

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 51: A Good Day

"Hey, you know what this calls for?"

Maybe it was the lingering raw sensation of tearing a healing talisman out of my own body, or perhaps it was simply the aftermath of using a memory spell for the first time – and one thrown together on the spot, at that – but the scene before me really wasn't adding up. My eyes travelled from the comely dove-gray mare to my sheet-wrapped love. The former sat on the couch with her eyes oddly closed in an expression of amusement while the latter perched atop her stool with her legs and wings clutching her body so tightly that I wondered if she would simply implode. I slowly turned my eyes to Scotch Tape, who was focusing intently on her cup of steaming weed water, and finished my pan by staring at P-21 as he poured another cup and offered it to me, meeting my gaze. The concern in his eyes was unmistakable. My eyes returned to the mature pegasus, and I blinked twice, ignoring the cup. My brain hurt way too much for tea. "Um... sorry. I have brain damage. Say again?"

"My name is Dawn," she said amiably as she put her cup down on the table. The mare didn't wear any barding or carry any equipment. She appeared about the same age as Mom and Rivets had been. Mature, but not quite showing the same wrinkles as the Ministry Mares had. She must have barely been past foalhood when she'd been adventuring with Big Daddy and the others. Her eyes seemed to be closed in merriment. Even when she was looking at us, she didn't open them past the barest squints, but I didn't get the impression that she was blind. While her pale gray hide bore the scars of a few slashes and bullet wounds, they were old injuries. Call me an idiot, but I doubted she would try anything just now. "I heard that my daughter Morning Glory is a close friend of yours. I was hoping to see her again. I also wanted to meet her dear friends," she said as she smiled over her cup pleasantly. "Do you go by 'Security' or should I call you Blackjack?"

"Uh... Blackjack. That's fine," I said as I took a seat and shook my head. For some reason, my thoughts were all muddled. "And... ah... Glory," I murmured, looking at my friends. I glanced at her and saw the tiniest little shake of her head. "Anyone seen Glory? Is she in town?" I couldn't figure out for the life of me why Glory wouldn't answer, given her mother was branded with Rainbow Dash's cutie mark on her flank. Maybe this was another weird Enclave pony thing? Still, if she wanted anonymity, I'd try and play along; if Glory was going to undermine her relationships, who was I to stop her?

"Yeah. In town. That's exactly where she is. Uh huh..." I muttered thickly.

"Really? How odd I didn't see her there when I stopped through," the gray mare said with a note of amusement before taking a sip. "This is quite excellent," she told P-21. The blue stallion looked about, flushing awkwardly.

"Uh... Riverside... Town. Yeah... that town," I muttered.

"Right," P-21 said with a confused look.

"That's it," Scotch agreed. "She's..." The filly scowled in thought.

"Getting spare parts!" said P-21 as the filly blurted simultaneously, "Buying healing potions." The

pair looked at each other in shock, and P-21 stammered, "I mean buying healing potions!" just as Scotch Tape spouted, "No, she's getting spare parts!" Both gulped, and Scotch Tape opened her mouth in time for P-21 to silence her with his hoof pressing to the filly's muzzle.

"I mean, she's getting spare parts *and* healing potions," he said finally. Scotch Tape looked up at him, then nodded quickly with a grin. I glanced at Glory, but only her eyes were visible, locked on the floor beneath her. For some reason, I could taste blood, and my head was really hurting. Wasn't the healing talisman supposed to take care of that?

"My. I'm so glad she's such a hard worker," Dawn said in that odd, cheerful way. "I'd hoped to learn more about her in town before I came here, but they were all so busy with the mess, and I understand there was an accident too?" Her smile disappeared, replaced with a sorrowful expression. "The Wasteland shouldn't claim lives before their time." Coming from anypony else, that line would have been pompous, even sanctimonious, but the pegasus practically glowed with sincerity.

Maybe it was the experimental spell that had given me a throbbing headache or the fact I could feel the knife blade between my ribs, or that for some reason I was tasting blood, but I looked dully at the gray pegasus. "Right. It's nice meeting you. If you'll excuse me, I feel like I need to throw up glass. Sorry. Dashie?" I staggered for the stairs, and Glory looked at me in shock, then walked over as if sure that Dawn was going to peer through her rags and spring upon her. I tried to put a hoof on the bottommost step, but somehow it moved out from under me, sending me staggering so I nearly landed on my face.

"Blackjack, are you alright?" Glory asked in worry, then ducked herself underneath my body and hoisted me onto her back. I didn't argue. My throbbing headache was getting worse by the second. I saw little drops of blood falling on her disguise as she carried my heavy body up, muttering, "Dumb question, of *course* you're not."

I just groaned, and the last thing I heard downstairs was Glory's mom saying politely, "What a curious young mare! I think she may look just like Rainbow Dash!" Glory laid me down on my bed, closing the door as we passed, and I felt more blood coming out my nose. I tried to send Lacunae a warning about Dawn and our story about Glory being in Riverside, but for all I knew I told her to kumquat the picklebarrel.

My E.F.S. display was weird, with a dotted line around the head of the diagram mare and her eyes were two x's. Apparently experimenting with memory magic had some nasty side effects I hadn't anticipated. There were all kinds of other displays and warnings, but I just translated all that as 'you broke yourself again, idiot'. I wanted to throw up, but my brain didn't seem to realize my stomach couldn't, so all I was left with was a crippling nausea.

Glory rolled me onto my side and dug around in her saddlebags for a strange little light on a stick. She shone it in my nose and mouth and ears as she examined me. "Tell me there's a secret cheat mode that kills my sense of pain?" I asked pathetically.

"I wish. Professor Zodiac didn't give me an operator's manual," she said sympathetically, but continued with a concerned little frown, "I thought you weren't going to hurt yourself anymore."

"I promise, when my head is better, you can spank my fanny till it sinks in. My head... not my fanny... I..." I groaned, closing my eyes tight. "Memory magic is harder than I thought. I sort of hoped that all I had to do was touch her forehead with my horn and woosh, magic happens!" My exclamation

sent a shiver through me. Quiet now, thank you.

"Don't you have a book on magic from Tenpony?" Glory asked in confusion.

"Yes. A book on beginner's magic. For beginners," I groaned.

Glory didn't give up, though. "Did you even *look*?" Oh no, she was using the 'Blackjack is not a smart pony' voice.

"Um... no?" I muttered as I covered my head.

She sighed and lay down next to me. "When you're better, your fanny is so getting it," she muttered as she held me gently and stroked my neck. The nosebleed had stopped, and the pain was receding a little. At least, I could pretend it was with her snuggled against me. "Did it work, at least?"

"I got into a memory... one of Shujaa's," and I retold it. Really, the whole pain thing aside, it seemed pretty senseless. A bunch of defecting enemies gunned down by an overzealous transfer. If I learned somewhere that Trooper Kill-all-zebras was sent by Goldenblood as a part of his master super sneaky scheme, I was going to flip a table or kick a hole in the wall or something!

"So they were robots that looked like zebras?" she asked with a small frown.

"I... don't think so. I mean, there were robot parts, but even if they were fancy and sleek, they were still metal. These were..." I paused, wanting to be sure. "These were cyber zebras. They had artificial organs and everything. Like me."

Project Steelpony. Had the zebras stolen it? Had Goldenblood actually given it to them? Or had the zebras developed their own line of augmentation research? For all I knew, Steelpony had been stolen from the enemy in the first place. But there'd been too much meat involved for them to simply be robots. Augmented zebras, though... a very unpleasant thought. I'd seen what Lancer could do with a rifle. I didn't even want to contemplate what he could accomplish with thumbs.

It was too much for a not-smart pony like me. So I turned, slowly... carefully... and faced her. "So. Care to tell me why you're not telling her who you are? I'd have thought you'd have been hugging and catching up on old times."

She closed her eyes with a sigh. "I know. And I should. I want to. But when I opened to door, I didn't think of how much I missed her or that I could finally get answers to questions I've had for years. I... I wanted to know why she was here. It felt... contrived. My mother coming out of the Wasteland after all this time looking for me?"

"Contrived? Please. I've seen Goldenblood. He's got contrived covering every inch of him. I don't think he could fart unless it was part of a greater plot. Your mom is just..." and I paused, frowning. What was it about her? There was something... I stroked her cheek gently. "Ever think that maybe this is just a coincidence? A good coincidence?" Despite the long odds, it had to happen occasionally.

"I did think that," Glory said shamefully. "And when I did, I wasn't happy. I felt... angry." She closed her eyes and scooted a little more against me. "She was just down there smiling. Like... like these years never happened. Like she was on her way home and decided to stop in and check in on me at school. 'No big deal. See you when you get home. Love you...'"

I thought about that. "Well, maybe if she knew you were you and what you've done since you've come down here..."

"Maybe," Glory murmured as she glanced at the door and then back at me. "But really... the more I think about it, the harder it is for me to believe she's here looking for me at all."

I didn't know what to say to that. I tried to imagine what it'd have been like for me if Mom left the stable one day, only to return several years later acting as if nothing had changed. I supposed I'd be pretty freaked out too, particularly if I were a magical copy of Twilight Sparkle. I sighed, nuzzling her ears till she eventually smiled. "Well, deal with it tomorrow. We'll find out why she's here and find out some way to explain all this to her," I said, brushing her rainbow mane with my hoof.

There was a soft knock on the door, and I looked over and tried to use my magic to open it. The jolt to my brain renewed my throbbing headache. "Yes?" I asked.

P-21 poked his head in, his voice low. "If you're done for the night, should I put our guest in Glory's room till she gets back?" I looked at Glory, who sighed, then nodded.

"Yeah, go ahead," I groaned, flopping my head onto the pillow.

"Right," he said, his blue eyes turning to Glory. "For what it's worth, I don't trust her." Was it because she was a mare? Glory just looked at her forehooves, as if hoping the answers would appear upon them.

He nodded to us and closed the door again. She slipped out of bed and locked us in before returning to my side. "Well, I guess it's a good thing you blasted your brain with that magic. Can't do anything naughty with Mom listening next door, right?"

I just blinked at her in confusion. She groaned and buried her face in her hooves. "Nevermind. Just try and get some sleep."

That was good advice. I just hoped that whatever was playing on the Psalm Memory Network would help with that...

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The hallway stretched out in one long tunnel punctuated by tiny little bedrooms on one side and cloudy windows on the other. Foals, colts, and fillies all moved around with a hushed tone. Not that laughter was forbidden here, but it was an alien sound in the sullen, gray building. Somepony had tried to cheer up the place with pictures of smiling children, but they were flat, stale images. No pony who lived here ever smiled like that.

I knelt down, two small hooves moving a ragged brush, trying to scrub the mud tracked in from the field outside off the faded beige linoleum tiles. It was raining again; that was nothing new. It was always raining, even when it wasn't. The filmy windows gave the impression of a constant downpour outside in the sunniest of weather.

"Hey Balm," said a colt as he trotted in, leaving fresh hoofprints across the just-cleaned floor. He wasn't being unkind. Most fillies and colts weren't around long enough to learn each other's names. You didn't want to stay here long enough to have ponies learn your name. I didn't reply; he was already

heading down to his room, which he shared with two other colts. I silently started cleaning the messy hoofprints again.

"Let me help with that," an orange unicorn colt with a shaggy yellow mane said, watching me work. "You're never going to get this cleaned up, otherwise." And he took another brush from the bucket and started to scrub beside me. "You need to really assert yourself. Show this mud who's boss," he said as he scrubbed back and forth hard. When another earth pony colt stepped in, he pointed his brush at the entrant. "Muddy hooves. Clean them! Now!" The abashed young pony gave his hooves a thorough scraping on the mat before continuing on.

"Thank you," I said, barely above a whisper, as we finished the hall together.

"Don't worry about it," he said with a casual grin. "I'm Cheddar. I just got here." There was a little pain in his eyes, but there was nothing new. We all had sad eyes. "Your name is... Calm? Palm? Buzz Bomb?"

"You... don't want to know my name," I murmured as I carried the bucket to the back door and threw the contents out into a puddle.

"Yes I do," he contradicted, looking confused. "Why wouldn't I?"

"If you know my name, it means you've been here too long." I set the bucket and brushes in their little cubby behind the back door. "I've been here all my life. Ever since my mom left me here as a foal."

He gave a little frown. "I thought nopony stays here more than a few months."

I twisted my lips into the same mirthless smile I always wore, used to explaining this. "Most ponies don't. You won't. I can tell. So there's no point in knowing my name. In a few weeks, you'll find a family. So really, there's no point in knowing it." I didn't raise my voice. There was always one every few months who wanted to be friends before they left. "But thank you for asking." I turned away to go wash up before dinner.

He darted in front of me, meeting my eye with his. "I promise you, I'm going to go find out your name. And I'm not leaving till I do."

It was a nice gesture. He hadn't been the first to say something like it. But really, all friends did was hurt when they left.

But he didn't leave; not that there weren't parents who wanted to adopt him. While pleasant and witty most of the time, Cheddar became the moodiest orphan in the place when prospective parents interviewed him. And when they moved on to another child, the friend emerged again. He got his magic first, then his cutie mark and his talent. He could speak any language after hearing or reading it for a little while. His scroll-and-fountain-pen cutie mark was quite the envy of most of the colts. Still, even with such an amazing talent, he still refused to let himself get adopted.

We'd climb up on the roof on those rare days the skies were clear enough to see the stars. He'd make up wonderful stories about life on those distant points of light. Silly stories that made me laugh, and sad stories that made me feel better about my own situation. And even though I'd told him my name several times, he pretended like he still didn't know it. Because he wouldn't leave until he did. That was

the promise.

And so, I had a friend. And that dingy building was a little less gray and hopeless. As colts and fillies came and went every few weeks, we became their temporary mom and dad. I kissed boo boos to make them better and he taught the fine art of spitballs. Sure, we had to go to the tired adults who actually cooked the food and took care of the adoptions from time to time, but even they were happy for our help. And a dream began to settle in; a dream where we'd eventually become adults ourselves. And we'd leave together when we were sure the orphanage was in good hooves. And he'd travel all around the world deciphering important things, and I'd see a world I could never imagine. A world where gray did not exist.

It was a pleasant dream.

Then, one day, Cheddar was called from the cafeteria. I didn't think anything of it, at first. We weren't having adoption interviews that day. I heard the sounds of muted shouting and rose to my hooves and trotted to the door. I gasped at the sight of two magnificent white pegasus stallions in gleaming golden armor. And I heard my friend inside shouting, "No! No, I won't go! I won't!"

"Cheddar!" admonished the headmaster. "One does not speak to their Princess like that!"

Princess? I stepped closer, then faltered. Even though the guards didn't move an eye, I could feel them watching me. I simply stayed in the hall.

"It's quite all right," came the sweetest, most wonderful voice in all the world. It was a voice from the world of my dreams. "Cheddar, at my school you'll be able to use your talents not just for yourself, but for all of Equestria. You'll be able to learn greater kinds of magic and make a fresh start for yourself. You have so much possibility and potential, and the headmaster knows that you could have easily been adopted by now."

"It's... it's my friend, Princess. Psalm. She's here too," he said slowly. "Could she come to your school with me?"

"Ah, yes. Psalm," said the headmaster delicately. "I'm afraid that she wouldn't be a promising candidate, Your Majesty. You might as well have an earth pony student as her."

"Don't talk about her that way!" Cheddar snapped. "She's... she's just fine with magic!"

"I understand the bonds of friendship, Cheddar," Celestia said in a firm, yet compassionate voice. "If she doesn't have very much magical talent, I don't think she would be happy there. She'd be surrounded by students of greater skill, and, despite my best efforts, many of them would look down upon her. I--"

"Well then that's it," Cheddar interrupted firmly. "Long as my friend is here, then I'm here too."

"I'm terribly sorry about this, Your Majesty. Psalm is pleasant enough, but sad. No pony wants to adopt a filly who never smiles. They think there's something wrong with her," the headmaster mumbled. I retreated down the hall as I heard hooves approach the door. "Now, I know the children will be overjoyed to meet you. They should all be in the cafeteria, Your Majesty."

I didn't go into the cafeteria. I heard the inhalation of awe and the cries of glee and even a few

who wept for joy at the sight of our wonderful ruler. Instead, I hid. There weren't many hiding spots in the orphanage, but I'd found them all. Unfortunately, I'd shown them all to Cheddar. Still, there were a few that even he'd hesitate to check. After all, no sane pony would hide on a roof when it's raining. I even caught sight of the Princess as she left in her glorious golden chariot to a life and places I couldn't understand. And she'd wanted to take Cheddar with her...

"Hey. Shawalm?" called a voice from the roof access hatch, and I clenched my eyes as the rain hissed off the wooden slates. "What are you doing out here? You missed the Princess," he said in worry as he trotted out. His mane immediately flattened in the steady drizzle as he took a seat beside me. It was starting to get dark...

"No, I didn't," I said as I stared at the cool Hoofington rain beading on my hooves. I wanted to hold on to the droplets, so clear and pure, but like everything else they trickled away from me. My voice was every bit as soft as the rain as I continued, "I heard you talking. She wants you to go to her school."

He sighed. "Yeah. Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns. She wants to see if I can translate stuff like griffin runes, zebra glyphs, and dragon clawsript. I told her I wasn't interested." He nudged my shoulder. "I got to stay till I figure out your name."

For one brief second, I felt warm and smiled a little. Just a little. Still, it made what came next all the worse. I closed my eyes and spat out the words that were choking me. "You should go."

He started to laugh, but that quickly died. He knew I didn't make jokes. "Come on. I won't deny that it was tempting, but I couldn't just leave you."

"You should have left months ago!" I said sharply, turning my face from him. "You... you could have had a home! After a week. The only reason you're staying in this horrible place is because of me!"

"Well, yeah!" he said in angry confusion. "I mean, you're my friend."

"I can't let you throw your life away for me," I replied and stood. "I'm not worth you giving up a future where you could be somepony! Everypony here dreams of finding a family again. Everypony. You lost yours. I never had mine. And there's twenty other colts and fillies who could only dream of having the chance that you're throwing away! It's stupid, and you're stupid for doing it!"

He stared at me in shock. "But, Psalm, I-- You..." A hurt look rose in his eyes and he asked in a voice I could barely hear over the rain, "Would you go and leave me if she offered it to you?"

I couldn't look at him as I spat out the lie, "In a heartbeat." And with that, it felt as if my own heart had stopped.

There was no answer but his rapid breathing. Then he said sharply, "Well... I guess I better go pack then!" When I didn't say what he wanted to hear, he spat out angrily, "Wouldn't want to miss my golden opportunity, would I?"

"I guess you better!" I shouted back, clenching my eyes shut. If I looked at him... If I looked...

"Fine!" he snapped.

"Fine!" I yelled back.

"If I'd known girls were so... so... urrrgh!" He trotted to the hatch and slammed it shut behind him.

"Goodbye," I whispered as I turned my face into the rain. Cold rain, and warm.

I don't know how long I sat there. I was still up there when the golden chariot returned, sans Princess, to take Cheddar away with his small bag of belongings. He looked up at me, but he didn't wave before he flew away. I felt a chill, but I didn't much care. I didn't care about anything at that moment. I'd broken the one thing holding him to this dreadful place. The children would be upset. Mommy would be sad and Daddy would be gone; nothing new to some of them. And I'd stay here and grow up and grow old and try to help every last one of them find a better place to live. And then, I'd die here.

"Not that it isn't terribly dramatic, but don't you know young unicorns should get out of the rain?" a mare asked above me, her voice soft and bright. The rain stopped in a semicircle around me and I looked up at a dark form drifting down to stand before me. Beads of starlight seemed to shimmer in her magically billowing mane and she wore a tiara the color of sky just after the last reds of sunset faded from view. Her majestic wings folded beside her and her horn glowed once. Instantly the water on my coat disappeared. Then she summoned a black wool blanket and draped it around me. I hugged the fabric close. "I was hoping to catch my sister here after I raised the moon, but it looks like she's still on the move." Princess Luna gave a small smile. "Now... what's the matter?"

I knew I shouldn't. That it was terribly impolite for me to do so, but I took one last look into her concerned blue eyes and pressed my face to her side and bawled like I never had before. Somewhere in all that blubbering, I got out the story of what had happened to Cheddar and how I'd thrown away my first and only friendship so he could have a chance at Princess Celestia's school and that now I was going to be stuck at the orphanage alone forever.

It had to be dreadfully rude to snot up a Princess's coat, but after I got everything out I was quite a mess, both from grief and the budding cold. "I see. It's a rare pony who can give up what she wants for another's happiness. Your friend must be quite special for you to give him that." She lifted my chin and gave me a comforting smile. "I know that it's not easy being the sad pony. To feel like you don't deserve anything good in your life. But you do. Everypony does."

"I don't..." I muttered softly, looking at her pristine hoof. Not a future. Not a friend. Not even a mother or father...

"You do," she repeated, firmly. "So here is what I want you to do, Psalm. I want you to hang on. I'm going to see what I can do for you, but it may take some time. Everything's so busy right now, but I promise that somehow I will give you a way to be with your friend."

"You... you don't have to..." I whispered, horrified that I'd be such a bother to her. "I'm not worth the trouble."

"It's ponies who think they aren't who *are*. I know what it's like to feel worthless and unloved," she said as she lifted me with her magic and flew me down to the front gate of the orphanage. "Please, be patient. Have faith. I'll try and help you soon."

I spent the next week sick in bed. The children started to avoid me; Cheddar had been popular and more than a few of the young ones blamed me, correctly, for his leaving. I washed the hall of muddy hoofprints by myself, and it took me far longer than the old times when it had been just me working the

scrub brushes. I had no right to complain, though. I'd brought this on myself. For a short while, I'd hoped something might happen. That a chariot would come and sweep me off to Canterlot. Maybe I'd work in the kitchens; I'd be okay with that. So long as I could tell him I was sorry. The chariot never came, though. Princess Luna was a very important pony; I had to be patient. I had to.

Over the next month the orphanage got lonelier and lonelier. The youngest went first, then older and older. Soon we were a dozen. Ten. Eight. Four. The mare who cooked for us left. Three. We all ate together with the old stallion headmaster. We didn't talk. And little by little, things started disappearing into boxes and crates. Then those too disappeared. I washed the halls even though there weren't any more muddy tracks to clean. Two. One...

Finally, the orphanage was empty. "There's a new one," the headmaster said, "A larger one for children whose families were lost in the war." He was going to see that I was transferred there. Then he was retiring. He said he's sure I'll find a family there. Those are the same words I've heard all my life. It'll be cleaner. Newer. Brighter. I can't imagine it. This dingy gray building is the world. It's all I know. I can't leave it. Perhaps I can stay after the headmaster goes. Clean the floors. Keep it intact for unwanted things...

He told me to pack, said he'd return in a few hours to take me to the new orphanage. I am left all alone in the empty building. I walk the scrubbed, faded beige linoleum walkway. I peek into the empty little bedrooms, bunk beds stripped of their mattresses and sheets. There're a few old toys, broken things, sitting forlorn in the corners. I gather them up in a blanket. I don't know what I'll do with them; nopony wants broken toys.

Luna. She'd said she'd help. She'd said to be patient. I imagined I could hear her voice calling me... But I couldn't be patient any more. I was out of time! I crouched there, eyes clenched shut. "Please..." I whispered. "Please, Princess Luna... Please..." I trembled as I curled up, as if trying to disappear so that when the headmaster returned, I'd be gone. Those three words kept me anchored there; the moment I couldn't say them anymore was the moment I was finished. They were the single light in the blackness that threatened to consume me. If it took me, I didn't know what I'd do.

"Psalm," came the soft voice above me.

Slowly I looked up at the beautiful dusky dark shape of the Princess of the Night. My eyes met hers, and I saw the understanding of the pain within me. Her lips slowly turned in a soft smile. "We were calling you, dear."

"I... I thought I was imagining..." My feeble words dribbled out before I lowered my gaze.

"I told you I'd come back," Luna said softly as she knelt beside me and stretched her soft wing around to pull me close to her warm body. The dam broke and all at once I was sobbing once more; but I knew this time the Princess wouldn't be troubled by a weeping filly. "Shh..." she hushed as she nuzzled me. "It's alright. I'd never leave you in a place like this." I blinked and looked up into her eyes. "I found someone to take care of you." At once my ears folded a little but she hugged me closer. "None of that. You're the last one, Psalm. It's your turn. You deserve a chance at happiness too."

She looked at the doorway. "Come on in. You're such a horrible lurker." There was a shift at the door, and then a handsome young stallion slowly walked into the room. His yellow eyes met mine with a wary look, the eyes of a pony who'd been hurt.

"Who... who are you?" I asked warily.

"My name is Goldenblood," he replied as he sat next to my bed. He looked up at the Princess. "Luna's... well..."

"I finally convinced him that leading a life of being a lonely intellectual was overrated," Luna replied, making the young stallion flush. "And he's agreed to look after you."

"Look after me?" I dropped my gaze. "But... I don't... I can't..."

"I know, but you do and you can," Luna said gently, smiling, but her deep eyes were filled to the brim with sympathy. "Listen, Psalm. I want to tell you something that I've never told anypony. A long time ago, I did something really bad, and my sister sent me to the moon. Time is funny there, but I was alone, and I was happy because I thought I deserved to be alone. I hated everything so much that the thought of being around anypony was too much to bear. And when I came back, the first thing I did was lash out at everypony around me, because I was still angry at them... but also, I was scared. It took me a year before I was brave enough to make a public appearance, and it took a brave mare to help teach me to be happy around others. I know there are times when being around others positively hurts, but that's better than being alone."

"Yes... Princess Luna," I murmured as I bowed my head. "I'll... I'll try..."

"Good." She slowly released me and gave us both a kind smile. "Now, I need to flash over to Fillydelphia and make sure everything's alright for Celestia's big ribbon cutting ceremony tomorrow. I can't believe they're actually opening a huge factory for making guns and ammunition. Can't imagine they'll really need that much." She looked over at Goldenblood. "You two can take the chariot when you're ready."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Goldenblood said with a nod of his head. The Princess beamed in return, and then her horn flared. In a flash of shadow, she disappeared completely.

"... don't want to go..." I murmured softly. I prepared for the onslaught of questions about what was wrong with me, how I could want to stay in this horrible place. "I know it's stupid and this place is dirty and closing but it's the only place I belong. The only place I deserve to be!"

He stood silently for a long moment before reaching out with a hoof and patting my shoulder. "I understand. This is your home," he said, not calling me silly. "But it's your turn to get adopted, Psalm. You're the last one here. It's your turn to go." For a minute we stood there with me just staring at the beige tiles, and then he sighed. "Nevermind. Take your time. The pegasi can wait."

It took some time. Time to gather my belongings in the black wool blanket, though there weren't very many. Time to collect the old toys nopony would ever play with again. Time to look at that grimy gray hallway and its rainy gray windows. "Should I call you... Father?" I asked as we walked towards the exit. The word sounded strained and awkward to my ears.

"That sounds... odd. I'm barely old enough to have children of my own, let alone one your age. I think a better word is 'guardian', but even that sounds off," he said with a small smile. "Why don't you just call me 'Teacher'? It's fitting. I just got a job working at Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns teaching history." He looked a little confused as he added, "Princess Luna herself recommended me, but I couldn't

tell you why for the life of me.”

“Oh,” I said, contemplating a moment before asking. “Do you think I could come to the school with you from time to time? I have... there’s a pony I know who goes there.”

Together we stepped out the front door. It was one of those rare moments when the rain had stopped and everything was clean and crisp. A rainbow gleamed in the direction of Canterlot and made the golden chariot sparkle with light. It was almost as bright as the candle which appeared on my flank, its lone light the faith against the melancholy that had almost consumed me. For the first time since Cheddar had left, I felt a warmth return to me, and Goldenblood smiled in quiet approval. I looked at my Teacher, giving him a smile I’d only shared with one other as he looked back and said, “Certainly. You can be my assistant...”

~ ~ ~

I woke and stretched, then gave a little pout as my hooves failed to come in contact with a certain beautiful mare with an uncanny resemblance to Rainbow Dash. A quick glance confirmed my suspicion: no Glory. I was also surprised to find that it was midmorning already. I usually never slept in so late, though usually it was because I was always trying to keep moving. I sighed and rolled onto my back.

“How’s Rampage, Lacunae? Did seeing that memory help?” I asked Lacunae telepathically. It wasn’t so much hard as weird. I supposed I thought about Lacunae and hoped she picked it up. Of course, for all I knew, all of Unity could hear me, but, if so, there wasn’t anything I could do about it.

“I do not know for certain. I think so. There is a difference between knowing you occasionally turn into a zebra and knowing that even if she is a part of you, she’s a good part,” my friend replied. “She says she’s going to do a little patrol. Keep an eye out for Harbingers today and think about things.”

I sighed and smiled, rubbing my aching horn. “So it wasn’t a waste. That’s good to know.” I frowned a little in thought. “Aren’t I breaking the rules, though? I thought that unicorns were only supposed to have a little magic that corresponds to their talent. But I can do magic bullets and light, and now I’m poking into memory magic.” Though, to be fair, that was like saying I was poking into brain surgery.

“That is a common myth, and one not entirely inaccurate. Before the war, a unicorn usually only possessed whatever magic they developed in their youth, and such magic was usually focused on their interests and thus usually related to their talent. But a unicorn’s magical potential is not limited by their special talents. Rarity exhibited designer skills but also knew a spell to find gems, as well as teleportation later in life. And if a unicorn’s magic was limited, what point was there in writing down spells or having schools of magic? Think of your own stable. Most of the unicorns were trained in magic appropriate to their field, regardless of their cutie marks,” Lacunae explained patiently. “Most unicorns, once they have the spells they want, simply quit studying.”

Rarity learning teleportation magic? I had to admit... the idea of being able to teleport on my own nearly had me salivating. Popping out of trouble, appearing behind my enemies... I wondered if the brain damage had somehow made me smarter: I’d actually followed all that. “So a unicorn can increase her magic?”

“Yes, through substantial effort, and such growth is not infinite. There are some unicorns who focus all their efforts on one spell to great effect. Others possess a panoply of abilities but never take the

time and effort to strengthen them. Only a hoofful... Twilight Sparkle... Clover the Clever... Starswirl the Bearded... devoted their lives to both. Sadly, I don't see you being capable of matching their talent."

"Yeouch," I muttered. "Rub it in a little harder?" I pouted, rubbing my poor... compact... horn. I did the best I could with it!

Lacunae chuckled. "I don't mean because you lack intelligence. Snips and Snails were hardly geniuses but were able to learn a magic utterly alien to unicornkind. No, I mean that such progress would take time and effort. You'd need to study. You'd have to be methodical about it. You have far too much shooting in your life to be a scholar. And I fear you don't have a studious temperament." She paused, as if aware I was giving the ceiling a shooty look. "On the other hoof, you have a reckless willingness to experiment, despite the possible harm to yourself. It may be that magic is a talent in your family."

Sighing, I let go of the dumb resentment. "Yeah. Mom aced every single security spell in the manual, and then some. But she never had Textbook teaching her," I muttered, feeling my aggravation swap to my old stable teacher.

I knew where this was going, naturally. It was looking all the way back at Tenpony and the prediction that I was Twilight Sparkle's descendant. If that were true, then it would make sense... but it couldn't be. I'd failed to open the door. So clearly, some other mare had to be my ancestor. Maybe Pinkie Pie; who *knew* who the pink one had gotten freaky with? Or Rarity. There was a tiny, immature... okay, maybe not so tiny... part of me that liked the idea of being the descendant of the love child of Rarity and Vanity.

"You might find that, once ponies stop shooting at you, you might have a horn for magic. Perhaps. But it's up to you. Magic takes time and effort, and certainly having resources on how other unicorns do their magic would be helpful too. But to be a serious student takes more than just intelligence. It takes stability. Something you're lacking in spades."

I crossed my hooves across my chest and pouted, because it was true. Mentally. Circumstantially. I couldn't settle down and dedicate a month or two for study to try and see what other spells I could learn. I'd save that for another day when Horizons was solved, EC-1101 was at the bottom of the ocean, and the Harbingers were long gone. "How about Glory and Dawn? Have you seen them?"

"Dawn went out early in the morning, leaving a note that she'd return. Glory is downstairs. She purchased some... ingredients... from Charity. Now I fear that she's experimenting in the kitchen. She really should leave the cooking to P-21. He has quite a hoof for it." As if reading my mind, and for all I knew she'd done exactly that, she added, "P-21 and Scotch Tape went back to town. Hopefully the Crusaders will listen to her now."

"Yeah. Hopefully." I lay back and paused, then thought, "How are you doing, Lacunae?"

"I am the same as I ever was and ever will be. You know that, Blackjack," Lacunae replied in soft resignation. "I cannot change."

"I don't believe that, Lacunae. I think you do change," I said as I smiled. "The more the Goddess crams into you, the more everything inside you gets shuffled about. That's change, isn't it?" The startled silence I received more than made up for my earlier indignation. Yes, Blackjack could, on occasion, come up with smart ideas.

"Well... in that case... I suppose I am... good?" Lacunae said warily, as if afraid that the answer would bring a backlash. "You are alive and safe. You are all reasonably healthy. You are more stable, as are Rampage and Glory. Relative to how you were, you are happier. That's all good, right?"

"But what about you, Lacunae?" I asked with a small frown. "Are you happy?"

"Please, don't ask me that, Blackjack. If you are happy, I am happy. It is the closest to happiness I can come," she said in that resigned voice, but there was something more.

"What is it, Lacunae? What's wrong?" I thought, fighting the urge to press hard for answers. It was difficult, because I caught a whiff of emotion. Over our connection I could feel something I'd never imagined would come from my friend.

Guilt.

"Lacunae?" I asked as I felt her trying to hide it, burying it out of sight.

"Please, Blackjack. It's nothing. It may not even matter anymore. You're doing so much better now. Please, don't ask," she begged, and I backed off. I heard a mental sigh of relief. "Thank you, Blackjack," she said, and then one last thing leaked through, "and I'm sorry."

Guilt? What was she guilty about? Lacunae had always been supportive and helpful. She'd been a good friend, and I was thankful that the Goddess had never made her do anything that required me to treat her as anything other than a friend. Ah, the Goddess. That must be it. She felt guilty because of the control the Goddess had over me!

I relaxed immediately. That was simply silly; she didn't have any control over what the Goddess could and couldn't do! She wasn't responsible for me being brainwired to Unity in the first place, either.

Then I heard the mental snicker in my mind and froze, trying to do everything I could to keep her out. It was futile, of course. She had my deepest secrets already, sure, but it was the principle of the thing. I needn't have bothered, though, as she didn't seem to be trying to do anything at the moment.

"Oh, you poor deluded little fool," the Goddess purred in my mind, and I imagined a blue mare holding me from behind and whispering in my ear. "You still haven't figured it out yet... no surprise. You see, your dearest Lacunae has betrayed you."

"Shut up," I growled, wishing I could mentally punch the silver-maned mare lying in my ear. "Lacunae would never do that. And if she did, it'd be because *you* made her do it."

"Oh no," the Goddess laughed in delight. "Not this time. This was all her. At the time I was rather put out that she'd done it, but now... heh... now I couldn't be happier with the results!"

"Shut up! You're lying! That's all there is to it," I said as stubbornly as I could. But that old refrain was growing a bit threadbare.

The Goddess persisted, her words oozing into my awareness. I couldn't plug up my ears to stop her, and mentally chanting 'LALALA' was far less effective against her than it had been against me. "She did something to you. Something that's hurt you more than you could ever realize. Something that's almost killed you more than once. All for her own selfish gain," the Goddess purred softly in my ear. "If

you really want to know, go into her mind. Find what she's hiding. Or don't. Either way, it should be fun."

There was no way to silence her, so I settled on ignoring her. My life in 99 had made me an expert at not thinking about things, though that skill had atrophied a bit. And now my own mind was supplying the venom. Had Lacunae done something to my mind now that we were connected, or perhaps something earlier in our relationship? Was there some poisonous strain of truth in the Goddess's taunts? Was Lacunae's friendship false? If it hurt me, I'd endure, but what if it was done to my friends as well?

I could ask. I could. But if she denied or refused, what then? Would I force the answer from her? Could I? Could I force the answer from her by violence or guilt or crude memory magic if she refused? I sighed, closed my eyes, and peeked deep down in the bottommost pits of my soul, beneath all decency, all loyalty, all compassion and love... I could. So I would not ask. I'd have to do something else, and then I would close my eyes and hope that, if one of my loyalest and most true friends had done me a wrong, she would somehow tell me. As if she did not, then I prayed to slain goddesses that only I suffered for it.

So, unless the Goddess was going to force something (and I lay there a minute expectantly, crossing my forelegs over my chest as I stared at the roof and waited for her to do just that), I might as well get up and find out what smelled so interesting downstairs. I trotted out and down to the smell of something burning and the sight of Glory hovering over the stove. Boo sat nearby, her head tilted as if trying to process just what was being created in the cast iron pan.

The pegasus glanced towards me and suddenly flushed, her disguise on the counter where the sheets were stained with 'ingredients'. "Oh! Hi, Blackjack. I had an idea and I was thinking of a way to make the perfect food for you," she said, then slammed her hoof down on the handle of the skillet, flipping something black into the air. Then she grabbed a plate between her hooves and with a swoop deftly caught what looked like an immense black cake. The plate shattered, and the dark discus fell to the floor and rolled like a wheel across to the pale blank. "Oh, shoot, it's heavier than most pancakes."

"Pancakes?" I asked in a daze. Boo took one sniff of the steaming, or smoking, disk, then snorted and recoiled, covering her nose.

"Well, that was how I started," Glory said as I levitated the black disk up. "But then I figured that instead of just flour, which wouldn't assist your digestion, why not add some grass for fiber? But then I thought that, really, a pancake like that would only be good for your biological aspect, so I added a layer of nails, and then some more grass and batter." I turned the disk back and forth before me. "Once I'd added them, I figured some crushed gems would also be ideal. And then I was worried that the flavor might not be right, so I crushed up some Sugar Apple Bombs for flavor. Then, just to make sure you got everything you needed, I added a layer of grease to keep your augmentations working smoothly."

"I'm not really sure that's how I'm supposed to be lubed," I said, watching the inexplicable blush on Glory's cheeks as I sniffed the black disk. Then I took a crispy, crunchy bite and chewed slowly and thoughtfully. Finally I gulped it all down and looked at the worried pegasus. I paused to consider how best to put this to her. "Well Glory, I don't know how to say this. You tried for perfection..." I said gravely, then grinned. "And you nailed it!"

I held the disk in my hooves as Glory beamed and Boo sat back in confusion. "This is the most perfect food ever! Cyberpony cakes! It's got everything I need for my body. And if I ever need to patch my armor, I can just nibble one till it fits!" Glory blinked as I popped out my fingers and swung the nibbled

disk. "And feel that heft! I bet I could throw one twenty yards and take off a raider's head! Heck! I can just bite it into whatever shape I need! With this, I can be armed, armored, and fed all at once!"

Glory stared at me, looking a touch unsure as I took another bite. It wasn't something I'd be able to devour all at once. Something like this would take time. But as long as I had a half dozen or so of these, I'd be good for weeks. "Well, I'm glad you like them," Glory said in a slightly concerned tone.

"I wonder if I can light these on fire?" I mused as I turned it over. "Incendiary cakes of death!" I chortled. Boo simply snorted in dismissal of Glory's wonderful invention and started nosing around the cupboards.

"Okay! I'm happy you're so thrilled with my armor plate weapon baking," Glory said with a little flush as she gestured to a small heap of them next to the stove as I munched a little more. Mmm... axle grease and apple... yum! "I'm also glad you're doing better than last night." She gave a little frown. "You were talking in your sleep all night."

I blinked with a worried frown. Maybe she might figure out what the Goddess was doing from my nocturnal mutterings? "What'd I say?"

"I don't know. It was in Zebra," Glory said with a worried frown. "I think you should stop experimenting till you know a little more about memory spells. Go to the Collegiate, talk to Triage, and find out how she does it. Or check that book you got in Tenpony."

I chewed thoughtfully and finally sighed. "Fine."

"I know you want to help her, and I do too, but..." she went on before she blinked. "Wait. What was that?"

"I said fine. You're right. I should know a little more before poking around inside her for more memories," I said with a simple little shrug of my shoulders. Boo pulled out a Fancy Buck snack cake and started ripping open the wax paper wrapper.

Glory frowned at me. "Who are you, and what did you do with Blackjack?"

I tried to maintain my dignity as I looked at her and she back at me. Our relationship was tense, but we both wanted it to work. I didn't want to live in a world without Glory. And in her eyes I saw endless worry, barely kept in check, that she'd end up living in a world without Blackjack. "You're not afraid I'll get in trouble, going out without you?"

She frowned a moment, as if thinking about that. Then she bowed her head. "I know that I put a collar on you, Blackjack, but I can't keep you within wing's length all the time. So I am worried... but I also have to trust you, Blackjack, to stay out of real trouble. Okay?" she asked, but as I met her gaze, I saw the warning. If I couldn't control myself and prevent things like Yellow River from happening... I'd lose her.

Then I was distracted watching the blank tear open the package. "She knows how to open them now?"

The cyan pegasus frowned, then relaxed and smiled at the blank-flanked mare. "Yeah. Figured it out a day or two ago. Don't know if it was Scotch teaching her or if she just picked it up on her own."

I sat beside Boo and rubbed her ears as she munched down on the cake. Without a soul, you're nothing but an animal. Could an animal learn to open snack cakes? I supposed so. Still, it was hard to think of a pony like her as having no mind or personality. "Like that, Boo?" I asked, and then levitated the black disk with the chewed edge in front of her. "Want a taste of a cyberpony cake?"

She looked at it skeptically, stretched out, licked the edge, and suddenly jerked back and snorted. She picked the remains of her cake in her mouth and trotted away, giving the black disk a sharp kick with her rear hoof. Unfortunately, it was perfectly aligned with my face. As I lay there a minute later, I reflected that I'd been correct: the cakes were very effective weapons.

* * *

I lay on the bed, flipping through the book on beginner's magic. I'd promised Glory I'd at least look and see if there was any memory magic listed. I came across a lot of little magic tricks that I'd never thought of before. Some of the magic seemed a lot more than 'beginner'. I tried to summon a door and ended up giving myself a throbbing horn ache as a tiny flimsy door in a doorframe appeared, slammed shut dramatically, collapsed into a pile of broken toothpicks, and then disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Well, it didn't say 'practical magic'. Some of the magic, like walking on clouds, I simply couldn't confirm if I'd done right or not. And one that created wings... well... I got through the first paragraph about cocoons and metamorphosis when my eyes crossed and I thought it best to move on. To my surprise, there was a section on 'mind magic' talking about making a bridge between two ponies by touching my horn to their brow. Apparently 'diving in' was discouraged; the book recommended pulling a memory into myself or pushing a memory into another. Just clumping minds together was apparently asking for trouble.

"What would life be without trouble, though?" I murmured as I levitated the book in front of me.

Then a folded piece of paper fell out of the back of the book, and I blinked in surprise. I set the book aside and lifted it instead. "What's this? Twilight's bookmark?" I said with a little half smile as I unfolded it. Instantly, Twilight's elegant hornwriting met my eyes.

Dear Princess Luna, it is with ~~great regret~~ a heavy heart that I must tender my resignation

What? I sat up immediately and read that line once more to make sure that my brain damage wasn't acting up, then read further.

Dear Princess Luna, it is with ~~great regret~~ a heavy heart that I must tender my resignation and step down as Ministry Mare of the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. Your ~~command~~ decision to execute Goldenblood without trial is a ~~crime~~ ~~insult~~ sad injustice unprecedented in pony history. I am ~~pleased~~ proud of the work that has been ~~committed~~ accomplished by my ministry and everypony working under me and am confident they will be able to serve Equestria admirably, but I cannot ~~remain a part~~, in good conscience, be a part of this government any longer. I will inform my friends of this decision and hope that your reign is ~~a good ethical~~ ~~better~~ prosperous.

There were other paragraphs saying similar things beneath it, with lines edited or crossed out entirely. Other rough drafts were to Fluttershy and Applejack, telling both that she could not be a part of the ministries any longer and suggesting neither of them should be either. There was a scratched-out section practically begging Fluttershy to talk to Pinkie Pie about stepping down from Ministry of Morale

and asking Applejack to try and get Rarity away from Image.

I wondered if, if the zebras hadn't launched their megaspells, Equestria would have simply collapsed in its entirety? Without the Ministry Mares, would the ministries stand? I understood that some of them had been figureheads to varying degrees, but even so, they'd been important symbols of the government. I thought about the legal briefs in the Fluttershy Medical Center. Prosecuting the Ministry Mares for crimes against Equestria? Prosecuting the Princesses for the same? EC-1101, a megaspell that effectively handed over control of the country to a new ruler. Project Partypooper, a conspiracy to eliminate everyone who could possess EC-1101. What would happen if there was no one that EC-1101 could connect with?

If Sanguine had been right... something bad.

Goldenblood had known. Hell, he was the grand architect of this whole scheme. This plot that had wrapped itself tightly around Equestria and the world. And he'd done something, created something called Horizons to deal with it. But something had gone wrong. Something that even Goldenblood had missed till it was too late to stop it. He'd had Trottenheimer make a weapon of unimaginable power, but had been arrested before he could use it. Executed. Failed. What had he known?

I flipped open my PipBuck and brought up the megaspell program once again, just staring at the screen. The key to Equestria, Applebot had told me in another life. Something ponies would kill for. Something that made miracles happen. And even after all that I'd been through, I still didn't feel like I knew any more than when I'd started!

A small part of me wished that I had pushed the button on that terminal and activated Project Horizons, just so that I'd know what it did.

I frowned at the folded piece of paper. This was pretty incriminating, not the sort of thing you just left around. It'd been stashed in the back cover of the book. I frowned as I thought back to that study and the scrolls within it. Personal. Private. Twilight's own study.

I clenched my eyes closed. Damn it, I hadn't been able to open the stupid Tenpony door! And now, more than ever, I had the overwhelming sense that I should have been able to open it!

Something was off, and for the first time, I couldn't stop myself from seriously wondering if there was some terrible truth behind the Goddess's snide accusations. Maybe there was something my friends were keeping from me after all...

* * *

"I have to admit, Blackjack, when you asked me for any tips we had on memory magic, I felt a sudden urge to run out to the badlands and play doctor with hellhounds," Triage muttered, the gray unicorn lighting another cigarette and leaning against the walkway railing as rain drizzled into the muddy university quad. "Now, I got to admit I have a sick curiosity making me wonder just what's going through your head to make you want to know how to extract memories without giving yourself an aneurysm."

After soaking up radiation for an hour in Blueblood Manor, Lacunae had teleported me over to the Collegiate to find out everything I could about memory magic; after all, they'd been the ones who'd modified Scotch Tape's memories. I had to bully Triage a little bit with suggestions about 'learning as I went' and experimentation... each one seeming to have the effect of giving the mare a migraine. I

guessed I would have had the same reaction if somepony told me they were going to try to clear a jammed gun by bashing it with a rock. Some ignorance was simply too intolerable to go uncorrected.

I finished tucking the last of the notes into my saddlebags. "Well, as fun as aneurysms are, I have to admit that it's easier getting through the day without them," I said as casually as I could. Triage had once again swatted me about the noggin when I'd explained what I'd done to Rampage. Apparently I should be dead of a burst blood vessel in my brain at this moment; fortunately, Silver Stripe's augmentations had prevented that. Lacunae stood nearby, quietly watching me. The alicorn had said nothing about teleporting me over to the Collegiate to pick up more notes on memory magic. Glory had warned me that if I trotted one step in the direction of trouble without her, she was going to put me in a harness she was saving for something 'special'.

"Well, that's all I know. If you were doing this to anypony besides Rampage, I wouldn't have told you. I don't think that mare can get much worse off," the gray mare said as she took a long pull on her cigarette and let the smoke blast out her nostrils. "I actually found her once... four or five years back when I was trying to make my way to Flotsam by boat. Saw her tumble right over the Core wall and onto the rocks along shore. Damnedest thing I ever saw. Of course she regenerated, but wasn't right in the head. Screaming. Babbling about a city of gore and flying steel. Sobbing. Captain blasted her with his gun twice in the noggin. She thanked him afterwards."

The unicorn jabbed the cigarette at me. "So if you want to go crawling through her head, fine. It's probably no more hazardous than a taint enema followed by a radioactive suppository, but it's your ass." She glanced down at my legs and took another thoughtful drag. "How're the prof's parts?"

"Saved my life more times than I deserve," I replied, making Triage snort. "Any luck with Steelpony?"

She twisted her lips sourly, then sighed. "With making full-on augmentations? Nope. We just don't have the fabrication facilities or engineering expertise for that. But we think we might have better luck producing less invasive talisman implants. Things that might make you a little stronger, faster, more charismatic, or smarter. We're working on one design that simulates regeneration. Nothing as fast or impressive as your regeneration implants, but still something that'll encourage cell growth to speed recovery and fight off disease."

"Really? Healing talismans fight off disease?" I asked with a frown.

"You haven't gotten sick since you got yours, have you?" she asked with a smirk, and I had to admit that I hadn't. "Anyway, hopefully we can do some good business with Red Eye's forces."

"Wait? Red Eye? As in the slaving Red Eye? As in the evil organization threatening all of the Wasteland Red Eye? *That* Red Eye?" I blinked in shock. "You're not actually doing business with those slaving bastards, are you?"

Triage looked back at me coolly. "Why yes, I am. Not a lot of options down here in the southeast. We've got bad blood with the Society, and the Enclave are competitors. Ghouls over in Meatlocker and Rocket Town don't need much in the way of healing. So Red Eye is our best source for caps and ammo. We patch them up and manufacture healing potions for them and they keep us supplied with food and salvage we need." She caught my glower and shrugged. "Don't look at me like that, Blackjack. If I had alternatives, I'd take them."

I sighed; much as I hated it, I didn't have a right to tell the Collegiate what to do. "What about the Harbingers? Have you had business with *them*?" If so, this would probably be my last trip here.

She glowered. "Aside from them poaching members of my staff, no. They've got their own sources for everything-- guns, food, potions. And they've been getting more and more belligerent. For all that pegasus prophet goes on about a grand new future and a glorious new world, the rest of them have a simpler message: join them or else." Triage gave a mirthless grin. "Even *you* can figure that one out."

"The prophet is a pegasus?" I asked with a frown.

"That's what I've heard. Never met them, though," Triage said with a smoky snort. "Just their flunkies. Their *well-armed* flunkies."

Triage took one last pull, spat the butt out on the floor, and stomped on it far harder than extinguishing warranted, twisting her hoof to make a point. "They're not quite at the point of outright hostilities just yet. The Zodiacs are patrolling every day keeping an eye out. It's just a matter of time before the Harbingers try something bigger than we can handle, and when that happens I'm hoping Red Eye decides to use some of his firepower to help us out."

I finally deflated. "Okay. Okay. I give." I'd told Bottlecap that I'd do something about Red Eye's occupation of the Paradise Mall, but unless something drastic happened in the next few days, I didn't see me pulling it off. "Any other news?"

"You mean aside from Hightower disappearing in a flash of boom?" the unicorn said with a dry smirk as she shook out another cigarette. "Something's going on at the Skyport. Lots more activity there. I don't know what they're doing, but they're up to something."

"Right," I said slowly, looking in the direction of the Skyport. "Well, I need to check on Glory's sister anyway... so I can tell Glory if... if everything turned out alright or not."

"Right," Triage said as she tugged her white labcoat closer about herself and turned to reenter the medical school. I turned to where the alicorn stood alone, in the rain. "Think we can just hoof it? It'll only take an hour or two."

"You promised not to get in trouble," Lacunae reminded me.

"It's a walk from here to the Skyport. How much trouble could I possibly get in?" I asked with a small smile.

* * *

We trotted along Celestia Boulevard towards the east as the rain hissed around us. "Now those giant frogs. Those didn't count as trouble, okay?" I said sternly as we walked down the waterlogged road. I took another bite of the cyberpony cake I was levitating beside me. They were even waterproof!

"And that mutated river serpent with two heads?" Lacunae asked softly.

"We got away, didn't we?" I objected. "Sure, you had to teleport out of its mouth, but..."

"And that squad of Seekers?" the alicorn asked just as quietly.

"What? Only took us five minutes tops to shake them. I don't see the trouble. There was no trouble, understand?" I said pointedly, flushing as I imagined the sound of the smack of a belt.

The alicorn sighed. "I don't understand why you'd say it wasn't. You like Glory spanking you," she said flatly.

My cheeks burned, and I said primly, "I won't dignify that with a response. Suffice to say, while I like the attention and time I spend with Glory in any form, I don't want her to worry about me. I want her to be able to trust me to keep myself safe when she's not around."

Lacunae groaned and swayed a little as the scream of Enervation grew particularly acute, but I couldn't see how or why. A thought niggled at me. There was something... something about a disk? Rings? Something? I could feel it in my brain, but every time I tried to pin down the thought, something else went wrong. "Are you okay?" I asked with a little frown. There was a boutique on one side and an ice cream parlor on the other. Red bars skittered about, but we'd been passing ruins rife with radroaches and hoppers for the last hour.

"I will be fine. I shall... endure..." she groaned, her wings drooping.

Wait a minute. Those bars were blue...

I stared at the boutique; there were definitely blue bars in there. A half dozen at least. Maybe some of those red bars were something worse than just vermin. "Go ahead. Find some place where the screaming is lessened. I'm going to go check this out," I said softly as I glared at the boutique.

"You promised that you wouldn't get in trouble," Lacunae reminded me. "And you always get in trouble when you're alone."

"I'm not looking for trouble. I just want to check this out," I said, looking over and seeing her skeptical look. "Really. If it's trouble, I'll back out. Promise."

"I should have brought Glory's leash," Lacunae muttered as she took flight and glided silently down the road. Pulling out Vigilance, I moved slowly inside.

The boutique was a mess of ruined clothing and ponnequins standing like silent, rusting sentinels. The red bars weren't zipping around, which meant they probably weren't radroaches like most of the others. Rain poured through rotten holes in the ceiling and floor, and more than once I felt the floorboards yield alarmingly underhoof. Still, I avoided knocking over any of the tottery ponnequins in their waterlogged garments. I supposed only the Enervation kept them from mildewing away entirely.

I glanced at the register sitting on the counter next to an old radio. The room echoed with the constant tinkle of trickling water falling around me and splashing below. I couldn't hear anything yet; for all I knew, the blue bars were in the building behind the boutique... or the building behind that. Why couldn't E.F.S. give distance as well as direction? One scavenging impulse acted on later, though, I discovered that the till still had twenty bits in it and that there was an old safe underneath. I busted out the old bobby pins and screwdriver, and three pins later I cracked it open. An old beam pistol, some gem cartridges for it, and a spark battery. Well, better than noth—

"Sign the bloody paper, you mules, and we'll get you out of here," a mare snarled from the storeroom at the back of the boutique. Well, it looked like whatever was going on was in the building after

all! “Every second you waste, the Enervation’s killing you a little more. Can’t you feel it?” Hello? What is this?

“Just sign. You’ll have a safe new life with the Society,” a stallion said in a more pleasant voice.

“We don’t want to be slaves!” a mare cried.

“Serfs. Not slaves,” the stallion said reasonably. “You just have to sign the paper saying that you agree. Then we can all leave this horrible place. I’ll heal you all up, and you’ll be ready to get to work.”

“You sure I can’t fuck ‘em?” a deep male voice asked, making my hackles rise.

“Not unless you want to pay for the damaged goods, Pain Train,” the mare growled. ‘Pain Train’? *Really?* Did he give himself that name? “Though,” the mare said in a considering tone of voice, “if they don’t sign soon, why the fuck not?”

“There? You hear that?” The stallion said in conciliatory tones. “Better sign, or we may not be able to control my friend here.” The voices were coming from the back room. Carefully, I peeked through the cracked door into the back and saw two ponies, an earth pony mare in battle saddle and a cleaner, handsome unicorn leaning casually against a heap of gray rags. There were five or six ponies all wearing explosive collars. Oh what I’d give for P-21 to be here... I carefully looked over the mare and unicorn... there. The unicorn had a detonator strapped to some sort of jury-rigged PipBuck.

The prisoners all looked pretty drawn out, with blood starting to drip from their noses like crimson snot. They had the hungry look of scavengers, maybe new arrivals drawn by the stories. I couldn’t see the third slaver; maybe he was hidden behind the massive heap of rotten gray cloth that blocked part of my view?

I felt my fanny start to tingle as I began to feel like I was about to get in Trouble. I looked at the gray earth pony mare. Two hunting rifles in her saddle. I frowned and tapped my nose. If I killed her, the unicorn might blow the collars. I looked at Vigilance, pressed my lips together, and thought it through. There was no way I was going to simply let them go.

Then I looked at the ponequins and a small smile spread across my face.

* * *

“Come on, ponies. Don’t make this—” The unicorn went silent as a slow laugh rose over the trickling and splashing water. His ears twitched, and the mare turned slowly as well. Again, the creepy laugh echoed through the hollow boutique. “What the fuck?” He scowled as he walked to the cracked-open doors, the mare at his side. “Watch ‘em, Pain Train.”

“Burners?” the mare asked as they pushed the door open and walked out onto the spongy floor.

“This far south? Forget it,” the unicorn said darkly. “Who’s out there?”

“...wicked...” an unearthly voice hissed in the drippy confines of the boutique. “I smell wicked, wicked ponies...”

“What the hell?” the mare asked in bafflement as the laugh grew higher and higher. “What is

that?"

Suddenly light burst into view as the rag-shrouded pony floated up above them. Baleful white light blazed from within it as its voice crackled and shrieked. "I smell the blood of wicked ponies! I HUNGER!" the eldritch form howled as it slowly advanced through the air.

"Fuck!" the stallion screamed as he pulled a revolver from his holster and began to unload rounds into it. The hunting rifles barked again and again, ripping through flapping wet hide. Red beams burst from the specter's mouth and struck around the pair as the wraith cackled madly and the two ponies scattered.

The stallion's hammer fell on empty chambers as the apparition loomed over him. "What... what do you want?" he screamed as the blazing eyes glared down at him both in the dim, dank room.

"I hunger for the blood of wicked slavers who prey on the innocent! I hunger for *you*!" the specter shrieked.

"Him! He's the one you want!" the mare cried as she raced past for the exit, tripping over rusty ponequins and racing out half draped in filthy cloth.

"No! I'm not a slaver!" he gasped as he dropped his gun and his horn magically pressed buttons on the PipBuck. There was a pop and a clatter and the sound of the prisoners within giving shouts of both fear and hope. "There! See?! Free!"

"Never take another, or I shall slake my hunger upon you! My hunger for blood! Blood! BLOOD!" the specter demanded, its voice rising to an earsplitting shriek.

With a scream of terror, the brown unicorn raced after his companion.

The specter's ear-stabbing shriek went on a few seconds more, then abruptly ended, as did the glow of my magic supporting it as I rose from behind the counter. The bullet-riddled ponequin dropped to the floor before me. I peeked in at the old radio, spark battery, and beam pistol, then extracted the last and switched off the first. The feedback at the end had given me a headache. Now that the collars were off, I didn't have to worry about some slaver 'liquidating' his stock as a final 'fuck you' to me. A tiny Pinkie Pie and Rainbow Dash smacked hooves in the back of my mind.

I could still see Clover's neck exploding in a cloud of red vapors...

I stepped into the back room walking upright, munching nonchalantly on a cake in my hand. See? No trouble...

The six were pressed together against the far wall. I looked around the room, but 'Pain Train' was nowhere to be seen. I couldn't see a back door though... where'd he gone? Was he hiding in that heap of filthy rags? Too many errant radroaches in the area to use my E.F.S. to find him... I turned my attention to the prisoners. Two stallions and four mares, all looking like they'd had more than enough Enervation for one day. Funny... the collars were off and their captors had gone, but they were still staring in terror at me. I gave a worried smile. "Hey, don't worry. They're gone. The ghost was just me." I levitated out my sword to cut their bonds.

"Good to know," the deep voice rumbled right behind me.

I turned and discovered that what I'd assumed was a giant heap of rotting clothes was in fact a giant *thing* of muscle and shaggy gray fur. It had a head like a brahmin, only not quite so deformed, and it stood on two heavy split hooves rather than four mutated ones. Its upper body was so muscled that it looked as though a good push would send it tumbling over. It was standing upright like I was, and its forelegs – arms? – ended in hands. I had a good opportunity to observe these in action as its backhanded swipe sent me flying, augmented legs and all, clear across the room. My magical focus was gone, and the sword and Vigilance disappeared into the debris of the storeroom as I crashed into the wall and landed in a heap of broken ponnequins.

Pain Train, I assumed. Apt name. The shaggy gray beast dropped into a sprinter's pose, scraping his hooves across the floor for traction, his breath blasting out his wide nostrils. Duty and Sacrifice were tangled up in the wreckage around me, and my ringing horn probably couldn't summon a magic BB, let alone a magic bullet. He pointed his brass-tipped horns right at me, and with a bovine bellow, charged across the floor.

I used the only weapon I had left. I threw the cyberpony cake as hard as I could straight into his face! The disk struck him right between the eyes, and he let out a roar as he staggered back, clutching his forehead. He blinked twice, some blood dripping down between his eyes, and then picked up the disk with two fingers. "Did you just try and kill me with a... what is this?"

A much needed distraction! I reached down and pulled out Duty, grasping it in my jaw and taking aim. Pain Train tossed the cake aside and with a swing of his massive fists sent an avalanche of rotten packing crates, rancid cloth, and old dummies cascading upon me. I fired a shot before the world disappeared under sopping blanket.

Okay. Maybe I was in just a tiny bit of trouble. Then I felt the impacts shuddering through the floor, getting weaker. Was he leaving? Did he think I was done? Maybe he was going after the prisoners! Or maybe...

Maybe he was just backing up...

"Here comes the pain train!" he bellowed, confirming my suspicions. A rumble in the floorboards began to rapidly build. What could I do? Summon a door for him to crash through? Give him half a mustache?! I struggled to get the anchoring layer of crap off me before I was hit by the pain train. I had to go! Now! Somewhere! Anywhere!

And my horn gave a fizzle, then a flash, and everything went white. I flopped limply on my back on top of some junk, my horn coated in a layer of soot. A split second later the gray giant rammed into the wall three feet to my left with an impact that made the whole boutique shudder. He glared down at me with his horns embedded in the wall. "Cheater..." he muttered sullenly.

"Don't look at me! I didn't even know it was going to happen!" I said as I pushed myself to my hooves. "What the hell *are* you?" I asked as I looked around for my weapons in all the mess.

"Pissed," he said, then smashed his fists against the wall in rapid punches that pulverized the material around his stuck horns. As he wrenched out and stood up, I grabbed the first thing I closed my hand on, anything I could use as a shield. I hefted a rusty ponnequin, but it flew apart after one blow of his fist. I grabbed the lid off a crate, but his other fist blew it into rotten splinters. I really needed my sword, but I had no clue where it was! The next thing he hit was going to be me at this rate. My fingers closed around something small, round, and heavy, and in desperation I brought it up to block his falling

blow.

The fist connected with the cake, and a horrible crunch filled the air.

“Yarrrrgh!” roared Pain Train as he reared back, clutching his wrist in agony. From the way one of his fingers was all crooked, I guessed he’d finally found something as tough as he was.

I didn’t waste any time as I charged, swinging the heavy disk as hard as I could.

He snorted, absorbed the blow with the forearm of his injured limb, and then grabbed my wrist with his free hand. A smile crossed his bovine features. My pupils shrank and my ears drooped. “Uh oh.”

My only saving grace was that the throw through the wall and into the front of the boutique missed anything structural. I rolled several times, aching as my E.F.S. displayed all kinds of fascinating red marks telling me the injuries I was sustaining. I huffed as I pushed myself to my hooves on the spongy floor. I glanced at the door behind me. I could run. Save myself. Live to fight another day. Leave the six prisoners with this... this thing... to whatever horrible fate awaited them.

Was I just putting my life at risk to save ponies who were already lost? Pain Train dropped into his crouch again, readying another load of hurt.

I wiped blood from my nose and pushed myself to my hooves. He slowly grinned, gave another explosive blast from his nostrils, and then raced at me once again. This time I didn’t just wait for the impact. I charged back. He released another roar as he lowered his horns to rip me to pieces.

I leapt up, pointing all four of my hooves at a single point as I came down. Not at his head. No, I doubted that even with my mass I could get through that skull. My target was something else: the floor right in front of him. With a wooden crunch, the floor collapsed under me, and I was falling into the basement of the boutique. A second later, Pain Train plunged through as well. My landing was broken by a pile of rotten clothes in boxes that burst in a filthy mass beneath me. He created a giant splash that washed me into the water.

Okay. Now what?

Pain Train rose out of the flooded basement, trailing streamers of the foul gray water. I backed away, aching as he advanced. I had to stay on my hind legs, and even then the water sloshed around my chest. It was only waist deep on him. I moved to put a beam between us. He reached out with his hands, ignoring the broken finger, and grabbed the beam. With a pulpy crunch, he ripped it down and broke it in half with a massive flex of his arms.

Oh shit. I dove under the water as he hurled the two halves where I’d been standing a second before. I had to get away from... whatever he was. Get some ground under me. Lead him away from the prisoners and to where Lacunae could offer some assistance. The Enervation scream was even stronger down here; I couldn’t hear the Goddess or my friend. I tried to kick my way free when something seized my back leg.

Look Mom, I’m a pegasus.

I flew across the flooded basement, crashing right through another beam and slamming into the

far wall. I landed in a heap against the bricks and rusty metal equipment. Overhead, the floor was making all kinds of tortured noises; no surprise, as there was only one more wooden beam intact. Pain Train wasn't looking too good either, though. The gash between his eyes was bleeding worse than when I'd hit him, and blood dripped from his injured hand. He wasn't resistant to Enervation like I was, and he seemed to realize that he needed to end this quickly and get the hell out of here.

He dropped into the sprinter pose once more, sent two great splashes behind him as he dragged his submerged hooves through the water, and raced the length of the basement towards me. I had nowhere to run, no weapons to use, and no more magic tricks in my horn.

But, despite everything, I still had my cake clenched in my fist.

I rose as high as I could on my rear legs and gripped the cake tightly as he surged forward like a rage-fueled tsunami. I had only one chance at this. My eyes narrowed as I focused on my target, licked my lips... wait for it... Then, twisting my body I let the disk fly straight and true...

Right into the remaining beam.

With a groan and crack the beam bowed where the disk had struck it, held for a heartbeat, and then collapsed just as Pain Train reached it. With a colossal roar, the floor above collapsed upon him. He halted his charge and, with his good fist, blasted a hole right through it. For a second we both stood there, me pressed against the wall, him surrounded by a ring of rubble, panting hard. I wished I could breathe the same; slow and continuous respiration just didn't suit a fight like this. Still, we gave each other matching manic grins.

Then the second floor collapsed on him as well. Then the roof. For several seconds my ears rang as the debris tumbled into the basement. The rubble gave a heave... started to shift... and my jaw dropped as those enormous fists started to push it off. "Oh come on!" I shouted as his head reappeared. What was his deal?

Apparently, though, whatever it was, it wasn't quite enough. He groaned and collapsed with a thud. Slowly, I approached him. After having three floors fall on him, he was still breathing, but even this cow monster was knocked out cold. And with the Enervation down here, he was helpless.

I reached into the water at the base of the collapsed beam and retrieved my cake. Still as nutritious and delicious as ever, and not even crumbled!

I started to climb up an angled section of the collapsed floor to reach the storeroom when I looked back. Stupid ideas started to creep into my head. Leaving him here, half buried? Leaving him to rot as Enervation slowly drained the life out of him? It just didn't seem... right.

There was a tiny yellow pegasus inside me giving me great big teal pleading eyes. I groaned, rubbing my temples. *No, Fluttershy. There is 'be kind', and then there's 'be stupid'.* The tiny yellow pegasus gave a little sniff and just stared at me. *He'd tried to kill me!* Her tiny lip quivered. I clenched my eyes, determined to do what smart ponies did with when they fought big, terrible, half-bull monsters, which was to just go. I could learn... I... She gave the tiniest little whimper.

"Ugh... fine..." I muttered, and was rewarded with a tiny mental hug.

There was no way I could move him myself. But maybe... I had an idea, but I didn't know exactly

what or why. It was just a gut feeling... I trotted around the perimeter of the basement, listening to the scream in my head. Finally I reached the rusted metal box. I could barely make out 'Roseluck Pest Solutions' on the case. I busted it open, and there... the green glowing silvery ring. I frowned; how'd I know to look for it? There was something about the rings and... *something*. It was like a blanket covered a part of my brain... I had no idea what I was doing or why I thought it would help, but I scrambled up to the front door and threw the shiny metal ring as far as I could down the street.

Instantly, the scream dropped to a whisper. I crept along the jagged edge which was all that remained of the first floor, looking down at the creature surrounded by twisted ponequins and draped in rotten wood and cloth. That would have to do. If he cared to dig himself out, he could do so. I was battered from head to hoof, my horn a lead weight on my brow. I trotted into the back where the scavengers watched me as warily as they had their captors. I found my sword in the remains of the back room, then Vigilance and the matching revolvers. Finally, I cut their bonds. "Follow me east, and we'll get you--"

That was as far as I got before they scarpered. Not a word of thanks, but I couldn't blame them. I looked at some papers beside the captives. 'Contract of Servitude', they were titled. I scanned the documents; apparently signing this piece of paper meant that you were agreeing to spend the rest of your life working for the Society for the 'betterment of ponykind'. I pursed my lips before tearing the papers in two and tossing them into the basement. I picked my way back to the entrance.

"So... all I need to do is heal enough and tell Lacunae that it wasn't any trouble," I said as I trotted out the front door.

And bumped right into the chest of my purple friend. She slowly narrowed her eyes before taking in the hole in the roof, the missing floors, the flooded basement, and Pain Train half buried in rubble. I gave a sheepish little grin and spread my dinged forehooves wide as her gaze returned to me. "Trouble? What trouble? No trouble here!" My grin strained all levels of credulity before I gasped, "Please don't tell Glory!"

Lacunae looked down at me, then slowly smiled.

* * *

I had many an unpleasant mutter as I followed Lacunae with a rope tied to my collar. It just wasn't the same as Glory... our differences in size made me feel like Mom was making sure I wasn't going to run down to maintenance to play games. Worse, she was lecturing me all about fighting the mutant brahmin minothingy and how much trouble I was in for trying to take one on alone. Fortunately, though, she both untied me and quieted down as we drew close to the Skyport.

The Rainbow Dash Skyport was a flurry of activity as we approached the front gates. A small mob of angry scavengers was gathered around them, shouting and hefting up crates of scrap metal as they yelled to be allowed in to trade for food. Three power-armored pegasi kept them at bay with their bristling weapons while a pink pegasus mare in a rain-soaked Volunteer Corps uniform tried to placate the mob.

As we approached the back of the throng, the rearmost ponies spotted us. Their eyes widened as they looked at my SWAT barding and the purple alicorn, and their shouts dwindled as they backed out of our way. Row after row slowly parted. Some glared, some looked on fearfully, but more than a few wore expressions of something like hope. The three power-armored pegasi kept their weapons trained

on me as the frazzled pink mare began to say in a perfunctory tone, "I told you! We're no longer accepting salvage for food and medical servi—" She broke off as her eyes widened in shock. "You!"

"Run out of food and medicine in there?" I asked wryly. An angry mutter rippled through the crowd.

"No! Of course not. It's just that the scrap metal trade has been currently suspended and we can't accept any more salvage at this time," she gave a nervous glance over her shoulder. "Please, come back later!"

"We're hungry now!" a stallion roared.

"Please. I've been gathering scrap metal all week for some good healing potions. My children need them!" an earth pony mare wailed. The urge to do something rash nibbled at my mane already.

"We can't accept any more scrap metal at this time. Please understand!" the pink pegasus begged.

"Perhaps, instead of trading, you might simply give them some supplies?" Lacunae suggested.

The pink pegasus gulped. "We don't want the local population to get dependent on donated food and medicine," she said lamely.

"You changed the deal on us!" challenged a stallion so loaded with junk metal that he resembled some strange hybrid of tortoise and pony.

"Look at it this way," I said to the pink mare, "you can give them a small amount of food and medicine and explain that the deal is temporarily suspended till later, or you can have a mob that gets bigger and bigger with every passing minute." I looked at the rain pouring off the barrels of the power armor, then back at the mare. "I don't doubt you'd be able to handle things if they got violent, but not without a doozy of a death toll and a lot of lost goodwill." I looked the pink mare in the eyes. "You came down here to help ponies. Not to kill them."

"No..." she muttered, then sneezed. Finally she sighed. "Okay. I'll tell them to release some food and supplies. They've got more than enough stockpiled to spare some." She looked at the crowd and then added, "But please spread the word that trading is currently suspended temporarily and that the Volunteer Corps apologizes for this!"

That mollified the crowd a bit. I looked at her, waiting till she finished talking to one of the armored pegasi who I assumed had some sort of radio. "Thank you."

"I didn't want to come down here," the pink mare said in a low voice, sniffing. "It's cold. And wet. Always wet, even with us trying to keep the rain off us. I think half the VC have caught all kinds of respiratory ailments. I just didn't want to be one of those ponies who stood by while others came down here. But thanks for helping me with that crowd. I never thought anypony would get worked up over a box of preserved food."

"For a lot of scavengers, a box of preserved food is the difference between life and death," I pointed out, then smiled. "Now, if you don't mind, I need to go in there and have a talk with Lieutenant Wind Whisper."

"You... she... I... You can't come in! She's busy. We're all busy!" she said in a rush.

I stared the pink mare right in the eye, watching her start to shake. "I need to talk to her. If she can come out here, great. I'll wait. But if not, I need to go in there and find her."

All three power-armored soldiers pointed their weapons at me again. I passed Lacunae a warning to be ready to shield me as I grinned at them. "Nice armor. Nice guns, too," I said calmly as I looked at their wingcovers. A telekinetic yank upwards as I passed forward, three shots from Vigilance right into the wingpit, sword out and slicing through the same weak point in the armor of the pegasus on the other side. Pivot around. Jump and grab the third with my fingers and ground him, then maybe finish them off.

Of course... if I'd actually done that (not that I could, anyway, with my horn burned out), that would have been Trouble...

Something sure had the winged ponies nervous, though. It seemed the utter lack of fear I showed of their armament was throwing these Enclave a bit. Maybe the fact that I was working on ways to eliminate them showed on my face. Or maybe there was something else entirely going on. Or maybe it wasn't me at all and something else had their tail in knots. Or all of the above. Either way, the three seemed to be getting more and more alarmed by the second.

Then the gate opened a crack, and a yellow pegasus with a brilliant orange mane stepped out. Lightning Dancer wore her power armor but had her helmet hooked to her shoulder. Her grave citrine eyes met mine. "Let her in."

"But... ma'am, we're on high security for the visit!" the pink mare protested.

"I know that. Orders from the lieutenant. Let her in." Everypony immediately stiffened and looked at each other, including me. Lightning Dancer huffed. "Trust me, the sooner we talk to Blackjack, the sooner she leaves." Lightning Dancer said firmly and then added, "Or maybe you'd like to tell her why you're questioning orders?"

"You're going to have to surrender your weapons," the pink mare said after a second.

That wasn't a problem. Between my fingers and Lacunae's magic, we should be okay if something went bad. I passed the gear over to Lightning Dancer, and she put them into her armor's pockets. Once we were through the gate and out of hearing range, the yellow mare hissed in a tense voice, "You've got fucking perfect timing, Blackjack. Absolutely perfect."

"What's going on?" I asked. The Skyport had been fortified, but I didn't see armies of Enclave ready to take over the Wasteland. There were only a few VC running around; the majority of the ponies I saw were in power armor and were working strange machines that were putting out even more cloud.

"No time. I need to get you out of sight. Then we can talk. Intelligence would melt if they knew I brought you in here," she muttered as she led us towards a side door of the terminal building.

I held her shoulders with my fingers and asked a little more forcefully, "Lightning Dancer, what's going on?" The level of activity was concerning, but more so was the tension and atmosphere of fear. Everypony whose face I could see showed a level of anxiety even I couldn't create.

She started to answer when her armor beeped. "Oh crap. They're here. The bastards are early."

"Who's--" I started to say, when I heard a deep humming noise approaching. Something big was moving through the foggy air, something I couldn't even imagine. A powerful downdraft made the fog swirl wildly as something huge and black swept in over our heads and landed. I'd thought the Vertibucks had been impressive, but the sight of this looming black weapon of destruction made them look like flimsy toys. It was as if the tank the Harbingers used had been shrunk down a little and then given the power to fly. Two more buzzed the fields, the rising fog barely hiding them.

But that was nothing compared to what came next. From the skies came a cloud... or at least that was the first impression one received. Then one caught the black plates. The armored bridge. The turrets. It was so impossibly large that the further details were lost to the gloom. I'd thought that the tanks had been impressive, but this? With a weapon like this, what stopped the Enclave from simply outright conquering the wastelands?

"What is that?" I said as it descended to hover just above the ground next to the terminal, making the large open space look cramped. "What's going on?"

"A Raptor. The *Castellanus*," Lightning Dancer said tensely. "You need to get inside. If they find out that I breached security..."

She reached a door, swept a card through a reader, and pulled the door open. The hallway beyond was dark and cramped, with cables snaking along the walls. Lightning Dancer pushed us along into a room with a bank of eight terminals showing different parts of the Skyport. From the sight of things, some sort of major meeting was underway. Lightning Dancer blocked the monitors with her body as she turned and faced us. "Now, Blackjack, do you know where Dusk is?"

I felt a cold frisson run down my spine. "She wasn't brought here?"

"Brought here? You mean you know what happened to her?" Lightning Dancer blurted. "What happened? One night almost a week ago she was called out for a patrol and nopony came back! I can't find any official orders, which means it was an Intelligence operation, but nopony is saying anything!"

I sighed. "I encountered zebras and pegasi fighting in the north five days ago. They looked like they were investigating a zebra disease. There were three Neighvarro pegasi there, too. The Thunderhead pegasi were wiped out, but Dusk survived." I omitted who had done the wiping. Call me a coward, but right now, I needed answers too. To get them, I'd need to answer some of her questions first. "I told the Neighvarro pegasi to bring her here."

"What?" Lightning Dancer gasped.

"I wasn't in any condition to bring her myself. They were. It was that or leave her to the Remnant," I said in a rush.

"Well, they *didn't* bring her here," Lightning Dancer hissed softly through her teeth. "Neighvarro... that explains it," she muttered darkly, then looked at me. "The Grand Pegasus Enclave said that they had substantive evidence of crimes against the Enclave committed by Thunderhead. Intelligence has been in complete chaos. Half their units abroad have either been arrested or have turned completely.

Neighvarro's got their own intelligence officers who've been wreaking havoc against us."

I felt two responses to this news. One was a tiny bit of satisfaction that Lighthooves had finally been caught, and the other a growing, gnawing sensation of dread at what that might mean. While I had no problem with him getting punished for his part in creating a bioweapon, I didn't have any desire to see Glory's whole home suffer for it. Until I'd seen that Raptor, the worst I'd imagined was Vertibucks. Now I was imagining enormous cloud machines of steel and vapor swirling through the skies.

"Such power," the Goddess purred in my mind. "With that, Red Eye wouldn't last a minute against me."

"Shut up," I thought furiously at her. "You're a dirty surfer too, remember? There's no way they'd work with you."

"Oh, you'd be surprised how easily the ambitious can put aside a little hatred for more power," the Goddess chuckled.

I tried to steel my thoughts against her, in part because I feared she might be right, but also because Lightning Dancer was looking at me in bafflement. "Sorry. Brain damage. You were saying?"

"I was saying 'where is Glory?' Why isn't she with you? Did something happen to her too?" the mare said in worry. "Sky Striker is here. He's been talking about finding her." She looked sharply at me, "And you, for that matter. Something about bed champions?"

Oh, Celestia. That did it. I turned on my broadcaster, opened a channel to wherever, and shouted, "Okay! Attention everypony! Security here! I am a dirty, lecherous, adulterous mule! I cheated on the best mare in the Wasteland and am a bad, bad pony. Happy?!" I blurted, then threw my hooves overhead. Lightning Dancer stared at me in horror as Lacunae covered her face with a wingtip.

Then I froze as I looked at the screens; every pegasus in power armor was tapping the sides of their heads and looking at one another in confusion. I stared at my broadcaster again. Okay... that wasn't exactly what I had anticipated.

Tingly backside feelings again...

Lightning Dancer pressed a wingtip to a little earbud in her left ear. "Okay. I'm getting orders to report in now. If they trace that transmission to this building, they'll tear this place apart looking for you," she said. After I'd told her that Dusk might be in enemy hooves, I was grateful that she wasn't just handing me over. "Stay here. This is my post. I should be right back, okay? And please don't do anything else like what you just did."

She trotted quickly from the dark room, leaving us together. "Wait! My... guns..." And sword, and all the other weapons she'd confiscated at the gates. I harrumphed, took out the cake, and started munching. I looked at the rows of terminals and reached out a hoof, scowling at it passed right through. I looked at the buttons and tried to push with my magic. Surely that would work, right? Not so much. I groaned and batted at the machine with a hoof.

Then Lacunae reached out and tapped a button with a wingtip. "—do not let one Neighvarro soldier off that ship. This is still the Thunderhead no-flight zone," one mare told four soldiers in the center

terminal monitor. "Find that security breach. Check the hangars!"

I looked at the alicorn in surprise, and she smiled back at me. "I am part pegasus, after all." She tapped more keys with her wingtips, finally bringing up a conference room. There was a long table with six ponies around it, three on either side. Each side had a stallion, a mare, and another stallion.

I recognized Sky Striker by the dashing old buck's eyepatch. He sat next to two other pegasi in dusky uniforms, a light-coated mare and a darker-coated stallion. From the fancy clothes and severe expressions on their faces, I expected them to be some kind of very important ponies. Opposite them were a matching trio: a darker stallion, almost black, who wore a smile that reached everything but his eyes, a pale older mare with a straight mane who looked far less amiable, and an ancient pegasus stallion in power armor who seemed quite bored with the whole proceeding. I'd hoped for more, but all these monitors were in monochrome.

"—you for meeting with us on such short notice. I didn't expect you to come, Honored Councilor," the lighter mare said with a thin and slightly baffled smile to the armored elder.

"Oh, few folks did," the ancient stallion said with a wheezy cackle. "A chance to go back to the ground. Get mud beneath my hooves again? Couldn't pass it up." He gave a toothless grin at Sky Striker. "And once they throw 'Honored' in front of your name, you can do just about anything as long as it isn't important, eh, Striker?"

The grim, one-eyed stallion grinned despite himself. "Yeah. Then half want to use you as a figurehead and the other half want you to pop off. Some things never change."

The light mare beside the Honored Councilor tried to hide her annoyance as the dark stallion on her other side just chuckled. "With all due respect, this meeting is quite important, Honored Councilor Stargazer," she said as she glared across the table at her counterpart. "We've received reports that Enclave Intelligence is acting outside its jurisdiction."

"That is why you've arrested over half of my officers, General Storm Chaser?" the dark stallion next to Councilor Stargazer rumbled. "Over a report? A report? Who filed this report? What was their training background? How was it confirmed?"

"Neighvarro has been working to establish our own intelligence corps... to supplement the efforts of Thunderhead, of course, Director Stratus. Some visionary members of your organization were properly thrilled to assist us," the dusky stallion next to the general said in calm, congenial tones. He oozed comfort and sincerity. "When we learned that Thunderhead Intelligence was involved in the development of a biological weapon that could be used against the rest of the Enclave, we simply *had* to act."

The director bared his teeth, not bothering to hide his contempt. "I'm sure you did, High General Harbinger. But instead of discussing this outside official channels as usual, you went and detained almost a hundred agents!" The name made my ears stand straight up. There was no way this could be a coincidence! And hadn't someone mentioned they were *led* by a pegasus? I racked my brains, trying to remember, but set it aside as I spied on this little meeting. "What was the origin of this report?"

"We were initially alerted by the surfacer terrorist who goes by the name 'Security' or 'The Security Mare'. She encountered one of our patrols and tipped us off to the development of a biological weapon at Miramare Air Station. Naturally, we were concerned by this possibility and investigated. Imagine our surprise when we discovered, buried in the base's terminals, records of some of the actions

of an 'Operative Lighthooves'. The accounts on the terminals were corroborated by pony remains infested with a prion contagion. The data pointed us to 'Yellow River', and once more we sent a team in. We were quite shocked to discover, again with this 'Security's assistance, that there were indeed signs of proof that a biological weapon was being adapted by this operative to infect pegasi," Harbinger purred with a growing smile. "Tell me, what is Operative 'Lighthooves's real name?"

"I cannot say at this time," Stratus muttered, earning a chuckle from Harbinger.

"You've been asked for the identity of this operative by the leader of the Enclave Military on behalf of the Grand Pegasus Enclave High Council. That is not a request!" General Chaser snapped.

The ancient stallion sighed and rolled his eyes. "Stop being a Tiara, Stormy. Let him answer." Chaser blinked and flushed, trying to glare an answer out of the Director of Enclave Intelligence.

"I cannot say at this time because we do not have an Operative Lighthooves assigned," Stratus replied. "I've got two hundred and thirty-two operatives, all memorized. There is no Operative Lighthooves in Enclave Intelligence."

"How convenient," Harbinger purred. Storm Chaser simply snorted. I was skeptical, too. If Lighthooves was behind this on his own... operating rogue...

Stargazer leaned forward. "As for investigating diseases on the surface, we needed to develop inoculations to better protect members volunteering to come down. Despite the Science Channel's exaggerations, there are real threats of an epidemic." She gave a little smile. "Besides, even if we were to develop such a weapon, how would we use it? All food and material shipments are rigorously inspected to make sure that we are fulfilling the terms of the treaty. We'd be at greater risk for infecting ourselves."

Harbinger twisted his lips bitterly, and Storm Chaser seemed to concede the point.

"There is also a question about how these--" General Chaser leaned forward and put a glass bottle on the table. I couldn't see well, but the contents appeared to be some sort of mane clippings. "--ended up in the Fluttershy Medical Center." Everyone except Harbinger and Storm Chaser stared at the bottle. "Notice the distinct colors."

Stratus gave a dismissive snort first and the one eyed buck shook his head. "So somepony decided to dye their mane. We get rebellious youths who do that all over the Enclave," Sky Striker said with a wave of his wing. "Eventually they either grow up or take the brand."

"This isn't dyed. In fact, chemical analysis shows that somepony probably used dye to *conceal* these colors. They're a 99.9% match to Dash," General Chaser said grimly.

"You were able to breach the field?" Councilor Stargazer finally said in alarm, with hints of fear on her face. Her tone seemed to make High General Harbinger smile even more.

"Not completely. Some sort of interference. But with the pony these came from..." Harbinger trailed off, looking at the scowling director. "So how *did* you do it? Find her in stasis? The report mentioned stasis pods in the hospital, and evidence of an Intelligence team. Or did you find some means to make a successful clone?"

"I have no idea," the dark stallion replied, glaring at his counterpart. "But if you give me that sample, I'll put my best minds on it."

"Sorry," Harbinger said apologetically, his wing reaching out for the bottle and pulling it back, tucking it in a pocket in his uniform. "We've got our own people looking into it."

The ancient pony sighed and shook his head. "All that is secondary to the activities of Thunderhead allowing prolonged contact with the surface." He looked across at Stargazer with clear worry. "We've been hearing it all across the Enclave, fears that Thunderhead is using trade and its resources to give itself an unacceptable advantage over the rest of the Enclave."

"To put it bluntly, we don't like or trust what you're doing," Chaser snapped. "With the materials you've gathered, you could be preparing to build your own independent force."

"That would be against the treaty," Stargazer replied calmly, folding her hooves on the table in front of her. "A treaty that Thunderhead has always abided by. And always will." From the cool disdain on her face, it was obvious that she was leaving it up to the General to show dishonor first.

Sky Striker jumped in. "Of course, if you really are so concerned, you could implement your own trade with the surface. There's absolutely no lack of settlements and organizations you could do business with."

"Most of our communities don't have surpluses to trade," the ancient stallion said with a sigh and a shrug. "And besides, it is far too risky. You've heard reports about this Red Eye and the alicorn monsters that serve him? He's just the first. If we get entangled in surface affairs again, it will be the same as during the war."

"Scootaloo thought differently," Stratus said bitterly. The ancient pegasus's eyes widened in shock a moment, then drooped. In that moment, he looked every bit as old as his body was.

"Director," Sky Striker rumbled in reproach. The dark stallion snorted and looked away.

"This doesn't have anything to do with bioweapons, Rainbow Dash clones, or the Volunteer Corps," Stargazer said softly, looking at her hooves on the table. "This is about the future. The Enclave has two dire enemies. One is complacency. The other is entropy. We've stripped every available resource we can from every mountaintop in Equestria. Thunderhead didn't open trade with the surface because we wanted to but because we had to. While the military has all our newest resources, even it can't keep up maintenance. We can only cannibalize so far before we're eating our own wings. Some communities are using talismans two centuries old. We have to change if we are to survive."

"Perhaps. Perhaps," wheezed the ancient buck. "But not now, and not like this."

"I'd also like to correct you," Harbinger purred. "You left out our greatest enemy: traitors."

"If you're so concerned about it, conscript your own unicorns," Stratus countered, then rubbed his chin. "Oh. Wait. I forgot. You can't. Life on quarried-off mountaintops is hardly conducive to quality talisman production. Guess you shouldn't have gutted those high elevation stables after all."

I didn't like the way he used the word 'conscript'. And apparently neither did the old stallion. "Excuse me," he sighed, rising to his hooves, his power armor clanking as it carried him out. I doubted he

could walk or fly without it. His wings were so tiny that they appeared almost absent.

"That was out of line, Stratus," Sky Striker retorted, glaring past the mare at him.

"With all due respect, Honored Sky Striker, this is a waste of time," Stratus said as he looked at the scowling pair. "Thunderhead controls the air defense system for Shadowbolt Tower. Anything bigger than a pony we can target and blow out of the sky before they come within fifty miles. If they destroy the tower, somehow, they'll be losing everything they want to capture."

"Not quite," Harbinger retorted as he rose to his hooves, smiling confidently, staring daggers into Stratus's eyes. "There would be quite a bit of satisfaction to be had."

"Enough," General Chaser said as she rubbed her temples. "This is getting us nowhere."

"Agreed," Stargazer said with a nod. "I vote for calm."

Sky Striker looked at Stratus. The sour dark stallion shrugged. "Very well. I will order a stringent examination of all Intelligence activities within Thunderhead and the Hoofington region. You can send your own observers to verify." He glared and pointed a wing across at Harbinger. Stratus said 'observers' the same way Harbinger had said 'traitors'. "But I expect the operatives you've detained to be released and returned immediately if you expect to see another magic talisman."

"Of course," Harbinger said silkily. Everypony rose to their hooves. "But I do hope you take care, Director. Equestria is a wide land full of possibilities. I promise you, the Enclave will not be dependent on Thunderhead forever. Someday, you may just need our magnanimity and find it missing."

"Thank you. If you will please wait here, we'll locate the Honored Councilor so you can depart together. Excuse us," Stratus said, and with that the Thunderhead trio turned and left the meaning room.

I saw them appear in a room on another monitor and start talking. "Can you switch the sound to them?" I asked in annoyance.

Lacunae didn't answer. Her eyes were locked on the monitor, wide and staring. "That was a lovely breeze of brown wind," Harbinger muttered. "Why did we waste our time with this, Stormy?"

"Because the public would look very poorly on the military if we did not make some formal diplomatic gestures of working this out. You know we have to keep Thunderhead's bad behavior from spreading," Chaser replied sourly. "And because I, personally, would rather not break the largest and most successful settlement in the sky in the process of reasserting control of the situation."

"You can't make a rainstorm without kicking a few clouds," Harbinger replied callously, then scowled. "You read the report, didn't you? The Canterlot hub went active. Two hundred years with barely a peep, and now we get a class one alert reporting a breach by surfer terrorists. For all we know, Thunderhead's orchestrated this, and who knows what's next? They could try to get their Rainbow Dash into the S.P.P. Then it's checkmate for us, Stormy."

General Storm Chaser seemed to consider that for a moment, then replied with a dour scowl, "Our forces are already committed against Red Eye. This alert was just what was needed to convince the more hesitant elements of the council that it's time to clean house. Red Eye's special agent 'LittlePip' accessed something in there, and we have no evidence that she's working for Thunderhead too."

LittlePip? An agent for who? Was he serious? I thought hard about Arbu and what she'd done. Was it... possible? No. It couldn't be. Harbinger was wrong... or pulling it out of his ass or... or something! It was like saying the Stable Dweller was working for the Goddess. It just... wasn't possible. It... it couldn't be!

The Goddess hummed a merry little tune in the back of my mind. I couldn't shut it out, so I ignored her... and ignored the memory of Triage telling me that the Collegiate was trading with Red Eye too.

No! Do not think about it, Blackjack, I told myself. Focus on these two. This was the kind of trouble that got whole stables killed. Don't think about Homage's pony working for... just don't. The general continued, "We've been drumming up the surface threat for months, anyway. I admit that this new biological weapon is extremely concerning, but we can't turn all our forces around to tackle Thunderhead now. After we've settled accounts on the surface..."

"We may be eating our own foals while Thunderhead rips Neighvarro to vapor," Harbinger finished grimly. He seemed to acquiesce to her argument, but it clearly galled him. In his eyes I saw a lust for war that approached the insatiable. *'There would be quite a bit of satisfaction to be had.'*

The general sighed. "The council and the public have been told that Red Eye is a more immediate threat, High General. We can stomp him in a week and tie up loose ends, *then* deal with other any other problems." General Chaser frowned at the High General's glowering silence, and continued, perhaps trying to keep his mind off of attacking Thunderhead, "Autumn Leaf's already dispatched Windsheer's team to gather as much trustworthy information as possible. They're the best of our new intelligence squads. We still don't know the full capabilities of these alicorns. They can fly and use unicorn magic, which makes them a greater threat than a potential plague."

Something about her words snapped the High General out of his brooding. His slow, easy smile seemed to make Chaser more worried than when he'd been growling about Thunderhead. "A greater threat... or perhaps a greater asset," Harbinger mused. And then I looked over at Lacunae and saw her growing smile... and then I realized that it wasn't my friend I was looking at but the Goddess. Her eyes showed a wild glee, like a filly getting everything she wanted on Stable Day.

Oh, you'd be surprised how easily the ambitious can put aside a little hatred for more power...

Worse, though, I could hear shouts from down the hall. Doors being slammed open. Somehow, I doubted it was a band of foals on a scavenger hunt. "We've got to go," I said, shaking her. Her leer only widened. I heard Harbinger making some sort of comment about 'possibilities', but I wasn't paying attention. I tried to think at Lacunae, but I felt distinctly cut out of the loop; it looked as if the Goddess was canny enough to disconnect me from whatever Unity was deciding.

Which meant that I was about to have company very soon.

No guns. All I had were thumbs, a burned out horn, and Glory's cakes. "Lacunae! Wake up!" I yelled as hooves thundered right outside the door. "Damn it..."

I was about to get in Trouble...

The door was kicked open, and two power-armored pegasi looked right at me for one stunned second. That was all I needed as I threw Glory's cake in a flat spin right into the mare's visor. The visor

popped and splintered under the baked projectile's onslaught, and her two beam rifles fired high. The pony behind her cursed and tried to hover to bring his own beam weapons to bear.

Couldn't have that...

I popped out my fingers as I lunged and smashed them against the broken visor. Pegasi were like unicorns: close combat was not their forte. With one hand gripping her helmet and another on her chest, I heaved her up above me and kept her in the line of fire. "Lacunae!" I shouted as I heard the mare scream in terror and many more hooves approach. "We have to get out of here!"

I felt eyelashes and tears against my fingers; a half inch further and she'd be needing an eyepatch. Crimson beams flashed as she fired in a blind panic, scouring the ceiling above me as she struck out with her hooves. The stallion had come up with an alternative measure of trying to push past the mare to get a clear shot at me. If it'd been Steel Ranger armor, I'd have been toast, but the Enclave armor was light enough that I was able to shove her between the doorjamb and block him.

I looked down at where Glory's cake had fallen and then back at Lacunae. Well... it worked for me. I kicked as hard as I could with a rear hoof, and the gnawed black disk flew through the air and struck my friend right in the back of the head. I winced; I'd really been aiming for her rump. Still, it snapped her out of that stare and made her frown at me, rubbing her head with her wing. Harbinger and the general were leaving the monitor anyway; I supposed that the Goddess had seen everything she wanted to see.

Then she noticed that I was wrestling with an Enclave soldier and trying to fend off another, and her eyes popped wide. She wasted no time in racing to my side, her horn flared brighter and brighter. I shoved the mare away just before the room flashed and dissolved around me.

* * *

"I can't believe it!" I stormed as we trotted towards Chapel. Vigilance! Sacrifice and Duty! The magic sword of scary sharpness... all gone! I was disarmed; I was pissed!

"We had no choice. Either your transmission or something else alerted the entire base. You would have killed them trying to escape or, more likely, they you," Lacunae said reasonably. I was in no mood for reasonable. I wanted to sulk my weapons back into their holsters! I munched on the cake that had fortunately been tangled in the alicorn's mane. It may have had a few stray hairs stuck to it now, but they didn't detract from the delicious appley, oily, greasy goodness.

Nice as Glory's treat was, though, it didn't dull the sting of having my weapons stuck back at the base. Still, sulking about it wouldn't really help. I couldn't go back right this second and demand my stuff back, so, instead, I tried to put it behind me and focused on the next, and more troubling, item of annoyance. "So... why'd the Goddess take you over?" She looked at me with a small frown, and I sighed. "I saw it. She was gawking at that pair like it was a dream come true. What was she thinking?" I asked as we walked along. Lacunae had teleported us a short way outside of Chapel; a 'near miss' in alicorn teleportation terms. I took out some of my impotent rage on some unsuspecting puddles.

"I have no idea. I have no memory of it," Lacunae murmured. Since we'd teleported away, the Goddess had been annoyingly silent. I could almost feel her smugness in the back of my mind.

"I can't believe she did it, though," I said with an emphatic stomp in a puddle.

"She saw an opportunity and she took it," Lacunae replied casually. "It's not the first time."

"Why aren't you mad?" I asked in a huff, then looked up at her. "She took you over. Completely. Again!" How could it *not* bother her? It was... it was like the *Seahorse*. She was helpless to stop it...

"You make the mistake of thinking that I'm a person to be violated. I'm not. She has the power and took the opportunity. I imagine the Enervation was excruciating for her," Lacunae replied as she trotted along. "It must have taken a significant part of her focus to achieve it. Despite what you may think, she is not sloppy or careless when she... asserts herself." She closed her eyes a moment.

I wanted to simultaneously hug and throttle her. Why couldn't she understand that she was a person to me... a person used by a monster. "But are you... okay?" I asked in worry.

"Of course," she replied, so matter-of-factly that gave me a heavy... well, not heart... blood circulation pump? Damn it, cyberponies needed some idioms of our own. The alicorn frowned a little as she went on, "The sensation of so many minds and wills within me is... overwhelming. So much in me wanting to return to its original owners... With just a little push, I think everything within me may have been returned to Unity."

I stared at her. "You mean you almost died?"

"I was never born in the first place. But I admit that it was close." She sighed and shook her head. "It was so close..." I couldn't tell if she'd said it like she was glad or regretful of her survival. I didn't press. I'd told her I wouldn't.

"Would that change her? So many memories coming at once?" The thought of a Goddess with humility and compassion thrilled me as much as the thought that it would take my friend away filled me with horror.

"Who can say? She winnowed them out once. Perhaps she would do so again," Lacunae replied with a sigh.

"It makes me so angry, what she does to you," I growled.

"Why?" she asked with a small, sad smile. "I'm not a person. I'm just a collection of memories. Any critical memories intrinsic to my own identity are gone."

"Isn't there anything left of who you used to be?" I asked as I looked at her powerful purple body.

"There's a smell of who we used to be. All of us have a brain, of course, but it's as if it's asleep. Still, there's a smell of who we once were that simply doesn't go away on its own. Like daydreams you can't quite remember," she said quietly, before looking at me. "That's for other alicorns, of course. Real alicorns. I'm no more an alicorn than I am a pony."

I looked at her oddly. There was a wistfulness to her voice that hadn't been there before the Goddess had set up shop. A regret that lingered in her eyes. I'm not one for introspection, but as we walked together, it struck me how alike all my friends were. We struggled so hard to understand our own identities. Glory, P-21, Rampage, Lacunae, even Scotch, all fighting so hard to determine who we were and where we were supposed to be. And I was filled with an overwhelming urge to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. What luxury! What indulgence! Most ponies in the Wasteland were happy just

trying to survive to next week, and here were the six of us staggering through existential crises!

Lacunae met my eye, and I guessed she read my thoughts. That did it, and I couldn't help but actually start laughing; it wasn't funny really, but it was laugh or cry and really... I was sick of crying. To my surprise and delight, she laughed with me. There was something both reassuring and unsettling about hearing it from her.

You're a real pony, Lacunae. Just like Rampage. Just like all of us. You'll see...

We must have looked quite a sight to the half dozen fillies and colts manning the machine guns at the entrance to town, the pair of us laughing side by side at the ridiculousness of it all and me lacking all my armament. If so, we weren't any less a sight than Chapel itself. Scotch Tape stood with her rolls of paper on a stack of beams and planks outside the post office. She waved a hoof, giving directions to not just most of the Crusaders but to the adults as well. The tumbled-down scaffolds and rickety structures were gone, and Scotch Tape was directing three different teams at work. One was out carefully moving mines away from the edge of the cobbled-together wall while another was disassembling it. A third was building some kind of small, long building downhill from the post office.

Charity watched from the post office door with a wistful and envious look on her face; I suppose it had to sting to see everypony working together under an outsider. Then she glanced at me, flushed, and pointedly rolled her eyes before stepping back inside.

I started towards the post office but heard two voices speaking in low voices. "But are you feeling any better, Rampage?" P-21 said from behind a stack of beams. I froze, then developed a little smirk and carefully peeked around the corner. Hidden between the wood and the stockade wall were my two friends facing one another. The striped filly leaned against the wooden wall with a sigh while P-21 looked on with an expression of mild concern.

"I don't know. Yes. No? Maybe..." the filly sighed softly. "Seeing what Shujaa did makes me feel... different. I don't know if different counts as better or not. It's like I actually know something about her... really know... rather than just having vague feelings about her."

"Blackjack says she's going to prove you're a real pony," P-21 said.

"Blackjack's an idiot. You know that," Rampage said with a smile and a roll of her pink eyes. "Sometimes I think she'd try to help a corpse take a walk." I flushed a little, frowning as I listened on their conversation. "I wonder why I continue to follow her around. Is there some soul inside me that makes me want to stick near her?" She rubbed her face. "I don't even know which part of me is thinking right now. The doctor? Shujaa?"

P-21 shook his head, "Try not to think of that right now." I could have kissed him, friendly like, as he kept her from dwelling on her problem and pressed, "I thought you stayed because you admired her."

Rampage gave a little sigh, then nodded. "I still do. A little. But... it's not the same, P. I used to think she was good. Now I don't know if she's good or just delusional. And she's trying to help me and you and everypony and... doesn't she get it? You can't help some things. Some ponies are just broken. Some ponies aren't meant to be helped."

P-21 nodded sympathetically. "So do you still want to leave, then?"

What? I scuffed my hoof as I tried to lean closer to the stack of wood and barely drew back before either of them heard me.

Rampage didn't answer right away. "I don't know. Maybe. I just want everything to end. No more crazy. No more questions. No more wondering who I am. Doesn't Blackjack get that? Can't she... can't she just honor my request? She had Folly. She could have ended me, but she didn't. I doubt she ever could," Rampage muttered, and then laughed. "But if I did leave, where would I go? Back to the Reapers? Beating up gangers for sport, taking over once Big Daddy dies? There's no future there."

"You could stay here," he suggested.

"Not with the Angel in me. And she is in me. Even as a filly... when Sonata was crying over Medley, I wanted her to stop. Wanted to stop her. If we'd been alone..." Rampage sighed and sniffed. "No. I can't stay here. Reapers are a dead end. I don't know anywhere to go. Maybe I should just go to that well in the manor and throw myself in. Pop some grenades and bury myself. Be done with it. It's an awfully deep well."

"Blackjack would dig you out. You know she would," P-21 said evenly.

Rampage gave a hiccupping little laugh. "Yeah, she would. Idiot... wonderful idiot..." She sighed softly. "And you? Have you decided what you're going to do?"

"I don't know. I have to admit, a part of me really wants to stay here. Try to make this father thing work. Try for a little... I don't know..."

"Happiness?"

P-21 laughed softly. "Yeah, but what would happen to Blackjack without us?"

"She'd probably trip, blow up half of the Hoof," Rampage laughed.

"Start a war between the Harbingers and the Enclave," P-21 added, "all while feeling horrible about it."

"And wind up pregnant with a mule," Rampage chuckled. I felt my ears burn along with my cheeks. Okay, that wasn't likely to happen any time soon! Really, did all my friends talk about me like this when I wasn't around?

The pair laughed, and I fought the urge to trot out there. Finally Rampage sighed, "You're going with her."

"And so are you," P-21 said in a more solemn voice. "She's Security, and we're her friends. That's why. She's the mare who tries, and we're the ponies who catch her when she fails." He sighed again and then chuckled, "I wonder if Twilight Sparkle's friends were ever as aggravated with her as we are with her great great great oh so greaty great great granddaughter."

What? A jolt lanced through me as if I'd be struck by lightning again. I felt numb and prickly all at once.

"I'm pretty sure they must have been. I think Twist would know..." Rampage sighed. "Are you going to tell her soon? About Tenpony?" Tell me *what* about Tenpony? I'd failed the stupid test, so what

were they talking about? I fought the urge to trot out there and shake my so called friends till their hooves rattled.

"Maybe. I promised Homage I would as soon as we thought she could handle it; I have her memory orb and everything. I just don't know if she's ready for it. We promised to wait till she was stable." P-21 let out his breath slowly between his teeth before looking back at her. "Do you think she'll be better in a few more days? She's out with Lacunae now. If she comes back without an emotional meltdown... maybe," the stallion mused, then sighed again. "I don't even know how to tell her. 'Hey, Blackjack, we've been lying to you since you came back. Hope you don't mind?'"

"She's got no right to be upset. Not after modifying Scotch's memories and telling you she'd lie to me just to make me feel better," Rampage told him. That balked me a little. I had thought it'd been okay to lie to my friends for their own good, and now my friends had done the same to me. It hurt, but it also stole some of my anger away.

"I know," P-21 said solemnly. There was a long pause. "I think she is better now. Better enough that she's not running off with LittlePip in the tunnels under the tower, anyway. Better than moping on a mattress or racing after whatever damned thing distracts her. She still keeps pushing herself to the breaking point over everything, though. Medley. Hightower. When will she say 'enough is enough' and stop?"

"Never," Rampage said. "And you love her for it."

"Please. She's a penis short for me," he grumbled.

"You do," Rampage teased. I peeked and saw the filly's sly little smile.

"I love her name," he muttered. "Not Blackjack. Her real name. I love how she seems like she can do anything... at least till she can't. I like how she keeps trying to do good, no matter how bad it hurts." He sighed long and low. "But loving her? You'd have to get me pretty drunk to pull that one off."

I heard the pair laugh. It was surprising to hear how easy it sounded when I wasn't around. Had my friends been sneaking around me since I'd come back as a cyberpony? They must have been. Running off and getting drunk on a gallon and a half of whiskey. Flying back on a herd of alicorns with a strange pony I'd only just met? On one hoof, yeah, it was funny. Glorious even. But on the other... yeah. I could see how badly I'd scared them like that.

My friends had kept secrets from me to protect me. Rampage had been right; Scotch Tape too. Not knowing sucked. Even if it had been with the best of intentions. I backed away from the stack as they kept talking. My friends were sticking with me, even if they doubted me some, they weren't going to leave me. Still, it was damned hard to take, even if I could understand the reasons behind it.

"You look like you've received some bad news," Dawn said from behind me, looking at me with her odd little squint, as if she never really opened her eyes. The look of merriment was more one of sympathy than mockery, though. "Did your trip go okay?"

I held my breath as I debated, then sighed. "It had its ups and downs. Fought a freaky brahmin monster with thumbs. Won. Lost my guns, though." There weren't words enough to express how frustrating that was.

"Ah. I'd wondered. Most folks don't trot very far without weapons," the pale mare said with a sigh. *She* didn't have any weapons... "Those that do, though, are more interesting than most." She looked over in the direction of Star House. "So how did my little girl get transformed into Rainbow Dash?"

I froze, my mouth working soundlessly. "I... don't know what you're talking about..."

"You don't have to protect her," she said with a sigh. "I had a feeling when I first saw her, and she was always a terrible liar." She turned towards Star House. "She still nibbles her mane when she's nervous. And that cooking... only my daughter cooks like that."

"Glory ran afoul of some Killing Joke," I said simply. "It transformed her into a literal Dash."

"I see," Dawn murmured. "Yes, I suppose that would do it. Something to alienate her further from her family and people." She looked at me with her eyes closed. "I've run into it myself once or twice. Insidious weed. The Everfree Forest is just rife with it."

I supposed that that might explain the whole weird closed-eyes-seeing thing. "I just hope it doesn't stop her from... from doing whatever she wants to do." And now that I thought about it, I wasn't entirely sure what that was anymore. "She's terrified that the Enclave will spot her."

"She's right to be. If she's become a complete copy of Rainbow Dash, she may be able to access the S.P.P.," Dawn said, then glanced at me. "A prewar superweapon. One built so that only a select few ponies could use it. Think... mmm... imagine being able to throw tornadoes and hurricanes at your enemies, and you'll get the right idea. Weather control on an enormous scale."

I thought of the Raptor and shuddered. Until today, I didn't really understand what 'enormous' really meant.

Dawn continued with a brighter smile, "I doubt it will keep her from doing what she believes in. She once almost flew down to the surface when she was just a filly, with plans to give her boxed lunch to the first pony she came across. Striker barely caught her before she was zapped by a lightning rod." She sighed and shook her head. "I can only assume she's still mad at me for leaving."

I thought about keeping up the pretense, but hearing P-21 and Rampage talk prompted me to be a little more honest, and I finally let out a sigh. "I'd say she is, a little. Mostly, she's confused. She's wondering where you've been." I paused, then asked softly, "Where *have* you been?"

Dawn just smiled and turned her face towards the west. "A little bit of everywhere. Manehattan. Fillydelphia. Stalliongrad. Las Pegasus. I even tried to find what had become of the griffins, dragons, and zebras. I looked everywhere I could for some sign of hope for the world."

"Did you find it?" I asked curiously.

"I did," she said with a nod of her head and a look towards the ponies working. "In the end, we're all the same. Pony. Griffin. Zebra. Dragon. We let ourselves become divided and separated. That's what caused the war. It's what caused the bombs to fall. It's what perpetuates the misery to this day. Differences as insignificant as where one was born, the stripes on one's skin, or one's species. It's those differences... those separations we create... that cause all the suffering and hardship in the world. Finding peace is no more difficult than overcoming those differences."

I gave a little smile. "Not sure how that gives you hope, then. Most raiders and gangers are more interested in putting a bullet in you than finding common ground," I said, not sure if I was indulging her or not. "I'd have more hope in having a bullet of my own, sorry to say."

Her smile turned sad. "At least you're sorry. Most folks aren't. Yet, doesn't that ganger desire the same things as their victims? Happiness? Health? Security? Joy? Yes, their expression is terrible, but their desires are all too common." She looked towards the Core. "If you scrape away all that pain and angst, what they want is what anyone wants: happiness and cooperation."

I sighed, shaking my head. "Yeah. I guess I can understand that." I didn't necessarily believe it, but it was a nice sentiment. "Nice to see Chapel moving ahead," I commented with a change of subject as we trotted in the direction of Charity's.

"Oh yes. If people work together, they can accomplish amazing things. Your young filly friend there is quite in her element. They're putting up that building in almost record time. I must say I'm impressed." Yet, something about the way she said it was almost sad.

"Chapel's had a hard time lately. They were attacked. The church was destroyed, and one of the ponies who ran the settlement died. They're picking themselves back up again," I said as I watched Scotch Tape giving directions on the odd, long house they were building. I wanted to ask what it was for, but there was no way to approach her at the moment; the filly was in full manager mode.

"Just like you, Blackjack," she said with an amused smile... but again, something was a little off. Despite her carefree, closed-eyes expression, something about her seemed off. Was she feeling guilty about her daughter?

"Hopefully better than me," I replied. I sighed, rolled my eyes a little, and changed the subject. "So does Glory know that you know?"

"I suspect not, and I'm not sure if I should tell her or try to spare her feelings. Talking about it only makes things more awkward." Her closed eyes turned back up towards Star House high on the hill. "Hopefully tonight. That P-21 fellow said he was going to cook something special." She gave a little shudder. "Thank the sun for that. Glory always had her father's skills in the kitchen."

"What are you talking about?" I asked in bewilderment. "She's a great cook. I mean, she made this," I said as I nibbled on the half-chewed cake.

Dawn just looked at me blankly with her odd squint, then smiled and said gaily, "Ah, love."

I huffed, bit off a corner, and chewed thoughtfully. My recent encounter with being 'protected' from the truth had left a sour taste in my mouth. "I think you can tell her. Just... be ready for tears. And make sure she can't throw you into any walls. She's been through a lot of stress recently... mostly due to me."

"Oh dear. And she doesn't handle stress well at all," Dawn mused. "I suppose that explains this?" She reached out with a wing and flicked the ring on my collar, making me blush immediately. "Ahhh. I see. Almost the exact same thing I did with her father."

This was starting to creep in a somewhat disturbing direction. "You collared your husband?"

“Of course not. That would be silly,” Dawn just laughed as she took to the air. “I married him.”

I watched her fly towards the house and sighed, shaking my head with a smile. Pegasi weren't quite as strange as zebras and griffins, but they were definitely on the list.

An empty tin can bounced off the back of my head. I looked over at the grinning Scotch Tape, who pointed her hoof towards me, then grinned and pointed at the structure they were building. “Hey, Blackjack! Glad you're back. We need your cyber-fingered funky zebra walking help here.”

Well, that was the magic word, right? Help.

* * *

With me playing the role of a jack, lifting and holding the heavy overhead beams in place, the work went even faster than before. The young ponies worked in teams of three and four to carry the materials over. I held things in place. The adults banged them together, Lacunae and my magic helping to hammer the higher places. Once the building was up and enclosed, four large open-topped barrels were placed up high along the back of the building. Pipes had been punched through the bases and sealed with Wonderglue and duct tape; I wondered if that'd actually work in the long term.

It wasn't until I saw what came next that I realized what we were making. Toilets. Five fine porcelain thrones from the manor itself. They were set in place by Scotch Tape herself. Lacunae used her magic to ferry over a barrel filled with river water and poured to fill each of the opened barrels. Then Scotch Tape shooed us all out.

“Go! Git! Out! I gotta test it!” she said as she pushed everypony out.

For a moment, everypony just looked at each other in confusion. Then came a sound of passing gas and a tinkle, and looks passed from one pony to the next. Finally a pregnant pause, and then a sound of a flushing toilet filled the air. The assembled ponies let out a cheer as Scotch Tape emerged, blushing faintly.

The olive filly nodded once with clear relief. “No more ditches.”

Of course, the luxury of having a working toilet was more than most of the assembled ponies could handle, and they quickly availed themselves of the facilities. Scotch Tape just sighed, watching them enter and leave with clear relief. Now the greater challenge: getting the fillies and colts to keep it clean.

It was then that I noticed something else was new besides the bathroom. When Scotch had emerged, she hadn't buttoned up the rear flap of her coveralls, and her butt was hanging out a bit. I blinked, then squinted. “Scotch... your flank... I think you got it!”

Her eyes popped wide, but rather than gawk at it like any sane filly would, she clenched her eyes closed and began to whimper. “I don't wanna see it!” she blurted as she tugged the flap back in place and sat down hard. I gave her a minute; she only lasted fifteen seconds. She stood once again, eyes firmly shut as she groaned, “You look, Blackjack. Please tell me it's not a toilet.”

I magically tugged her coveralls back and sighed before I patted her head. “It's not a toilet,” I said as reassuringly as I could.

"You're just saying that, aren't you! I got a big old white bowl on my butt, don't I? Or something even worse!" She whimpered and shook her head. "I don't want to see it! I'll go find a big old patch of that blue weed and get myself turned into Applejack or something!"

"Scotch Tape, it's not a toilet. To be honest, I'm not really sure what it is!" I laughed and that prompted her to take a peek.

The filly's cutie mark was a strange diamond over an unwrapped scroll. The four-sided diamond was made up of two strange apparati. The bottom one was a ruler which seemed to be bent in the middle at a ninety degree angle. The top was some strange piece of equipment that resembled two sharpened metal sticks joined at the apex by a hinge. On the parchment was some strange abstract design that appeared vaguely structural.

"It's... I... but..." she stammered as she stared at her flank. P-21 appeared from the crowd, slowly walking up with a wistful smile. Scotch Tape looked up at him, her eyes filling with tears. "Daddy?" she whimpered.

"It's a very nice cutie mark," he said as he pulled her into an embrace. Immediately, she burst into happy tears as she held him. Some of the other ponies looked on at the spectacle in confusion and with a little envy.

I sighed and took a deep breath. "You realize what this calls for, don't you?"

Scotch Tape wiped her eyes. "Huh? What?" Suddenly, a lot of ponies started looking nervous as I grinned from ear to ear.

* * *

It wasn't anything like a Stable 99 cutie mark party. There weren't any recycled dresses, the food was whatever we could raid from Charity's stores and a Society merchant Lacunae cornered in Megamart, and the festivities were rape free (thank goodness). The decorations were whatever fancy ribbons we could throw up around Star House. There were so many ponies that those who couldn't fit in the living room spilled outside. The vast majority of the colts and fillies were both utterly baffled and completely delighted by the festivities. When they got their cutie marks, it was mostly just another day. Who could spare food and energy for a celebration over a cutie mark? So rather than saying this was just for Scotch and her mark, I hastily made up a story of 'cutie mark day'.

P-21 was in his element, cooking in the kitchen with the help of Rampage and Lacunae. The striped filly seemed to be lisping a little, her pink eyes slightly sad; Twist was making an appearance and helping out from time to time. Lacunae floated bowls of some sort of improvised punch drink stuff that was mostly Sparkle-Cola onto tables outside the front door and put a brake on any of the festivities that got too wild. The games she and I put up were also odd to most of the ponies; 'pin the tail on the pony' wasn't nearly as interesting as 'shoot the head off the raider'. Oh well, as long as they were having fun and being careful. Others improvised a band of whatever instruments they could and played despite the Hoofington drizzle.

I brought down Octavia from my room and showed her to Adagio, Allegro, and Sonata. I tried to explain how she was special, and how they should play with her, take care of her, and not leave her alone. The three young ponies looked at the instrument thoughtfully. Then the blue and magenta Adagio stood firm as the magenta and rose Allegro hopped on his back. Tiny Sonata clambered onto Allegro's

shoulders, and her hooves began to work the neck of the bass. Allegro didn't use the bow at all! Instead, he happily plucked the strings, and deep twangs joined the rest of the band. I tried not to wince, but oddly the notes that came out were clear and deep.

There was a little bit of regret, too. I'd liked making music. It'd been nice; it'd saved me more than once when I'd been at my absolute worst. And a part of me liked to imagine just what I'd have been like in another time and place where I could have learned music rather than how to patrol and enforce the rules of the Overmare. It was a silly, selfish thought, but I felt it all the same. Still, Octavia should be in the hooves of other ponies to enjoy her music, not kept as a prize in my room for when I was down.

And ultimately, I liked giving her to the three who'd lost their friend more than I liked playing her for myself.

Rampage moved like a jackal on the fringes once the cooking was done, her face a constant mask of indecision. Should she go, or would she be safe to participate? Did she even want to play with a bunch of silly foals, or was she a mature mare? Finally, appearances decided the matter. Two green colts shouted something to the equivalent of 'boogie down' or maybe 'booger town' and started to dance like maniacs beside her. Indecision finally broke, at least for a little bit, as she smiled and joined them in their exuberant dancing. She even smiled like a filly.

Sweet cupcakes, music, and fun. For a little while, we pushed the Wasteland away and had a little hope and civilization. I looked up on the roof where I could barely make out the still forms of Glory and Dawn, their heads close together as they had their own reunion. I sat on the periphery of it all as I chewed on the edge of my cake, watching them. My friends. My community. My stable.

Dealer chuckled softly beside me. "You don't have to sit out here. You can go and join them." The white pony looked better than he had before, more rested. Younger, too.

"I don't deserve to," I said quietly, taking a pull on a bottle of Wild Pegasus I'd obtained for the celebrations. He gave a deep sigh, and I smiled. "It's alright. I'm fine like this." I watched them celebrating, and my smile grew. I couldn't partake, but I could appreciate. "Are you okay?"

He frowned. "Me?"

"You've been quiet a while. I expected you to put in an appearance at the Skyport. All that talk of responsibility and accountability," I said, then saw his uncomfortable look. "What's wrong?"

"I'm... scared of her." He pulled his hat over his face to hide his shame.

I blinked in shock. "Scared?"

"I'm a soul in a box, and EC-1101 is bonded to me. The Goddess manipulates minds and souls connected to her. If she found out about me, she might try to yank out the Megaspell through your connection."

I gaped at him. "Can she do that?"

"Do you want to find out?" he retorted. I really didn't want to find out.

Topic change. "So, apparently my friends have been keeping secrets from me," I said softly

before taking another drink. "To protect me..."

"Friends do that sometimes. You did that," he added, and I gave a little grimace. "You can't have it both ways, Blackjack. Either you're honest to your friends, or you try to keep things pleasant. Not all that easy to pull off both."

I frowned, closed my eyes, and let go the little bitter sense of resentment that I had no right to hold. I'd tried to give my friends peace of mind. How could I hold their actions against them when they were just trying to give me the same? When I looked at him again, his lips curled in a tiny smile of approval.

"I know. I know..." I murmured. I sighed softly, smiling just as slightly as he was. I looked at the celebration and frowned a little, tallying up all the good things... and bad things... that had happened today. My friends were working out their problems. Scotch got her cutie mark. P-21 might actually be happy again, at least a little. Rampage too. I'd saved six ponies without killing anyone. I'd gotten answers without reenacting Yellow River. Saw a Psalm dream that didn't have me in tears. Glory was finally talking with her mother again after years of separation. I might have actually teleported before my horn went poof. Chapel now had flushing toilets. And yet... there was something off about it all that I couldn't quite put my hoof on. "Ugh, today's just been... just been weird."

He smiled a tired, sad smile. "The word you're looking for is 'good', Blackjack."

"Good?" I blinked in confusion. "What are you talking about? Blackjack doesn't have good days. She has days that are bad and less bad and occasionally are punctuated with good events." I saw his smile and brushed my mane behind my ear. "Okay... theoretically it might be possible... one in a gazillion chance..."

"Trust me, Blackjack. It's been a good day."

I watched the celebration, and my smile grew a little more honest. Not the expression I usually wore when I was in the calm between disasters and breakdowns. Sure, I'd lost my guns and sword, and I'd had a reminder of the consequence of good intentions, but I'd also helped my friends and appreciated just what 'protecting my friends' really meant. I'd get Vigilance back one way or another. Duty and Sacrifice, too. And the creepy sword of crazy sharpness. And find some way to stop whatever was building between Glory's home and the rest of the Enclave.

"Yeah," I said softly as I watched the proceedings. "Yeah, I guess it was."

And if I could have one good day, I could do anything.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: this chapter was an amazing endeavor by Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster. Three days to get it all put together. Everything seemed to conspire to prevent it. Colds. Deadlines. But finally we persevered. Sadly there were serious structural flaws that had to be changed in order to give you the best story possible. So, credit all around to all of them for their hard work making this positively almost good!

On another note. I'd like to dedicate this chapter to a good friend who greeted me when I moved to Fallon

and helped me feel welcome. It was nice to actually talk to folks face to face for a change and made me feel not quite so lonely. Sadly, he's left for a new teaching job on the far side of the world. Hopefully he'll still be able to read this in China. Matt, thanks for being a good friend in the brief time I knew you. I hope everything works out for you.

Finally, as always, thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria in the first place. Thank you everypony that leaves feedback. And thank you, everyone, who's taken the time to read this and stick it out as long as you have. Thank you.)