

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 49: Consequence

"You have a lot to think about."

There's something distinctly depressing about being able to compare deaths. You'd think once would be enough for anypony. The last time I'd died it was peaceful. Calm. I'd spent the time beforehand feeling full warm sunshine glowing down on me while I listened to the rush of water against the hull. When I finally went, I'd been lying in Glory's embrace and surrounded by friends who cared for me, and the actual dying had been like drifting away up to a better place without a fear or worry in the world. My only regret had been that I would have liked to have seen the beautiful stars above me before I departed.

This time, it hadn't been peaceful, I wasn't drifting upwards, and I had much bigger worries than missing out on a view of the night sky. This time, I was getting ripped through some sort of murkiness like so much rainwater being sluiced through a storm drain. I'd like to think I'm one of the few ponies who knows exactly what that feels like. Enervation's piercing scream surrounded me on all sides, and every few seconds I passed through a shimmering, more-loudly-shrieking silver ring that sucked me in and spat me out ever faster. I struggled against the current out of sheer obstinacy, but it was no use; there was no way I was going to get away from it.

And as I was yanked through that gray void, flipping and spinning about, I became aware of a great glow in the distance that I was rapidly approaching. And I wasn't alone in my travels; even though I didn't have eyes, ears, or even a body, I was still aware of others being swept along with me as wailing motes of light. I brushed against one and instantly had an impression of a mare, earth pony, ganger... but then she was gone before I could feel more. Then I hit another one: colt, earth pony... I was struck by the smell of brahmin, the jingle of a pack harness, and a sensation of a horrible fever and suffocation. And then he was gone too.

Truth be told, I much preferred the first version to the sequel.

The flow increased as I was carried along, and I brushed against more pony... souls? Spirits? Every contact transferred a little information about another pony. I watched others try and break away and saw one strike the edge of one of the screaming rings as it passed; the light seemed to smear out and freeze in place, trapped against the circle as I swooshed by.

The luminescence grew brighter and brighter as we were sucked through that endless hazy gray gloom punctuated by loops of screaming silver that propelled us ever onward. For a moment I soared upward and had a glimpse of an immense disk like a circular saw blade, the motes of light being pulled through gaps in a colossal, jagged tire-like wall of silver that surrounded that glowing donut. I was sent following the rest...

And then the current weakened to a dull tug. Slowly I drifted along in a sea of motes within that immensely large wall. There were strange shadowy shapes around me, things that looked vaguely like walls and tunnels that I passed harmlessly through. From all around me came the wail and babble of untold masses crying out, some calling for Luna or Celestia to save them, others screaming in rage against their imprisonment, and others babbling in Zebra. I brushed against griffins, dragons, zebras, and

things I didn't even have names for. Over it all, though, was one terrible cry... a scream of such anguish and suffering that it dug into me.

Then, green lightning flashed from that immense wall and tore through the sea of motes. Even I screamed as an agony I'd never known flashed across me. It wasn't a physical pain so much as a sense of profound violation. It felt like being nailed back in the *Seahorse* again. The green lightning flashed again and again into the center of the sea, and the scream peaked once more.

"Awesome magic, huh?" a familiar stallion said from near me.

"Snips?" I asked. I felt him close, but I couldn't tell which of the thousands of motes around me he might be. "But you're... and I'm... shit..."

"Well, I sure am. No doubt about it," Snips replied, "but I suspect that you still have a ways to go before you're dead dead."

Huh? What was I, then? Semi-deceased? Only mostly dead? I was pretty sure this was the point where you turned me upside down and looked for loose bottle caps. "But what... Snips, what is this place?" I asked as I looked around the sea of floating lights.

"The eye of the storm. The tar pit. The ocean to which eternal rivers flow," Snips said with an odd hint of merriment. "All poetic names by different ponies. To be honest, we really don't know. It's always been here in Hoofington; maybe it's the product of ancient zebra curses that were beyond even the black book. The writing in the text was particularly fearful of it. I think there's a much more fitting word for it: Hell."

Or... if you believed a certain zebra myth about giant star monsters... but that was just crazy... "Guess I wasn't a good enough pony after all," I muttered; I'd have gulped if I'd had a throat. It just didn't seem fair. Sure, I'd done lots of things worthy of damnation, but what about that colt? What could he have possibly done?

"Good and evil have nothing to do with it," Snips contradicted. "The ancient zebra necromancers were utterly terrified of this sea of souls and its drawing power, but tempted by it as well. They tried to control it with rituals, placate it with sacrifices, and understand it through madness. Their creation of soul jars like the black book was a method to try and escape its pull." He chuckled darkly. "Seeing it, I can understand their feelings better." There was a pause, and then he asked quietly, as if terrified of hearing the answer, "Did you get Snails out? Is he okay?"

"Upset, but okay." I felt a profound sense of relief from nearby and went on. "He told me about what Rarity did... the final step of Eternity." I felt it was kind of ironic, given that I was looking at spending an eternity here myself. Or... maybe not, apparently? "What did you mean 'dead dead'?"

"The curse is designed to sever your soul from your mind and body. What it leaves behind is a shell that will eventually perish without help," Snips said quietly, regretfully. "We saw it several times when we were starting out." I thought of Rumble in Happyhorn, lying there unaware. "Without the soul, you have no motivation or direction. The most fortunate are like animals. They have intellect but no will to use it and no personality or sense of self. But as long as your body is still alive, you have a chance that Snails will be able to summon your soul and put it back in your body."

"But what about you?" I asked with a little frown... or would have if I had lips. The lightning

flashed, and that anguished scream rolled out across the sea of souls like a wave.

He gave a light, dry laugh, as if my concern amused him. I guessed it was a little after the fact. "Well, my body was either cremated or vaporized, so..." He sighed. "I'd hoped that splitting my soul might protect me, but it looks like I was wrong. Or maybe I just have two copies of my soul frozen in that statue and inside my friend, forever trapped at the moment they were severed. Who can say?"

"Well, this is all very educational," I muttered sarcastically. "I could probably write a manual when I get back. '101 ways to die'."

"Oh, I'd be astonished if you recalled any of this when you got back. This is your soul, not your mind. You are the summation of yourself, but without a mind, how could you remember?" He laughed mirthlessly. "Snails and I... experimented... on a few victims on our own, but none of them really remembered anything when he summoned them back."

Great... I looked out at the vast sea of motes and murmured softly, "How many are trapped here?"

"Millions. Perhaps hundreds of millions. Who can say how long this place has been catching them?" Snips said quietly.

"Is this place... eating them?" I barely murmured.

"No. I don't think so. There'd be a lot less if it were," Snips replied. "I think it's more that it's hoarding them, like a dragon hoards gems." The lightning flashed once more, slicing through the cloud of motes, and that scream rose up from the center of the sea. "I have no idea what that might--"

Then I was struck by that emerald lightning again and felt myself torn by its foul magics. This was malicious hate; no reason or purpose. Simply inflicting pain for the sake of inflicting it and nothing more. The motes swirled wildly, and by the time the agony faded, I was left feeling as if I'd been raped and violated all over again. The lightning hurt me on a fundamental level I'd never imagined before, and yet I couldn't die again. I could only scream. And this time there was no Scotch needing protecting to give me strength; there was only the hope that eventually Snails would be able to get me out of here.

I'd lost contact with Snips with that last attack, and no matter how I tried to call out, I couldn't get past that terrible scream. The few motes I did bump into were sobbing, raging, or worst of all... resigned. To keep myself from going mad, I tried to move, but in this place space seemed... uncertain. I felt like I was moving, but no matter which direction I took, I was travelling back inside. The very center of the sea had a hollow; if there was something here devouring souls, then I at least wanted a good look at it.

The closer to the center I moved, the more frequent and terrible that lightning became, but I started to suspect it wasn't as if this place was singling me out. I was just getting caught by stray fire. Whatever the lightning was targeting lay right in the middle of this sea. Slowly, the motes thinned out more and more until...

No...

It couldn't be!

A dozen bolts of lightning struck the center, and for the first time I realized that the scream

Lacunae had been hearing hadn't been a *what*. It was a *who*.

A moment later, there was a hooking sensation, and I felt myself being pulled away. I didn't fight it. I couldn't think at all. If I'd had eyes I would have wept; a mouth, and I would have cried out. Instead, I simply shut down and let myself be dragged away.

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I slowly opened my eyes, and the first things I saw were Lacunae's purple ones gazing back into mine. I had a sensation like a red hot poker digging around in my guts. I glanced down at the bandage over the hole ripped right above my navel, then looked around and found myself in a hospital bed in what I recognized as the Hoofington Memorial ICU. Psychoshy was sleeping in the bed across the room from mine, with Stygius snoozing at her side. Rampage lay curled on the floor at the foot of my bed, her pink eyes troubled as she gazed off into the distance.

I had no idea what magic had been used on me; I didn't want to know. I felt dirty and defiled, wronged more profoundly than just a simple betrayal by a desperate Snips. I hurt far worse than the simple wound in my stomach. I started to tremble and Lacunae stretched forward. I curled around her neck and buried my head in her shoulder as she shielded me with her wings. Then I bawled like a little foal. I didn't know why; I just knew that something was horribly wrong and it *hurt*.

* * *

Several hours later, it was morning according to my PipBuck. It was always the same time down here, though: gloom o'clock. Doctor Wheelbarrow had my rear legs and hooves strapped into my bed, probably suspecting that, if he hadn't, I'd be out of it confronting Ahuizotl about Tulip's death. Or trying to, at least; one of my forehooves was missing and the other mangled, so there was little chance of me getting away. Which, naturally, made me even more eager to do *anything* that would get me the hell out of this bed and out there doing things. It didn't help that every hour I had another spontaneous crying fit that I was powerless to stop. Sometimes they lasted only for a few seconds, but others went on and off for almost half an hour.

...Okay, maybe I should stay in bed for the time being after all.

Lacunae never left me alone. Rampage was keeping her distance for now, not trusting the Angel inside her not to kill me for shits and giggles. Doctor Wheelbarrow came in, changed the blood bags, and injected me with a shot of Med-X for the pain, giving me a cold look. I'd gotten Graves killed, so I couldn't fault him for that. "It looks like you'll live," he muttered. "No thanks to me."

"Thank you for..." I began, but he silenced me with a glare.

"No thanks to me means just that. I'm not repairing that hole in you. The cybernetic gadgetry in your body is doing that," he said as he looked over to the far side of the ICU at a bed with some curly pink mane sticking out from beneath the sheets. "Pity you can't give that to somepony else."

"How... how is she...?"

"Crippled. By you. But alive. No thanks to you. Excuse me." He turned his back on me. I'd cost him Graves; I supposed they'd been close. They'd been colleagues at least, though, and, even if there'd been no personal attachment at all, she was still half of Meatlocker's medical staff. Not someone

easily replaced.

The Goddess muttered darkly in the back of my mind about what an embarrassment I was and ignored me otherwise, for which I was grateful. I supposed that at the moment I was another emotional toxic waste dump, and she only wanted to see my misery, not feel it.

Snails returned shortly with Silver Spoon. "You're okay," the ghoulish mare said in relief. I didn't correct her. I was miles and miles away from okay right now. I needed... something. Something to protect me from this feeling of wrongness inside me. But she didn't need any more to deal with at the moment.

"What happened? What did you do?" I asked the luminescent-eyed mustard yellow unicorn. I must have been using the shooty voice, because everyone immediately looked a little nervous.

He blinked. "Oh, ah... well... ya see, I couldn't stop the curse from popping you out, eh? But I was thinking of what could bring you back, like that thing on boats, ya know?" he said slowly, then rubbed his chin. "Ah... uh..."

"Anchors. He used an anchoring spell," Lacunae said from my bedside.

"So, when the curse went off, I was able to pull you back and put you in your body," he said with a nervous smile. "Snips and me used it once to see the other side... but I don't remember much. But my eyes were all glowy afterwards. Weird, eh?" He leaned uncomfortably close, peering at my own. "Wonder why yours aren't. I mean, there's a kinda reddish light in there, but..."

"My eyes are synthetic," I said quietly. I looked at Silver Spoon. She was alive, so to speak; I'd gotten her out alive. A victory. "What are you going to do now, Silver Spoon?"

She glanced at Snails and gave a little smile. "Well. I'm still around. And so were Snips and Snails. And Twist is kinda around, so we thought we were going to, like, look around and see if Diamond Tiara's still around too! Not... crazy looking around. Really looking." The unicorn stallion rolled his eyes a little, but then she looked up at him with a sympathetic smile, and said, "Snails wants to find some unicorn mare he knew back before the war."

"Mhmm! The Great and Powerful Trixie!" There was a sudden tense silence inside me, as if the Goddess were suddenly holding her breath. It was as if I could feel her peering right over my shoulder at Snails. "She was the most amazing, most talented, most awesome unicorn in all of Equestria... even if she couldn't banish the Ursa Minor."

The silence from the Goddess was a welcome relief, but it didn't last long. "That silly... That... he remembers when... I..." she murmured in shock. Lacunae suddenly jerked and shivered, turning her head away. I got a flash of a blue unicorn, a wagon, two unicorn colts, and a cheering, adoring crowd. "No... no..."

"You don't have to throw those feelings away, Trixie," another mare whispered in my-- in *our* heads.

"Shut up! Last thing I want is more lectures from *you*!" the Goddess replied in disgust, her voice trembling. "If he saw us now. If he saw me like this... No! No! I don't want to feel this way." Lacunae groaned, and then the Goddess said, more firmly, "And I won't," haughtiness rising. "And he is right to

seek us out. Perhaps in time he may join us as well.”

“Alfalfa smoothies... extra hay...” Lacunae whimpered aloud.

I wanted to tell him not to, but there was a pressure on my mind, like a migraine. I couldn’t get the words out, and in my current condition, I couldn’t even try. “You... might check... Maripony. Out west...” I muttered. The Goddess gave a pleased, throaty little sound, and I felt a ghostly pat on my head. The pair just looked at me in worry, but I couldn’t say more. The Goddess wouldn’t let me.

Feeling doubly violated, I shifted onto my side, curling up away from him. I felt sick, the sensation of wrongness unshakable. I could at least still give him thanks, though. “Thank you, Snails. You saved me. Just like Snips said you would.” I was glad that he couldn’t see the tears of shame streaking my face.

“Um...” Snails balked a moment. “Did you... did you see him over there? Like a ghost or...”

I felt sick again. “No,” I said, not sure, but it felt like a lie. As dirty as lying to Silver Spoon about being Diamond Tiara. “No, but I’m sure he’s okay, wherever he is.” Please go. Please.

“Please, Blackjack needs to rest and recover,” Lacunae told them both gently.

“Oh... ah... okay then. Um... hope you feel better, eh?” Snails said.

Silver Spoon hesitated and then answered, “Yeah. Sure. Get well soon, Tiara.” I heard their hooves trot away just before my body shook and I let out another sob. I wanted to throw up and purge myself, but I had nothing inside me to force out.

“Oh please. There’s no need for such drama,” the Goddess thought at me contemptuously.

“Shut up,” I screamed back at her. “Someday it’ll be your turn! I don’t care if it’s tomorrow or a week from now, some day you’ll get to die too! And if you come back, then we can see how well you handle it!” I shook from head to hoof, the hole through my middle a niggling afterthought. When I came back the first time, I’d felt depressed and suicidal. This time, whatever had happened, I knew I didn’t want to go back there. Not there.

“Shhhhh...” Lacunae said as she stroked my mane. Maybe coming back had driven me crazy? Maybe something in me had changed for the worse? “Shhh... Don’t worry about that now. You’re back. That’s all that matters.”

I wept against her as she held me. “Can you take it from me? Whatever... whatever I’m thinking... or feeling... or whatever?” I shook as I pressed my face against her shoulder. “Please?” I begged, desperate for her to make it all better. “Please...”

“I wish I could, Blackjack. I really wish I could,” she murmured. “I wish I could make it all go away, but whatever happened to you happened at a level I can’t touch. This pain is yours. I wish we could understand it better, make it easier for you to bear,” Lacunae said softly into my mind. “I’m sorry.”

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Around noon, I finally pulled myself together enough to get out of the ICU bed. Rampage returned with some Fancy Buck snack cakes, three tin cans, and some minty emeralds. Lacunae started

to lift me into a wheelchair, but I waved her off with my mangled left foreleg and simply stood upright on my rear legs, felt the disorientation for a moment before my body adjusted, then looked at her and Rampage and even smiled at their incredulous expressions. Hey, it might look weird, but at least it wasn't pathetic. After the last four or five hours, and the Goddess, I needed to start building some self-control and confidence back.

My barding had been taken... somewhere... to get fixed up. Either that, or I'd been robbed; at the moment, though, I suspected the former over the latter. Likewise, Carrion must have helped himself to Kingpin's possessions, because they were gone as well. Oh well; the only enemies I had to worry about in here were the possible zebra infiltrators, and since they'd have been eliminated already anyway, I should be safe-ish even without armor, right?

Psychoshy and Stygius had both gotten some severe smoke inhalation; the former was still bedridden and quite pissed that nopony would let her out on account of her gasping for air every ten seconds. I gestured with a nod of my head for the batpony to come over. "How are you doing, Stygius?" I asked with a rueful smile. "Regretting you came with me?"

He rolled his eyes and waved his hoof sideways with a snort like it was nothing at all. Then he looked apologetic as he nodded over his shoulder towards Psychoshy. "You two an item?" He sighed, his tufted ears drooping a little as he pulled his slate out of his armor.

'Not allowed. Rules,' he wrote with a sigh and an actual pout. Boys weren't supposed to pout!

I chuckled, shaking my head. "Well, one thing I know about her is that she probably doesn't give a buck about rules. Do you like her?" He blinked and looked over at Psychoshy trading insults with Rampage. He closed his eyes, smiled, then looked at me and nodded. "More than me?" I asked with a grin, and he immediately blanched.

"Yeah, Styggie... do you like me more than her?" Psychoshy asked, looking over from her bed with a smirk on her face and worry in her eyes. He looked from her to me and back again and bit on his wingtip for a moment. Then he pointed at Psychoshy with his wing and actually flinched! He knew I had Glory, though... ugh, batponies were weird.

But it did prompt in me the rare impulse to have fun. "Well, that's good to know. By the way, Stygius, do you think that I've been putting on weight?"

His pupils shrank as he gaped at me, looked at my butt, then back up at me. I just arched my brow expectantly. Then he swayed, put a hoof to his brow, and collapsed on his back with all four legs thrust into the air, his tongue lolling out the side of his mouth as his eyes rolled back in his sockets. "Not the worst answer to that question I've ever seen," Lacunae observed.

The sight of everypony laughing at the flopped over Stygius, the fact that they'd all come so close to dying... somewhere I went from laughing to sobbing without even realizing it. Stygius rose as Rampage and Lacunae kept me from falling over as I swayed. "You two... you two are really really good together. Really... really..." The two fliers didn't know how to respond; fortunately, somepony else did.

Rampage blushed and batted her eyes at Lacunae. "Well, you heard her. Will you be my very special somepony, Lacunae?" The stunned mental babble coincided perfectly with the confused 'what?' from the Goddess. And just like that, I was back to laughing... no, crying... no...

Okay... maybe I still needed a little more time before leaving the ICU...

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I lay there on my side, feeling the damage to my crippled torso mending. It was rather disgusting, feeling things moving around inside me; it reminded me of when I was tainted. My brain wasn't just an emotional wreck... it was the fact that I had things in my head that didn't belong. The Goddess... strange files... I wanted some control back, damn it! I wanted to talk to somepony and not burst into tears. I wanted to think about Project Eternity without getting flashbacks. At least I *chose* to see memory orbs.

I needed somepony who knew technology... or, rather... some*zebra*. I asked the ghoul in charge of the ICU and then waited. The privacy curtains had been drawn around both Boing and Psycho's beds. I spotted the faint shimmer as she entered. I waited till it was right beside me, then hooked her neck with my remaining forelimb and pulled her in close, smooching her right on the end of her invisible muzzle.

The zebra appeared, eyes wide, cheeks flaming red as she fell back, staring at me in horror. "Why are you being all invisible, hmmm?" I asked, arching a brow. The embarrassment she showed helped me avoid thinking about my own problems.

"Oh... ah... well..." She flushed as she muttered, tapping her hooves together. "I think the suit likes being sneaky... and after those two spies and the Nightstalkers... well... it's just easier this way." What and what? Well, I supposed I'd get the full story when I was a little more together. I needed to take care of something. Something to give me a little more control.

"You should take it off from time to time. I agree it's a great suit, but there's such a thing as too much of a good thing." The zebra fidgeted as she looked away. "Anyway, you're good with terminals and computers and stuff. I need you to do me a favor." I turned my head, pushed my mane away, and pulled the cover up so she could see the plug in my temple. "I'd like to see if you can go through and delete any audio or video files that are in my head." At her incredulous look, I explained how unsealing Eternity had caused all kinds of flashbacks to the recordings. While I found them interesting, I didn't want them popping up completely at random.

"Oh. Sure. I can do that," she said as she took Marmalade's PipBuck and pulled a short cable out of its housing. "Universal plug... I'll just go through and... um..." She bit her lip as she looked away. "You're sure you're okay with letting me in your... well... system? What if I mess up?"

I wagged my mangled left leg at her. "Xanthe, with all that's messed up in me, I really don't see how you could make me worse." Then I frowned and rolled my eyes. "Well, no. You might make me able to only speak in Zebra, make me forget the letter S, or just turn me into a remorseless cyberpony killing machine, but really, I think the chances of that are probably pretty slim." She still looked uneasy, and I smiled. "And I trust you not to do something bad to me."

Xanthe sighed, took the plug in her mouth, and pressed it into my socket. I had an overwhelming urge to rub my right eye as I felt something behind it. She then started to tap on the PipBuck keys with the very tip of her hoof. "Wow. Look at all that," she murmured softly.

"Lot of stuff in there?" I asked with a small frown.

"Yeah. I think this Steelpony audiovisual interface is using your brain as a buffer. That why it's

triggering seemingly at random,” she said as she typed steadily.

“You can’t delete my memories or stuff though, right?” I asked with a little frown.

“Of course not. Memories aren’t data. Well... not the kind you can take out by just pushing a button,” she said as she started working. “Wait... *mater futūtor*...” Well, that didn’t sound good. “I think... Blackjack, your eyes and ears have been recording days of information in your brain. And they haven’t just been saving them; they’ve been broadcasting them somewhere as well.”

“You mean somepony rigged my eyes and ears to use for spying?” I gaped, turning my head to glance at her.

“Yes. I can’t tell where the data’s going, though,” she said with a frown. “Do you want me to remove it?” She caught my eye and swallowed. “You want me to remove it.”

“Can you tell how long it’s been doing it?” I asked, frowning as I thought back to when the visions started in Hippocratic.

“Near as I can tell... they always have,” the zebra replied. “There isn’t really a log or anything, but I’ve got timestamps going back for days. The earliest is... um... I think nine or ten days ago.”

That was before Hippocratic. In fact, that was right about the time I... “Zodiac. She set them to record?” I frowned -- my eyes twitched back and forth as I thought -- then rubbed my eyes. Ugh, eyes shouldn’t *twitch*. Then my paranoia began to assert itself. “Or... maybe she didn’t. My eyes came from her. Maybe... maybe somepony hacked her eyes and ears a long time ago.” Goldenblood? Maybe. I wouldn’t put it past him. Except he wasn’t a technical wizard... but then, he certainly could have *had* it done even if he couldn’t do it himself.

“There’s no way to tell. You’d have to ask her,” Xanthe said as she worked.

I lay there, my eyes every now and then flickering on and off. And as I lay there, I thought about why my eyes were spying on things and who was receiving it. And what they could have been doing with it... Thank goodness I had the help of somepony who knew all about terminals and robots and balefire bombs and--

Wait a minute.

“Xanthe... I’m curious. How do you know about balefire bombs?” My eyes clicked off so I couldn’t look at her, and from her silence she’d either frozen or was running for her life. I hoped it was the former; it’d suck if I was stuck blind, again, till Lacunae got me to Rover. I quickly continued, “I’m not angry... I just want to know how you know so much about them.”

The zebra began typing again, and I just hoped I was right about her. “The bunker I grew up in was a balefire launch facility. It was called a dragon’s nest... intended for a first strike against Equestria. That’s how I knew about the missile in Hightower. It was probably fired from my home.”

“Well, unless you’re two centuries old, I don’t hold it against you.” ...Though considering how many people I’d run into who *were* that old, I couldn’t discount the possibility. “And even if you were, I still doubt I’d hold it against you.”

“Really?” Xanthe sounded surprised. My vision popped back on, and I looked at the baffled

zebra.

"Xanthe... Twilight Sparkle was creating alicorns. Fluttershy was a traitor. Pinkie Pie's law enforcement ministry was corrupt. Rarity was dealing in necromancy. There were megaspells aimed at doing Celestia knows what. Honestly, I can't blame the zebras for using their bombs. If I were in their shoes, I might have tried the same thing." I sighed, wondering what horrible things Applejack or Rainbow Dash had done behind the scenes trying to win the war at all costs. "We were so focused on winning that we never realized it wasn't worth the cost."

Xanthe was silent for a time as she worked, but then she said in a quiet murmur, almost to herself than to me, "The Remnant have one more." I looked at her as she sat, keeping her eyes down. "You're right... I do know a lot about balefire bombs. There was one silo that didn't fire. The missile malfunctioned... so we had to keep the bomb safe and secure. When the Remnant came, they discovered it and took both the bomb and the zebras who maintained it."

I slowly sat up, and she flinched away. I reached out and stroked her black and white ponytail. "Do they have a working missile or rocket?" I asked, and she shook her head. That was something. Still, I wouldn't put it past them to smuggle it somewhere.

"Please... don't be mad at me. This cursed city... it is evil and our enemy. It is Starkatteri... and the home of Nightmare Moon. A place of evil and... and..." She looked stricken as I slipped off the bed. "I didn't want to betray my people..."

"Xanthe... you're a good person. If you weren't, you wouldn't have told me," I said quietly. "Why haven't they used it if they have it?"

"The last order of the Caesar was for us to fight on until the cursed city and nation of stars were no more. If the Legate is to fulfil that order, the balefire bomb must reach the Core somehow," she said, looking to the west.

I whistled softly. "Tall order."

"Yes. That place has automated defenses and magic shields which would protect it from a detonation outside. Before the day of fire, multiple missiles were intended to bombard the city and overwhelm its protections." She sighed and shook her head. "The missile in my home was damaged, though, and I don't know where the Remnant would get another." She gave a sickly smile. "Not that one missile would have much chance at breaching the Core, anyway."

Maybe not the Core, but what if the Remnant fired it somewhere else? The Society? The Arena? Thunderhead? "Don't they have extra missiles at Dawn Bay?"

She shook her head. "No. Your Ministry of Awesome destroyed and stole dozens of our missiles prior to the day of fire," she said quietly.

"How'd they pull that off?" I asked with a wry smile.

"We've no idea. It was one of our greatest defeats; in one night the Shadowbolts and members of the Ministry of Awesome infiltrated the launch facility, made off with two dozen cruise missiles, and destroyed dozens more. More than a hundred guards were executed for their failure." She looked away. "The ministry sabotaged the balefire bomb stockpile. When the day of fire came, only a dozen bombs

were fired from Dawn Bay. Not hundreds, as intended.”

“Hundreds?”

“Oh yes. The Caesar’s final plan was to turn every inch of Equestria into irradiated glass. There was some invasion or big attack planned, something made with the help of a collaborator, and if it failed we would have been left with only one solution: overwhelming balefire bombardment.” She said it so casually... “Had Dawn Bay and other facilities been intact and ready, it might even have been realized. Collaborators and sympathizers had allowed us to build and hide weapons all over your country. The old launch facilities ran for miles above the base. A forest of ballistic missiles that never flew, thanks to your Ministry of Awesome.” She sounded just a touch resentful.

“So the zebras were going to push a button and wipe out all of Equestria?” I asked in shock. Xanthe’s shamed eyes fell as she tapped her hooves in front of her.

“From documents in my home, I believe so. What alternative did we have?” Xanthe asked, almost begging me to understand. “Even with our superior numbers and natural resources, we could neither overcome you nor push you to surrender. Your megaspells and secret projects were too much for us. No matter how much we stole, infiltrated, or attacked, we couldn’t beat you. Even balefire wasn’t enough! Ponies developed megaspells that turned the sun itself into a devastating weapon. There were predictions that when we struck Equestria, only one out of every twenty missiles would reach their target, and that number grew every month! In another year, it would have been one out of every two hundred. And once we fell, what would stop the Maiden of Stars from taking over the entire world?”

It hurt to think about. The war had gone on for a generation, and here was a zebra absolutely certain that if they hadn’t used tens of thousands of megaspells, they would have lost for sure. But so what? Wouldn’t it have been better for one side to win than everyone to lose?

What if the zebras had won the war? The Remnant had continued waging war for two hundred years to destroy the Hoof. If Equestria had surrendered, would they have just stopped there? While Sekashi and Xanthe proved that not all zebras were bad, I had seen Lancer coldly shooting a dozen of his own kind. Would there have been death squads of Lancers hunting down ponies? Countless balefire bombs annihilating Equestria entirely? I just didn’t know...

What if Equestria had won? I’d like to have thought that everything would have returned to normal, but honestly, I’d never really thought about what postwar Equestria would have been like. Luna’s Equestria... I felt a shiver run through my entire body and shook my head. It didn’t matter... and I didn’t want to think of Equestria after a thousand years of Luna, the ministries, and the O.I.A.

I sighed, pressing my thrashed limb to my face. “There’s no point in worrying about what might have been. The bomb the Remnant have now is a bigger problem. Do you know where it is?”

“Dawn Bay, I imagine, but it could be hidden anywhere. The original launch facilities were all heavily damaged in the war. The balefire bomb armory is a molten slag pit.” She lowered her head, and the suit seemed to hug her, snuggling a little against her. “There is one thing, though... Before we left for Yellow River... they were repairing one of the launchers. In fact, they didn’t want me to leave because they wanted me to fix the guidance terminals. I guess they didn’t expect me to get cursed...”

She pulled the plug from my temple, then tapped the keys a few more times; the deftness she employed with the tips of her hooves astonished me. “There. There shouldn’t be any more foreign data

stored in your brain. I've transferred all of it to this PipBuck; I don't know if it's useful, important, or just plain garbage." She handed Marmalade's PipBuck back to me. "I tried taking the spy programs out of your system, but it looks like that'd have some unpleasant side effects... like permanent blindness and deafness. It's really integrated in your systems."

"Ugh... why would anypony even do such a thing?" I muttered as I rubbed the socket cover.

"It's an exceptionally good place to hide data," Xanthe replied casually. "You wouldn't have known things were being recorded if it hadn't played them, so a unicorn wouldn't have been able to extract a memory magically. And most technicians don't think of using a brain to hide terminal data, so they wouldn't think to search for it there. They would look in the hardware." She sighed and patted my shoulder. "Still, running the clean and sweep program on this PipBuck from time to time should clear it out."

"Thanks," I said with a relieved smile. Then I looked at her as I tucked the device into my bags. "What about you? Do you want to stay with me?"

Xanthe gave me a pained smile. "No. Blackjack, you're a decent pony, but you face things that terrify me. I don't think I could face anything like Hightower again. I still can't sleep after seeing it." She shook her head. "I think I need a place to rest and think... and decide about the future..."

* * *

I found Willow and Windclop in the conference room after I'd pulled myself together again. The ghouls from Hightower were there too, along with one or two of the settlement guards. Twitchy, the unicorn with hide like a spoiled pumpkin, screwed up his face in confusion. "So... wait... run that by me again? We're... dead? As in... dead dead? And that's why everything looks so... wrong?"

Blossomforth groaned and buried her face in her hooves. "We've run it by you twenty times, Twitchy. You've got to get your brain out of the past."

"I know, I know... just... we're dead?" Twitchy began again. "As in dead dead? And that's why everything looks so wrong?"

Willow sighed and stood. "You work him through it, Blossom," the green ghoul said, glancing at me and trotting over to the door. When she looked up at me, her brows furrowed. "Do you have to stand like that, Blackjack? You look like a freaky robo-zebra."

I waved my mangled forelegs at her. "It's either two legs or try to use these. Sorry." I frowned a little. "Speaking of zebras..." She looked back to the guards and then stepped out into the hall and sat down. Given the serious expression on her face, I doubted the news could be good.

"We got Cerberus's message," Willow said grimly.

"And did you find any zebras?" I asked nervously, afraid she was going to tell me about some other pony's death. Velvet or someone.

Willow snorted. "Oh yeah. Two of them in the old maintenance manager's office, along with maps of Meatlocker and crates of critters."

"Critters?" I cocked my head; this was going in an unexpected direction.

"Ever hear of a something called a Nightstalker? Looks like a snake and a dog got frisky? Well, they had dozens of the things ready in cages. Set those critters loose during an attack and we probably wouldn't have been able to defend ourselves. They were all set to do something big, and soon," she said sourly as she glared down the dark hallway. "But the zebras were killed and we made sure none of the Nightstalkers survived."

"So... what's the catch?" I asked as she pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shook one out, and lit it. I stared at the yellow flame. When she closed the lighter, I trembled and quickly looked away.

She took a long pull off the cigarette. "Guess who killed them?"

I blinked, and my mood joined hers. "Ahuizotl?"

"Yup. Claimed he was investigating a noise, found them, and got lucky. Surprise, it was right after Cerberus came floating up blasted all to hell. Both were shot dead center in the back of the head, so now he's a Goddess damned hero to half the town." She let out a long blast of smoke from her nostrils that put me on edge. I shivered at the smell and backed away, waving my hoof in front of my face. She frowned at me. "What's the matter with you?"

"Just... not good with smoke and fire right now. Hightower was really rough," I muttered. Willow frowned, then spat out the cigarette and carefully crushed the tip. Taking a smoke-free breath, I moved along quickly. "What about what Xanthe said? Or you could talk to Carrion."

"She's a zebra. It doesn't matter if she said Ahuizotl was the Caesar himself, nopony is going to believe her. And Carrion's got that damned Contract. Unless he can stand in front of the town and say 'my boss conspired with zebras to smuggle in nasty critters and take over,' there's nothing that can be done." Willow sighed and looked back in towards the conference room. "At least you brought back some good shooters. This'll double our security. I knew Blossomforth from before the bombs; good mare."

I lowered my eyes. "Hardly makes up for losing Graves," I muttered.

She sighed and shook out another cigarette, paused, and put the pack away with a scowl. "Look, Blackjack, when Graves told us she was joining you, Windclop and myself did everything we could to get her to change her mind, but she wouldn't think of it. She had her reasons for going back, and they were just that: hers." The green ghoul glanced back at the conference room. "And if what I hear is right, if she hadn't gone, none of you would have gotten out alive."

I sighed, frowning in thought. That Ahuizotl was going to get away with it was galling. Wrong. And after what I'd been through, more wrongness in the world was just too much. Then I looked at my wrecked forelegs, and paused. An idea was worming its way through my head.

"You said that the ghouls wouldn't care if it came from Xanthe's mouth." The green ghoul frowned at me in confusion as I smiled. "What if it's from somepony else's mouth?"

* * *

The Mortuary was more than just dead, it was closed. I might have broken a few rules picking the lock, but I really needed this little chat. When I stepped inside the bar, I saw all the things from Kingpin's

cell heaped over rusty gurneys that had been converted into tables. Ahuizotl dug through the sheets muttering feverishly to himself. Carrion stood in the corner and looked over in surprise as I walked in alone. "Ahuizotl," I called across the room, and the ghoulish jumped, overturning the gurney he was working at and falling on his rump. I had only my mangled limbs... and the bag of bits Rampage had found in Hightower.

"Wha... you?! The sign says 'Closed' for a reason! Get out!" he spat as he rose to his hooves. "Carrion, throw her out!" The griffin sighed and put his patched-up helmet back on. I noted he'd kept Xanthe's rigged beam gun.

"I want to talk money," I said flatly, and I jingled the bag at him.

At once he raised his hoof. "Or we can hear the young lady out," he amended at once. He looked over my bare body and my metal limbs. "Your resilience is astonishing. Truly, I expected all of you to get a little ways in and then run out. But to have destroyed the tower... well... it's impressive."

"Well, I do impressive things," I replied as I looked at him evenly. "I need to get into Dawn Bay."

His smile disappeared and his eyes shifted to the large bag beside me. "Carrion. Make sure we're not disturbed." He waited for the griffin to leave, and then his lips curled in a wicked little smirk. "One moment. You're going to have to humor me." He trotted around me, checking to make sure I didn't have anything concealed in my scorched mane or stubby tail. I considered it a triumph that I didn't smash his skull in as he ran his hooves near some personal portions of my anatomy. "Now... what makes you think that I would be able to facilitate... this request?"

"Xanthe said you fed information to zebras about a talisman inside a zebra at Yellow River." Now he looked suspicious, but I was there in just my hide. No guns. No tricks. Of course, I could have killed him myself, but that would only get me thrown out.

"I know many different people. I've been around for quite a while," he replied. I turned the bag of bits over and let the heap of gold coins pile up on the table before me. His filmy eyes grew wider and wider; the sight of the pre-war money seemed to arouse him. Okay, not something I needed to see. I held up the empty bag so he could see nothing was concealed inside.

"The Remnant have a balefire bomb. I need to defuse it. That requires getting in and out of Dawn Bay. You should know somepony who can help me do that without getting killed or caught." His smile broadened with an expression of bliss that I was certain involved thoughts of taking my money and selling me out. "Oh, and incidentally, if I *were* caught, Rampage would be coming for you. You know, immortal, unstoppable Rampage the Reaper?"

His smile soured immediately. "I see... yes... well... it wouldn't be impossible," he muttered. "I may have a few acquaintances in the Remnant. They've always been generous to sympathetic, helpful ponies."

"You were a sympathizer during the war?" I asked, and he sneered back.

"You have to care to be a sympathizer. I was an opportunist. I played sympathizer for the zebras and mole for the O.I.A. and made money from all sides. It was an instinct that served me quite well in the Wasteland." He tapped his hooves together. "Such an arrangement is going to have to be expedited,

however, if you're to have a chance."

"Why? Do you know something?" I asked with a scowl.

"Why Blackjack, I know many things," he said in his silky, smug purr as he polished his hoof on his chest. "If you pay me sufficiently, you might know them as well."

I chuckled, smirking. "Yeah, you do, don't you? Like those zebra."

He immediately scowled, looking me up and down. Come on you bastard, take the bait. It's just you and me, all alone...

"You knew they were down there when Willow and Windclop didn't have a clue. Probably had a chance to clean up anything sticky." His lips twitched, and I saw pride and greed at war with caution. I lifted a wad of gold coins with my magic and let them tinkle slowly back into the pile. "You can get almost anything done, can't you?"

"Well. With the proper incentive..." he murmured. One coin bounced free and landed at his hooves. He stepped upon it, hiding it beneath his hoof. "Keeping those two out of sight was quite a trick. Their pets even more so."

I smiled happily. "What I don't get is why they bothered. It seems kind of stupid to go through all that trouble just to take over a hospital full of ghouls," I said as I kept the coins tumbling back into the bag beside me. He was actually salivating!

"Well... you fail to recognize the strategic importance of the hospital. Nopony really trades with us, so a change in ownership wouldn't have been noticed. From here they could strike at Red Eye at Paradise, the Collegiate, Scrapyard, and the Skyport with nopony ready until it's too late." He grinned. "Once I had my pick of the spoils, I'd head on over to the Society and buy my way into their good graces. Or maybe set up an establishment in the Arena," he said as he trotted behind the bar. "However, things have changed with you here."

"Because I'm in a position to make you incredibly rich?" I suggested with a grin... one which he returned.

"Actually, yes," he said as he pushed a button on his terminal. Suddenly there were a whole bunch of beeps on the undersides of the tables around me. "If you take one step, I'll have to sell you to the Remnant as ground pony." Then he reached under his desk and pulled out an explosive slave collar. "Now, float the money over to me and put this on. I've got a little hidey hole in the back room to stash you in till things cool down." He looked at my glare and laughed, "What? You don't seriously think I'd believe you want to do business with me? You're the saint of the Wasteland. I'm sure you're just here to chat up some evidence to take back to those morons." He nodded to my mangled leg. "Probably got that PipBuck recording this whole conversation, don't you?"

Now I was the one grinning. "Darn. You figured me out. Well, except for one thing. My PipBuck? It's a broadcaster."

Then the door opened behind me. "Mines!" I snapped. Willow and Blossomforth stepped in behind me, and I carefully lifted the beeping furniture one piece at a time to the corners of the bar with my magic. The pegasus held up Marmalade's PipBuck with a desiccated wing. In the hall behind her were

even more ghouls.

"I take it my servant is dead, then?" Ahuizotl sneered at us, his eyes twitching as he stood on the precipice of disaster.

Blossomforth chuckled. "Got to give it to the stripe, her ability to muck up tech isn't limited to just robots. One spark mine and his power armor turned into a fine bird cage."

Willow smirked back. "We'll get him working once you're taken care of."

Ahuizotl looked from one of us to the next, licking his lips. "Now... hey. Listen. I can explain. I'm... ah... being blackmailed. Zebras made me say all that shit. 'Cause they got my... my... ah..." He slumped as Willow focused her guns on the ghoul and worked the bit on her battle saddle, chambering two rounds. Finally he slumped, glaring at me in resignation. "Ah shit. Fine. Ya got me."

Willow glanced back at the doorway and then looked back at Ahuizotl. "Ahuizotl, for conspiring against the residents of Hoofington Memorial, we sentence you to exile. Your bar and its contents are to be seized and sold to fund the community."

I blinked and stared at her. "Huh? Aren't you going to shoot him?"

"If you'd gotten him to confess to killing Tulip, maybe. But ghouls don't like killing other ghouls. Even ferals," Willow said as she glared at him.

"You may as well kill me! Where am I supposed to go?" the ghoul pony protested.

"You seem to like working with stripes. Maybe they'll take you in," Willow retorted. "But I can guarantee that if you do go to the Society, or Flank, or the Arena, everypony will know the shit you pulled here."

"Well. I see... very well then. Return my servant to me and let me gather a few things, and I'll be on my way. Or are you exiling me completely naked?" Ahuizotl asked with a glare.

"Pack a saddlebag and get out, Ahuizotl," the mare replied.

"What! You can't just let him take Carrion with him!" I protested.

Willow frowned in distaste. "Carrion is free to stay or go. It's his stupid Contract that's exiling him with this lump of shit." We stood back as Ahuizotl packed his bags and, once loaded up with as much as he could carry, trotted past with his lips curled in malice.

I stood there for a second, and then I looked down at the pile of money beside me. I swept it off the table back into the bag and snatched it up. Outside the Mortuary there were two dozen ghouls gathered in small groups talking in low tones. I saw Xanthe kneeling beside Carrion, strange arcane devices probing an open panel in his power armor. There was a hum and suddenly the griffin began moving once more. "About time. Let's go, Carrion. We'll leave these fools for the Remnant." The power armor whined and sparked as it struggled to walk, and Ahuizotl gave a long, low hiss of disgust and continued moving, leaving Carrion trying to catch up.

"Wait. How'd you like to have enough money to go anywhere in the Wasteland?" I asked as I jingled the bag once more, slowing him. The effort of resisting the clink of coins seemed to cause him

physical pain. Finally he stopped, glaring back at me. "There's enough money in here to start over nearly anywhere in Equestria if you're smart."

The hatred in his eyes was matched only by his covetousness for the contents of the bag. "And you're giving me this out of the kindness of your heart?" he jeered.

"No. I'm trading it to you for Carrion's Contract," I said as I shook it again.

Ahuizotl narrowed his eyes at me. "On the one hoof, with that many bits I could hire three griffin bodyguards and have more than enough left over..." He drew back. "But on the other hoof, I rather despise you, and doing anything you actually propose pisses me off. I should tell you to ram each and every bit right up your ass." He screwed his lips up as his two base natures warred with each other. Finally he snorted, then reached into his bulging saddlebags and rifled around till he dug out a wrapped up scroll of paper. He tossed it in my face, stretched out, and grabbed the handle of the bag and tossed it on his back. "I can't wait till you get what's coming to you, Security."

He started to trot away as Carrion caught up, and I held up the roll of paper with my magic. "Hey Carrion! Look at what I just got." Carrion looked at the paper with blatant shock. "It is your Contract, isn't it? I mean, it's not some garbage he gave me in exchange for the money, right?"

"No... that's exactly what it is," Carrion said, and then smiled. "Excuse me."

I looked at the confused Willow and Blossomforth as Carrion trotted rapidly after the departing ghoul. "Ahuizotl. I've been told that you've sold my Contract and I am no longer in your service."

"That's right, Carrion" Ahuizotl sneered. "Why? Did you come to give me a kiss goodbye?"

"Yes," Carrion replied simply. A moment later a green beam lanced through the ghoul, transforming him and everything on him into a heap of glistening green goop. "Goodbye."

I just stared in shock, along with almost everypony else. "What the hell was that!?" I asked as I gestured to what little remained of his body.

"Ahuizotl was an evil bastard," the griffin replied. "The scams he ran, the lives he ruined, and the misery he inflicted were enough for ten bastards. So long as he held my Contract, I was honor bound to do as he commanded and remain silent. But now you are my employer, which freed me to rid the world of that disgusting rat. And now, for good or ill, I serve you."

"But... I..." I stared at the heap of green slime as a huge bubble rose in the middle and popped. "Couldn't you have made him put down the gold *first*?"

* * *

While there was no question that Ahuizotl deserved to be rendered into luminous slime, there was enough outcry that Carrion's days in Meatlocker were over for the time being. To be honest, I had no idea what to do with him. I'd tried to give him his Contract back, and clearly I'd insulted him badly by the way he told me bluntly 'no'. Apparently, someone else holding their Contract was the point of being a griffin... and with that, they eclipsed zebras as weirdest species in the Wasteland.

Silver Spoon and Snails wanting to look for their friends. Xanthe looking for a future. Carrion needing somepony to hold his Contract. I had ideas churning around in my freshly cleaned out head. A

part of me was still thinking about running off to Dawn Bay and dumping that balefire bomb into the ocean. Another part of me felt the siren's call of EC-1101 luring me off into the sky.

Really, what I wanted more than anything was to see Glory again. And P-21. And Scotch Tape. I wanted to go home to Star House.

But I still had one more thing to do before I left.

Back in the ICU, the ghoul, Carol, was listening to Hearth's Warming Eve carols on her terminal with the volume cranked up. Lacunae and Rampage were gone. I looked over at Psychoshy's bed, hearing her groans. She really had to be hurt worse than I thought, but it was best that nopony could overhear me at the moment. Because no matter how I ran this though, it was going to be ugly.

I pushed back the curtain and looked at the pink filly; her mane had lost a lot of its curly bounciness. The single, unbandaged blue eye stared up at me impassively. Beneath her sheets, her legs bent wrong. I slowly walked next to the bed and sat on the floor, looking at her. Suddenly, my brain felt as if Xanthe had scrubbed out too much, and now I didn't have anything left to say. 'How are you doing?' Well, she was alive, in pain, and crippled. 'How've you been?' Better. 'Sorry...' for what? Not killing her? I opened my mouth and closed it again.

Finally I dropped my eyes. "Please, forgive me," I muttered as I looked at my mangled forehoof. After a minute, I looked back.

Boing didn't say anything. Her pale blue eye just drilled into me. I was waiting for it. She'd say no... or call me a murderer... or a monster... or Nightmare Moon or something. And it would hurt like hell. But she didn't. She just looked at me, and I could feel myself getting wound up. "I was... I was really out of it that night. I was exhausted and... fighting. Sweet Celestia, fighting for so long. I didn't see who you were till it was too late... and..." Again, she just stared at me. Was she drugged? Had I deafened her?

Finally, she said in a voice barely audible over the music and Psychoshy's groaning, "What for?"

I swallowed and lowered my eyes again. "For... for attacking you. For hurting you. For killing your friends. For getting Scoodle killed and..."

She closed her pale blue eyes. "Stable ponies don't know nothin'..."

I blinked and stared at her as she gave a sad little smile. "What do you think happened to Scoodle and me before you and yer blue friend showed up?"

"I..." But I knew what had happened. I knew exactly how horrible it was. I'd seen 99 and felt it on the *Seahorse*. "You girls got raped, didn't you?"

"Yup. Ploughed good," she said quietly, simply. "Wasn't the first time, neither. First time was Daddy makin' a mare out o' me while Momma stood by. Reapers got him good. Momma tried sellin' us to the Society, but I wouldn't sign so she just dumped me. Ended up in Chapel." I swallowed in horror. "After we split with you... well, lost Friskyhorn two days later to an angry radhog. Giblets got too many rads, puked up her guts, and never woke up. The others run off. I met those two with a plan to scav some bunker; figured why not? Make enough caps to get out of here. Probably planned on killing me once we found something worthwhile." She swallowed and closed her eyes. "Then you smashed me

good. Doc said you damn near killed me.”

“I’m so sorry...” I muttered.

“And that’s why yer stupid,” the filly countered. “You think my daddy was sorry? Or my momma? Or them raiders? Them ghouls? Was the radhog sorry? Or the radiation?” She gave a little snort and closed her eyes. “Not a one of them was sorry. So why are you coming here askin’ me to forgive you? What’s the point of that?”

“Because... because I am sorry. What I did to you was wrong. I shouldn’t have done it,” I said as I sniffed. “I’m trying to be a good pony... I’m trying to do better...”

“And that’s where you done fucked up. There ain’t no such thing as good ponies. Not a one in the world. I ain’t a good pony. You ain’t neither. We’re all just ponies,” she said as she sighed and closed her eye again, shaking her head. “You just want ta feel better than the rest of us by playing the big hero. Well, ya ain’t. So if you feel like scum, congratulations. You are. And someday you’ll accept that. Then you won’t give a fuck about forgiveness.”

I just sat there, stunned by her words. No. No! Ponies could be better than this. I could be better! I just had to try harder. “I wish things had been different, Boing. I wish I’d listened to Scoodle. Everything would have been better... I think...” I swallowed and licked my lips. “Is there anything I can do to help? To earn your forgiveness?”

She sighed and closed her eye again. “You could kill me. Quick and clean. Doc wouldn’t do it. Said he swore some oath or some horseapples.” I stared at her in horror as a few tears escaped her eye and disappeared under the bandage. I could see the terminal in the Fluttershy Medical Center. I heard us singing. What was one more? I heard the Angel hissing in the rain beside Thorn’s broken body. *‘I gave her peace!’* Damn my synthetic organs and their refusal to reflect the horror I felt. Finally, she looked away. “Otherwise, no. I ain’t gonna forgive you, Blackjack. ‘Cause if I did that, I’d have to think about forgiving everypony from my daddy onward, and I just can’t do that.” She pulled the sheets over her head. “Go’way, Blackjack. Whatever yer after, ya ain’t gonna find it here.”

I staggered away from her bed. Somehow, some part of me had thought that I’d be pardoned. That all I had to do was tell her I was trying to do better. I tried to be kind, strong, awesome, enduring, and remember that it was under E. But to hear that being good was just some sort of self-delusion... Worse, a form of self-aggrandizement... Look at me... I’m Blackjack. The goodiest good pony. The saint of the Wasteland.

I covered my face with my chewed-up hand as I stood there, listening to the loud holiday music and the groaning. I had to be good. I had to. I had to know that at the end of this... somehow... there’d be sunshine and rainbows. Otherwise, the sooner I turned into Deus or the Goddess... the better. Only monsters could be happy in the Wasteland.

“Excuse me,” Carol croaked from the nurse’s desk. Then she looked pointedly towards Psychoshy’s bed, then back at me with an expression like I should do something about it. I sighed and waved my hoof. Really, though, she’d have been better off getting the doctor. I trotted over and pushed the privacy screen out of the way. What did I know about medicine? Really, if she felt this bad all I could do was give her a shot o--

Oh. My eyes took in the sight of the yellow pegasus atop Stygius, rising and falling as she

gasped and groaned, biting down on the end of her wing to try and silence herself. From the spots on her coat and the thick scent in the air, they'd been at this for a while. Stygius gave a squeak beneath her and shuddered as she trembled atop him. I looked at their union, and then Psychoshy glanced at me, her face turning scarlet as she moved atop him, seemingly unable to stop herself.

I gave a warm smile back. "Yup. He really is a champ. Trust me, you can probably get two or three more out of him," I said as she stared at me in stunned shock. Psychoshy made an admirable imitation of her mother as she blushed. She didn't stop moving, though, and really I couldn't blame her. "Make sure he uses his mouth more. He put it in you, he can clean it out. And have fun." I waved my chewed hand dismissively. "I'll probably be looking to leave in an hour or so. See you in Afterlife."

And I turned on heel and left the two alone, leaving a suggestion to the ghoul she turn the radio up more or just invest in some earplugs. Really, what was Psychoshy getting embarrassed about? It was just sex, a lot of sex from what I'd seen, and good sex at that. Still, I was smiling. I'd needed something to whack my mind back into action. The sight of two ponies passionately enjoying each other reminded me that there was still good things in the world, even if they were fleeting...

* * *

"You're sure about this?" Rampage asked as I handled Carrion's Contract. I'd gotten my barding back from Velvet, along with the rest of my things. Vigilance really needed some TLC, and even Duty and Sacrifice were showing wear. The Contract itself was neatly printed: a list of duties he would perform, lines he would not cross, and expectations he had for his employer. Reading it, I understood him a little better. He'd been a soldier, and a realist, but his Contract didn't allow him to be used as an assassin. He was, above all else, a guardian. And despite how wretched and undeserving Ahuizotl had been, Carrion had upheld his Contract to the letter. The amount of dedication that took staggered me.

"Mhmmm..." I said as I sat in Afterlife, absorbing the music and the atmosphere. Despite the vibrancy of the tunes, there was something sad about it, too. These were ghouls clinging to a civilization that didn't exist anymore. I thought about how so many ghouls got stuck in the past, locked in one moment that made sense. Then I thought of Ditzzy Doo as a part of a living community, how she'd been doing more than simply existing.

Carrion, Xanthe, Silver Spoon, and Snails all sat opposite me. The griffin had his power armor completely restored by now, though Willow had ordered it disabled after Ahuizotl's execution. "So. I guess this is where we part ways," I said to them. Silver Spoon looked a little sad; the glowing ghoul took off her warped frames and rubbed the crinkly glass adhered to her cheeks. "You two are determined to go looking for others?"

"Oh yeah. It's a wide, freaky Wasteland out there, eh?" Snails said with a nod.

"And dangerous too," I said and then levitated the Contract over to Silver Spoon. "Here. I'm giving you Carrion's Contract. He'll keep you safe while you search." The griffin stared at me impassively, and I couldn't help but give him a smile. "It's what he excels at."

"Tiara... I... thank you!" she said as she rushed around the table and hugged me. My radmeter began tick tick ticking really really fast, and I tried to push her away as gently as I could. She raised her hooves, and I smiled and did my best to follow along. "Bump! Bump! Sugar lump rump!" She sniffed softly she backed away. "I'll... I'll try to keep it all straight, Ti... I mean... Blackjack."

"You'll have help," I said, looking at the zebra. "I don't have any say over what you do, Xanthe, but I think you should go with them."

The zebra gulped, her eyes growing large. "Me? But... I... you... is this another curse?" she asked in confusion. The others looked at her as Silver Spoon returned to her seat.

"Carrion will need somepony to help with his armor, you have that stealth suit, and you know about terminals and can help them find their friends. It'll also take you away from the Hoof. Maybe if you get away from here, you won't be quite so cursed." I smiled at the four of them. "And trust me, it's better to have friends with you in the Wasteland than to be on your own. Even I've learned that."

"I... well... but... I..." The zebra looked around in a near panic and then hung her head. "Oh, curses." Finally she smiled and looked at the other three. "Very well. I accept."

"Do we have a place to start?" Carrion asked, all business.

"Shattered Hoof Ridge Correctional. That was where Tiara was last," Silver Spoon said. "I know she probably didn't get out, but I have to hope." And if nothing else, it was a way to keep from going feral.

"That's a long way off. We'll need to stock up on ammo. Give you some weapons training," the griffin said as he looked at Snails and Silver Spoon. Then he nodded with his grumpy expression and continued, "Still, it's doable."

I rose to my hooves. "Well, it sounds like you have some plans to make. I've asked Windclop to pass you some of the bits I found in the Stonewing statue to make sure you're outfitted well enough." As I started away, though, Carrion approached me with a grim look on his face, his expression so stern that for a moment I was grateful that Willow had disabled his energy gun. It was disabled, right? I didn't think I could regenerate from a pile of green sludge. My cheeks strained with the biggest grin I could muster up as I backed away from him. "Erm... so... goodbye?"

"Yes," he said darkly, those predatory eyes locking onto mine. Then he suddenly gripped my shoulders and pulled me in, pressing his hard beak to my lips and slipping something the texture and flavor of boot leather into my mouth. I think my scorched mane stood upright as he kissed me, and I fell over retching as he said with a straight face, "Goodbye, Blackjack." He turned solemnly away and returned to the table as half of Afterlife erupted in laughter at me sitting there, scrubbing my tongue with my twisted fingers.

Sweet Celestia, I couldn't get the taste off!

* * *

Twenty minutes later, Psychoshy and Stygius joined Rampage and me outside. The mare looked happy. Not 'sadistically and gleefully pounding another pony' happy, but truly happy and relieved. Stygius met my eyes and gave a sheepish grin but then put his wing around her and pulled the yellow pegasus against him. Rampage looked on with a little sigh, then shook her head and gave them some space.

The absence of Hightower was a little disturbing; to the north, all that remained was a ridge of tossed-up debris. It was getting late; in an hour or two it would be dark, but a flickering blue-green glow emanated from the other side of the ridge, and as we approached my PipBuck started to tick. "Lacunae?"

I thought out at her, not wanting to get closer to that crater.

“Just, a few more minutes...” Lacunae thought back at me in a breathless voice. She was probably finding all that radiation very nice indeed.

I sighed, looking at the rubble around me. Windclop had been right: it had definitely ruined the neighborhood. Of course, the neighborhood had been ruined before, but now with huge lumps of concrete and steel beams scattered all over the bunker-like apartments, the ruin had been doubled. ...Or was it squared? Bleh, too many fancy mathematics to keep track of.

Then a dark shape slowly walked out through the deepening darkness and drizzle. Yellow eyes stared out at us from under the helmet of an archaic suit of armor as she turned to face us. I looked from her to Stygius beside me and gave a weak little smile. “Um... isn’t that your sister?” I asked, and he licked his lips nervously and nodded, his tufted ears drooping as he shrank back from her furious gaze.

“THOU ART IN SO MUCH TROUBLE, BROTHER!” she bellowed at us in a thunderous voice. “THOU SHALT ABANDON THY VAINGLORIOUS QUEST AND RETURN TO THY FAMILY! OUR FATHER COMMANDS IT!” Rampage fell over, clutching her ears, and I shrank back as the booming voice started a screech of feedback in my ear.

Stygius swooped up to her and covered her mouth with his wing, making hushing motions as he looked back in the direction of Meatlocker and made little squeaks at her. “NAY, BROTHER! I SHALL NOT BE SILENT! THOU HAST DONE FAR MORE DAMAGE TO THE SECRET OF OUR EXISTENCE THAN I!” She advanced on him, and step by step he retreated. “THREE DAYS THOU HAST BEEN ABSENT! THREE DAYS! THOU INSISTED THOU NEEDED BUT ONE HOUR TO BED THE STRUMPET BLACKJACK! NOT THREE DAYS! OUR FATHER IS MOST VEXED WITH THEE!”

Strumpet?! “Now wait a minute!” I snapped. “Stygius can go where he wants with who he wants, and he doesn’t need your permission!” Psychoshy looked stunned as her eyes went from Stygius to me to Tenebra.

“NAY, THOU TEMPTRESS, BLACKJACK, THOU HARLOT THOU! THOU HAST ENTANGLED HIM WITH SOME FORM OF LECHEROUS MAGIC! THOU HAST BEGUILDED HIM WITH THY FLANKS OF STEEL AND FOUL UNICORN SORCERY! WHY ELSE WOULDST HE FOLLOW THEE LIKE A LUSTFUL MOONCALF!?” Flanks of steel? How do you beguile with flanks of steel? Who was I going to seduce, the tank?

Rampage winced. “Um... *Please* stop shouting?”

“And anyway,” I snapped, “*she’s* the strumpet that’s riding his little pony.” I pointed at Psychoshy.

“Hey! There’s nothing little about it!” the pegasus retorted, and I had to give her that. She flew into Tenebra’s face. “No pony is taking Stygius anyplace!”

“INCORRECT!” she roared, and then the darkness around us came alive! Shadowy tendrils reached up around our legs and held fast. I staggered, struggling to rise as they curled about me more and more.

“Oh, this is new!” Rampage shouted as she struggled against the darkness. In my mind, the Goddess was contemplating adding a batpony or two to Unity if it meant that she could get her hooves on

that kind of magic!

Psychoshy evaded the tendrils in a yellow streak as she came around and smashed her hooves against Tenebra's helmet. I kept debating about jumping into S.A.T.S. or not. The shadow magic had wrapped around my weapons, but I still had my horn. I looked over at the stricken Stygius, who simply seemed at a loss.

"OW! THY CANTANKEROUS... OUCH! CEASE THY-- HEY!" Tenebra bellowed as she struggled to grab the darting yellow pegasus with her shadows. In her armor, the batmare couldn't quite bring herself around in time to face her. "STOP THOU CUNT THOU!" she bellowed in frustration.

Psychoshy tackled her straight into the ground, knocking the helmet from her head. Her bellows became high pitched, barely-audible squeaks and chirps as the yellow pegasus ground her face into the dirt. "Stygius isn't going anywhere with you! He's a free pony! He can make his own choices! If he wants to stay with us, then there's nothing you can do about it."

"Please stop," a stallion said beside me. Stygius wore his sister's helmet, and I suspected he was whispering to keep his voice at a tolerable volume. He trotted over to the pair, put his wings between the two stunned mares, and separated them. "I apologize for my tardiness, Sister. Truly, one hour was given and one hour was all I meant to spend. But... Sister, please hear me. I have in but three days lived such that three lifetimes could not compare! I have faced peril, horror and trials, but wonders too. Did thou knowest that just a short flight yon, thou canst hear melodies unlike any in our dark home?" He pointed a wing back towards Meatlocker before grinning widely. "And that is but one place I have encountered! How many more may be discovered?"

Wow. Somepony actually *happy* to be in the Wasteland. Who knew?

Tenebra stared at him and made little squeaks and chirps. He shook his head. "Nay, Sister. Our mother's tales of horrors and hardship were not false. But not all surfacers are savage. Many are brave, fearless, gentle, and..." His eyes turned to Psychoshy. "Beautiful." He gave her a kind smile and then looked back at Tenebra. "I left with Blackjack for base intentions, I confess. Yet in her company and that of her friends, I have seen an example our own kind would be wise to adopt."

Her shadows slowly relaxed and I straightened. She gave another chirp, and he looked away, again appearing sad and torn. She chirped again. "Nay, Sister. I would not defy our father the king. But I am loath to leave this place now that I have started to discover its treasures," he said as he looked at Psychoshy. "Please... cease thy attack. I shall make my farewells."

"You're a prince?!" Psychoshy blurted, and he flushed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He sighed. "Prince of a people who hide beneath the ground and who dwindle away generation by generation in fear and seclusion. Never before would I have questioned our ways. Now I see how life struggles on in the Wasteland, in such hardships." He looked at me with a sad smile. "I thank thee, Blackjack, for thy kindly education. In thee, thou hast shown me true valor and friendship."

"So, you're leaving?" Psychoshy asked in a little voice. "Just... leaving?"

"I must. My sister spokest true; my father will insist upon mine return. I am unforgivably tardy." He reached over to her and lifted her chin with his wing. "Were I not a prince, my father not a king, I would remain with you all my days. Even if I must pluck the wings from my back to maintain our secret, I

would. I have seen such courage, passion, and life in this time with you than in all my years below. And all of you I shall sorely miss."

Tenebra was looking at Psychoshy oddly as the stricken pegasus began to weep. Stygius slowly wrapped his wings around her and kissed her softly. Rampage sighed as she looked away. Finally they parted lips. "Farewell, kind lady. I shall hear the whisper of thy wings on every lonely breath of air for the rest of my days." Slowly he pulled away from her and turned away to walk to his sister.

I looked from Psychoshy to Stygius and back again as the mare stood on the verge of losing another pony she loved. "If you are going to do anything besides live in regret, now's the time to do something," Rampage said quietly to her.

Psychoshy swallowed and then swooped after them. "Wait! Wait... please..." she said as she landed in front of him. "Take me with you."

Stygius's eyes popped wide. "Fairest, I cannot. Thou art of the surface and I am of the depths. Were you to come with me, thou couldst never return!"

"So what?" Psychoshy said firmly as she looked up at him. "All my life I've been nothing but a tool or a killer. You're the first pony who really makes me want to be better than who I was. I... I like you, Stygius. Enough to take a risk coming with you. If your father has a problem with it, then fine. I'll deal with it. But I'm sick of just going through life hoping it will get better."

Stygius opened his mouth to talk again, when Tenebra gave a chirp. The dusky-blue-maned mare smiled at the yellow pegasus and then looked sternly at her brother and gave another chirp. "You're sure? But Father..." She chirped again, firmly. "You'll speak with him... but..." And then she gave a long squeak and he balked. "Yes... I would much... much rather not marry you, dear Sister. Much rather..." He looked back at Psychoshy and then smiled and wiped her tears away with a wing.

"You'd better hurry," I said as I looked back towards Meatlocker, knowing that somepony would come to investigate the shouting sooner or later. I smiled at them both. "I hope it all works out. Thanks for helping me with... um... everything," I said with a slightly embarrassed smile.

Psychoshy turned towards Rampage, but the mare just forced a smile and waved a hoofclaw. "Go on, you crazy kids. I'm happy for you both. There's nothing better than finding that very special somepony." Her jaw strained to maintain her grin.

"Well, then... goodbye," Psychoshy said.

"Goodbye, Psychoshy," I replied.

Then she shook her head with a smile. "Not Psychoshy. Whisper. If I'm going to start a new life, I may as well start with a new name as well." And with her eyes clear and confident she flew to the pair of batponies, and with one look back and a smile, they took to the air together, flying northeast around the crater.

Rampage waited a minute and then sniffed. "Finally taking her chance on her own life... lucky girl..."

Then Lacunae dropped from the sky and landed beside us, throbbing with a full charge of magical

energy to take us home. "Hello, girls. Did I miss anything?"

It took a bit of explaining, during which time Lacunae seemed completely fascinated by the magical powers of Stygius's sister. Shadow magic was apparently making the Twilight in the Goddess so uppity that she was dumping every bit into Lacunae. Rampage said little, looking slightly... something. Pensive? She grimaced when I told Lacunae how happy 'Whisper' was now that she had a new life and muttered under her breath as she turned away.

I supposed that Whisper wasn't the only mare who wanted a fresh start with somepony who loved them.

* * *

While my eyes recovered from the glare of teleportation, I heard a number of startled voices and the sound of water flowing behind me. Slowly the afterimages began to fade away, and I looked at the stunned faces of dozens of ponies. I looked at the horseshoe-shaped strip mall beside the Hoofington River and the numerous ponies around vendors and shops. Steely-eyed stallions with hunting rifles looked our way but didn't go red on my E.F.S. Strings of lights had been stretched between the two arms of the strip mall, filling the plaza between them with a shattered rainbow.

"Hey, this isn't Chapel!" I said, perhaps a little more loudly than I'd intended. "What are we doing in Riverside?" I asked Lacunae with a little pout, standing on my back legs next to her.

"You need new forelegs," Lacunae pointed out, "and I felt that teleporting here and walking would be less disruptive than teleporting into the midst of the sand dogs' home." I huffed and slumped. She had a point. Seeing Glory again would just have to wait. Besides, when we'd last left Riverside, it'd been a ghost town on the verge of being completely abandoned. Now, the stalls and shops that had been all but empty were overflowing with goods, and everywhere I looked were ponies. At least forty or so were going about their business in the dwindling daylight.

Or had *been* going about their business; our appearance had created quite a stir. Murmurs of 'Security', 'Rampage', and 'Reapers' were circulating. Most of the expressions were either awed or confused, with a few glowering at me. Lots of ponies were staring at my limbs -- or the remains thereof -- and shooty eyes.

"Hey, Security," called a voice from beside me, and I frowned as I looked at the peach mare with fish for a cutie mark standing behind a stand loaded with fish, parts of giant frogs, and hunks of leech. She met my gaze and hesitated as if reconsidering. Her eyes lingered on my shredded and mangled metal legs. Then she finally smiled, though, and looked me in the eye. "It's Perch. We met a few weeks ago? Welcome back," she said as she turned to a hubcap filled with coals over which cooked fish on metal skewers. "Want a free sample?"

Well, I ate Cram. How bad could it be? I levitated one over, and she passed another to Rampage. Lacunae just looked away with a faintly ill expression. To be honest, the fish was absolutely delicious, though I didn't think Perch expected me to eat it bones, skewer, and all. The others were looking at the shops curiously.

"I will go find Rover," Lacunae said. "You can stay here and talk with your friend." He knew the alicorn from Tenpony, so there was little chance of a problem with the meeting, hopefully. Rampage finished her roast eel, belched, and trotted over to walk beside the alicorn. It looked like, for once, I

wouldn't have anything to do. It left me feeling a little uneasy, but I was curious what'd brought about this turn around in the town. It couldn't be because of me... it just... couldn't.

"Where did all these people come from?" I asked the peach fishermare.

"Amazing, isn't it?!" Perch said in glee. "Lots of these folks are from outside Hoofington. When those dogs started trading, they had... well... everything! Everything we could ever hope to swap! And they love my fish." The mare was nearly dancing in her joy. "Once we had the salvage, the trade caravans started coming really regularly! We actually have some traders planning to go from here to Manehattan to Dise! Can you imagine?" she said as she hopped on her hooves. "Chems from Flank. Bullets from Megamart! We're getting food from the river and trading it with the Society for vegetables. It's amazing! And it's all thanks to you."

I felt a little dizzy; this was sort of the opposite of Yellow River. I never really expected to ever see anypony really happy to see me. *Trade will save the Wasteland*. It was astonishing how simple economics kept civilization going. "You don't have many Harbingers here, do you?"

She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Those Hoofington Rises freaks? Nah. They'll only give you free stuff if you join their wacky cult. We don't need that garbage." She pointed over at the huge towers across the river. "I mean, their latest line is about how the Core destroyed Hightower. Blasted it to pieces. 'Hoofington Rises and the evils of the Wasteland are destroyed...' blah blah blah." I strained my smile, laughing and hoping few other people had seen the green beam minutes before the explosion. "*Everypony* knows that it was just that damned bomb going off. We don't have time or the need to bother with nonsense like that anymore. We got ponies working to clear debris. Ponies working to bring in more fish. Ponies trying to fix up more shops. It's a real town again!"

"It surely is," an old earth pony stallion chuckled, pushing through the crowd. The lemon-yellow Keeper grinned at me with that look that inexplicably drew a blush to my cheeks as he tugged down the brim of his floppy, beaten hat. His eyes lingered on my busted up forelegs and he shook his head. "Why is it that you always seem to look two steps from the hereafter? One day we need ta meet up when yer whole and healthy. Make a day of it." He grinned at me. "Still, yer better off than when I last saw ya." His eyes settled on my legs and the smile faded, an old wistful look crossing his features; after a moment, I realized that maybe he was recognizing my limbs from their previous owner. Then he shook his head, though, and said calmly, "I hear tell you've been running like a mad hellhound all over the east, Security."

"Yeah, pretty much," I replied with a sheepish little smile. Then I blinked and levitated out Vigilance and my revolvers. "Do you have any parts for these?"

He whistled through his teeth as he took Duty and admired it. "Mmmm... maybe. Looks like the action's worn." He waved over one of his brahmin and dug around in one of its packs, taking out another battered, less fancy-looking heavy revolver. "There. You should be able to cannibalize the parts off it." A little more impromptu trading and I had enough to repair the three weapons. After raiding the Hightower gun vault, I had enough guns to trade for the parts. Finally, we both sat back as I put them in my bags.

"Thanks," I said as I tucked them away. "Been busy."

Keeper laughed and then gave me a sly little look. "So I heard. Folks are talking about how Security blew the dickens out of old Hightower. Pretty impressive," he chuckled. "Can't wait for DJ Pon3 to get back on the air and talk about it."

I groaned, covering my face, then blinked. "Wait! It happened just yesterday. How in Equestria could they possibly know it was me?"

The old yellow buck threw his head back and laughed. "So it was you! Thought so. Blackjack, didn't take long for folks to figger out who in the Hoof *coulda* done it! Big Daddy's crowing 'bout how the Reapers got the damnest toughest fighter in the Hoof. I think that old bastard is thinking of adopting you or something. The Flashers are practically ready to become your own personal gang. The Collegiate's probably gonna name you an honorary doctor or something."

"Great," I said with a roll of my eyes. "Doctor Blackjack." I'd probably kill whoever I tried to heal. Gunshot wound? Amputation! Broken leg? Gunshot! I sighed, shaking my head. "I just want to get home. I should have never been crazy enough to leave Glory."

"Oh, your lovely one-winged marefriend?" He chuckled, stroking his little garlic bulb of a beard with a look that belonged on a stallion half his age. Really, I didn't think he had a chance... He quickly added, as if I were offended, "I don't mean anything by it, of course." Then he leaned towards me a little. "So. How *did* you get the Core ta shoot Hightower and blow it to smithereens? 'Cause that's a story I'd love to hear."

I sighed, looking out across the river for a minute. "You know those Harbingers? Well, they're right about one thing: there is something stirring in the Core. And it wants this." I tapped the cover over my PipBuck. "There was a ghoul -- freakiest thing I ever saw, big as a skywagon -- that was about to eat me. Whatever the damn thing is that's running the Core, it blasted the ghoul to keep it from destroying my PipBuck." Then I gave a half smile and rolled my eyes. "Ten minutes later the balefire bomb blew. Totally unrelated. Really."

"Well rut me twice and call me Sandy..." He looked a little bemused and slightly sympathetic. "Still pretty impressive, though... And what were you after in Hightower in the first place?"

"Just following a wild goose," I said. "And I nearly got cooked in the process."

"Sorry to hear that." I could tell he wanted more specifics; information and rumors were probably just another commodity to him. After a moment, though, he seemed to realize that he wouldn't be getting anything else on that subject. "So what's your next move?"

I groaned and buried my face in the remains of my forehooves. "Right now, I just want to get back to Star House and Glory. That's all I want." He smiled and patted my head.

"And that's why yer gonna end up a *bona fide* legend, Security," he chuckled, but I simply forced a smile and looked away. "You're more concerned with returnin' to yer lady love than with fame, fortune, or power."

"Unless I'm remembered for being a monster," I muttered, thinking back to my friends in the prison. To a slaughter on a stormy night. To a little filly with broken legs. I looked at my mangled limb with a sigh. "My friends are scared of me." I met his worried eyes. "And I think they're right to be."

Keeper looked at me for a long moment. "Hey, Perch! Bring me a bottle of Wild Pegasus," the yellow earth pony shouted. The fishermare pulled a familiar-looking bottle from behind her stand, and the old stallion took it and trotted over to a rusty table and pair of chairs beside the crumbly brick wall that ran along the riverfront. I followed and watched as he deftly poured two glasses, then picked his up with his

mouth and shot it down in a gulp. He smacked his lips. "Best thing for them there existential crises," he said as he leaned back in the old chair. "So... what's the bee in your bonnet?"

I sighed and lifted my glass, looking at the amber contents while he poured himself another. "I don't know. A month ago I was Blackjack. A few days after that I got mutated eyes. Then I found out my PipBuck's the key to all kinds of pre-war technology. Then I had jelly legs. Then I was blind and crippled. Raped... Then dead." That made him arch an eyebrow. "I came back as a cyberpony... and I just felt all wrong. Still do. I was suicidal for a spell. Terrified of stallions. Went nuts. Tore apart some pegasi and crippled a filly. Got some help. Got laid. Got cooked and irradiated. Died again... worse this time. And now..." I sighed as I turned the glass back and forth before me with my magic. "Now I don't know what to feel. I don't know who I am. I just... want to be good. I don't want to be one of the fuckers of the Wasteland, you know?" I set the glass down and looked out at the water as he drank a third. "You said I'm gonna be a legend, but a legend of what? Who the hell am I anymore, Keeper?"

He smacked his lips. "Funny thing about legends. They tend to be whatever a person wants them to be, instead of what they really are. Take Princess Celestia, for example. The nicest, goodiest Princess there ever was, right? Heck, you hear people say 'sweet Celestia' all the time; I just did it myself. Hardly ever hear them say 'Dear Luna' or something. Almost always Celestia. Why do you think that is?"

"Cause..." I paused and frowned. "You just... do. She's Celestia."

"She's also the reason the war started," he replied with a smile. "Oh, I know there's all kinds of arguments about coal and industrialization and national pride and such, but I like to blame whatever pony said 'go'. Because ultimately that's where the bit is supposed to stop." I drank my glass, and he poured us both another. The old stallion went on, "Thing is, folks got it so fixed in their minds that she was this goody good paragon of goodness that even two hundred years later they say her name like they think she's gonna swoop in and save them. But me... I want to know who Celestia was at one in the morning when everything was dark and she was all alone. Was she really so good? Was she really so perfect?" He shrugged. "Guess that's one of them glasses half filled deals."

Now I was more confused than ever. "So are you saying I'm not as good as they think I am?" Gee... surprise surprise.

"I'm saying that there's no cut and dry good and bad. You might be remembered as a saint by these folk, but as a nightmare by some other folk." He poured himself another drink, downed it, and sighed. "Fact is that while I trusted my friends, and liked them, I always knew that if things went bad then they could beat the shit out of me. Especially Big Daddy, Awesome, and Crunchy Carrots." He swirled the remains of the bottle. "Sure enough... not long after Dawn left... they did. And bad. Something stupid." He sighed and shrugged once more. "So if your friends are scared of you, well... you can't help that. You can just keep control of yourself. Trying to do more than that is just setting yourself up to fail."

I smiled a little as I looked down into the whiskey in my glass. "Thanks, Grandpa."

He laughed at me, husky and throaty as he swirled the bottle. "You're one of the few mares where I can honestly say that ain't a possibility." He lifted it and drained the remainder of the whiskey, then grimaced. "Ooooh, gonna be feeling that in an hour." Finally he looked back at me. "So I hear you're having other problems?"

"Had some Harbinger troubles," I said as I looked back towards the river and the foamy brown

water. "They've been after my head."

"After your PipBuck is more like it. I've heard through clients that they're offering a princess's ransom for it." He snorted and shook his head. "Offering too damn much, honestly. Anypony you should be worried about isn't taking them seriously. Yet. Besides, the Zodiacs flat told them no. With Sanguine and his freaks gone too... well... not sure who else is gonna snap that up."

"Oh, I'm sure somepony will. It's not the first time," I muttered. He winced, and I smiled a little. Was I actually getting blasé about a bounty on my head? Ugh... "I've been doing this too long. This has been the month from hell."

"Awww, you've only been in the Hoof for a month and you're already bitching? Wait a few years and see what it can really throw at you," Keeper teased, and then reached out and snagged my shot glass. Before I could do anything he finished that off too. "Well now. I think I'd better be going. There's a nice young aspiring caravaneer here, and I was thinking of giving her some personal tips of the trade before she heads off to Baltimore." He stood, tugged down the brim of his hat, and then walked, a touch unsteady, off into the crowd.

I watched him go, then turned and looked out at the water flowing past the settlement. It wasn't raining for the moment, and I felt a little bit of peace. I didn't look at the seat across from me as I said in a low voice, "You've been quiet, Dealer. Both back with Boing and now."

The pale buck shuffled his cards as he sat in the seat that Keeper had vacated. "Why go through all the effort of contact when others do a job for you?" he asked in return. "Does it make you happy? Seeing this place you helped?"

"A little," I admitted. "Back at Flank, I figured helping was just... giving folks what they needed. But the gift didn't matter if it wasn't what they wanted or from who they wanted it from." I looked at the shops and the lights and the hope... the energy was infectious. And I'd helped with that... putting Rover in a position to trade with Riverside. I glanced back at the Dealer. "So Boing tears me down and Keeper builds me back up again? Is that the deal?"

"I guess." He bowed his head a little. "Not like I'm good at this sort of thing, Blackjack. Being stuck in a stable maneframe for two centuries doesn't do much for one's people skills."

"Then why do it?" I asked, and he closed his eyes. I leaned towards him, trying to prop up my chin on my mangled left leg.

The old, pale buck looked at his cards. "Back before the bombs fell... Goldenblood came to me. It was literally hours before he was arrested for treason. He was... more scared than I'd ever seen him before. More unstable, too. You know better than almost anyone how calm and collected he was. Well, that night, he wasn't. He was scared to death. He insisted that we'd all been played, and that he was the biggest fool of them all. That something had to be done to save Equestria."

"And that was binding you to EC-1101?" I asked in return.

"Part of me. That was what he wanted, yes. He had all the files from Rarity and making her own soul jars. He wanted to make the program itself my soul jar, make sure that it would stay intact no matter what. But he wanted more than that. To make sure that no matter what, EC-1101 reached Celestia at all

costs.”

I shifted on my seat. “Celestia?” I remember how coldly he’d dismissed her, cutting her off from the kingdom entirely. “Why?”

“He didn’t say. He said that EC-1101 would have to get to her.” He shook his head slowly, closing his eyes, and then continued with great regret, “And I told him no. I think I might have killed him, then. He left to find Trottenheimer. Said Trottenheimer’d made something for him to deal with something bad. But then a half hour later I was stunned and woke up in an interrogation room. Luna was there. I was Goldenblood’s assistant. They questioned me for... I don’t know how long. Luna asked me if I wanted to prove my loyalty, and I said yes.”

“Wait. *Luna* put you into EC-1101? But...why... how did she know how to do it?” I gasped.

“I don’t know. Maybe Rarity told her? It was my chance to prove my innocence. They’d split my soul so that it wouldn’t kill me. Luna told me that if anything happened to Equestria because of Goldenblood’s betrayal, I was supposed to find a worthy heir. Somepony with the strength to save the kingdom and the intelligence to do what’s right.” He looked at me with a tired smile. “So far, you’re the best candidate I’ve found.” I didn’t know if I should be flattered or horrified. I was settling on baffled.

“So... EC-1101’s routing is doing what?” I asked, now completely confused.

“I don’t know. It’s got its own thing going, and I’m just along for the ride. I can help you access it and get past all the verification gibberish... but it’s running its own program. Maybe it thinks Rainbow Dash is in Shadowbolt Tower. Maybe something else is affecting it. The only one left on the list is Horse. Maybe it’s trying to get to Robronco. I just don’t know.”

“Ahem...” Perch said, watching me with a concerned smile. “Is everything okay?”

I realized how I must have looked; chattering to myself. “Oh yeah. Sure. Just... um... heroic brooding. ‘Cause, you know, heroes...” I gave a nervous grin that made her look even more worried. “We... um... brood.” I quickly cleared my throat. “What can I help you with. Need raiders ventilated? Evil thwarted? Just let me at ‘em.”

“Actually,” she pointed a hoof at the empty whiskey bottle, “I need to you to pay for that. Twenty caps please.”

I gaped at her, then at the bottle, then in the direction Keeper had gone. “But... but I only drank one glass...”

* * *

“Why is pony always breaking legs? Pony has good legs. Pony needs to take care of legs,” Rover said as he fussed over my damaged limb with his tools. The sand dogs were doing better than I imagined. They weren’t extending their modifications to other ponies yet, but the trade in salvage had brought in a wealth of gems and food for the beleaguered people. Their subway station was still a complete mess, but I gathered that that was more because the sand dogs preferred it that way.

“Well, I lost that one to keep from eating a balefire egg,” I explained yet again, “and that one was chewed up by an ultra ghoul. It could have been a lot worse.” I levitated up a gem and popped it into my

mouth. Mmmm... a nice fruity amethyst.

Lacunae and Rampage waited outside in the rain. My striped friend seemed more down than usual; I hoped that Lacunae would be able to help her. She'd helped Psycho and me after our troubles, but I wondered if maybe this was how she coped with her own problems. That and stomping things six feet underground. That left me alone with the old sand dog as he attached a new foreleg to my stump. I alternated between munching on scrap metal and gem fragments and the occasional smoked fish stuff, which was probably tainted but meh, honestly, how much worse could I get?

"Pony should be more careful," he muttered as he trotted over to a terminal, brought over plugs connected to several wires, and began attaching them to sockets hidden inside my remaining limbs. "Dogs work hard to get you best parts. Should not damage them needlessly." The components he'd used to repair and rebuild my legs were ugly, ungainly things; I wondered if he was giving me deliberately bad-looking replacements as a further try at getting the point across.

"Believe me, after what I've been through, I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for your work." I tried to get my fingers to work on my mangled left limb, then scowled and just lifted the limb and extended my thumb with my magic. "You were right about thumbs. These things are amazing!"

"Told pony," he snorted before walking over for even more cables. How much wiring up was he going to do? "Rover told striped pony, but she say hoof for pony. Rover say thumbs better. Dogs win." He grinned and began typing on the terminal with far more speed than even P-21 or Xanthe. "Rover enjoy making Pony's body. Good parts. Good looks. Like old old times again." Then he pointed a finger at me. "Is why Pony should take care!"

"I know. And I'll try harder." I pressed my mangled hoof to my chest. "I solemnly swear I won't intentionally break my limbs on any enemy smaller than a house. Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye." A little pink pony in my head nodded primly.

He snorted with what I suspected was disbelief. "This take while. Must make old repair talismans fix new parts like old. Make all same system, or limbs not work right."

And he was getting *even more* cables. "How did you get trained to do this?"

"Trained?" He seemed to find the word both offensive and amusing. "Dog not get taught this trick. Dogs get first metal parts. I make sure I watch procedure. I steal papers and books. Finally, pony need assistant. I make sure I be assistant. I pay attention and make sure when other sand dog fixed, I do the fixing. Pony happy to let dog work on dog. Give lots of parts." He chuckled throatily. "But dog cleverer than pony. Dogs dig tunnels, yes? Work with much machinery. Learn to make tools and machines to fix problems underground. Learn to make parts for dogs." He sighed softly, his remaining ear drooping. "Other dogs not learn. Rather scavenge. Mate. Let Rover fix dogs. Rover hopes some dog learn soon. Rover is old dog. Too tired to learn new tricks."

"Have you thought of teaching a pony?" I asked delicately. He snorted at once, and I quickly added, "I mean, there's Triage at the Collegiate. They have all the Steelpony files, too, from the professor."

"Rover not want dogs to forget," he grumbled. "Maybe if I teach dogs too. Fifi maybe." He snorted again and shook his head. "Not important now. Fix you up."

As he came over with yet another cable, I huffed, "Jeeze, how many more wires do you need?" The old dog's muzzle split in a grin.

"Silly pony. Is not wire," he said as he lifted the tube. "Is catheter."

* * *

I had to admit, once he got underway, I was glad for that little tube, despite the Goddess's amusement at my embarrassment. Rover reached over and did something, and like that, I stopped. I couldn't even move my jaw; the muscles just strained against it, something in there (maybe part of the thing that let me eat metal?) apparently being locked up tight. Some experimentation revealed that I could still move my tongue, tail, ears, and eyelids and that my magic still worked, but other than that I couldn't do anything but stand there like a statue while feeling the strangest electric tingling in my forelimbs. And this was going to take all night. He'd set the terminal-tech-stuff to fix and calibrate everything while he had me wired up, so I simply stood there and tingled while Rover went to bed.

I closed my eyes and tried to relax. I couldn't move... but really that didn't bother me as much as I thought it would. In its own way, it felt sort of nice. If he'd tried immobilizing me like this before Happyhorn, I'd probably have been clawing the walls of my mind, but now... I focused on control, like I had with Stygius. I am not freaking now. I am not reacting. I am calm... calm... I watched the lines of data that scrolled in the margins of my vision and slowly drifted away.

~ ~ ~

The royal palace of Canterlot sure seemed different at night without celebration. The looming ministry hubs along Ministry Walk were still relatively lively, but few of the great pale marble structures' stained glass windows showed signs of light and life. While Canterlot bustled about its social affairs, its heart was dark and still. I slowly approached the main gates, looking at the shadowed recesses above with a careful eye trained to find targets. Most ponies would have missed the lurking batponies of Luna's guard watching from on high. During the day the palace was all unicorns and pegasi and brightness. During the night...

I wondered if those daytime unicorns and pegasi really were what they appeared. Or were they enchanted night guards made to look like those races? Just one of countless rumors about the palace and its ruler.

"HALT! WHO GOES--" boomed a voice from beside the gate, and I fell back at once, gaping at the hovering stallion above me. The handsome night guard made a face and tapped a gem on the front of his armor before landing in front of me. "Ahem. Sorry. Only supposed to use the 'royal voice' with the tourists." He reached the tip of his wing around and winced as he twisted it in his ear canal. "Woo. Does a doozy on my ears."

"Lionheart," muttered a mare who stepped out of the shadows next to him. "Thou art supposed to use the--"

"Oh stuff it, Nightracer," Lionheart said with a snort. "That's fine for formal occasions, but honestly. No pony talks like that anymore. You'd have to be half crazy to talk all the time in the royal voice. Even the Princess doesn't talk that way. Save it for the tourists." He looked at me kindly and extended a wingtip while the dusky purple mare glowered at him. I hooked it with my foreleg, and he

pulled me to my hooves. "So, you have an invitation, right?"

I blinked, then pulled the white envelope from my saddlebags and slid out the folded piece of paper. He flipped it open with his hoof, the dusky stallion frowning as he scrutinized the invitation. "Mmm... Psalm... meeting with Eclipse. Well, it looks about right. Still gonna need to confirm, though. Procedure. May I see your hoof, please?" He pulled a long silver needle from his armor.

I balked, looking at his pleasant smile and then at the glowering mare. A peek revealed two more batpony stallions standing silently behind me. I had a feeling that saying no was going to earn me even more trouble. I held out my hoof and winced as I was jabbed with the needle. He drew one drop of blood and let it drip on the paper. Instantly the entire invitation began to glitter with bright red sparkles. "That's unicorn blood, all right. This way."

He led me into the palace. Despite the dark windows, there were ponies trotting around on quiet hooves. Guards, certainly, but also others, ponies who averted their eyes and halted their conversations as we trotted past. A hush seemed to envelop everything. "Do you... do you have to do that often?"

"More and more these days. There's more than one way for a zebra... or other things... to hide their appearance," he said in that soft yet comforting burr. "Regular visitors have blood talismans to speed things up. They also don't use the front gate, either."

I looked at the dark windows, the normally bright glass images now menacing abstract shapes. "I don't know why I'm here at all. I've never met this Eclipse. Do they work for the Princess?"

"Something like that," he replied with a smile, and then his ears twitched and he frowned. "Hmmm... Celestia's here." I looked around, but aside from a distant chirping I couldn't hear anything.

"Princess Celestia? Where?" I gasped in a rush of glee, earning a cool look from the stallion. "Not that Princess Luna's not... um... nice..."

"It's always trouble whenever she visits," he muttered as he led me further into the back of the palace. "Doesn't she understand that Princess Luna's busy? Ugh..." He stopped at a pair of double doors and poked his head in. "Psalm to see Miss Eclipse. Also, *she's* here."

There was a pause as a mare muttered under her breath and then said, "One second. Almost... there..." And then abruptly the voice changed and became deeper. "Send Miss Psalm in."

The office was a square room whose ceiling was enchanted to look like the night sky. One wall had high windows whose tops were lost in the shadows. A second wall was almost consumed by a massive map of the world with numerous little white and red dots covering it. Floating against the surface of the map were eight icons of light: bright orange, cyan, pink, purple, violet, yellow, green, and gold. Half were clustered over Canterlot, but I watched in amazement as the purple dot flashed and disappeared from Manehattan to reappear in Maripony.

The pegasus mare behind the desk was a dusky lavender with a buzzed-short royal blue mane and an eyepatch. Her remaining eye followed me closely as she gestured to the fancy padded chair on the opposite side of the desk. "Thank you, Lionheart. Please make *her* comfortable." The guard bowed and trotted out of the room. Eclipse smiled at me, folding her hooves on the table. "I'm glad you could come, Psalm. My name is Eclipse. I work closely with various agencies and report directly to Princess Luna. I wanted to ask you some questions about your squad's latest incursion to Dawn Bay and your

attempted assassination of Legate Fortis.”

A sick feeling rose up inside me, and I swallowed as I lowered my eyes. “Yes ma’am,” I murmured.

What proceeded was a complete debriefing. She asked me who I saw meeting with the Legate. Did they appear to be fancily dressed, armored, or in scientific garb? When I was planning my shot, what other activities were going on in Dawn Bay? Was there increased construction? Was the Legate fortifying his troops, building more war infrastructure, or wasting resources on increasing the luxury of his own living quarters? Every question, the pegasus seemed to think and consider, often smiling to herself and tapping her chin thoughtfully.

What she wasn’t asking was the most important question: why had I missed? They’d provided me with a zebra rifle and made very specific instructions that I was not to modify it in any way nor fire it against any target except the Legate and that I was to leave it behind. I’d assumed there was an enchantment or some other thing at work; maybe a bullet enchanted to kill only the Legate? If only...

Despite myself, I grew more and more upset. It was one thing to kill somepony in the heat of battle, but what had happened... I hunched over and started to sob, and Eclipse paused, staring at me in shock. “I’m sorry,” I blubbered. “I don’t know how I failed. The shot was perfect. I had the zebra rifle just like I was told and he was right there and... and... I didn’t mean to kill his son! The shot just went wide and... and...”

Suddenly Eclipse was there, patting my mane. “Shhh... shhh... You didn’t know. You couldn’t have known. You were never supposed to kill the Legate. Fortis is paranoid; he’s convinced that one of his rivals is plotting to kill him. He’ll waste months improving his guard and purging his own ranks of suspected traitors. It was just bad luck his son had been standing right beside him when you fired.” But she didn’t say it like it was all that bad. In fact, she looked downright pleased with the results of my miss. “The sights on the zebra rifle had been tampered with, and I knew that your squad wouldn’t have tried as hard as you did just to miss a shot at the Legate.”

So, it had been for nothing? The raid into Dawn Bay had been a harrowing affair, struggling behind enemy lines to find a shooting position before waiting for days to learn the Legate’s daily routine well enough to find a window of opportunity. Then, finally, getting the opportunity to take the shot. The zebra colt falling instead, the bullet through his eye. The escape had nearly cost us all our lives, and only Big Macintosh had kept us focused enough to be extracted by Rainbow Dash. All just to put a little more fear into one of the enemy generals?

“I’m damned... damned...” I whimpered.

“No.” Eclipse frowned in thought. “You acted on the orders of the Princess. I’m sure that your... soul... can be absolved in service to the Princess. I know she’ll forgive you.”

“She... she will?” I sniffed, rubbing my eyes.

“I’m sure of it,” Eclipse said with a firm nod and smile. “Just do whatever you can to help, and she’ll forgive you when this whole nightmare is over. I promise.”

Just then the door opened, and I heard the wet rasping breathing that announced his presence. Goldenblood stepped in, struggling for air. He looked at me, his eyes widening in momentary surprise,

and then at Eclipse. "Princess Luna needs you. She needs to speak with her sister and wants us present."

Eclipse actually frowned and rolled her eyes. "Not again. Honestly, why can't she simply go stay with Cadance?" Eclipse snorted scornfully, and my shock must have shown because she immediately coughed and forced a smile. "Ahem. Sorry to cut this short, but sometimes there's just no reasoning with my... with Princess Celestia. I'll get somepony to show you out, my dear." She trotted quickly and moved out into the hall. One side effect of the hushed halls: the mare's voice carried. "What is she going on about now?" Maybe it was the sight of my teacher, or maybe it was just because it had to do with Princess Celestia, but I followed along quietly.

I was able to shadow the pair without too much trouble. A dark castle with most of the guards on the outside and plenty of other ponies going about their business inside was nothing next to infiltrating a zebra military encampment. They walked down to another room and slipped inside. My magic reached out and gently grabbed the door's handle to keep it from shutting all the way. Looking up and down the seemingly abandoned hall, I heard the voice of Princess Luna ask in a tired and irritable voice, "Alright, Tia. What's it this time? More protests about Twilight helping me? Maybe another protest on the diamond dog relocation?"

"It is good to see you as well, dearest Sister," Princess Celestia said softly and without a hint of sarcasm. "Have you seen this?"

"An invitation to a diplomatic meeting at Shattered Hoof Ridge," Luna said with a sigh, and then there was the sound of paper being wadded up.

"It's a trap, pure and simple," Goldenblood rasped. "The Caesar hasn't made any serious moves towards opening a dialogue with Her Majesty. Quite the reverse; he's using their mythology as a rallying cry to unite more tribes against her and us."

"What if it's not, though? This offer comes from the heads of four major tribes," Celestia said firmly. "For ten years before Littlehorn we quibbled around the negotiating table. What if this is a step towards ending the war, even after that? I've spoken to the zebras in Zebratown and many prisoners of war. They all want this conflict over."

"Even if that is the case, the Caesar doesn't." Goldenblood sighed like a rusty boiler. "It's not legitimate, Your Majesty. And even if it were, there's no way that we could manage to keep her safe at Shattered Hoof Ridge."

"Perhaps Luna cannot attend, but why can't I negotiate peace for Equestria?" Celestia asked.

"What?" Luna asked in a low, shocked voice. "Tia, I said no. I don't care if there're forty tribal leaders wanting to talk a ceasefire; until they concede to our main demands, there's no point! They won't even agree to withdraw from Dawn Bay, and that's one of our *lesser* requirements."

"You cannot pass this up, Luna!" Celestia insisted.

"I most certainly can and will," Luna replied coldly. "And I refuse to let you go. If you were captured, the blow to morale would be incalculable, not to mention that they might simply kill you."

"I am willing to take that chance," Celestia countered. "Thousands risk their lives every day in this

war. It's time I did as well."

"I am in charge of Equestria now!" Luna snapped. "Or did you forget that you stepped down?" There was a long silence before Celestia spoke once more.

"There's not a day I can forget that, Luna," Celestia said calmly. "Nor a day I don't regret it. When I passed the throne over to you, I thought it was to lead Equestria to a brighter future, not a darker one. I am going to this meeting in your place, Luna. You can arrange security if you like, or I will go alone, but either way, I am going. Equestria needs some hope that this war will end, and if I can give it that hope, I will. I'm sorry, Sister."

"Tia!" Luna cried out, but there was a flash of golden light, and the Princess of the Night let out a sob. "Damn it, Tia. I'm trying my best! I am. There's just so much to do. Can't she understand that?!"

"Doubtful," Goldenblood rasped. "They probably worked quite hard to get that peace offering to cross Celestia's hooves. Worst case, Celestia gets captured and the Caesar uses her as leverage against the ministries. He'd offer peace and her release, but the conditions... well... your exile would probably be top on the list. Refuse, and some of the population will turn on you. Celestia's still quite popular."

"Damn it, Tia," Luna muttered. "Why can't she just... let me do this? Why is she always trying to force things? I didn't want to be in charge of Equestria. She asked me! And ever since then, she's been constantly meddling and criticizing. Why can't she just go to her school and leave Equestria to me?" Luna sighed. "I don't suppose I can just lock her up, can I?"

"Only if you want a full-on revolution on your hooves, led by Twilight and her friends. I've tried my best to keep their interactions to a minimum, but she was Twilight's mentor. Those bonds sometimes go deeper than you ever expect." Goldenblood let out a rusty sigh.

"What's the best case scenario?" Luna asked.

"They kill her," Goldenblood replied. I felt an electric tingle paralyzing me.

"Ha ha. Very funny," Luna muttered sarcastically. Then she paused and said in shock, "You're serious? Golden, she's my sister!"

"Captured, she'd be a lever against you and, by extension, Equestria. Killed, she'd be a martyr for the war effort. Recruitment would probably double, if not more. There'd be no more interference to your rule, and the aristocrats would fall in line behind you. Better, several tribes of zebras revere Celestia as an embodiment of the sun. Killing her would turn them against the Caesar. We might even sway portions of the Propoli to break ranks. That could completely cripple their war effort." He paused and then added, "Of course, the cost would be unthinkable."

"I should think so! She's my sister, for pony's sakes!" Luna snapped. Then there was an ominous silence, and Luna groaned. "What are we going to do about her? What if she's right?"

"Then you'd best be ready to return the throne to her," Goldenblood answered. "If this peace effort is sincere, any arrangement will require your abdication. The terms beyond that would probably be equally unpleasant, but moot." He paused and sighed. "We could see if she's right, Luna."

"You just said--"

"I know, and I still believe it. But if we have peace, real peace... well... you won't be responsible for Equestria anymore."

There was another long silence. "No. No! I'm not going to just... just give up! I don't care if she is older and wiser and nicer and... and... I'm going to do it right. I'm going to do whatever it takes and show her and everypony that I am every bit the ruler that she was! I have to show them I can do it. That I'm more than Nightmare Moon and the young mare that fools around on Nightmare Night."

Goldenblood let out a long sigh. "Then we'll just have to disrupt the meeting. I'll pull together a guard detachment that will pull her out at the first sign of trouble. See what I can arrange in the interim."

"And if they do capture her, somehow? Or try?"

"Better a dead Princess than a captured one..."

~ ~ ~

My eyes fluttered open. It was all I could do at the moment as my mind rolled that last memory over and over again. 'Better a dead Princess than a captured one.' Could Luna have possibly okayed such a thing? No... No, Celestia lived through the war, right? Princess Luna didn't kill her.

No. That was just... unthinkable...

I was still dangling wires and tubes. My magic levitated a bottle of water off the counter and lifted it to my lips. I couldn't see what condition my limbs were in, so there was no telling how long I'd been like this. I couldn't hear Rover snoring; maybe it was already morning.

"Lacunae?" I thought out at her. "What time is it?"

"Dawn," she replied. "We are outside." There was something off about her words.

"Is everything okay?" I asked at once.

"Rampage is... disconcerted. That is all," she replied. Before I could ask further, she queried, "How do you fare, Blackjack?"

"I can't move an inch," I said with a chuckle.

"You seem to be handling it well." I ignored the surprise in her voice.

"You've never been in security. A third of your time is spent walking, another third standing a post, and the rest is the time something interesting happens." Okay, *theoretically* that was the job. There were also a lot of card games, dice, and sexual liaisons involved that I'd left out. "Granted, being able to scratch myself would be nice too. Cozy as it is, this catheter itches like crazy. The plug in my back end is a lot more comfortable, though." I paused. "Lacunae? Are you there?"

I strained and could barely pick it out. "La la la la la... not listening to Blackjack talking about things in her hiney." I couldn't open my mouth, but I still chuckled in my throat. Even the Goddess seemed to be tuning me out.

Well, it was one way to get a little privacy.

Then I blinked. Was that a... growl?

"Lacunae? Lacunae! Um... I think I might need some help here..." But all I got back was that stream of her not talking to me. The growl sounded again, deep and low and right on the far side of the door. The handle slowly rotated, the metal squealing faintly as it was shoved open. And then I was incredibly grateful Rover had stopped me up before working on me. I'd have probably had an accident then and there.

The creature was almost two feet taller than Rover, but it stooped over. Yellowish hide sprouting knots of scar tissue and bristly black fur covered its incredibly muscled frame. Actually, scratch the 'it'; there was no question whatsoever that 'it' was a 'he'. He wore only a leather harness sporting dangling magic fusion cells, and a large energy weapon was slung across his immense shoulders. It reminded me of the weapon Xanthe had cobbled together; it looked like some kind of mining tool with every safety feature removed. More immediately terrifying than that, however, were the immense hands that each ended in a set of wicked claws. The pointed maw peeled back, and I saw a ridiculous amount of yellowed, razor-sharp teeth, more than any species outside dragonkind had any right to possess. His yellow eyes ran down my body in a way that made me wonder if he was going to eat me or rut me... Oh Celestia! Was it coming out?!

I didn't even think past that point. I simply went straight into S.A.T.S. and toggled up four magic bullets right for his face as I began mentally screaming in a blind panic. My horn flashed, the bolts smashing into his head and tearing off a goodly chunk of his features. Blood and torn hide dangled in flaps along the side of his face, and I might have gotten his eye... but the damage was far from the blasted skull and splattered brain I'd inflict on a pony target. He swayed and fell back against the wall, then fixed me with a glare and a bowel-loosening snarl. He pushed himself upright and started to advance.

I had a few more spells in my horn. This time I didn't aim for his face as he began to charge. I aimed for his kneecap. The two bolts ripped into the leg, and the canine monster was thrown off his gait. Now I'd really pissed him off. Not able to scream, I did the only thing I could think of: pull the trigger on his crude energy weapon. At least, I hoped it was the trigger... and I was right. Instantly three bolts of magical green disintegration energy blasted around his feet and the monster howled in pain as it struggled to get the energy weapon in its grip. Again and again I jerked the trigger, blasting the wall and floor and anything the weapon happened to be pointed at.

Finally those claws just shredded the harness and let it fall in a heap. There was no way my horn could lift something that huge, but I could turn it! And as the creature got ready to cut my head off with those razor sharp claws, I spun the energy weapon towards its back and fired again. The monster let off a hound-like roar as it collapsed. The weapon's energy cell was depleted, so I fumbled with controls, trying to eject the spent canister. How had Glory done this?

I finally managed to pop the cell free when Rover rushed in. "No! Stop, Pony! Stop!" Huh? I hesitated as I looked from Rover to the beast and back again. Had he missed the claws and fangs? Had he missed that penis?!

"What is that thing!?" roared the monster in pain, bringing those claws down and tearing its own weapon in two before I could bring it to back to bear. I mentally asked the exact same thing. It would

have been really nice to be able to talk. He huffed, blood dripping from the holes I'd blown in his face as he stood over the wrecked disintegration gun.

"Pony. Stupid pony," Rover said as he helped pull the monster to sit upright. "Gnarr. Blackjack the Security Pony. Blackjack, Gnarr," he said with a gesture of his robotic claw towards the yellow canine monster. "Gnarr is hellhound and guest of sand dogs."

The hellhound growled that ominous snarl as he rubbed the raw red burns the energy weapon had made in his hide. "This is Security? Huh. Thought her horn was bigger." The monster rose to his feet as Rover began to remove the cables from me. My eyes narrowed as I looked up at him, feeling implants and motors start to reactivate as the cables were removed.

"Security Pony help sand dogs. Dogs hope Security could help hounds too," Rover said as he reached up and pulled a plug out of my shoulder. My mouth filled with the taste of battery, and I could suddenly move my jaw. "Not shoot hound just because hound is scary!"

"Little mare is tough, that is for sure," Gnarr growled as he picked at his fangs with a claw. "I take it you've never seen us before... or maybe you've seen too many of us and know better?" The hellhound chuckled as he tapped his claws against the blasted wall.

"The first one," I croaked, and floated the bottle of water over again and took another drink. Every time a cable was removed I was struck by a building pins and needles sensation followed by restored movement. As soon as I could look down, I stared at the smooth metal of my limbs. They looked exactly as they had before I'd left Meatlocker for Hightower. They were even re-enameled! "What's a hellhound?"

Rover typed on the terminal as Gnarr snorted, "Rover told you of how we were forced off our land by ponies long ago? Even before the bombs ended your world, our homes were poisoned. Some came here, worked for ponies, and lived beneath their cities. Others returned home, and those that survived the poison became strong." He flexed his powerful frame and chuckled deep in his throat. "Dogs are cousins of hounds... weaker for staying away from home."

"Yet hounds came to dogs for help, Gnarr," Rover snapped, wiping the grin from the hellhound's face.

"What could... well... you... need help with?" An irritable dragon perhaps?

Gnarr grumbled and crossed his arms. "Do you know about the flying ponies, Security?"

"Do you mean pegasi or the Enclave?" I asked in return.

"The second one," Gnarr growled. "Our den has been under attack by them for nearly a month. Many scouts and warriors have been taken, and the Enclave have used their strange devices to control them. I was one of the last, driven from my home when they overran us with our own people." He reached down and pulled something off his harness that looked like some sort of skull cap. "Do you know what this is, Pony?"

I levitated it and turned it over. "No idea. I-- yipe!" I jumped two feet into the air as the last tube and plug were yanked out of my hind end. I blinked and swallowed. "Toilet!" I wailed as I tensed immediately. Rover snorted and pointed to the door, and I rushed out to the station and into the little filly's

room, nearly hopping across the tracks.

Really, not the way I wanted to start the day. The pair met me outside, the hellhound looming over the other sand dogs. "I guess we're even for me shooting half your face off?" I asked Gnarr, my face flaming. The pair looked at each other, and the hellhound just gave an indifferent shrug. "What are the Enclave doing with your home?"

"Enslaving us. I know of at least half a dozen dens that have gone silent all across Equestria." He pointed off to the southeast. "Our den lived in the old pony army base. More and more were taken, and then one day they returned all at once and with pegasi and controlled hounds and took over the base."

A month ago. I thought about what I'd seen Lighthooves doing and my mane prickled. "Was there anything biological at that base? Something that could be used for a weapon?"

"It was a pony army base and struck heavily by the bombs. The only thing that remained were the bunkers filled with old stuff from the space center. Safe for us; we're immune to the radiation. But not the Enclave." He growled long and low at me. "I came hoping Rover could find a way to jam their control over us. Rover suggested I tell you."

Me? Why would he tell... oh. "Hmmm... I am curious, I admit. Anything that Lighthooves was involved in interests me. I don't know when I'll be able to do something about it, though. I... crap!" I whirled towards the east (thank you, PipBuck compass). "Paradise! I completely forgot to clear Paradise of Red Eye's forces! Damn it! I was just over on the east side, too!" I sat down hard, glowering at my oversight.

Gnarr rubbed his chin and chuckled. "Heh. Busy pony. Well, Rover can keep working. And if you get down that way, maybe you can stop them. Or I will, if Rover can figure something out." I had to admit, someone solving their problems without my help was refreshing! Why, if this kept up, then I'd be out of a job and could retire!

Yeah, right. It took turning off my limbs just to get me to sit still.

"Well, I'll remember it. If Lighthooves wants something in that base, I'd like to know what," I said with a sigh and a smile. "Right now, I'd really... really like to just get home." My ears wilted a little as I gave a sheepish smile. "I've got my friends waiting for me."

"Very well. Do... not... break... legs... Pony..." Rover said as he tapped his metal claw against my nose with every word. "Pony breaks leg again and Rover start charging money to fix," he said with a scowl.

"Oh? So begging wouldn't work?" I threw myself at his feet. "Please fix me, Rover! Please please please! Pleeeeeeeeeeeease!" I squealed as I beat my rear hooves and hugged his leg, sticking out my bottom lip.

Gnarr whimpered and covered his ears but Rover just grinned. "Whine all you want, Pony." And he tapped the side of his ear. "Dog ears cut out feedback."

"Rats." I pouted and then rose to my hooves. "Well, I'll have to think of something." I waved my

hoof and smiled as I trotted for the exit.

Rover muttered behind me, "Dog bet hound half a brahmin pony is back in two days."

"Sure," Gnarr replied, and I glanced back to spot him shaking hands with Rover as I trotted for the entrance. "Just one question, though, Rover: why do you keep talking like that?!"

* * *

After leaving the subway station, I met up with the morose striped pony. We were waiting for Lacunae to fly to the Miramare crater and return, but I really wanted to walk right now. After losing the use of two limbs, I reveled in full mobility.

I trotted in circles on my hooves, danced, pirouetted, and hopped. The response time was better than when I'd gone into Hightower! I popped out my fingers and worked each and every one. Even my breathing felt smoother. A heartbeat would be nice right about now, though. Could Rover make some kind of thudding implant that corresponded with pump rate? I'd have to ask him next time.

Rampage sat off to the side with her head low, pink eyes troubled as she muttered to herself. I looked in the direction Lacunae had gone and thought at her. "Is she going to be okay?"

"I am not sure," Lacunae thought back. "She is very distraught. She questions herself now. Her motivation and desires... her fears... her mistakes... everything."

I walked up to Rampage and gave her flank a nudge. She glanced over, and I tried to give a consoling smile. "I know I have absolutely zero right to say this, but my advice is to try not to think about it." Yes, listen to the queen of denial, because it's worked so well for me. "After a few days with P-21 and Scotch, you'll be able to stop worrying about who you are and just be yourself. Thinking about it will just drive you crazy."

"Yeah. The question is, how do I stop?" Rampage asked.

"Do what Blackjack does," Lacunae said in my mind. "Find the most dangerous place in the Wasteland and charge right in. Get shot up and so caught up in fighting for your life that you can avoid thinking about things."

"I don't... I... okay, I'm trying to do that less," I muttered, my cheeks reddening as we waited in the broken and blasted street. I hoped the alicorn wasn't loitering and enjoying the radiation. Her indignation answered my unvoiced suspicions. I sighed. "Ugh... sorry. Does talking about it help? Not talking about it?" I looked around for some red bars. "I can try and find something to attack us." That at least made her smile a little.

"Honestly, helping you deal with all of your problems really helps me avoid dealing with mine," she answered with a small smile. "I think it's the doctor in me. Or maybe Softheart. Or... ugh... I don't know. It's like... for as long as I could remember, I had no idea who I was. Fuck toy. Loving partner. Reaper. Psychoshy was the same way once she realized Sanguine was just using her."

"Whisper," I corrected, and she rolled her eyes.

"Fine. Whisper. Big Daddy's gonna love that." She huffed and then looked off to the east. "Point is, she found out who she was supposed to be... or wanted to be. So yeah, I'm a little jealous. If it

weren't for you, she'd be just as miserable as me, and I could ignore my misery by helping her with hers."

I patted her on the shoulder. "Hey. It could be worse. I nearly killed a helpless monster hellhound and felt guilty about it." She looked at me, and I said, "In my defense, I couldn't move and it had a penis the size of my leg. A girl's got to be careful, right?" Okay, only a small shiver. Progress!

"Is that why you blasted it?"

"No," I said defensively as I stood and folded my forelegs behind my head. "It was more all the fangs and claws and... yeah. Big dick." I held my hooves out and her smile widened in amusement.

"So, if you can joke about it, are you over it? Did you work all that out?" she asked with a little smile.

"Sort of. I think I'm back in control of that. Mostly. Hope so." I was lying to myself. I'd always be a little on edge when it came to guys and sex, though maybe if I knew him really well, I'd be fine. "But I'm still trying. That matters, right?"

There was a purple flash announcing Lacunae's arrival. "Anything happen while I was gone?" she asked as she looked at Rampage and me.

"Penises," Rampage said simply, but smiling.

"Monster dog penises," I agreed.

The purple alicorn shook her head and sighed. Rampage grinned at me. "If only the Wasteland knew what Security talks about when she's not being a hero."

"You should try what she *thinks* about." Lacunae shivered.

"What? The plug was actually pretty cozy."

"La la la la la... not listening to thoughts..." she began to say in my mind, so I thought exactly how things had *felt*. Lacunae went even redder and finally blurted aloud, "Sweet Celestia, stop thinking, Blackjack!" Rampage and I shared a laugh as the alicorn gave a dignified toss of her head. "You keep thinking that and you will be *walking* to Chapel!"

"Okay! Okay! Sorry!" I said, raising my hooves in apology. She nodded, trying to recoup her dignity as her horn began to flare with magic. Then I couldn't help myself. I added, "I wonder where Glory can get another one of those..."

The pair disappeared, and I blinked, looking around the now empty ruins. "Lacunae? Lacunae?!" I looked around for a blue bar. "Very funny, Lacunae!" I thought at her.

"La la la la la I suggest you start walking la la la la..." she thought back. Somewhere in my mind, the Goddess howled with laughter. Cheeks blazing, I turned south and started running.

* * *

It was midmorning by the time I reached Chapel, slurping down another gem. The town now looked... well... like a town. The spire of the church was on its way to being repaired, and there were

more structures being thrown up. I skirted the minefield that they'd been kind enough to mark and trotted around the settlement proper and up the hill towards home. There had to be at least fifty or so ponies working down there. Most were fillies and colts, but I saw a pair of gray adult earth ponies heaving up boards while a filly unicorn hammered them in. Things still looked like a mess, though, and there was a rank stench like a cesspit that I didn't remember from the last time I was here.

I was so concerned by the reek that I halted and looked up towards the tantalizingly close roof of Star House. If there was something wrong, through... ugh. "Five more minutes won't kill me," I said as I turned and trotted towards the entrance to Chapel proper.

The machine gunner's nest was unoccupied, something that sent a frisson of fear along my spine. Had those adults enslaved the Crusaders or something? But as I trotted further in, I saw the hustle and bustle wasn't anything malicious. Still no explanation for why there were no guards, but this was just ponies cooperating to build a town.

Sorta.

Now that I was closer... There was a stockade going up, but it looked as if it'd been abandoned half way through, then restarted on the other side till it tumbled over. Four mobile home wagons were just parked in the middle of the street. The few small homes that had been here before seemed to be sprouting tumorous growths of planks and siding. The post office was almost buried beneath crates, boxes, and building materials scavenged from the manor. Most disgusting of all was the ditch running along the road, which had been turned into an open sewer.

Ghoul children and young ponies were making a game of construction, which was good for a fort, I supposed, but bad for anything you actually had to live in. I spotted the young zebra Majina running around with other fillies and colts. The adults, who seemed to have a better understanding of construction, were all throwing up their own shanties. Sekashi and Harpica stood by as I entered and surveyed the scene in shock.

"What the hay is going on?" I muttered as I stared at the chaos.

"Ah. The guardian has returned," Sekashi said as she approached with the nervous ghoulish pegasus. The minty-colored mare was hovering in the air and kept looking over at her undead charges, who were probably acting like real children for the first time in two hundred years. "You have had some adventures, faced great perils, met mighty champions?"

"You can't imagine," I replied, and the zebra chuckled merrily.

"Oh, there's been lots of imagining, indeed." The mare grinned and gave my flank a nudge. "But what matters is that you are well and happy, for how can you be happy if you are not well? And how can you care about your health if you are not happy?" Okay. Zebra weirdness. Gotta love it.

"Well things sure look busy here... and smelly..." I coughed, backing away from the ditch.

"Ah, yes. No no, don't put that in your mouth!" Harpica blurted to a filly sucking on an empty cola bottle. "The Crusaders have been a little... *overenthusiastic* about fixing up Chapel after the attack," the minty blue ghoul said nervously. "I'm not really sure if they're doing any good... ah... please don't run!"

And then there was a solid thud against my rear end and I jerked, spinning around and looking at

the stunned white blank. She sat there, swaying limply a moment before she shook her head and then frowned up at me. "Oh. Hello Boo!" Her pale eyes narrowed, and her frown grew more severe. "Um... I missed you? Sorry I left, but... um... yeah..." Her face could have been carved from plaster. I reached over, popped out my fingers, and started to scratch her ears nervously. She pursed her lips, clearly not satisfied as she leaned towards my face even more. Her eyes then grew large and watery as her lips quivered.

"Here," a stallion said softly behind me, tapping my shoulder with something in a wax paper wrapper. My magic lifted it up and passed the cherry Fancy Buck Cake to the blank, and instantly she perked up and seized it in her mouth with a happy little squeal. She turned away but paused and looked back at me over her shoulder. Then she darted back and nuzzled my cheek before trotting off with her prize. "You spoiled her, you know," the stallion said with a quiet little chuckle.

"Yeah, I guess I..." I said with a smile, but that slowly vanished as I turned and looked back at the speaker. The shaggy blue mane was the same, as was the lighter blue coat. His frame was gaunt, though, and he sat as if a strong wind might blow him over. More than that, though, the eyes that looked back at me were those of a stranger: calm, serene, and no longer looking at the world like it was his enemy. "P-21?" Even seeing his cutie mark, I wasn't entirely sure it was him.

"Nice to see you again, Blackjack. I heard you've been busy. Did you find what you needed?" he asked with a kind smile. The smile of a pony who had done just that.

"I... yeah. Some. I think," I said as I rubbed my mane. "I shouldn't have run off like that. I should have stayed and--" But he put his hoof to my lips.

"Don't start with that already. You did what you did. All that matters is if you're better for it or not," he said, patting my shoulder with his hoof. "And your plan worked. The Harbingers didn't follow us far, and we haven't seen them at all here. You didn't miss much besides two or three days of detoxification." He gave a little shiver. "Finally done with the treatments..."

"And you feel better?" I asked in concern.

"Of course not. I feel like I've been scraped raw inside and outside. Glory says the lifetime of drug abuse in 99 probably did a number on my lifespan; if we hadn't been retired, we probably would have been dropping in a few years anyway. But I don't have... the tension. The craving. The need's gone. It's like a huge weight off my back and off my mind. I can finally think clearly again." He then looked over at an approaching filly with heaps of scrolls poking from her saddlebags. "So I've been focusing on better things."

"Can you believe it, Daddy? That guy's building his house right by that septic trench they call a toi--" Scotch Tape silenced as she saw me sitting there, then let out a squeal, "Blackjack!" She charged up the road at me, shedding rolls of paper right and left before hugging me fiercely. Immediately afterwards, she started coughing.

"Careful," P-21 warned. I picked up one of the scrolls with my magic and carefully unrolled it. It showed four toilets and a shower, along with some extensive plumbing.

"I'm fine..." she rasped, then smiled at me, and her eyes shot open in alarm. "Blackjack! Don't look at that!" She threw her forelegs around it, yanked it out of the air, and hugged it to her chest. I floated out another one and opened it up to look at some kind of house. She eeped and grabbed that one

too. "Don't look at my drawings! They're horrible." Another bout of coughing made me stop.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Yeah. Glory says it's some bug I picked up when she put in the new lungs. Got a wicked scar though, see?" She lifted her chin and pointed her hoof at a straight, raw red line that started under her chin and went all the way down to the collar of her utility barding. I tried not to think of Sanguine leading a little blank copy of Scotch away.

"It's post-operative pneumonia and you should be in bed," P-21 said firmly. Scotch blew a raspberry. "I promised Glory I'd keep you from overexerting yourself. You still need a few days and several more healing potions to get the infection out. Enervation right now would kill you." Good thing I hadn't taken her with me...

"But what are these?" I asked as I floated one of the papers she'd dropped over to us.

Scotch Tape fidgeted as she looked down at her forehooves. "Just some... you know... ideas."

"Ideas?" I asked, opening the scroll to look at... some sort of diagram of... something.

"For the town. Since I was sick and couldn't do anything," Scotch said, then gestured around. "I mean have you seen this place, Blackjack? Everypony's working and throwing up whatever they want. Half of it's gonna be falling down in weeks, if not days. They've got a ditch filled with poo running through the middle of town! And the money from the manor won't last forever." She reached over and looked down at the plan in her hooves. "I always liked thinking up ideas in 99... but I was in Maintenance. We never built anything new. We just focused on keeping everything how it was."

I thought about how I'd felt when I'd played the contrabass for the first time and was wondering if maybe I might have had a different life if I'd been allowed to play. "Well, maybe this will be how you get your cutie mark. Maybe your destiny *is* to bring plumbing back to the Wasteland."

"I'm gonna have a toilet on my hind end the rest of my life..." Scotch Tape pouted as she slumped.

"So why don't you try and build one of these designs?" I asked. "One that's not a toilet?"

She huffed softly. "'Cause nopony'll listen to me. Everypony's fixed on doing their own thing and nopony's thinking about what we're gonna need. We're gonna need a doctor. Someplace for fixing things. Need to move the minefield further out. Need to get that stockade finished and matched up and plated with scrap and reinforced with dirt or something. Need a place to store food and maybe a mess hall. Need to make bunkhouses for the Crusaders. We're gonna need a school. Ya can't just throw a story or two on top of a house!" She sighed as she looked down at the paper. "Besides, I don't know nothing about real engineering. I just fix up toilets."

I patted her mane. "Scotch, you know more about building and fixing things than anypony here. You've been training to do maintenance work since you could play. Heck, I bet you had a steam assembly for your first toy. If this place is going to be a real town, it's going to need ponies like you."

"Yeah," she replied, but I could tell her heart wasn't quite in it. "Maybe I can talk to Charity. I know she'd be glad to have some of this stuff organized." For some reason, the name of the filly

shopkeeper set my mane on end. Did I owe her money? I *thought* I was all paid up, but... wait? Had I paid for that Wild Pegasus she sent me on my birthday yet? Shoot! I didn't know for sure...

"Anyway, I need to get going. I really, really need to see Glory," I said as I rose to my hooves and backed away. The pair looked at each other with worried expressions.

P-21 said evenly, "Maybe we should go up with you, Blackjack. Glory's... well... kind of upset."

I sighed and smiled. "No, it's okay. She has a right to be." I turned and looked up in the direction of Star House. "Actually there's a whole lot I need to talk with her about. I've got a whole lot of apologizing to do." For running off, for making her worry, and other things. "We've got a ton of making up ahead. And I'm going to enjoy every minute with her." He frowned in worry, looking more like the P-21 I remembered. I rose to my hooves. "Where are Rampage and Lacunae?"

"Well, Lacunae said something about a dress when we saw her this morning. And Rampage..." Scotch trailed off as looked up at the graveyard on the hillside above the town. A red-maned pony stood out amid the gray-green grass and the white headstones. She was at her daughter's grave, if I guessed right. "Is she okay?"

"No. She's not," I said softly, shaking my head. "She found out something about herself, and it's bothering her terribly." I patted Scotch's head. "Just be careful with her. She needs our friendship a lot right now. It might be the only thing that'll help her."

P-21 looked at his daughter and stroked her mane. "Maybe we should go see her. Make sure she's okay. Why don't you go get Precious?" The dragon filly'd help if something set the Angel off.

"If I can get her off that stack of bottlecaps," Scotch said with a roll of her eyes as she turned and trotted into the post office.

The blue stallion looked at me in concern. "Be careful. With Glory. I mean... I tried to explain it but... she's really upset with you right now."

I sighed and then nodded. "Yeah. We've got issues to clear up. I mean, leaving like I did was horrible for her."

"No, I mean what you did with--" he started to say with a concerned frown, but I froze.

I could feel the horror creeping up on me. My mane crawled on my scalp as I looked left and right. A little pink pony in my head pulled out a spyglass and searched for the dreaded menace. Perhaps I could plead poverty... but no, it didn't matter. She could sense my purse and was coming for it! All my wealth would be hers! And yes, there she was, stepping out of the post office! She looked at me. I looked back, and her eyes narrowed like a hellhound about to go in for the kill. I leapt straight into the air, turned, and with all the power in my cybernetic limbs I raced away, laughing madly. She wouldn't get me! Not this time!

The yellow filly's words reached my ears, but I paid them no mind as I fled. "What's her problem?"

* * *

I entered Star House with just a little bit of apprehension. The place was clean and orderly and,

moreover, it looked lived in. I heard the sound of a faucet running in the kitchen and spotted the blue pegasus filling up a pot. Her rainbow mane was tied back behind her head with a white cloth. It didn't matter if she looked like a young Ministry Mare in her prime or my gray beauty; she was Glory. My imaginary heartbeat picked up as I slowly walked towards her. Suddenly the troubles of the last several days were nothing, and I couldn't keep from smiling. She turned and looked at me, her rose eyes popping wide, and then she smiled with an oddly dismissive expression. "Oh, hey Blackjack. What's up?"

Huh? I furrowed my brows as she set the pot on the stove and then took off the rag and shook out her spectral mane. "Um. Hi Glory. P-21 said you wanted to talk to me about something that upset you?" This wasn't quite what I expected; she smiled again and approached. Oddly enough, my mane picked now of all times to get itchy. "Whatever it was, I'm sorry. I'm just so glad to see--"

She silenced me with a hoof to my lips, smiling up at me before her expression turned concerned. "Now. Before anything happens, I want to know how you are. Any injuries that need treating? Radiation? Taint? Anything like that?"

"No, actually." I smiled and looked down at my foreleg. "I was just at Rover's. He fixed up my legs just fine, and the talismans..."

But again she silenced me as she put her hooves around my neck and gazed into my eyes. "What about emotionally? Are you better now than when you left?"

"Oh, absolutely. I was... I was in a really bad way there for a while but... well... I found some help too." And I got shot up a lot and died again, but I could tell her about that later.

"So in other words you're in good shape? Tip top?" she asked in a voice that almost approached sultry and made my hindquarters quiver in anticipation. This was damage control I could handle!

"Yup. One hundred and ten percent," I said as I smiled goofily.

Her legs tightened around my neck as she said softly, "Good..." And then she hugged me close, feeling soft and firm and wonderful. But as I lifted my legs to hold her, I became aware of a little pink pony in my head waving a red flag, a white unicorn waving her hooves in alarm, and a horrified-looking yellow pegasus pressing her hooves to her mouth as Glory whispered in my ear. "A champion in bed, huh?"

And then her wings snapped and she hauled me into the air. "Blackjack!" she snapped, and then, with more power than I'd known any pegasus could muster, threw me clear across the room and smashed me into the far wall. I dropped to the floor with a crash, the five little ponies in my head equally rattled. Somewhere, for some reason, I imagined the Goddess looking on, munching on popcorn. Glory flew over with tears streaking her cheeks and yelled down at me, "You... You... fucking *cunt!*"

Welcome home, Blackjack.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: Wooo. Talk about shuffling around. We had events moved around. Added in. Firmly objected to. And then taken out again. I am glad that I got this chapter out before I moved though and I

hope to have chapter 50 done before the end of the month. It'd be really nice. Anyway. Some of you might have noticed I used the name 'Cadance.' Some of you might also remember that back in Ch 43 I said that Cadance and whatnot were dead to me. Well, that was more because of issues I had with the finale. 4 months later, I can actually use them... not much, but yeah. Hopefully it won't blow up in my face. Probably will... but meh.

Anywho. Huge thanks to my editors for really trying to make this the best chapter possible, even if it meant rewriting one whole scene and adding another. I'd like to thank Kkat for creating FoE in the first place and Minty for saying 'Yeah, the chapter's fine. chill.' Thank you to everypony who has given me feedback at the [Cloudsville](#) forum. Yes, occasionally the forum scares me, but I really appreciate the feedback. It gives me the mental means to keep going. Finally, if anypony would like to help support the writer moving to Vegas or wherever else I can find a job, donations can be sent to David13ushey@gmail.com though pay pal. Thanks so very much, and thank you for sticking with PH this long.)

Editing note. Some folks might wonder what comes in and goes out of Project Horizons. [This is a scene](#) with Stygius and Psychoshy's departure that was cut and changed to tone it down. YMMV as to if it was better or not. WARNING: While we cannot confirm that this scene contains spoilers, we also cannot deny that possible fact. Read at your own risk, and please also remember that the various component of this scene may or may not be heterogeneous in their canonicity, said canonicity possibly having the potential to lie at any level or levels below (and in part but not in full at) full membership in the canon.

(Author's addendum: The above disclaimer was written by Hinds. :P)