

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 52: Reunions

"I put two and two and two together and it added up to Matilda!"

I can't claim to be any kind of expert on parties, but it seemed to me that the cutie mark celebration was slowly winding down. Food was now in the process of digestion, the lengthening night robbed the party of its energy, and the rumble of thunder was the final nail in the celebration's coffin; nopony wanted to have fun in the rain. Soon we were escorting the colts and fillies back down the hill to Chapel. The adults who'd attended carried two or three young ponies on their backs with slightly awkward looks. I could understand, though: these weren't their children. Still, all of them seemed willing to do the right thing. To do better.

Several of the younger foals climbed into the cart the Crusaders used to move salvage, and I hauled it down the hill and around the minefield. The fillies and colts all staggered into the post office to sleep, and the adults crawled under tarps or into the few other buildings as the Hoofington skies began to pour.

While my friends returned to Star House, I lingered a moment. The heavy drops started to hiss as they struck the piles of lumber, stacks of recycled building material, and cracked asphalt. I looked at the ditch full of dirty water. Just yesterday, I'd jumped in and tried to save a filly. Today we were having a party. What would happen tomorrow? I grit my teeth as I felt my emotions give a sudden lurch. It wasn't fair. Wasn't right!

I looked at my leg, where the damned program that had caused all the trouble in my life lay. I wanted to throw it in the river then and there. I'd never relinquish it to the Harbingers—whatever they served was not worth that—but it would be satisfying to know that *no*pony would get their hooves on the thing. I deserved to have it, though. I deserved all the pain it...

No! I wasn't going to do this *again*. I sucked in great breaths of wet rain and struggled for control. With each breath, a little bit of the anxiety inside me escaped. I let the rain wash across my face as I fought the urge to kick myself right into the ground. This was the Wasteland, and people died. I'd tried to save her. I'd tried. Bit by bit, stability asserted itself.

Was EC-1101 worth all this grief? I'd had a good day. Not exactly a normal one, but good. What would it be like to have several more? I needed to think, so I walked slowly along the road down to the lonely shell of the church building. The forlorn structure hadn't been repaired at all; all the energy had been spent on the village itself.

I looked up at the dark window from which Princess Celestia had once gazed down at her loving subjects. Now I could only see the black towers outlined in the stark electric green glow of the Core through the empty, shard-rimmed frame. Water dripped and pattered through the holes torn in the roof. The cushions were saturated, squishing unpleasantly beneath me as I knelt upon them. My eyes passed over the shadowed paintings of the Ministry Mares, their faces lost in the gloom. Even my augmented vision didn't do much. The only one I could make out well at all was Twilight Sparkle; judgmental purple eyes stared down at me. They were Mom's eyes.

I closed my eyes and then accessed my recordings. Slowly, the hymn that had saved me from the nightmare beneath Horizon Labs began to play. I imagined that I could almost pick out Medley and Priest from the countless others. Of course, I couldn't. The music sounded hollow and weak in the wet gloom, a ghost of the melody and the moment. Funny; just a few hours ago, I'd been using a ghost to save six lives.

There was nothing funny about the real thing.

"Blackjack," came P-21's solemn voice from the door of the church. "I didn't see you at the party."

"I don't think I'm really all that much of a party pony anymore," I replied as I looked at the water sloshing around the saturated violet cushion. "Does that mean I'm getting old?"

"Mature, maybe. I can't imagine old. Or I can't imagine anything but being old," he said as he walked up slowly to stand beside me, pushing back his wide brimmed hat to look me in the eye. "Are you okay?"

I was sitting alone in a ruined church on a rainy night all alone, and he asked if I was okay? I'd be scared of anypony who hung out in a place like this and found the term 'okay' applicable. "Yeah. Sure. As okay as I'll ever be, I guess." I looked at the blown-out window and went on, "I'm not feeling like I need to run or I'll die. I only did one moderately stupid thing today. I'm depressed about Medley... and Boing... and everypony else I've failed, but I'm trying to deal with it. I'm happy for Glory and Scotch, at least. So... yeah." I gave him a little smile. "Okay."

I looked down at my PipBuck and fiddled with it as he watched me with a concerned frown. I flipped through a few songs, selecting one at random so I wouldn't have to listen to dead ponies sing. It landed on something classical. No words. Just soft piano and strings that fit the drizzle around me. "I've been doing some thinking since Hightower... and Medley... and Priest... everything. I've been chasing after EC-1101 for weeks now, trying to find a secret. Now... now I'm wondering if I should. It was always a goal to chase after; an excuse to run myself right into the ground."

I looked towards the clouds above, barely visible in the green glow of the Core. "Maybe I should give up on following EC-1101. Help folks here. Deal with the Harbingers and Red Eye. Try and fix up what I can rather than just getting folks killed trying to get to a navigation tag." I forced a smile as wide as I could. "That would be better, wouldn't it? Glory would be happier knowing I'm keeping out of trouble. You could spend more time with Scotch. We could work out Rampage's problems."

But he didn't look like he agreed with that at all. "Yeah. You could do that," he said evenly. For almost a minute neither of us spoke, and my cheeks ached at the forced smile.

"So. That would be good. Right? Good for everypony," I said as I rubbed my PipBuck nervously. "No more stupid adventures of Blackjack. Yay..." I forced every bit of insincerity I could into that cheer.

"Except for you," he said softly.

"Me?" I couldn't believe it. My smile trembled even more. "I told you. I don't care about EC-1101 anymore. It's not... not worth everything we've been through." Not worth the worry I'd caused Glory. Not worth the danger I put my friends in. "I think I'll give it to Spike or... or something." It was a lame suggestion; I had no idea if Spike would accept it when he was already guarding the Gardens. But P-21 just looked at me with that steady blue gaze and disappointed little smile. I finally snapped. "Sweet

Celestia, P-21, fuck whatever I want! What I've wanted has been a fucking disaster. What about what you want? You want to stay with Scotch Tape. Say I'm wrong. Glory deserves a little attention and stability. Rampage needs help more than me. Fuck my Goddesses-damned quest!"

But he didn't answer. He pulled the brim lower over his eyes. "Yeah. I do want that. These last couple of days have been... well... they've been the best in my life. Damned wonderful. And I know Glory'd be happy with that. Rampage too. But you've been following that for a month, and now you just want to give it up?"

"Yes! Why not? Who cares what Goldenblood did? Who gives a damn about what Project Horizons is? Why can't I just..." Just what? Quit? The question caught in my throat and our eyes met again. This time, I was the one who looked down at my rain-streaked hooves.

He put his hoof on my shoulder, and I looked into his eyes. I didn't see the hard blue gaze of my friend. They were calmer, softer. If 99 had been different... if so many things had been different... "If I thought you really wanted to give it up, sure. But I don't think you do. I think that this is just another case of you tearing yourself down. Something to make you miserable. Like me refusing to tell Scotch the truth. Me convincing myself that I deserved to be miserable." He patted my shoulder, and his smile widened a little. "Tell me I'm wrong."

I opened my mouth soundlessly once, unable to speak the lie. Finally I whispered, "You're not wrong." I should give it up. It was going to get me... my friends... everypony killed. "It's just... this was a good day for everypony. I'd really like to see more of them... you know?"

"Me too," he replied with an unusual smile as he nudged my shoulder. "And when you find out the answer to this mystery and EC-1101 is really done, that'll be a great day. For you. For everypony. But no giving up on it, Blackjack. Not unless you'll really be happy with it."

I sighed and closed my eyes. And I knew I wouldn't. The questions and mystery would be there like a thorn in my mind. Eventually I'd resent my friends for my own stupid decision. Finally, I smiled in resignation. "Okay. You're right. I guess I'm just being... not smart again..."

"You're smarter than you think," P-21 replied evenly.

"Yeah. Brain damage did me some good." I snorted and rolled my eyes sarcastically before frowning in seriousness. "If I just had a clue what Horizons was! Sanguine said it was something bad and something big. Real big. And apparently, from what I saw on Goldenblood's terminal, wherever and whatever it is... it's ready to go off. But I can't think of anypony who'd have a clue as to what it is or what it's meant to do. The only ones who might know are the Harbingers, and we're not exactly on speaking terms at the moment."

P-21 frowned, seeming lost in thought before he slowly nodded. "Yeah..."

"Well, nothing I can do about that now. While I can't quit, I think I can spare a short vacation from EC-1101. A week or two, maybe," I said with a smile. Or till the Harbingers showed up. "See? Blackjack can learn." Somehow, my joke didn't reach him.

"Yeah," he said as he stared away out the door. "Blackjack. Do you trust me?" I caught the glint of guilt in his eyes as he peeked back at me from the corner of his eye.

"Sure," I answered at once. "I trust all of you."

"Even if we... I... did something behind your back?"

I looked at him for a long moment, and then smiled, "All of you are a whole lot smarter than I am, P-21. If you did something and didn't tell me... well, I trust you'd only do it for good reason. And I trust that you'd tell me sooner or later." My response seemed to tear at him a little. I knew it couldn't be easy for him.

He turned away and seemed to debate with himself a minute. I could have asked for whatever he was hiding from me, but I didn't want to push him. Then he glanced back at me, and our eyes met. For the longest time, we seemed to just stare at one another. For the oddest reason, I thought back to 99 and meeting outside that supply room. It felt like it'd all been a dream. He turned, his stoic mask spoiled by the tension of worry about his eyes. He was waiting for me to ask. I was waiting for him to tell me. Finally, he lowered his gaze. "I have something to tell you, Blackjack. You're not going to like it, though."

I arched a brow. "About Tenpony?" Heee, it wasn't often I got to be the smug pony.

He was silent for a moment before he sighed and frowned with an annoyed little scowl. "So Glory told you. Figures." He shook his head grimly, as he went on, "Well, we promised Homage we would when you were ready. She promised to talk with me first though."

"Actually, she didn't," I answered as I looked at him. "I sort of worked out that something was wrong about what happened there." He scowled at me, skepticism clear on his face. I sighed and rolled my eyes. "And I heard you and Rampage talking about it." Surprise showed for a moment before he recomposed himself. He swallowed and looked out at the gloom around us.

"I'm... I'm sorry. We..." He didn't seem to know how to finish.

"Thought it was the best thing for me," I finished for him and gave an honest smile. Any anger I'd have normally felt was muted by the rain and the talk I'd had with Dealer. I'd lied to my friends to protect them... they'd lied to me to protect me. That was the definition of 'fair'. It didn't matter if fair still sucked butt.

"Yeah," he muttered, looking ashamed. "When you ran off with LittlePip, Glory was in a panic. Homage was beside herself. We were all... concerned." He sighed and shook his head. "Then you returned on a flight of alicorns and... yeah. All of us were really worried."

"You were right to be," I replied, putting my hoof on his shoulder. He reached up to his wide-brimmed black hat and pulled it off, then reached in and scooped up a round memory orb in his hoof. I frowned, focused, and barely managed to snag it with my feeble magic. That teleport had knocked my horn for a loop, but it didn't diminish the fact that I'd done it. Mom had told me her mother had been able to do it, and her grandmother's mother too. I'd never seen Mom pull it off, though.

"So, how'd you get it from me?" I asked. "I know I'm not as smart as LittlePip. No way I'd do it to myself."

"We didn't. It's my memory," he said. "No sex. No surprises. Just the truth." He trotted to the side and took a seat in a sheltered spot. "It's not long. I'll watch you while you view it." I blinked at him in shock, and his eyes popped open. "I mean I'll watch out for you while you view it. Not watch you 'cause I

want to watch you..." He closed his eyes and pressed his hooves to the sides of his head. "Priest. Stronghoof. U-21. Calamity," he muttered over again.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "I'm pretty sure you can like both stallions and mares."

That brought him back to his scowling, grumpy self. "I don't like mares. Most are whining, chatty, hypocritical, and just plain crazy. With the exception of Scotch Tape and... I just don't like them!" he blurted, waving his hoof at me. I couldn't hide my smile, and he pointedly glared at anything that wasn't me. Some things never changed. Thank Celestia for that.

Chuckling, I glanced from him to the little orb, then moved beside him. Not the opportune place, but it was better than nothing. I tapped the orb to my horn with magic and tried to make the link to the orb. According to Triage's notes, I wasn't supposed to force it. Then the connection took hold, and the world slipped away.

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It'd be nice to say that it was the first time I had been in a pony like this, but I'd be lying. The full body ache ran from head to hoof; it wasn't nearly as intense as the agony I'd experienced as Deus, but I couldn't imagine anypony living like this day after day. Each step sent a wave of discomfort rolling through his muscles. Every breath was an ache-filled labor. Even blinking created a swell of pressure in his eyes. I instantly had a greater understanding for my friend's personality. If I felt like this daily, I'd be pretty grumpy too.

He trotted away from where all the others talked in low voices and sat. Carefully, he reached behind his head and raked his hooves through his brushy mane, pulling out three syringes of Med-X. He hesitated, looked back over his shoulder. He bit the cap covers off two of them and jammed the needles into his hind leg right above the knee that'd been crippled not so long ago. Instantly he shuddered and let out a long sigh of relief.

He looked up and met the equally stoic gaze of the zebra, Xenith. I hadn't known her very well; she'd been nothing like Xanthe, despite how similar their names were. Xanthe had been weird. Xenith had been scary. The zebra didn't say a word; her light green eyes may have simply been cameras recording his private moment for all the judgment they held. P-21 said nothing either. Then there was some silent acknowledgement in Xenith's tiny nod before the zebra turned away and he tossed the syringes in the trash. With a deftness that shocked me, he wound his mane around the remaining needle and hid it in his wiry blue hair.

Slowly he walked back towards the conversation. "... is having the memories extracted. To be safe, we're going to scrub every reference to Blackjack and the rest of you from her mind before she leaves here. She wants us to save the chat she had with Red Eye, but with Lacunae following the rest of you around... We don't want to risk the Goddess thinking Blackjack knows something," Velvet Remedy said calmly, not noticing P-21 returning to the group.

"Blackjack knowing things is an oxymoron," P-21 replied sourly.

"She's lucky," Homage nearly growled. "LittlePip is so getting punished when she's... better. Running off like that in the middle of the night. Not telling anypony!"

Glory looked like she'd been crying with her lovely purple eyes all bloodshot and puffy. It didn't

matter what body she possessed, she'd always be beautiful. "Punished?" she asked a little cluelessly.

"Means she's going to strap her down and take a crop to LittlePip's hind-end till she learns not to scare us all so bad," Calamity replied with a chuckle, making the gray pegasus blush furiously.

"Does... does that really work?" Glory asked, blinking in surprise. When ponies looked at her, her ears folded back, and she said softly, "My... ah... my sister is like that."

The gray unicorn smiled kindly and then rolled her eyes. "Maybe. Maybe not. But it's definitely going to make me feel better," she said with a small smile at Glory and a nod at Velvet and Calamity. "Anyway. LittlePip is our problem. What about Blackjack? Is she okay?"

Glory opened her mouth, sighed, then started again. Her voice was more clipped and reserved. "She drank nearly a gallon of whiskey in one go. She would have been dead of alcohol poisoning if she'd done this a week ago." She sighed again and covered her face with a hoof and her voice shook. "I... I don't know if it was another suicide attempt or not. I knew there'd be trauma... We nearly lost her so many times. I just... I just don't know."

Sweet Celestia, I deserved whippings for a year for doing this to her. Velvet put her forelegs around Glory in a light embrace. P-21 stepped forward. "I doubt we'll be able to apply the term 'okay' to Blackjack any time soon. We'll see how she stabilizes... if she does. She was mutated, violated, mutilated, and then... she..." His voice broke for a moment as he looked away before finishing, "And then she came back as something else."

A speaker beside the metal drum holding the professor's head crackled, "At the very least, she shouldn't feel discomfort from her augmentation. We were very careful to block as much pain input from her synthetics as we could. She shouldn't need Deus's Mega-X painkiller formula. That's one benefit."

Wait. So I was *supposed* to hurt? Was that why I felt so... so still inside? Were my implants rubbing against flesh, scraping at nonfunctional nerves, with every step? I'd never forget the pain Deus had been forced to live with.

"Did her augments make her do this, Professor?" P-21 asked.

The speaker was silent a moment, then said, "It's possible. Steelpony only had a few test subjects as heavily augmented as her. There seems to be an equilibrium point where, once so much of the body is lost, the mind becomes increasingly unstable. A few became terribly reckless in battle; after all, they had repair talismans. Why worry about damage? Others felt a loss of self and suffered depression. Still others became more aggressive as they tried to assert self on their augmentations."

"So her twigged behavior could be from the mess she's lived through, a loose wire, or both?" Calamity asked before looking at Homage with a little half smile. "Kinda makes ya miss PTMs, don't it?"

"No. It doesn't," Homage replied before looking at Glory. "Don't worry. We'll get her straightened out."

"We'll go check on LittlePip. Let her know you're coming in a bit," Velvet said, and then she and Calamity headed for the exit. P-21's eyes lingered on the brown pegasus's backside; I had to admit, my friend had excellent taste. I'd said it before: I didn't know what it was, but there was just something about

fliers that was nummy! A second later, noticed only by P-21, Xenith departed as well.

When they'd gone, Glory sighed and looked at P-21. "Is Scotch Tape still with Lacunae?"

"I think so," he answered as he took a seat across from the crimson-and-scarlet-maned stallion, Life Bloom. "If LittlePip was right..."

"She was," Homage replied firmly. "Twilight Sparkle was pulled into Unity days after the bombs went off." Glory shivered and shook her head.

"Then we need to keep this from both of them. We don't know what the Goddess would do if she knew." Glory looked at Life Bloom. "Can't you convince the Twilight Society to put off this stupid test?"

"Unfortunately, no," Life Bloom replied with a sigh and a shake of his head. "They spent a considerable amount of resources helping put Blackjack back together. They want a payback. Sooner, rather than later."

"She just woke up, and the first things she did were run off into a tunnel full of feral ghouls and sneak into an enemy camp with a complete stranger," Glory said as she wiped her puffy eyes with her wing. "Give her a little time!" she begged.

"It's not my decision. The Society wants her tested," Life Bloom said grimly. "Every few years we come across a Ministry Mare relative, usually an Apple, who can bypass spells keyed to the Ministry Mares."

"But how do you even know there is a descendant for Twilight?" P-21 asked.

"A hundred and fifty years ago there was an organized attack on Tenpony. Raiders were part of an ill-planned attack on the tower itself, back when the Twilight Society made efforts to help the inhabitants around the tower. Several raiders were captured. One carried a memory orb. Before her execution, she said she'd gotten it from a strange ghoulish living in Canterlot who claimed she'd gotten it from the Ministry of Peace hub. Inside were memories of Twilight having a clandestine relationship with Big Macintosh and of an unborn foal being transferred to a surrogate mother. Unfortunately, we've never been able to ascertain which of Twilight's cousins could have been the surrogate. So for a hundred and fifty years, that memory orb has achieved near mythical status."

"Why?" Glory asked with a frown. "What do they expect her to do? Be the second coming of Twilight Sparkle?"

"Twilight ushered in an era of magical discovery unparalleled since the mythic ages of Clover the Clever and Starswirl the Bearded. Her brother was captain of the Royal Guard for several years. Her family had been integral to Equestria, and there was even speculation before the war that the Sparkle lineage was descended from those legendary ponies," Life Bloom said calmly. "There are many in the Society who believe that any pony descended from Twilight would be destined to do great things."

"Nevermind that she could be one good push away from a complete psychological collapse?" Glory protested.

Life Bloom closed his eyes and sighed. "In their eyes, if Blackjack is unstable, she can always have an heir or two to fit the Society's agenda."

"Over my dead body," P-21 said flatly.

"I'd never be a party to such a thing either," Homage said, glaring at Life Bloom.

"There are elements in the Society who would trade DJ Pon3 for the Twilight Sparkle bloodline, Homage. In a heartbeat," Life Bloom replied grimly. I had to say, all the warm and fuzzy sentiments I may have had for the Twilight Society were going bye-bye. He looked at P-21 and Glory. "Not all, or even most, but enough. The moderates simply want to know, then make up their minds in their own time."

"But if she is, then the hardliners would probably never let her leave," Glory said with a scowl. "But if she doesn't do their test, then they won't let her leave either."

"Are you certain Blackjack can't handle the knowledge?" the professor asked. "She seemed remarkably resilient."

Oddly, everypony looked at P-21 instead of Glory. He looked around, then sighed. "I think that with time, Blackjack can handle anything. Wait a few weeks, and she'd be able to deal with being related to the most famous unicorn in history. But throwing it at her now... no. I don't think it'd be good. She'd react badly. Like... gassing Stable 99 badly," he added, looking around at the others.

"What is the test that is being considered?" the professor asked.

Life Bloom sighed and rubbed between his eyes. "The hardliners want something definitive. Perhaps some kind of blood test. Umbra wants nothing less than an egg harvest for magic testing. The old bastard probably plans on eventual in vitro fertilization." P-21 reached into his brushy tail, and I felt the bump of a grenade underhoof. Life Bloom glanced at P-21 and I guessed saw my blue friend's equivalent of a shooty look. "That is not what most of the Society is after," he added quickly, and P-21 relaxed just a little. Glory didn't. If looks were magic bullet spells... Life Bloom continued, "Most want to see if she can open the doors."

"Doors?" Glory asked in worry.

"There's a number of doors that were magically keyed to Twilight so that only she or close relatives could open them. Some are... very hush hush. But there are others that were more symbolic. Like the main doors to the M.A.S. meeting room where all the boring official business happened." He looked around the building. "Before this place was made the M.A.S. hub, it was an exclusive hotel. Much of the building was modified for the M.A.S. to use."

"I thought that Tenpony was built for the M.A.S.," Glory said in surprise.

"A lot of things were built from the ground up for the ministries, but it's not like they all appeared overnight," Life Bloom replied casually. "While Maripony and the Canterlot and Hoofington hubs were being constructed, Tenpony was converted as a base of operations. It had already been modified into a broadcasting tower for the war effort before Luna rose to power, so it was a natural conversion. The uppermost floors were converted to M.A.S. use while the lower ones remained as they were for the populace."

"So... before these doors were enchanted so that only Twilight could open them, the room was

just an ordinary room?" P-21 asked, his brows furrowing.

"I believe so, yes," Life Bloom said with a frown.

"With ordinary locks?" P-21 asked.

Homage frowned at him. "You're thinking of locking the doors so they won't open for *anypony*."

"Right. Blackjack and the hardliners will see her fail to open them," P-21 replied.

Life Bloom smiled. "And then we can have her open something else later to be absolutely sure. Perhaps Twilight's study. It's off the athenaeum; most ponies won't be there." He looked at the others. "That way I can inform more moderate members discreetly that she is Twilight's."

"Blackjack will never have to know," P-21 said with a little nod, then looked at the worried Glory. "She can continue on thinking that she's just Blackjack."

"And the Goddess won't know any different either," Glory said as she closed her eyes. "Oh, Blackjack... I'm so sorry..." She sniffed. She had nothing to be sorry about.

Homage frowned at the three of us, then shook her head. "The only way I'll agree with this is if we tell Blackjack the truth."

"Homage. We know why we can't," Life Bloom said with a resigned sigh.

"And I accept that. There is a time and a place for honesty. This isn't it. But she deserves to know the truth." Homage looked at all of us sternly before adding, "Otherwise, I will tell her. And if that'll be easier on all of you, then that's how we can do it."

Glory trembled a little. "I couldn't... I wouldn't know how..."

"I'll tell her," P-21 said in a low voice. "She knows I won't lie to her."

Homage's eyes softened a little. "That would be welcome, but things might get... mixed up." That was an understatement; if we went back out into the wastes, there was a chance he could die and I'd never know. "How about copying your memories of this meeting? She can access them later... if her magic recovers. It might be easier to show what we decided rather than tell her. Make it easier on her. And you," she added.

P-21 glared at the mare, then lowered his eyes. "Fine."

The rest of the memory was simple. P-21 snuck up in the early morning, avoiding cameras and personnel alike as if he were a giant blue StealthBuck. He walked right up to the fancy doors, tried to open them... nothing. He squatted, and with a pin, his screwdriver (which I thankfully learned he kept concealed in his brushy tail and not... other places), and some scrap metal jammed the heavy old lock closed.

So that was it, then. My friends had conspired to keep me safe from not just myself but from others as well. And they'd been right to do so. If the Goddess had known I was related to Twilight, she might have tried to hurt me simply to torment the Twilight Sparkle within her. If the hardliners had known, I might never have left. And if I'd known... yes. I would have done something stupid and selfish. Hurt

myself... or hurt my friends even more.

P-21 made his way towards the clinic when he passed by a mirror. He looked around, confirming he was alone, then stared at his own reflection. "Blackjack..." he began, then clenched his jaw and averted his eyes from himself. "I don't know how to say this. I don't know if you'll ever be well enough for this memory. Heck, we might all be dead tomorrow. I just... I wanted... I..." He covered his face with a hoof and groaned. "I think it was easier when I wasn't allowed to talk most of the time."

He sat for a moment, then looked at himself again. Slowly he took another breath and then said softly, "Thank you. Even if you're the most... boneheaded, idiotic, infuriating mare in existence... you never quit. You never give up. No matter how hard it is on you. I hope you realize that we don't want to give up either. You suffer so much for us... sometimes pointlessly... that it makes me want to scream and hug you at the same time. Don't suffer for us. The guilt is worse than the pain. We can take it. Maybe not as much as you do, but we can handle what the Wasteland throws at us."

His lips curled in a rare, soft smile as he stared into his own blue eyes. "You can trust us with the burden sometimes. That's all I'm saying." He flushed and then glanced away, back again, and then added, "And... um... please don't tell Calamity. Or talk about this... ever... or..." He groaned and shook his head. "Ugh... nevermind..."

Then he turned and continued on his way. The world swirled away as the memory ended.

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The drizzly night reasserted itself along with the strange notes of Octavia's mournful music coming from my PipBuck. I was the descendant of Twilight Sparkle. The child she and Big Macintosh had conceived together had been passed to Marigold after his assassination. Marigold had raised Tarot as her own. By a fluke, she'd been visiting a friend when the bombs fell, and instead of ending up in the doomed stable 90, she'd gone to Stable 99 where she'd passed the filly to Card Trick. She'd grown up in a stable where the rules almost guaranteed she'd have a child. Generations later, here I was. How could all that be a coincidence?

A riot was taking place in Unity as the Twilight part of the Goddess struggled to assert herself at this news. I couldn't pick out specific words from all of the babble, but I was guessing that the Goddess wasn't going to be too happy with me when she finally imposed order on the consensus. That hardly mattered, though. She was already plenty pissed with me.

I'd go crazy if I tried to calculate the odds. I remembered being on Star Point when I realized the implications, but now... I wondered if there was some force out there playing with me, setting things up. Maybe Discord had done it all as a joke ages ago. If I found a memory orb of Goldenblood plotting this, I'd scream. Or maybe it was as simple as Celestia and Luna still managing things from the hereafter. Or simply it was all chance, a trillion to one odds. Who could say?

All I knew was my tail was soaked and my butt was cold. I turned to P-21 with a grateful smile. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," Dawn said happily from beside me with her merry squint.

"Gyaaaaah!" I shouted, lurching back and falling over. I waved a hoof at the dove-gray pegasus

looking down with an expression of concern. "Where- where'd you come from?"

"Flankfurt... though I think today you call it just 'Flank'," she replied casually.

P-21 stepped up beside Dawn, looking a bit wet and more worried than usual. "Hey," he murmured, looking away awkwardly as he rubbed his shoulder with his forehoof, water dripping off his battered hat. "I.. um... I hope you don't mind." He pointed at my PipBuck. "I wanted to play some of that Octavia broadcast."

What Octavia broadcast? I opened my mouth to ask, but then I saw the familiar seriousness in his eyes and a tiny nod towards Dawn. I swallowed, and then gave a little smile. "Yeah. No problem. I love Octavia too."

"Good. You should leave it on." I just frowned at him in bafflement, then gave a little nod. He relaxed just a hair, glanced at Dawn, and then asked in a lower voice, "Are you... okay?" I could hear the unanswered questions. 'Okay with what we did? Okay with what you know?'

Was I? Twilight Sparkle was a legendary figure in my mind. To be related to her, even distantly, felt... overwhelming. But unlike at Tenpony, now I'd had time to come to terms with some of the changes forced upon me. And I'd seen that Twilight hadn't been perfect; good, yes, but not perfect. No perfect pony could have left Discord to be processed into Flux. But she'd been willing to resign rather than continue being a part of ministries that did bad things. I wasn't quite the fuckup that I'd always thought of myself as. Not perfect – certainly not – but trying to do better.

"Yeah. I am," I replied. He smiled, body sagging in relief before he gave a sharp sneeze. I patted his shoulder. "We should go back inside Star House. Getting sick sucks."

"Actually. I'd love to talk with you a moment alone, if you don't mind," Dawn said. I saw P-21's features immediately grow grim.

"I don't think—" I began.

"Go ahead, Blackjack," P-21 said as he pulled his battered, floppy hat down over his face a little more.

Wait? He wanted me to go with her? "Are you sure?"

"Sure. I'll go back to the house," he said with a smile. "You should talk with her. She's an interesting mare. Some questions and answers might help you out. Expand your horizons." Wait... what?

My eyes went from her to him. Did he think Dawn knew something about Horizons? "If you're sure," I murmured, glancing past him at the amused pegasus.

"Sure. Just keep her close. Friends always stick close," he said quietly, then turned and slowly, silently, walked out into the night. Overhead, the clouds let out a long, deep rumble of thunder.

"Such a fascinating stallion. You know, I suspect he's secretly in love with you," Dawn said as she looked at me with her eyes closed.

"Unlikely," I replied flatly. "He's more interested in stallions than mares." Dawn just seemed to

find that even more amusing, and I felt a flash of annoyance. “So. What do you want to talk about?” I asked, the contrabass beginning a long, low musical sawing that made my mane crawl. I wanted to turn it off, but I remembered what P-21 had said.

“If you don’t mind, I was hoping we could go for a walk and talk a bit,” Dawn said absently. “I’ve been eager to learn more about the mare who’s done so much in such a short time. It seems like Equestria is seeing an outbreak of heroes these days.”

“Now?” I asked, gaping at her, looking around at the dripping rainwater. “In *this*?”

“Oh, it’s hardly poor weather. The rain is coming down evenly, and we shouldn’t see the worst of it for at least an hour,” she said as if it was no matter. “As to the time, I’ve long grown used to keeping unusual hours.” I disagreed with her on the ‘hardly poor weather’ part. The black skies were lit from within by the distant, dull flashes of lightning around the Core. She pointed up towards the manor. “Perhaps up to that lovely estate and back again?”

Right. A walk in the middle of the night to chat as a storm builds. Even I wasn’t that stupid, but it wasn’t as if I could just shake her. Not till she told me what was going on. P-21 said I should stay with her... so I faked as much enthusiasm as I could. “Sure. Sounds like fun.” I’m just taking a walk, in the rain, at night, with a storm coming, *unarmed*... I sighed. There were so many things wrong with this.

Trust me. Expand your horizons.

I do, P-21. And I stood and followed her out into this hissing rain as the skies crackled. Octavia’s classical music seemed to rise and fall in fitful melodies. I glanced at the title. ‘Storm’. Wonderful...

For Glory’s sake, I dearly wanted to cling to the hope that Dawn was here for good reasons. That P-21 was just being paranoid. That this really was good and right... I glanced at her as we walked in silence through Chapel and saw her frown a little. “I admit I have some concerns about you and Glory. I’ve heard some disturbing stories... about how dangerous you’ve been to others. And to yourself.”

“Well, the Wasteland is a dangerous place. Especially around Hoofington,” I added as I looked at the rain rolling off her wings. She was walking with her eyes closed. How in Equestria could she see where she was going? It was getting beyond ‘weird’ and into ‘creepy’.

“Mmmm. But for all its danger, Hoofington has always had potential for greatness. Did you know that, long ago, it nearly became the capital of Equestria? I’m not talking about during the war. No, this was hundreds of years before that,” she said happily as she walked slowly beside me.

“No. I honestly didn’t,” I replied.

“Mhmmmm! This entire valley was to be a glorious city. From one side to the other. A place of beauty and majesty fit to make Manehattan look like a backwater,” Dawn said as she walked along. She faced me and added, as if sensing my skepticism, “Not all Wastelanders are ignorant savages. I’ve spent years collecting any lore that might help others understand what Equestria was... and could be again.”

“Still... Hoofington?” I muttered weakly, just not seeing it.

“No. Lunaria. The capital of Princess Luna.” My shock and confusion had to be showing. “History gave her the far less flattering title of Nightmare Moon.”

Funny. I seemed to recall a memory of Luna happily assuming that title herself. "But she was banished. And a thousand years later stripped of her powers." You'd be surprised what you can learn on the night shift with nothing but old textbooks in storage to read... though mostly they'd just been about the importance of following rules.

"Indeed. Celestia and her forces met Princess Luna here before her dark citadel and used the Elements of Harmony to banish her to the moon for a thousand years. The valley was all but abandoned afterwards, till centuries later the village of Hoofington was founded. And then reborn a third time as the Core." I tried not to snort. A city only Nightmare Moon could love...

"Yeah. Great place to live, if it didn't kill everypony that got close," I said sarcastically.

"Yes, the automated defenses are a problem, but there is a key to shutting them down," she replied, and I felt a chill creeping along my spine. It was now I really wished I had my barding and a gun of some kind. Even one of Glory's cakes. There was no way to tell with her eyes closed to slits, but somehow I could feel her looking at EC-1101.

"And you'd want to live there?" I asked slowly, as if I were trying to disarm a landmine.

"I'd like to live anywhere we can have peace. Don't you want peace?" she asked in an almost pleading voice.

"I'd like any place where people aren't killing each other over some bottlecaps, salvage, or their next meal," I replied. "I'd like to not have to kill anypony again. Wouldn't you?" We passed the post office, and I saw Caprice peeking out at us. The peach mare's pink eyes met mine for one instant, then dropped shamefully. Slowly she drew back into the building and closed the door.

My question seemed to amuse the gray pegasus, who sighed and shook her head. "Of course. I don't believe in killing any more than you do. Every life lost is one more person who can't help us rebuild the world. And I want to rebuild the world," she said calmly. "I'm hoping that we can work together for a common good."

"Your good, or mine?" I asked as we walked past the town entrance. The colts manning the light machine gun in its tower looked down at me with a seriousness that didn't match their youthful appearance. They reminded me of Boing.

"Why not both? You want to help the people of this city. I want the same. It seems we have some common needs that should be grounds for cooperation," she said very matter-of-factly. "You've heard of virtues, yes? Mine is salvation. I've devoted my entire life to bettering the world. To do better, as Fluttershy said." She tilted her head towards me. "I imagine your virtue must be quite similar to do all that you do."

I hadn't thought of my virtues in a long time. Salvation? No. I didn't think so. And even as much as I threw myself into the meat grinder, I doubted that it was sacrifice. Tenacity... endurance... maybe. But I didn't hold any illusions that I could save the Wasteland on my own. I doubted anypony could. All I could do was give ponies a chance.

"I just don't want people to hurt. If I can spare them that, then I'm happy," I replied, not quite telling the truth but not lying either.

"It's a generous gift you want to give them," Dawn said as we trotted along through the rain. "It was a gift my husband, Sky Striker, tried to give me. A wonderful gift. A life above the clouds."

"Oh?" I asked, wondering where to take this strange conversation as we crawled up the hillside. "How'd you meet?"

She gave a little laugh. "Oh, it was quite unexpected." She flushed a little, running a hoof through her mane. "You know of my friends? Big Daddy? King Awesome? Carrots and Zodiac? Keeper? They were much like you and your friends." She shook her head. "When I was just a filly, my tribe was wiped out in a brutal fight. I saw my parents, both earth ponies, killed before my eyes. Such things were common then. But I vowed on their deaths that I would stop the killing. It earned me my cutie mark," she said as she looked at her flank and the Dashite brand. "A new day..."

My eyes lingered on the mark a moment. "What was it?"

"The sun... or what I imagined a sun to be. A great bright disk of light... illuminating the Wasteland..." She sighed and shook her head. "At least, that was what I believed."

I frowned and listened as she continued. "I was just a naïve young pony going into the savage Wasteland. I met Big Daddy first. A huge braggart of a stallion seeking to become the Wasteland's greatest fighter. He joined me to prove to the skeptical filly how mighty he was. Then Keeper, the horny scoundrel, making his way from one end of the Wasteland to the other in search of caps. Big Daddy had to thump him regularly to protect my virtue." She snorted, the thunder rumbling overhead as we drew closer to the manor.

"We met Crunchy Carrots and Zodiac trying to kill each other raiding the same pre-war bunker, trying to find the same ancient technology. Turned out to be a dead end. King Awesome joined last, bringing his own magical skills, and an ego to match Big Daddy's, to the team." Her smile turned wistful as she sighed. "And together we decided to save the Wasteland, starting with Hoofington. Those were the best days of my life."

"Saving the Wasteland's easier said than done," I commented lightly.

"Yes. Much. And over time, the lack of success grew... frustrating. The flaws in us pushed us apart more and more. Eventually, we were fighting each other more than the gangs and warlords of Hoofington..." She sighed and shook her head. "One day there was an incredible storm, and from the clouds above fell a wounded dragon and a pegasus. The dragon crawled off... to where, I never discovered... but I met my Sky Striker and nursed him back to health... and then... he offered to take me back with him."

"Your friends allowed it?" I asked.

"No." She shook her head. "But by then... well... we weren't much of friends anymore. They stayed together because of me and... well... I flew off. I abandoned them to find their own way." She looked out into the night. "I failed them. They joined me because they believed in me..."

I thought of Dawn and my own friends. Would we still be friends in five years? Or even one? I'd been outside in the Wasteland for a month and a half, and look at how much I'd changed. "And once in the Enclave, you tried to get them to help the surface."

"Yes," she said with a nod. "Though I tried to be a mother first. It was... nice," she said with a faint blush. "But my virtue had always been to try and save people below the clouds from the life I'd lived. The Enclave, even now, has power and food and the sun... so very much... that we lack below. But I failed. And soon... soon there were ponies willing to kill me to keep them from having to acknowledge the suffering below." She shook her head again. In the flickers of approaching lightning I could make out the outlines of the manor through the pouring rain. "I say I left to protect my family... and part of that is true... but..."

I finished for her as the thunder growled like a stalking beast growing closer with every minute. "But you also left because you hadn't done what you needed to. The wastes still needed saving."

"Yes. My friends hadn't been able to do so. Nor had the Enclave. So I left them behind." She stopped and, for a moment, looked skyward again. "Sometimes, though... sometimes I think I'd give almost anything to go back. To be with them... my family... my friends... Sky Striker. All I'd need is one word, and I'd fly back to that life. The feeling terrifies me at times." She shook her head once more, as if trying to rattle the desire from her mind.

"Sometimes, I'd give anything to have 99 back. Do anything. Just to have a chance of making it better. There were good ponies there, even if it was messed up. I'd give anything to give ponies a chance at a better tomorrow," I said as we started down the driveway towards the cavernous manor. With luck, it'd offer some shelter from the storm.

Glory's mom stopped in the rainy road and looked at me quizzically. "Then why is it you deny EC-1101 to ponies who would use it to spare countless others pain and suffering?"

No. Looking at Dawn, the sensation of hope that Glory would have a happy life with her mother again guttered, and I felt a chill pass through me. The building storm now completely forgotten, I looked on in sad resignation. P-21 had been right. She did know something! "How do you know about EC-1101? Did Glory or P-21 tell you?" Her smile, smug and knowing, informed me that Glory hadn't. And P-21 wouldn't...

"Oh no," she said softly as she trotted up the road. "I've been searching for EC-1101 for quite a while now."

Then I knew the answer, like a sick punch to my gut. "You're with the Harbingers."

"More accurately, I *am* the Harbingers," Dawn replied matter-of-factly. "I am their prophet for a better tomorrow."

For a few seconds, I wondered if my horn had recovered enough for a magic bullet. If not, fingers would work. Still, I looked at the unassuming gray mare... their leader. It was a rare moment I really wished I could kill a pony in cold blood. But Dawn wasn't just unarmed, she was unarmored and Glory's mother besides. The second she turned red on my E.F.S., though... "So all that catching up with your daughter? Just a lie?" I asked, glaring at her in the rain.

"No. It was a gift. A miraculous indulgence," Dawn replied, her smile fading a little. She looked towards Star House with that infuriating squint. "It was wonderful to meet her again. To talk to her like we did years ago. And I thank you for giving me the opportunity, Blackjack. I do. But time is running out. I'm here to ask for your help. No guns. No tricks."

"Really? So this isn't just an attempt to get me alone and kill me?" I asked sharply.

She looked at me evenly. "Believe it or not, while I do want EC-1101, I also want my daughter to be happy. You make her happy. Happier than I ever could," she said, her voice a soft note of shame.

I snorted in disbelief. "You're the leader of the Harbingers. You've been hunting me for the last week. Why in hell would I ever work with you?"

"Because you want to save the Wasteland. And together, we can save it from Project Horizons."

I felt as if lightning had struck me again, and I stared at her in shock. "Project Horizons? You know what it is?"

"A bit," she replied with a small smile. "And I know that you've been trying to figure out what Goldenblood and the O.I.A. did two hundred years ago," she said, trotting off through the rain towards the front of the manor. "If you want to know more, come with me. We'll talk, and I'll tell you what I know."

I stopped in my tracks. Going with her would need a level of idiocy astounding even to me. This clear ploy had to lead me into a trap. It was obvious from a mile away. I tried to send a message to Lacunae to try and find P-21. To give some kind of warning to Glory. The riotous argument being held in Unity made me unsure if it got through to my friend, though.

I'd already walked into one... two... too many death traps trying to unravel the mystery of Horizons, and I'd promised Glory I wouldn't get into trouble. "Thanks, but—" I began, and then I froze.

My eyes returned to Dawn. I had friends. I had to trust in them. P-21 had been right. I could no more give up on learning about Horizons than I could cut off my own head. And now I had a chance to find out something about Horizons itself.

Falling in step with the pegasus, I asked, "So. What is it?"

"Horizons itself was a superweapon developed two hundred years ago by Goldenblood to prevent a coup by the Ministry Mares. I don't know where it is or how it works, but being that it was designed by Trottenheimer, who adapted megaspells to weaponized purposes, we can assume the destruction would be substantial. You saw what his silver bullets could do," Dawn said as she walked beside me.

"How do you know this?" I asked with a frown.

"Because thirty years ago my friends learned about the activities of the O.I.A. and the existence of their secret projects. Not hard, given that Zodiac worked on one of them. We scraped the surface and learned just the barest hints of the projects, but that was enough. Unfortunately, the struggle between my friends was too much to bear, and we separated before we could learn more. But I knew of it." She sighed and hung her head a little and continued, "And unlike the others, I remembered."

"Zodiac said she didn't know anything about it," I countered.

"She lied." Dawn shrugged. "Or she simply forgot. I suppose living for two hundred years could make a pony somewhat forgetful," she said simply. "I'd suspect the former, though. She was always casual with the truth." The gray mare sighed and shook her head. "In any event, when I returned to the Wasteland, I sought out something... anything... that could save it. The Enclave was too isolated. They would have killed me before they lifted a feather to help the surface. So I travelled far and wide in search

of anypony who could bring order to the world.

"I came across a few prospects. A griffin warlord trying to recoup his people's fallen glory. A dragon with the intelligence and skill to manipulate ponies, living in an old prison and trying to establish control around his lair. The most promising by far was a cyberpony willing to do or give whatever he could to re-establish civilization. Each of them, however, fell short. The first was too consumed by hatred, the second obsessed with greed, and the last callous to the suffering he caused. When I returned to Hoofington, I was prepared to die. I went into the tunnels, ready to rot away and be done with life," she said solemnly. "And it was there that she found me."

"She?" I asked with a frown as we walked towards the camp where the Crusaders had gathered their salvage. So far, there were only two red bars, but I had no idea if they were Harbingers at the edge of my sensor range or radroaches trying to get out of the rain. From the movement, possibly the latter. Still, there could easily be snipers focused on me this very second.

"I was sick, dying, and delirious when she found me and saved me from the Enervation beneath the city. I was nursed to health and given the ability to understand her." She turned to me and smiled in bliss. "She is the Goddess of the Core."

I halted in my tracks at the mouth of the empty camp, and so did she. "Goddess? As in... Princess Celestia goddess?" Or alicorn-creating crazy evil goddess?

"Yes. A goddess of technology and knowledge. Cognitum. She is trapped and integrated with the Core, but she showed me such wonders. The Core is there... a city that can contain and care for the entire population of the Wasteland ten times over. It is a place where all sapient life... not just ponies but zebras, griffins, hellhounds, and even dragons can live in peace. Even with the extensive damage that time and the war inflicted, there is more than enough for all." She smiled gently. "You've already felt her blessing. She was the one who overrode the interference to fire the defense beam at the ghoul in Hightower."

"Interference?" I frowned in confusion.

Dawn sighed. "When Equestria fell, countless automated spell matrixes were locked out. Though Cognitum is wise and powerful, nearly every system in the Core disobeys her. It is a struggle for her to exert her will on even the smallest system." She then smiled once more. "But, with effort, she can."

"I see. So she fried the ghoul," I said slowly.

"And she took over the holo-emitters in Flash Industries and killed your enemies," Dawn said with a wide smile. "See? Even though you have never known, she's assisted you several times before."

Funny, I recalled her assistance practically ripped my leg off and nearly killing Glory! I scowled and put that aside for the moment; I needed answers, not to pick a fight just yet. "So this Cognitum told you more about Horizons?"

Dawn's smile faded a little. "Yes. It is a device capable of destroying not just the Wasteland but potentially far more. EC-1101 serves as its trigger. When Equestria fell and EC-1101 went active, the fuse was lit, but then through sheer chance the spell became trapped within your stable, and the fuse was

then delayed. Now it is out, and once more Horizons is primed to fire.”

“And how does giving you EC-1101 figure in?” She hadn’t told me much about Horizons, but I definitely wanted to know more. P-21 had been right, again.

“Right now, Cognitum struggles to assert herself over the most basic of systems. Without the authority granted by EC-1101, she is only able to utilize one ten thousandth of her normal capabilities. She struggles through interference and dealing with the damaged systems. Once EC-1101 is in her hooves and properly activated, she will be able to cancel Horizons and establish a new Equestria from here. All will be welcome. All will be equal in her *true* unity. And then... then we will have peace.”

That meant that this Cognitum had to be a descendant of a ministry mare too. “So Cognitum sent Sanguine to my stable?”

“Yes,” she replied simply. “The price was the restoration of his family. But Sanguine was a coward. When he learned of the true Goddess, he sought to retrieve EC-1101 and flee. He would have run beyond her reach and, in doing so, doomed us all. Eventually, EC-1101 will conclude that Luna has been deposed and fire Horizons. When that happens, the Wasteland, perhaps the world, will be destroyed.”

I frowned; something about this was off. Goldenblood had been paranoid, no doubt about that. He’d done everything he could to ensure that Luna had remained in power. He’d manipulated the ministries and the entire kingdom for her. But if Luna was deposed or killed... why blow everything up? Some sort of vengeance? It couldn’t have worked as a deterrent because nopony knew about it. I looked at the gray pegasus with a long frown. If this Cognitum had lied to Dawn, there was only one way to figure out the truth.

“I need to meet her,” I said sullenly. And that meant a trip to the deadliest place in Equestria. We stopped in front of the Crusaders’ salvage camp built before the main entrance of Blueblood Manor. The dark building loomed above me, thunder booming through the dark skies above. A lone lightning bolt illuminated the scoured front of the structure.

The manor had certainly seen better days; the Crusaders had stripped it of anything that was even remotely of value like a gleeful swarm of radroaches on a corpse. Lying about were crates of pipes and coils of wire that had been ripped from the building but not hauled away yet. The structure itself, with its reinforced walls and beams, might stand for a century more before it collapsed completely, but nothing of value would remain within... except for Vanity’s bedroom, if Charity had honored her promise.

Dawn’s lips curled in a grin even wider than she’d shown when she’d been with Glory. “And you will. When you give EC-1101—”

“No,” I interrupted. “I’m not giving EC-1101 to you. Nor her,” I said levelly, leaving the mare as stunned as if I’d kicked her upside the head. “You don’t get it. She exposed my home to a disease that turned almost everypony I knew into cannibals. And you and your Harbingers made the exact same mistake Sanguine did. You shot first. You should have tried this conversation before sending squads of killers after me.”

Dawn’s mouth opened and closed. “I... we thought there was no choice. After Sanguine took it from you, I ordered Steel Rain to retrieve it at all costs. We had no idea who had it; perhaps you, or a

minion of Red Eye or some raider acquired it.”

I glared at her. “But you found out it was me soon enough. You chased me all the way across the Hoof.”

“I wasn’t in charge of that. I simply...” Dawn struggled to justify herself and then said, “Steel Rain informed me that you would never willingly surrender EC-1101. I simply followed his recommendations.”

“And he was probably right. What matters is that you didn’t even try. You should have had this talk with me after we left Hippocratic Research. Instead, you tried to blow my head off and take it, just like Deus and his bounty hunters,” I replied sharply. “If you’d spoken to me in the Fluttershy Medical Center, I would have been happy to give it to you. Or at least to talk it over. But your Cognitum killed Sanguine and I’m pretty sure sent a super-sentinel after me. Your seekers hounded me. Steel Rain—”

Dawn suddenly straightened. “Would it help if you could get revenge on him for what he did to you and your friends?”

“What?” I blinked, lightning flashing and booming above me as I stared at her.

“You said so yourself. Steel Rain advised me to take it by force, and in the process wronged you. If you like, you can take his place.” She reached out and tapped my chest. “You can make certain that the Harbingers remain an order of good virtue.” *Remain?*

“He’d never just let me kill him!” I gasped, staring at her in shock. Was she actually serious about this?

“You may be surprised,” Dawn said as she looked at the front door to the manor. “We can deal with that right now, if you like.” Then she stated firmly, “Rain. Come here. No armor or guns.” For several minutes I just stared in shock before the door creaked slowly open, and then I tensed as a blue bar appeared. He wouldn’t actually come out here unarmed. Dawn was crazy if she thought he—

“I knew that you’d never give it up,” the stallion said as he emerged from the manor. On instinct, my horn’s magic reached for weapons that were probably in some locker at the Rainbow Dash Skyport. I was surprised to see two things: one, he wore only a PipBuck. Two, he looked positively cute! The stallion with guns as massive as Deus’s seemed disturbingly vulnerable without his fancy armor. His pink mane was plastered to his purple coat, and his kindly face wore an oddly embarrassed expression.

Again, for the second time of the night, I really wished I were a pony who could kill an unarmed enemy. “You’re showing a lot of guts trotting out here like that,” I said. I ground my teeth, trying to think of some way I could beat the ever loving snot out of him and not have Fluttershy give me dirty looks inside my head.

“I don’t have much choice in the matter...” He paused and then rolled his eyes. “I figured there was a fifty-fifty chance you’d kill me at first sight anyway after what happened on the *Celestia* and at Goldenblood’s house. Or maim me, at least.”

“I’m thinking about it. I’d treat a fart as a deadly weapon from you,” I growled.

“Please. I don’t want you two to argue. This is about the future of Equestria and getting Blackjack’s cooperation,” Dawn told the unarmored stallion firmly.

"Of course, Prophet," the former Steel Ranger said smoothly. "But unfortunately, you still don't realize just what lengths Blackjack will go to win. Just what she's capable of. You should accept that she will never willingly part with EC-1101 or join the Harbingers. We're the 'bad ponies'." He grimaced and sat, making little quote wiggles with his forehooves.

"Teaming up with him was a big mistake," I said to Dawn without taking my eyes off him. "I'm surprised he hasn't shot you in the back long before now, Dawn. He betrayed his last leader for technology. He'll do the same to you." A half dozen more ponies were emerging from the manor. All were unarmed and unarmored and keeping their distance as they moved around the camp. My eyes kept looking for snipers or whatever was Steel Rain's plan B.

My comment added a bit of amusement to the embarrassment on his face. "Ah yes. That *had* been my plan, I admit," he replied with a small grimace as he pressed a hoof to his chest. "Unfortunately, a certain measure has been taken to ensure that I cannot betray Cognitum or her prophet." He met my gaze and gave an almost sheepish smile. "It seems my ambitious nature was better known than I anticipated. There's a kill implant nestled right in my chest. One signal from either, and it will immediately puree my insides."

I remembered the prospector in Tenpony vomiting bloody viscera and blinked in shock, then looked at Dawn. "When we discussed how to retrieve EC-1101," she said calmly as she trotted up beside me, "Steel Rain was quite adamant that it could only be done by force. That you were using the megaspell for your own agenda. I believed him. My mistake for thinking you were a monster after I heard what you did to your stable."

Steel Rain chuckled. "Oh, she is. The worst kind," he said with a casual smile that didn't hide the fear in his eyes. "A monster who thinks she can stop being one."

I looked from her to him and back again. I didn't know what to say to this. "If you like, I can kill him now. Or maim him. Or simply exile him with a command that the kill implant goes off if he uses any technology more advanced than a can opener," Dawn said evenly, her smile returning and the purple stallion's gentle features growing resigned as he sighed. "Consider it a repayment for following bad advice."

"What?" I gasped as I backed away from both of them. "Whatever happened to believing in not killing?"

"If his life is the price for saving all of the Wasteland, then it's one that I will accept. What's one life compared to the multitudes that will be saved?" Dawn asked with that blissful smile.

"Everything," Steel Rain said with another sigh before he smiled at me apologetically. "Well, I won't pretend like I don't have it coming. Go on then. At least it'll be relatively quick."

I stared blankly, my gaze shifting from one to the other. Was she serious? Just... kill him and take his place, just like that? I looked into his pink eyes and saw an acknowledgement of defeat in them. I had no doubt whatsoever what he'd do if our positions were reversed. Right now, I could do the smart thing and kill one of my greatest enemies. I might not even have to follow through on handing over EC-1101 afterwards. There was just one little problem...

"No," I replied. Steel Rain flinched, then blinked and then paused as his pink eyes looked from

Dawn to myself.

Dawn frowned for a second, then brightened. "Oh. I understand. You want to do it yourself. Well, I can give you the kill command just as soon as—"

"Fuck no!" I snapped as I backed away from both of them. "Don't you get it? I'm not a fucking executioner. Give him his armor and guns, and I'll do what I can to kill him properly if he's going to try something, but I'm not going to kill him just to give you what you want!"

"But... the Harbingers... Cognitum..." Dawn stammered, weakly, still clearly astonished I wasn't taking her offer.

"Sorry, Dawn. I know you believe the Core holds all the answers, but I can't believe in your goddess. The Core is simply death. Always has been. Always will be." The fact she'd been willing to kill him, at all, for her mistake in believing him convinced me that the Harbingers weren't the Wasteland's final solution. I didn't place my faith in goddesses and lost technology.

It took hard work to do better...

We stood there in the darkness and hissing rain, facing each other. Suddenly Steel Rain began to laugh. "Oh, this is too rich. I knew that Blackjack would never part with EC-1101, but I never imagined she'd pass up a chance like that! It's too much!" He chuckled, shaking his head with a mirthful grin.

"So. Is this where the ambush occurs?" I asked bluntly, glancing around me, wondering where the stealthed and armed Harbingers might be.

"Don't be ridiculous, Blackjack. Of course not. Even naked and unarmed, you're fantastically deadly. We'd be idiots to attack you now," Steel Rain said with his friendly smile as he waved his hoof at a large sheet of canvas covering something massive. Four ponies ran up and started pulling off the tarp covering what I'd assumed to be salvage. "We're going to use something... else."

I glared at the pair, then watched as a black-and-white-striped mountain of metal came into view. The tank. Immediately, its engine snarled and spotlights glared to life, and it swiveled the lamps towards me. I tensed, ready to run, but then Dawn said in a quiet but horribly sure voice, "No. The other target." For almost a minute the tank sat there, revving its engine. Then it slowly swung its main turret away. My blood froze as what I realized what the 'other target' was.

The guns pointed right down at the sleeping village below.

"You fucking monsters..." I whispered as I looked at the war machine, its engine snarling as if it were pissed to see me again. I struggled to break through the chaos within Unity to get a warning to Lacunae. Maybe if I could activate my broadcaster... ugh, but as I tried to turn off the music and turn on the radio, Steel Rain frowned and leaned in towards me. Damn, he remembered that trick! I quickly brought up the file and showed them EC-1101 with a twist of my hoof. "Is this worth killing innocent foals for?"

"What other choice have you given me?" Dawn replied quietly, her mane obstructing her face. "Trying to take it by force has failed. Trying to negotiate has failed as well."

"Give up?" I suggested, half in contempt and half in desperation.

"Could you?" she asked coldly as she turned away from me, asking in a near whisper. And then, for an instant, she looked at me over her shoulder, her eyes open and blazing with a bright, violent green luminescence, then looked down at the village and spoke again, her voice rising with every word. "What else am I supposed to do, Blackjack? I have devoted my entire life to finding some way to save the Wasteland, just as you have! I left my husband and my children in Thunderhead for this world. I must find some way to make it safe! And I've found it! I've found it!" she proclaimed as she whirled and advanced; her green eyes glared brighter as she thrust an accusing wing at me. "And you... YOU! You refuse to let me. How dare you, Blackjack?! How dare you withhold the key to Equestria's glorious rebirth?"

I gaped in horror and backed away, wishing for some armament as I beheld the furious, screaming mare and glimpsed the real Dawn within the baleful green glow of her eyes. "What in Equestria are you?" I gasped in shock. A mutant? A monsterpony? Something else?

"I am what I needed to become, just as you are," she said coldly as she closed her eyes once more and turned her back to me, looking up at the tank. "I do not want to kill helpless foals, no more than you want them to die. But I will kill them if you force me to it. The future of Equestria is infinitely more precious than any one village."

I knew I couldn't take the risk of calling her bluff. I'd lost EC-1101 before and recovered it. My eyes met the calculating gaze of Steel Rain, and his apologetic smile grew a little. He knew that the second the village was out of harm's way, I'd be after them again. They'd either try and kill me or shell the village to keep me busy.

My eyes dropped to EC-1101 in my hoof as the maudlin music rose. Was this another damned price I'd have to pay? Steel Rain'd been right. I'd pay with my own pain and suffering as long as I had to, but now was I going to have to pay with the lives of others to keep the program from my enemies? I clenched my eyes shut, as I searched within me. Could I really pay that price *again*?

"Fine," I said bitterly and then glared at her. "All right, Dawn. If you're willing to slay sleeping children with a fucking *tank*, then I guess you win."

A lull in the storm calmed the air for a moment, as if the world itself had been stunned by my surrender. Dawn faced me, her eyes closed again and hiding that baleful luminescence I'd seen before. "What?"

"I'm not going to kill more innocents just to hang on to a damned program. So congratulations. Your willingness to murder helpless children won." My words made the mare jerk as if I'd kicked her. "I hope you'd be proud. I hope your children would be proud."

"I... I have no choice," Dawn muttered.

"Wrong. You always have a choice," I replied.

"You have no right to lecture me after what you've done!" Dawn hissed at me. "You've killed foals! You gassed your own stable!"

Oddly, the attacks only made me smile. After all the beating up I'd done to myself for my mistakes, those accusations seemed petty and hollow coming from another. "Yes. I did, Dawn. So consider me an expert on mistakes. The fact you have to kill helpless ponies is a hint that what you're

doing is wrong. You know it." I dared step towards the pegasus. "Be the better pony. You can save the Wasteland another way."

For an instant, I thought the growling thunder and flickering lightning would end. Dawn walked away from me towards Chapel and the Core lying beyond. I liked to imagine her eyes opened for real and she saw the hideous towers for what they were... a lie of a better life. A trap. That she'd think of her own family and children and do what was right. It was a hard choice...

But then the skies boomed and the rain fell hard and heavy upon us as she hung her head. "I'm sorry..." she murmured, barely audible before the lightning flared and the thunder drowned out anything else she may have said.

More Harbingers spilled out of the manor, these armed and armored, and quickly moved in around me. "Get a maintenance kit," Steel Rain said. "Last thing we want is for one of us to damage the PipBuck." Then he looked at me with an irritatingly contrite smile. "Oh, and please turn off your broadcaster, Blackjack."

"What?" I frowned, glancing at it. "I never turned it on."

"Really? Because I've been listening to your conversation since you left Chapel." He lifted his head and then turned it to show some kind of earphone thing. "I've been a big fan of Radio Blackjack." Then he suddenly smirked. "Champion in bed? Really? That freak?"

"I've changed my mind. Kill him," I replied flatly at the worn joke, but inside I was elated. I glanced down at my PipBuck as it played the classical music. Had Glory been listening in? I could kiss a certain smart blue pony! I cancelled the transmissions and killed the music, though; they'd served their purpose, and there was no point in antagonizing the Harbingers further now when I was stalling for time... Overhead the clouds boomed deeply once more.

"We should hurry. I have absolutely no doubt that Blackjack's friends will be on their way," Steel Rain said sharply.

"We have sentries," Dawn replied absently.

"I've learned that with Blackjack it is better to be safe than sorry," Steel Rain said in worry as he scanned the night, no doubt using his E.F.S. He looked back at me with a warm smile. "I don't want to underestimate her again. Her friends have a disturbing tendency to rescue her at inopportune moments."

I glanced at Steel Rain for some sign that my act of mercy might gain some assistance, but the one time our eyes met he simply gave a sorry smile and a shrug. I supposed that if the purple stallion had an implant that could kill him instantly, he really couldn't help me that much. Dawn began to address the Harbingers around us about the wonders of the Core now that they had EC-1101. A city that, despite its ruin, all could be safe in. A place where there was enough plenty that raiders wouldn't need to raid.

She wasn't crazy. That would have made this easier. She simply believed, more than anything, that this was the last chance for the Wasteland. A simple, wonderful solution. But I'd been in Hoofington long enough to know that there was no simple solution. There was a catch, and Dawn had either missed it or didn't want to accept it. Peace, at any cost, where ponies could do better and be better and have better than they ever had before.

"So you'll be the kindly teacher lording over us all?" I asked, perhaps a bit too sharply. An earth pony mare set a metal toolbox down next to me and began to pull out all kinds of arcane equipment.

"Of course not, Blackjack. When the Core is open to all, I'll return to the Wasteland for others. I'll direct them... unicorns, pegasi, griffins, zebras, dragons, anyone who needs safety... until I die out in the wastes." She smiled merrily as she looked at me once more with her eyes closed. "I have no illusions, Blackjack. I don't deserve the Core, and I won't accept a place in it. I've been forced to do horrible things, and I know that there's no forgiveness for some crimes." She cocked her head. "Would you ever be able to truly forgive yourself for what you did to your home?"

"No," I replied. I could choose not to punish myself, but forgiveness? Never.

"Then you understand," she replied. "Cognitum will teach the Wasteland civility. She will return Equestria to what it should be. None will war when the consequence is immediate execution." I glanced at Steel Rain and shivered with the thought of everypony forced to have a kill implant inside them. That was Dawn's idea of improvement? That was doing better?

As the brown earth pony mare worked, I could see the Harbingers watching me carefully. The tank's cameras whirled and machine guns twitched to follow my every movement. The engine growled again and again as if the massive machine wanted to blast me into bloody scrap. I knew this was going to end with my death. There was no way it couldn't. Yet even now, every armed pony was keeping their distance.

Steel Rain veered away to step inside the manor. I took a look at Dawn and the bristling guns pointed at me. All it would take was one aggressive twitch from me and they'd vaporize me where I stood. But the tank wasn't shelling Chapel at the moment. With luck, somepony had heard my broadcast and they were getting to safety, or P-21 was somewhere out there, or... something.

Because if it was just me, then I was done.

Finally there was a jerk, and the Delta PipBuck was pulled out of my hoof. Half my systems went with it, my vision filling with errors and static as readouts went dead. She passed the device to Dawn, and the gray mare cradled it to her chest as if it were a baby. "So..." I said as I was slowly herded into a spot adjacent to a solid wall. The Harbingers had formed a half circle around me with my back to the Manor. I gave a slow, sickly smile. "Guess this is it."

"I guess it is," Dawn said as she hugged the device. Steel Rain, now armored, stepped up beside her. Several seconds ticked by. A moment passed as the rain hissed around us. The lamps of the tank bathed me in their harsh white glare. I could barely make out the individual faces of the Harbingers. Only Dawn, front and center, and Steel Rain could be seen clearly. She kept her face downturned. "You understand why we're going to kill you. We have no choice..."

"You always have a choice. You just keep making the wrong one," I said back.

"I told you. Suicidal," Steel Rain said. At least he hadn't put on those cannons yet. I supposed that with the tank sitting there they were somewhat redundant.

"No," I countered flatly. "This isn't suicide. I don't want to die here, like this." My eyes swept over the shadowy silhouettes of the Harbingers around me. "I know the Wasteland sucks. Every single person knows that. But I also know that, so long as folks think the right way is more killing, nothing is

going to get better. I'd like to live. I'd like to go back to Glory and tell her what an idiot I've been. But I also know... just like every one of you knows... that there is no easy way out. Never." I looked at Dawn, narrowing my own eyes. "I don't know what this Cognitum has told you, Dawn. I don't know what the Core has to offer. But I do know that there is no simple fix to the Wasteland. No saving it. There's only doing better, and making the hard choice." I looked at the Harbingers around me. "Even if it hurts. Even if it gets you killed."

"What a lovely inspirational speech," Dawn said softly, "but you are quite mistaken. There's been nothing easy about this at all." One second. Two. Ten. "Fire," Dawn said quietly as I closed my eyes.

Thunder roared around me, and everything went white.

Then I frowned as I became aware that I hadn't been torn into bloody cyberpony pieces. I opened my eyes and glanced above me at the luminous shell that encompassed me and the sight of Lacunae hovering above, her brows furrowed in focus as her shield flashed and flared from the bullets striking it. Her purple eyes looked down and met mine, and she smiled.

A second later, from the rear of the tank there blossomed an immense plume of flame that filled the air with a scream of steel. A half dozen more pops filled the air from the rear of the Harbingers as great billowing clouds of smoke swept out. The Harbingers wheeled about in confusion. Steel Rain swore loudly as he waved his hoof, trying to establish order in the thickening murk of the smoke grenades. Thank Celestia that most of the Harbingers didn't seem to have E.F.S.

I saw Dawn launch herself skyward only to be knocked from the air by a cyan bolt streaking by. The PipBuck tumbled from her hooves as Glory arced around and slammed her azure forehooves into Dawn's face as the mare began to recover.

"Killing foals, Mother? Using a tank against foals and Blackjack?" Glory shrieked. "Are you mad?!"

Dawn didn't answer her as she twisted and dove, but Glory, in the body of one of the finest fliers in history, streaked down and smashed her hooves against Dawn's spine. I would have expected the kick to have taken Dawn out of the sky entirely, but to my astonishment she kept flying with merely a grunt. Still, Glory was hardly through after a single kick and swooped around for another pass. Dawn snapped and rolled, disappearing into the smoke with Glory racing after her like a ghost from the past.

The rain and wind fought the heavy clouds of smoke as the skies poured down, lightning flashing over the manor with a resounding blast of thunder. I raced to catch my PipBuck as it tumbled to the ground. Steel Rain dove from out of the shadows towards the tiny vital piece of technology!

Then my feeble magic seized the device and just barely brought it to a halt, dangling in the air above him as he sprawled in the mud. Quick as my horn could manage, I pulled it back through the air. My friend's magic arrows flashed out, impacting against his armor. Steel Rain charged Lacunae, ready to power through her shield and thrash us into pony jam. I popped my fingers out, jumped up on her back, and pulled myself between her wings as she launched into the air. I pulled the device safely back into my hooves. The Ranger dove beneath her hooves, sliding in the mud with a roar. "Get Blackjack," he shouted, "or shell the village!"

"Thanks, but cutting it a little close, weren't you?" I yelled to the alicorn.

"Well, it was a very nice speech," Lacunae replied calmly as she soared up over the milling Harbingers. "Besides, it took time to quietly neutralize the snipers they set up, and P-21 needed time to get that bomb together." Up in the air, we were a huge glowing target. "One moment, and I'll teleport us away."

"No!" I shouted, pointing down at the machine. "We have to destroy it!" Already the tank was in the process of repairing the smoking hole ripped in its back. In a few minutes it would come after us itself, but we couldn't leave just yet. Even if we left and Dawn pursued, Steel Rain would certainly level anyplace ever allied with me. Megamart. Riverside. Meatlocker. They'd all be targets!

Lacunae glanced back at me in worry, then returned to the ground. First thing I needed to do was shove my PipBuck back into my leg and close it up. It could be reconnected later, but I didn't want it to fall out or something. Then I looked around for P-21. I needed a smart pony here!

I saw one Steel Ranger with two grenade machine guns preparing to blast us out of the sky when a white filly with red stripes jumped on their back. For a moment it was a bit of a comical sight, the armored pony giving her a piggyback ride. Then the ripper clenched in her jaws whirled as she rammed it against the side of the Ranger's neck between two armored plates, spraying out sparks. The Ranger thrashed wildly as we flew over them, and then the armored pony started screaming as the ripper sunk through and into their neck, the screeching saw blade painting Rampage's face red as the Ranger collapsed.

Rampage pulled her weapon free, spraying a fan of crimson, and then spat the ripper out to call to us. "Like my can opener?" she shouted before disappearing into the smoky confusion with a manic filly laugh. I think I preferred her hoofclaws.

Glory flew up beside us, laying down a constant stream of green death. Either Dawn had gotten away, or Glory had broken off to come help the rest of us, or... I saw the tears in her eyes that promised she'd need a whole lot of TLC if we made it through this. She met my eyes once, and then she was gone again, drawing fire with her own suppressive strafing.

The tank began to screech and groan as it started to turn its weapons towards me. Maybe it had some version of an E.F.S. We landed a little ways away from the Harbingers behind the cover of some crates full of copper pipes. "Fuck, where is she?" Glory swore, her furious rose eyes glaring as she turned around in a circle. She glanced at me, worry momentarily replacing rage before her eyes returned to the skies.

P-21 appeared from the shadows seconds later carrying my barding. "So, is there a plan?" I asked him.

"That's my line," he said wryly before he swung up Persuasion, bit the grip, and fired the weapon at a Harbinger bringing a markspony carbine to bear. The grenade struck the fighter in the face, knocking him over as it spun further out into the chaos and exploded. "We need to get out of here and—"

"We have to take out that tank," I shouted, pointing at the pink flashes of repair magic visible through the haze. I saw him on the verge of arguing and rushed on, "They'll blast Chapel to pieces if we run. It'll be Sanguine with heavy artillery!" That focused him and squashed any argument he might have had. "Tell me you can pull together another bomb or something to take it out?"

"I'll need time and materials," he said with a frown. "Some of these fuckers have got to have

something that goes boom. I just need to get enough of it." But it was four against fifty, and that didn't allow much time at all. Not good odds, even for me.

Lacunae lifted a Harbinger's dropped markspoon carbine to me, then seized an anti-machine rifle from a staggered mare and swung it hard into her face like a giant club. "Then we'll buy you the time you need."

We had to get moving. Anypony with an E.F.S. was going to see us. "Scatter and delay them till we can take out that tank!" And with that we broke apart. This was one time where being outnumbered was in my favor: everywhere I looked were enemies. Still, there were three that mattered more than the rest: the tank, Steel Rain, and Dawn. I had to find them. "How much did you hear?" I asked Lacunae telepathically.

"Everything. P-21 contacted us as soon as he left Dawn. He suspected her, but none of us anticipated she was behind the Harbingers," came the reply. Then a pause before the comment, "Blackjack, about that memory orb..."

"Not right now," I replied as the Harbingers started to be organizing with shouts to fan out and find us. "We can talk about it after we win!"

"Of course. Of course," she said, sighting down the rifle. Her shot blew the head off a mare in combat armor.

"Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another," I murmured as I finished off the magazine in the carbine and three Harbingers closed in around me. Bullets peppered off my barding and hide as I went into zebra stance, popped my fingers out, and grabbed the nearest one's head. My body twisted in a spin that his head followed and his body didn't. As his neck snapped, I heaved him over me as a shield to catch the anti-machine rifle rounds of the other two, and scooped up his carbine to replace my empty one. Rocking and twisting the body to keep it between me and their weapons, my horn levitated the carbine towards one of the mares and unloaded the entire magazine in her general direction in a spray of wild fire. I thought my horn might explode at this rate; my eyes were running as I struggled to keep focused.

As my target fell, the last mare took advantage of my distraction to dart to the side and point her pair of anti-machine rifles on her battle saddle right at me, firing at almost point blank range. I flailed in an attempt to dodge; the shots buzzed as they nearly struck me, but the weight of my corpse shield overbalanced me and sent me falling to the ground. The mare's eyes lit up in triumph as her jaw started to tighten on the trigger bit...

Then she screamed in agony as a whirr filled the air and she fell back. Rampage squatted behind her, holding a severed rear leg in her hooves, grinning around the bloody handle of the ripper. Yes, I definitely preferred her hoofclaws to that.

Heaving myself upright, I looked around for my next target, then staggered as another AM round glanced off my barding. I tried to find something I could use for a better shield than the stallion's corpse, but something else slammed into me from the other side... an explosion? My E.F.S. showed all kinds of damage that I really wasn't feeling like I should... thanks to Professor Zodiac. This trauma hurt in an almost abstract way; distant, more an alarm than deep visceral pain. Not the agony that Deus had been forced to live with.

Small wonder I loved any physical sensation I could get with Glory.

Glory wasn't strafing now. She was doing daring aerial maneuvers in and out of the lingering smoke to evade being torn apart by the gunfire, returning shots whenever she could to disrupt our enemies. The Harbingers were orienting themselves, organizing to focus fire. Worse, even more reinforcements seemed to be coming from around the sides of the manor. The odds were rapidly going from ten to one to twenty to one... or worse.

Don't think about that now. Fight. Kill. Run. Move. Fight. Reload. Take ammo. Kill. Move. Grab. Break. Throw. Aim. Fire. Run. Jump. Turn. Burst. Roll. Ignore the damage. Burst. Give P-21 time. Grab. Fire in face. Move. Ignore the red flashes on my damage display. More time. Grab. Gouge eyes. Take carbine. Shoot face. Roll with the explosion. Stand up. Move. Move! MOVE!

I lay on my side and then became dully aware of why I wasn't standing anymore as I looked at my rear leg and saw the brand new forty-five degree kink put in my metal limb during my explosive tumble. "Shit," I muttered thickly, lying there in the mud as six Harbingers advanced. I tried to get my horn to teleport me like yesterday! I was Twilight Sparkle's descendant. I could do it! My horn glowed as bullets chewed through my barding and into my body. Do it, I told my horn!

It flashed... then popped like a lightbulb burning out. My carbine dropped to the ground as I reeled like a hammer had smashed upside my horn once again.

Okay. Maybe I should have waited a few more days before trying that...

Suddenly there was a deep intake of air, followed by the roar of a flamer mixed with screams meeting my ears. Great. Looked like I was going to burn after all. I opened my eyes, expecting to see the Steel Ranger that was about to roast the meat from my bones.

"Blackjack? Are you okay?" Scotch Tape asked as she raced through the muck with the purple dragonfilly at her side. Precious jumped over me, bullets pinging off her scaled hide as she took another breath and let loose a plume of green flame that washed over three of the Harbingers. "Sorry, stupid question," she said as she knelt beside my scrapped leg.

"Scotch? What are you doing here?" I asked weakly as the filly struggled to help me drag myself behind the cover of the Steel Ranger that Rampage had dropped.

"Don't be stupid, Blackjack. We're all here," Charity said as she emerged out of the bedlam with a bloodsoaked Rampage. The filly wore a miniature battle saddle that had been converted to hold two heavy revolvers, which she fired past the dragonfilly at some enemy I couldn't see. "That's eight caps!" she roared at them. "Sixteen!"

Scotch opened my foreleg and, with far more focus and skill than the mare who'd removed it, re-attached the Delta.

Suddenly, I saw blue bars...

A whole lot of blue bars!

My E.F.S. now showed a lot more blue mixed in with all that bloody red on my display. I watched in shock as the blue and red colts Adagio and Allegro raced up and dropped Octavia sideways before

them and the three colts from the watchtower tossed their light machine gun across the instrument's body. Anti-machine rounds whined and sparked off the instrument's indestructible body as the machine gun opened up a chattering line of fire into the Harbingers. The ghoul Harpica flew high above dropping apple grenades into knots of enemies.

"Rampage! Bend that limb straight," Scotch Tape said, digging through her tools. The filly grabbed my thigh with her hindlegs and my damaged fetlock with her forehooves, and with a grunt of effort she bent my leg till it was straight again. Scotch pulled out one of Glory's cyberpony cakes and shoved it into my hooves before starting her work; I immediately started eating it as quickly as I could. "I hope I can do this," Scotch Tape said as she made repairs.

"You can. It's in your blood," I muttered around the cake. She flushed, but smiled as I scarfed down the disk while Scotch made her field repairs. Caprice slid next to me in a blue pre-war dress utterly unsuited for battle, her eyes wide and terrified as the SMG she held jittered in her mouth. This bedlam was so beyond her, but she'd come. I could at least respect that, but I reached up with my fingers and relieved her of the 12.7mm SMG before she accidentally shot somepony on our side... like me. "Thanks," I said, and she flushed and immediately handed me her magazines.

"I shouldn't have come," she muttered, the once fabulous mare dropping her eyes to her hooves as she stood in the churned-up mud.

"I'm glad you did," I said before I bit down on the mouth handle and sighted two Harbingers that were getting ready to take out Scotch Tape. The recoil nearly shook my teeth out of my head as I emptied the magazine in two seconds. I spat it out and stared at the weapon. "Damn! This thing just loves ammo."

P-21 emerged out of the chaos holding a small block of plastic explosive that had been taped together. "This is all I could find," he said with a frown. It was less than half the size of the bomb he had used the first time we'd faced the tank. He looked over at the grinding machine as it began to rejoin the battle. Harbinger and Crusader alike gave way as it ploughed back and forth, searching for me. "We've got to get it inside. If we can get it inside and kill the crew running that thing, it'll be as good as destroyed." He slipped a detonator into my barding.

I slowly groaned and sat up. Suddenly, something connected, and a jolt ran through my hind leg. It began moving once again. "You did it," I said to Scotch, then finished off the cyberpony cake.

A wing of fliers whooshed overhead, and for a moment I thought the Harbingers had pegasi of their own, but these were Enclave! It was pointless to shout a warning to Glory; the noise and chaos ensured she wouldn't hear me. "I've got to lead it away. I can't fight it and worry about all of you and keep my head from getting pulped by a lucky AM round at the same time."

Charity snorted. "Don't worry about us. These fucks owe Chapel for even dreaming that we're helpless. Not after Priest. Never again!" she shouted as she ran forward with Precious, then stopped and looked back. "Arloste! What the fuck are you waiting for?"

Rampage blinked and smiled as tears danced in her eyes, then snatched up her ripper and, with a gleeful scream of the weapon's motor, raced forward with them.

"Blackjack, how are you going to lead it away? I mean, it's a tank!" Scotch Tape shouted over the din. P-21 fired off a grenade nearby and I winced; as outnumbered as we were, there was still a chance

he'd hit a friendly. I trusted he knew what he was doing, but it still made me damned uneasy.

"Keep them safe," I said as I started moving again towards the front door of the manor. On the way, I was astonished to see a striped mare move like a ghost out of the smoke with nothing more than a simple wooden pole and a snarling red wooden mask. Sekashi sprang right into the midst of three Harbingers, her hooves spinning the pole with astounding finesse. She launched forward and rammed the end into one pony's throat, whirling it around and tripping a second, batting away a levitated pistol and then crushing the horn of the unicorn wielding it with a sickening crack I knew all too well. The dehorned unicorn screamed as she fell back, scraping her hooves over the stump. The whirling stick rammed into the tripped pony's head with such rapid succession that when Sekashi stopped the entire head slumped like a battered sack of meat and bone. The screaming unicorn was knocked from her hooves and then silenced with a double hoofstomp to the head.

The choking stallion brought his battle saddle's carbines up towards Sekashi's back, but before I could fire at him, a tiny striped filly with a blowgun appeared from nowhere and shot a dart into his throat. His eyes bulged, and then he collapsed with a goofy smile. Majina waved her little hoof at me with a happy grin.

"This reminds me of a very funny story!" Sekashi said with a laugh as she whirled her staff; how in the world did zebras *do* that? "I will have to tell it to you another time, though." And with that, the striped pair disappeared into the fight.

My body was almost to fifty percent as I reached the front doors to the manor. I flipped open my PipBuck and started looking for nearby transmitters. A tank had to have some kind of radio, right? Maybe I could order them to follow me into the manor. I located... well... it was close. "Security was just spotted going into the manor! Tank! Go after her! Quick!" I barked.

The tank, which had been simply rolling across the battlefield firing its machine guns at anyone who got in its way, suddenly stopped. I smiled as it turned its spotlights and main turret on me, but then paused. Why was it just sitting there?

Suddenly its main guns blasted just as something peach slammed into me from the side, knocking me behind the sandbag barricades that'd been erected centuries ago. The shells detonated high, the blast crushing me to the ground like a massive hoof a second before an avalanche of rubble fell down upon me. I was dazed for a second, and then I opened my eyes and looked at the mare who had shoved me down.

Caprice stared at me, her mouth moving silently as she stared straight ahead. I looked at her bloody, battered body. I was a cyberpony, and that shot had hurt. Caprice... "Lacunae! Somepony! I need a healing potion!" I screamed, hoping somepony was close enough.

The tank was moving. I heaved the peach earth pony over my shoulders and ran through the blown-in doors into the main hall. Everything remotely valuable had been stripped away and the walls, once bedecked with finery, were now bare. Piles of rubble lay everywhere where rubbish had been heaped up. "Why? Why'd they use the cannons?" I asked. Something like that could have destroyed EC-1101! Crush me. Use machine guns. But the cannons? I popped my fingers, ripping off strips of Caprice's ragged dress and trying to tie her bloody wounds.

"It's my fault," Caprice said. "I... I told Dawn you were here. I told her... told her about Glory..." The mare whimpered as she coughed and threw up a bloody mess down her front. "Blackjack... I'm so

sorry..." she croaked as tears ran down her cheeks.

"Don't worry about that. Just hold on," I said, trying to ignore the growling motor growing louder and louder.

But she shook her head. "Listen... please... he's with them..." she said weakly, struggling for breath. "I gave him to Dawn. He's the tank..."

"Who?" I shouted, as her eyes grew unfocused. "Who's in the tank?"

"Sorry..." she whimpered. "Should have... done... better..."

Her blue bar disappeared.

Then the building began to shake.

I turned in time to see the smoking wall explode inward as the massive tank rammed right through, barely slowing. I retracted my fingers, dropped to all fours, and raced down the vaulted central hall as the massive war machine ripped along after me. The lamps painted the hall in their harsh white glare as the tank's machine guns gouged lines of steel death through the air. The piles of rubble were my only cover, and the vibration of its steel treads sent them bouncing and sliding around my hooves. One misstep... one delay... I'd be either machine-gunned in half or ground to pieces beneath its massive treads.

Get it inside. Get it jammed. Get the bomb inside it. That had been the plan in my head. Only the tank wasn't playing along! Even as it tore down the second floor balconies above me, it wasn't stopping. Its engines powered it right through the broad hallway it was supposed to be getting stuck in.

I slipped for just a second, and its twin cannons roared. The shells passed through the air with a buzz like a colossal bumblebee as the blast wave picked me off my hooves and sent me tumbling forward like a cyber rag doll. The force of the shot and the detonation in the central conservatory shattered the skylights overhead, and rain began to pour in through the smoke. I picked myself to my hooves as the shaking grew stronger and stronger beneath them.

Through the smoke emerged two crushing treads and a broad, jagged row of steel teeth. I lifted my forehooves completely on reflex and put them right above that row as my hind legs slid backwards beneath me. My fingers struggled to find something to grab on to. Maybe if I could get on the damn thing... but then I stared at the two machine gun turrets pointing right at me. They could kill me right now...

Then I glanced behind me at the wall and understood. Shooting was too good for me. They were going to smash me to cyberpony mush. Then I saw the smoking hole blasted into the wall five feet up. I kicked my way up onto the rubble churning in front of the machine as the wall grew closer and closer. I had no idea how to do this; I had no idea if I *could* do this. But my body had been made by a zebra, and I could only hope it had half their agility! I launched myself up as a yard remained between the tank and wall, curving my back as my momentum carried me through the jagged hole. I landed on my head a second before the whole building shook with the force of the impact. The engine let out a roar as I sprawled onto my back.

I was in some sort of large courtyard. Rain poured over my face as I lay there, bringing me back

to my senses. If my ears had been flesh and blood, I'd probably be deaf now. There was a cyan flash, and Glory was there. She threw her hooves around me and hugged me close as I numbly patted her mane. We shared a wonderful and terribly poorly-timed kiss before I pulled myself to my hooves.

"You're safe!" Glory muttered as she held me.

"Safe as I ever am," I replied with a wry smile. "That was some pretty incredible flying, Glory Dash."

She immediately colored. "Don't call me that. I was just shooting wild. I think I may have wet myself somewhere while they were blasting at me. I just had to keep firing at them."

"Glad as I am to see you, there's a tank right on the other side of that wall, and I have a feeling they're really pissed with me," I muttered.

"You have that effect," a mare in Enclave power armor said as she landed next to us, followed by two others. She immediately opened her helmet, and I saw the yellow features of Lightning Dancer. A second pegasus landed beside her, facing Glory. Then two more! Thank goodness they were blue bars... for now, at least.

"Fuck me. She really does exist," one of the armored pegasi, a mare, breathed, then reached up and tapped her helmet. The lavender features of the Neighvarro mare Twister appeared, her eyes widening.

"I never thought I'd see... her..." another mare said as she retracted her helmet faceplate, her orange and yellow striped mane poking out of the opening. "Rainbow Dash..." Sunset breathed.

"No. I'm... I'm not Rainbow Dash," Glory stammered.

"Fooled me," the missile-armed stallion who must have been Boomer muttered thickly.

"What are all of you doing here?" I gasped, looking from one to the next. "Lightning, why... what's going on?" If they were here to take Glory...

But the yellow pegasus shook her head. "Well, after the meeting at the Skyport, Sky Striker decided he was going to find out what was going on himself. The Honored Councilor sent these three with him."

"We've got the most experience operating in the Hoof," Twister replied. Meeting my eye, she added, "That mare, Dusk, is okay. She was in critical condition, and the *Castellanus* was closer than the Skyport, so..." She trailed off as she stared at Glory. "Who... how..."

"Hey, Twisty?" Boomer said as he pointed at the wall. "Didn't she say there was—"

An explosion blew a cascade of dust and rubble over the six of us, and two smoking cannons pushed through the blasted hole as the machine tried to make its own door.

"Shit! Right! Tank! Roof!" Twister grabbed one of my forehooves and Glory the other, and they both lifted me up towards the roof. We barely cleared the lip when the tank rolled into the courtyard below. I didn't really see this as much of an improvement; if the thing had an E.F.S., we were seven

pretty obvious red bars.

Lightning Dancer reached into her barding and threw down a legful of blue-banded grenades. They detonated with crackles and pops of arcing magical electricity. The tank froze, turrets sweeping back and forth. The yellow pegasus backed off along the flat, rain-washed roof. "Those spark bombs should jam its E.F.S. for a little bit."

"Right," Twister said as she whirled on Glory. "What the hell is going on? We were searching Miramare with Sky Striker when he heard a broadcast about his wife fighting out here or something. And now we find Rain--"

"I'm Morning Glory," she interrupted as she frowned sternly at the mare. "I got magicked into this body! I'm not really Rainbow Dash."

"Striker's kid? Oh my..." Sunset's red eyes widened. "No wonder he set a speed record getting here."

Twister glanced from me to Glory. "What the hell is going on here, Blackjack? The surface isn't supposed to have ordinance like that anymore!"

"Tell you what? Stick close, and if we live through this, I will explain everything. Okay?" I snapped, looking down. The tank was swinging its guns around like a giant radroach's antennae; it seemed to be searching for us.

"Fair enough," Twister said as she looked at Glory again, the lavender mare clearly spooked.

"You're here with Father?" Glory gasped as she looked around. "Where is he? And you have Dusk?"

"I dunno where he went. This whole mission turned into a squall soon as Striker got that message. As for Dusk, she was unconscious in the *Castellanus's* med bay last I saw her," Twister said.

"Here," Lightning Dancer said as she dug into her saddlebags and dumped my weapons out onto the rooftop beside me. I saw the sword, and my life suddenly became a lot better. It might not have been a ripper, but it would do for a can opener.

"We have to find Father," Glory said tersely, looking around in concern while I tucked my equipment away.

"Isn't he right over there?" Boomer asked as he pointed further along the rainswept roof towards a pair of blue bars. I glanced down at the tank as my body continued to regenerate; it was blasting the courtyard walls with machine gun fire as if in a fit of frustration. Then I looked where the stallion was pointing and saw the eyepatched Sky Striker standing two feet from Dawn. I froze. "Oh no..."

"Father... Mother..." Glory moaned, looking anguished.

"Glory... your mother..." I said weakly as she walked a few steps past me closer to the pair. I didn't know what to really say now. That she might not even be a pony anymore? That she was a murderer?

Up here, the sound of the grinding of the tank crashing back into the manor struggled with the

fury of the fighting below and the storm raging above. Yet, despite all that, there seemed to be a calm surrounding the two like the eye of a hurricane, and I was helpless to do anything but watch. Neither of them spared us the slightest glance; all their attention was for each other. If there was any chance for Dawn giving up this suicidal mission, it was Sky Striker. If I said a word, I knew that we'd lose her to Cognitum forever.

But he didn't know... and Celestia damn me, I couldn't think of any way to warn him without losing her. I looked at the stricken Glory and swallowed. I had to give him a chance. *Please... please save her, Sky Striker.*

I saw him look down at Dawn, concern and frustration warring with each other as Dawn hung her head. Then, with a sob, Sky Striker hugged her close to him. "You're alive. My heart... my love... You're alive... How... why... I thought you were gone forever..."

"I had to go. We would have been killed. You know that," Dawn answered as she nuzzled his neck with a small smile.

The one-eyed stallion sniffed. "We could have left together."

"And taken our children to the Wasteland? No mother could do that," she replied quietly. "Or would you have come with me and left our children alone? Forced Dusk to become their mother when she'd just gotten her cutie mark? No... I couldn't stay, and none of you could come with me. I had a mission to complete down here."

"Your mission...?" he asked softly, then smiled. "I've tried to carry out your mission, Dawn. Thunderhead finally sent down the Volunteer Corps. It took ten years, but we finally came down and helped." He stroked her mane gently. "You could come back with me. We could make the Volunteer Corps bigger and better than before. Do real good! Save the Wasteland."

She clenched her eyes tightly and buried her face in his chest. "Save the Wasteland. That's all I've ever wanted. All I've ever dreamed of." She gave a sob, and then said quietly, "I'd love to go back with you, my love. Back up to my life... my family. To ponies who love me. To a better world."

I swallowed, feeling the floor rumble under my hooves. I wondered if it was from the thunder or the tank moving through the manor beneath me. Tanks should get a special E.F.S. bar! I looked back to Dawn as she trembled in his grasp.

He started to say something, but perhaps he sensed it at the same time I did. A wrongness that didn't belong to the mare he loved. Dawn could never go back. She was like me. Just like me, she knew she didn't deserve happiness. Her followers were fighting and killing children, for Celestia's sake, but I wanted to believe she could. I wanted it as much as Glory and Striker did. Because if there was hope for her... there could be hope for me too...

She swayed before melting. "Sky... I would... I would love to go back up to your castle in the sky. Forever... just like a pony tale..." And for an instant she smiled, and I knew it was over. She'd come back with us, tell me what I'd need to know, disband the Harbingers, and go home to her family. Glory would have her mother back. Striker would have his wife. Dawn would be loved once more. For an instant...

Then her eyes opened and she looked right at me.

The baleful green glow of her eyes flared once as they moved to stare at my hoof. The dire luminescence rippled out from her glowing pupils, and green lines of light traced themselves across her silver irises as it passed. The light shimmered along those fine faint scars crossing her body. Then the gray hide split along those lines and sloughed wetly apart, revealing a blacker hexagon-patterned hide hidden beneath and broken by green tracers of light. From under her gray feathers, dark chisel-like blades emerged, each sporting green circuits of light. Her hooves split as mechanical fingers erupted from the disintegrating flesh of her fetlocks, each digit tipped in a long black talon surrounded by a sickly jade aura. She plunged the curved blades into his back, slicing through his black power armor as if it were butter.

With a furious scream, she plunged her bladed wings deep into his body and with horrifying force flung him away, his crimson blood raining down. I watched as her tail seemed to weave itself into a whiplike appendage that crackled with green lightning. Almost by reflex, Duty and Sacrifice were drawn and, slipping into S.A.T.S., I blasted eight rounds right into her face, enough to decapitate most ponies. The impacts knocked her back from us, and she launched herself into the air. Glowing green chips in her ebony dermis peeked through her ravaged face, but the hexagonal hide was barely damaged and regenerating before my eyes. She hovered there a moment, looking down at Sky Striker's broken body with a cold stare. "Enough! No more weakness!"

"No!" Glory screamed and raced to her fallen father. From inside Dawn's body, the green glow spread, a disintegration field rendering her tattered hide and feathers to ash that washed away in the rain. What remained was a mare who was more cyber than pony. For an instant those glowing green eyes looked at those mechanical fingers and claws, at her husband's blood being washed away, and then looked down at her husband and daughter with a fleeting expression of horror. Then with a scream I'd heard in a buried city beneath the ground, she launched herself into the lightning-filled sky.

Lightning Dancer and I rushed to the fallen Sky Striker. "Stop her! I've got him!" she shouted, and the Neighvarro ponies immediately popped their helmets closed and took to the air. Glory, her face a mask of anguish, did her best to stem the flow of blood. Lightning Dancer pulled out familiar purple potions and poured them into Sky Striker's mouth.

Glory whimpered as she struggled to save her remaining parent. "Come on, Daddy! You've been hurt worse! I heard all your stories. You've taken worse from a dragon..." But though the wounds closed a little, some force seemed to be fighting the restorative magic. The wounds were tinged with a faint, malignant green glow. "The potion's not working, Blackjack!" the cyan pegasus sobbed in distress.

"Dawn... my Dawn... what happened to her?" croaked Sky Striker. "Such a fool. Heard her voice, her name... and I... such a fool..."

"Hush. You're going to live for Glory. You understand? Glory isn't going to lose two parents today," I said, then looked at the two mares. "Can you get him to Star House? The potions might be more effective there."

Glory pulled off the scraps of Sky Striker's armor. "I think so," she said in a terrified whimper, and we carefully draped Sky Striker over her back. I sent a frantic message for Lacunae to get to Star House as soon as possible and use her healing magic on Glory's father. Then there was one last thing to cover...

"You aren't going to try and capture Glory, are you?" I asked Lightning Dancer in a tense mutter. "Please. She's not Rainbow Dash." I hoped I didn't sound as much like I was begging as I feared I did.

Lightning Dancer looked at the bleeding Sky Striker and then back to me. "One hurricane at a time, Blackjack. We'll talk about it later. For now, see to your own battle." With that, she carefully began to fly off towards the northeast.

I sighed, looking at the blood and ash mixing with the rainwater. Why did it always have to end in tears?

Then the tank stopped waiting.

The roof erupted beneath me, and then the world fell out in a roaring avalanche of stone and beams. I landed in a crash in the very ballroom where Blueblood had slain Roses. The elegant room hadn't been picked over as much as the rest of the manor. The white marble floor hadn't been torn out, and the pillars still had their golden carvings of unicorns. Darkened balconies ran across both sides of the long hall. Despite the tank's immense size, it had more than enough room to move freely and was more than capable of blasting me to pieces.

I slowly rose to my hooves as the engine snarled like an angry dragon. The lamps and machine guns whirled as they oriented on me. Glory had her battle. I had mine. No more running. It was time to finish this. "Okay, you metal bastard. You want to play?"

As crazy as it was, I grinned from ear to ear.

"Ante up."

I dove to the side as the machine guns opened up, their rounds tearing into the pristine marble floor and the blackened patch where Blueblood had died. I found momentary cover behind a pillar but didn't dare stand still when the machine guns paused in their barrage. The cannons boomed, and the thick column disintegrated in a spray of marble, filling the air with dust and smoke. The lamps flashed back and forth as the tank turned and strafed wildly along my path. I reached the corner pillar and leapt as the cannons fired again, blasting out stone chunks and shrapnel as I slid across the floor on my side, coming to a stop in front of the stairs that forked in a Y.

My body reacted almost on its own as the tank turned to face me and began firing its machine guns once again. Backflipping end over end, I ascended the stairs as the machine gun ripped a line of fire right after me. I saw that the marble wall behind me where the stairs split was embossed with the Blueblood family tree, and as I raced to the side the machine gun fire continued up along it. As I ducked behind another pillar at the top of the balcony, I watched it rip through the stone all the way up to the final name. 'Goldenblood'.

I popped a sapphire in my mouth and took a peek as the turret slowly turned from one balcony to the other as the rain poured down upon it and smoke and dust drifted through the air. I waited till the cannons pointed towards the far balcony before I moved, running as quickly and as low as I could. Still the machine guns fired wildly as the main turret swung around towards me. I ducked behind a pillar as the guns blazed, their bullets ripping through the stone in a stream of lethal metal. The twin cannons came around and pointed up at me.

This was gonna hurt... I had no idea how, but I stood like a zebra and launched myself in one

arching backflip off the marble balcony, feeling the fiery fingers of the machine gun rounds punching right through my limbs and body. But I couldn't stop. My body couldn't stop. The machine guns chattered as they struggled to track me through the air, and a thunderous boom washed through me as the tank blasted the balcony where I'd stood two second before.

I landed with a bloody clang atop the tank's turret. The machine guns couldn't target me when I was lying flat on the metal, and the turret swung back and forth wildly. I drew my sword with my fingers, clenched down on the grip, and then rolled off onto the front of the tank. With all my strength I jammed the sword into the socket of one of the machine gun turrets, and the silvery blade slipped through the metal with its magical sharpness. Wrenching it about a few times, there was a spark, and the turret froze. I quickly wiggled the blade again for good measure, then pulled it out and repeated the process on the other machine gun turret while it tried to target me. It too sparked and went dead.

Roaring in fury, the tank revved its engines and swung its main turret as it bucked back and forth. I clambered back on top of the turret, and then spotted it: a hatch. Holding on for dear life atop the flat turret, I levered the blade tip into the hatch and started cutting.

You fuckers are gonna die, I thought with cold certainty. I'm going to blow your faces off.

The tank suddenly charged the far wall and struck with such force that only my teeth and two fingers kept me from being flung off. For a moment we both sat there, the tank and I, and then it backed up and fired both cannons nearly point blank into the wall. The shockwave nearly knocked me off, and my magically sharp sword slid out of the hatch along with the cloud of rubble that cascaded over me. I held onto the hatch, looking behind the tank for the glint of silver. Then, as if sensing my intention, the damned machine backed up!

I gritted my teeth as I looked down at the hatch. Rain from the hole blasted in the roof pattered down around me. Even now, the machine gun turrets were glowing pink. Soon they'd be operational once more, and then the hoof-wide gash I'd managed to cut in the hatch would follow. There was only one thing to do... I hooked my fingers into the hole, squatted, and started to pull.

I felt the tension build more and more. Felt the line between flesh and metal grow more acute. The motors in my legs began to whine as I put more force into them than they'd been designed to bear. Then they started to smoke as my own repair talismans struggled to keep them pulling. Pull, damn it! My flesh began to distort where pony ended and metal began. Warnings filled my vision as the metal hatch began to bow outwards. Just a little more. Bullet holes torn through my metal limbs twisted as smoke reached my nostrils. Just a little more...

Everything gave all at once, the motors and power talismans popping one after another in one final spasmodic tear. The stress on my metal limbs caused my already battered back leg to explode apart completely, and my right foreleg ripped off entirely, connection cup and all, leaving a bloody mass of wire, metal, and meat. My left foreleg shattered at the joint midway, flopping uselessly by my side as I finally pushed myself further than even my cyberpony body could go.

But it had been worth it: my final pull had also forced the hatch open. Now I just had to kick the explosive block off my barding and into the tank and... um... fall on the detonator?

I stared down into a turret filled with technology I could barely understand stuffed into a space that nopony could fit inside. It was filled with wires, talismans, and a clear glass jar that was occupied by a round globe and a few metal vertebrae. A mechanical arm tipped with a camera looked up at me, and

then the equipment inside spoke in a mechanical voice.

"Kzzzt....K....Kuntzzz."

Not 'he's *in* the tank.'

'He *is* the tank.'

"Deus," I whispered back.

With my legs destroyed and my horn burned out, there was nothing I could do as he jerked back and sent me tumbling off the turret and onto the ground. There was nowhere to run. I had nothing left to fight with as he pulled back and pointed every turret right at me, lamps glaring. He sat there, and I could almost imagine him savoring the moment. Would he blast me to pieces? Machine gun me apart? Crush me beneath his treads? His engine revved over and over again.

So I rocked up into a sitting position, looked up at the tiny socket cameras beneath the lamps, and shouted as loudly as I could, "I'm sorry!"

The engine abruptly fell to a quiet idle as I sat there, the rain pouring down upon me. "I'm sorry that I killed you. I saw your memory orb, Deus! I felt... how you felt. I know how Sanguine kept you on a short leash and used your pain against you... pain that nopony deserved!" I closed my eyes. "And I saw the orb in Miramare. I saw what Brass did to you... what that... that..." I clenched my jaw and then shouted, "that Cunt did to you!"

Slowly, I looked up into the cameras, rain and tears streaking down my face. "I know you loved Twist... and I know that she couldn't love you in return. That you never meant to hurt her. That you just wanted to love her. But you couldn't. And you made a mistake... And I saw how Vanity kept you from her when all you wanted to do was to see her once! Just fucking once!" I yelled as I rocked there in the rain. "But he didn't. He left you there in Hightower to rot. Like you were scum."

I sat there silently, expecting the annihilating blast to come at any second. But it didn't. All I could do was sit there as my E.F.S. flashed critical failure at me on multiple limbs. I lifted my shattered right stump, showing the cables coming out of my torn flesh. It didn't hurt... not like it should. "I know what it's like to be a cyberpony now, Deus. I know what it's like to feel dead inside. To have your body move in ways you can't understand. Like you're not really in control anymore. I know the feeling of violation... how it feels like you've been turned into a thing. And I know you felt the same way, Deus. I know how it feels to have the one good flesh and blood part of you that makes you feel like a pony... and I'm sorry that I took that away from you as well."

The engine let one long low growl, but it dwindled away. "You were a good pony once. You fought for Equestria. You were a Marauder, gunning down enemies with a minigun to hold a hill that command told you to abandon. And you were a monster, Deus. You made a horrible mistake... there's no lie to that. But you were never given a chance to show you could be more than that mistake. To prove you were a better pony. To do better..."

"I used to think that what you did to my home was horrible. That you were a monster for it, and deserved whatever you got. Well, I learned what it means to make a horrible mistake. I know what it means to become a monster, Deus. I became a monster too!" I shouted at the pony within the machine. "But I got a chance to do better. To become more than a monster. And now you do as well. You can

choose the better choice. You can turn your back on the Harbingers who would have had you kill children; make up for your mistake.”

I heard a commotion at the hole in the wall Deus had made to drive in and saw P-21, Scotch Tape, and Rampage, their eyes wide in shock. My eyes met P-21’s, I gave a little shake of my head, and he stopped the pair from charging in.

I bowed my head before the tank, closing my eyes. “Please. One monster to another... please...” I whispered, “choose to be a pony... Doof.”

There was a moment of silence save for the soft noise of the rain and the low rumble of the tank, and then Deus’s engine let out a mechanical scream as the cannons fired. The wall behind me blew out. Again he fired. And again. Again. The shockwaves of the cannons battered me and the concussion would have deafened me had my ears been flesh and blood. Again he fired. Again. He blew out the walls and ceiling. His machine guns ripped apart the balconies, and his cannons pulverized the marble surrounding us. Again. Again. Again.

Finally the barrage ended; only a bowl of rubble remained of the ballroom. Rain hissed to steam off his barrels as the water washed the dust from his striped armor. I hadn’t moved. Slowly, my friends peeked over the edge of the debris at where I still sat, head bowed and body broken. All four cameras oriented on me. Slowly I smiled. “Thank you,” I whispered.

Deus ground his gears and turned, ramming the far wall of crumbled stone and ploughing right through it. Slowly, I looked over at my friends as they rushed to me. “Oh Sweet Celestia,” Scotch Tape said as she lifted my shattered cybernetic leg. “Blackjack... why do you keep breaking yourself?”

Maybe it was the blood loss, but I laughed, which only made them look more worried as I said softly, “Because I know there are people who can put me back together... make me a pony again.” I looked at Rampage. “Did we win?”

“Yeah,” Rampage said. “The Harbingers have run off. Steel Rain got away, though.”

P-21 looked the way that Deus had gone and then back to me. “How’d you beat him?”

“The same way you beat me,” I murmured softly as I leaned my broken body against his. “I gave him a chance to be a better pony.”

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author’s note: So, before any blame falls on my editing staff, I want everypony to know that the tank battle, backflips and limb damage all, is my own fault. Some ponies have noticed I like certain animes and you might be able to pick which one inspired this battle. If you found it ridiculously cheesy and poor writing, it’s my fault. But this is something I had planned since chapter 16.... and I really thought that I’d get to it a lot sooner than this.... sigh...

Anyway, I want to give my editors huge thanks for this chapter. Folks probably noticed a lot of things got in the way of getting this chapter done. But Hinds, Bro, and Snipehamster stuck it out and got through the whole thing. I’d also like to thank Fuzzy for giving his time and opinion to this chapter. There were some major questions about what was going to happen in this chapter. As always, thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. And lastly, thanks everypony who leaves comments and feedback. It’s really important to me, even if I don’t always get to responding as promptly as I should.

I hope that everyone is happy with the pacing of the story. I know Horizons is ridiculously, freakishly long. I hope that it's not going too long. I have a plan and an ending, I promise. Hopefully we'll get to it before next Christmas... or the Christmas after next...

Anyhow, thanks for sticking with Horizons and I hope the story is doing well. Hopefully we'll get one more chapter before Christmas. Take care. Thanks for reading!)