only Hinds would bring swicked his 4.4 grams of candy.

Bronode: What's the going exchange rate between candy and sexual favours?

Heartshine: Depends on the favour and the person asking for them?

swicked: I'll take the candy thankyouverymuch.

Bronode: Why do I ask these questions? I always regret it.

Heartshine: Solis rather likes gummy candy, Bronode. And she lives with me. You could test this theory. She seems to be rather fond of you. Maybe that'd help the exchange rate.

Hinds: I was again told to type something here and that this again counted.