

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 54: Fate

"Oh, my fortune telling has nothing to do with my Pinkie sense! It's only good for vague and immediate events. Like that, see? ...Where did that even come from?"

"So," Glory asked from the kitchen as she carefully stowed every bit of food we had left into bags, "is he safe?"

There was no question who 'he' was. Rampage looked up from where she sat as a surly teenager adjusting the straps on her power hooves. "Safe? Deus doesn't do safe. He does 'more harm' and 'less harm'. 'Safe' isn't applicable to him." She then started to put on the metal armor, which was still a size or so too large. I supposed having a size-changing body would be extremely annoying. She seemed to have a system of belts and straps to keep it all in place.

We were rested and getting ready to move out with the sunset. All that was needed was to make sure everything was stored up. Rampage had drawn a crude map showing how to get to Grimhoof, a route essentially heading back south to Flank, then continuing east till the road crossed the Hoofington River above the reservoir. If all went according to plan, the Harbingers would see us go and not bother Chapel any longer.

P-21 looked at the magazines of bullets he was carefully inventorying and preparing in advance. "Well, he's less harm to us... unless he wants to commit suicide. I found five explosive devices wired up inside him; one of them was set to go off in less than an hour. Whoever put him in that thing had been pretty methodical about it. First charge would have disabled the case holding his brain and severed his connection to the tank. The second would have scrapped the life support, then the repair talisman, and finally the engine itself."

Scotch Tape carefully stacked up her own supplies. Tools, duct tape, Wonderglue, scrap metal, plungers, wire, some arcane electronics scrap, and capacitors were all arranged around her in a fan. "How'd the zebras even shrink down a reactor small enough to fit on a tank? I can't figure that one out," the filly said, then passed a roll of tape to Boo, who caught it in her mouth and then set it into the bag. How'd Scotch teach her that trick?

"Better question is 'Where did the Harbingers get a tank in the first place?'" Twister asked as the Neighvarro pegasus checked her power armor. Next to her, Sunset was loading her beam rifles with new cartridges. "All our recon said the surface shouldn't have anything even close to that kind of firepower." She gave Glory another of those long, indecisive looks like she was trying to come to a decision.

"Maybe it was captured. Maybe they have a working facility making repairs somewhere underground," Glory hypothesized with a shrug. She held up a cyberpony cake to me. "Want one before I pack them all away?"

"Awww, if you insist," I chuckled; she tossed it to me, and I caught it with my magic. Lacunae was outside, keeping an eye out for the Harbingers. No sign of them yet, but they were reforming and rearming; we had to get out of here before they made a second attack on me while I was still here. And if they tried to use Chapel as a hostage against me again... well... I think at that point I was entitled to go

Yellow River on the Harbingers. Besides, given the defenses Chapel was building up, there'd be the chance of an embarrassing defeat by a bunch of foals.

"Those are going to make you fat, Blackjack," Scotch Tape opined with a snicker.

"I'm still getting things repaired. I'm a growing mare," I said, taking a bite. I chewed happily for a moment, then sighed. "The real question I have is why he's coming with us in the first place? I don't think a radio-controlled bomb would stop Deus from killing somepony if he really wanted to." Rampage snickered, and I looked at her. "Rampage's 'Follow Blackjack because she beat you' theory aside, there has to be a reason. You knew him longest, Rampage. Can you think of any other reason?"

"Deus wasn't exactly the most social war machine," Rampage pointed out. "Nopony besides Big Daddy and Brutus ever fought him hoof to hoof. Even Psychoshy never tried to take him on. Gorgon was the closest thing to a friend he had, and he was a mute monsterpony." The young mare then stopped and frowned.

"What?" I asked as I checked the wear on Vigilance. Some parts from some twelve millimeter pistols had done it good, and I'd tried, mostly in vain, to polish it to its original sheen. A markspony carbine would have to do for longer ranges. I'd all but given up on keeping a riot shotgun intact.

"Well... it's stupid," Rampage said with a flush. "It's just that... well... I think he was scared of me. Don't get me wrong, I know I'm one scary pony, but you remember Deus. There wasn't a mare he wouldn't try and fuck if she looked at him wrong." After what Brass and Hightower had done to him, I could understand it. Forgive... no... but I could understand. "He barely said two words to me in two years."

But given how Rampage resembled Twist with her coat and her mane, it wasn't hard to imagine why. "I wish I could just ask him," I grunted in annoyance.

"There are wires that connect him to a speaker, but he doesn't talk," P-21 said with a shrug as he packed his things away in his bag. It never ceased to amaze me how he could hide entire grenades in his brushy mane and tail. Maybe it was kicking the Med-X, but he looked pretty good. Then again, he'd always looked good... not flier-good, but still...

"He might be suffering from severe aphasia," Glory said as she tucked the last of the food away and trotted to her battle saddle, deftly slipping on the gatling beam gun's harness. When she saw my sardonic expression of cluelessness, she elaborated, "It's a speech impairment due to brain damage. Yes and no may be all he's capable of expressing."

"Or he's keeping silent," P-21 suggested as he shrugged into a bandoleer of 40mm grenades for Persuasion. He glanced around, looking a little agitated, and checked the grenade launcher for the third time.

Rampage snickered. "Oh, come on. Deus couldn't go five minutes without a 'cunt'." P-21 looked at her coolly, and the striped mare blinked. "What?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't use language like that around my daughter," he said primly. I shared a look with Glory and suppressed a laugh.

"Oh, really? What should I use?" Rampage asked with a grin. "Sugar pot?"

"Vagina would be the most accurate," Glory offered.

"Hoo-hah," Twister suggested.

"Vertical smile?" Sunset said with a grin.

"I usually just call it my turbine," Scotch said as she rubbed her chin thoughtfully, then looked at me, "cause it makes me hum." It seemed perfectly reasonable to me, but P-21's mane seemed to twang a little like snapped wires. "What?" she asked, and the poor blue stallion looked so flustered that I decided not to chime in with my own personal nickname.

"Okay. That's enough talk of... that..." he said with a nervous grin, waving his hooves as if trying to banish the topic.

"Oh, come on. Surely you have some little nicknames for your own equipment?" Rampage teased, then shook her head as she looked back at Scotch, then at Glory. "Aren't the socio-sexual mores of stable ponies fascinating?"

She flushed a little, but then replied primly, "Don't ask me. I spent my grade school being encouraged to prefer fillies. Boys for boys. Mare's love. All kinds of slogans and stuff to keep us apart when we went into our fertile cycles."

Rampage laughed and grinned at Scotch Tape. "Oh, yeah. Wait till you start your cycle. Best and worst time of the year for mares. Then you'll call it your... I dunno, reactor or something." Rampage snickered, then sniffed the air. "Smells like one of us is due right now. Knowing our luck, we'll all kick into cycle at the same time. That's always fun." I glanced at Glory blushing furiously and giving a little squirm. Rampage turned and grinned at P-21. "What do *you* think?"

P-21 sat there, eyelid twitching before he jammed his hat on his head as his cheeks flared. He turned and marched out, shoving Boomer aside as he muttered darkly. The brown stallion blinked as he looked back over his shoulder. "What's his problem?"

"Propriety met reproduction on the battlefield and was promptly bent over and rutted," Rampage replied. She caught my glare and recoiled, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Fine. I'll apologize to His Grumpiness." Power hooves clicking, she trotted out after him.

Boomer took several deep breaths. "Oh, yeah. Thought something smelled good." He gave a crooked grin. "If any of y'all need that itch scratched, well, I'd be happy to help out. There's a reason the ladies call me Boomer, after all." I chuckled, remembering how close I'd come to gelding him. What a waste that would have been...

"Just because a mare's fertile doesn't mean she becomes a sex fiend, Boomer. Y'all know that," Twister said.

"I reckon not. T'get to 'sex fiend' takes a few drinks." The brown buck grinned, and the mare flushed a little.

"Y'all better get back out there and keep an eye out for any hostiles, 'fore I remove the head yer

thinkin' with!" Twister snapped.

"Sure. Might need to... nnngh... adjust my armor though," he said with a laugh before he went back out. Mmm... fliers...

"Stallions," Twister muttered. Then the lavender mare saw Sunset looking at her curiously and flushed. "It's not me! I'm at least two weeks from cycling."

"Is it that bad?" Scotch Tape asked with a little frown.

"Eh." I gave a little shrug. "You'll start looking at stallions more and the idea will be on your mind a lot for a week or so. Just make sure you stay around other mares, and we'll stop you from doing something with some moron just because he's got a nice body. Make sure you never point your hind end at a stallion if you can help it. Really gives them the idea if they get a good whiff. Give yourself a good rubbing once or twice a day till the itch passes. You've got your implant, right?" The filly nodded. "Then you've got nothing to worry about if you do mess it up. It's more an annoyance than anything."

Scotch Tape looked relieved as she finished passing things to Boo. The last of the supplies were packed away. I kept looking at Glory, and as she completed her own packing I trotted up to her. "So, is it you?" I asked, giving her a little nudge.

"No!" she said as she blushed furiously, then pressed her lips together. "Maybe..." Finally she slumped. "Probably." She sighed and rolled her eyes. "Ugh... stupid biology. It's not like I'm attracted to him in any way, shape, or form. It's just a dumb little thought that I just can't quite put out of my mind. It's not fair I've got a piece of anatomy nagging me to be a mommy. This is the worst time possible for me to have a kid!"

I gave her a little nuzzle. "It's not a bad thing to think of down here. Just roll with it." She huffed at me, but finally gave in with a roll of her eyes. "That a girl."

"Well, he is pretty nice," Glory said with a little smile. That's the spirit. Bisexuality: double your options, double your fun! And Boomer was certainly nice to look at.

"Now you're thinking like Blackjack," I said with a grin. Maybe if she broadened her horizons a bit, I could go along for the ride with her. "I think you'd make a great mom, Glory." I winced inwardly, hoping that she didn't take it the wrong way.

But she didn't. "Maybe someday... if things were normal and not so crazy... maybe. But it's probably just the hormones talking," she said, then looked towards the door with a wistful sort of smile.

"It wouldn't hurt you to experiment," I said with a nudge. I supposed I could terrify the brown stallion into behaving himself.

"Maybe," she said again with another little sigh. "It might be okay with him. I doubt he'd hurt me." Her wings pomfed out a little bit as she smiled, then trotted for the door along with everypony else. "There's just something about earth ponies..." she murmured softly before closing the door behind her.

I stopped in my tracks and blinked in shock at the closed door. "Wait. What?"

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There weren't any cheers as we climbed onto Deus, but everyone in Chapel watched us go with an unfamiliar look in their eyes. Maybe it was the sight of the black-and-white-striped tank with 'MEGA DEUS' hoofpainted by Scotch and Rampage in red across the front, or perhaps it was the three pegasi in ominous black Enclave power armor flying overhead along with a purple alicorn, but every pony, ghoul, and zebra watched us go with an odd expression I'd hadn't ever really seen before. Not fear. Not joy.

As Deus's treads rumbled along the road through the village, I looked out at all the faces gazing on and gave the smallest smile and little wave back. I must have looked ridiculous; my reinforcements made wearing normal barding impractical, so some of Sky Striker's plates had been duct taped and Wonderglued to my augmented limbs to cover the gaps. Still, I saw something akin to open awe in Sekashi and Majina as we rolled by their cottage. Harpica, the ghoul maid, gave a bow and spread her dusty wings in a curtsy. Charity looked on, her normally calculating eyes watching me now with something more honest and sincere.

"Why are they looking at us like that?" I asked as I flushed.

Rampage looked at me. "Are you serious, Blackjack? You don't know?"

I frowned at her. "Me not knowing is nothing new. They keep staring at us..."

"Not at us, Blackjack. Not even at Deus," Rampage replied. "You. They're staring at you."

Now I was blushing everywhere that wasn't metal. "Me? Why me? What did I do?"

Glory sighed, smiled, and shook her head. P-21 leveled a sardonic look at me. Even Scotch Tape seemed to get it. Rampage's grin lost some of its edge as we rolled out of the village, and she just looked at me with admiration and pity. "You gave them hope, Blackjack."

* * *

The last time I'd travelled between Flank and Chapel, I'd been running like a maniac to try and save Chapel from Sanguine. This time, I was a passenger on a war machine with three power-armored pegasi providing escort. As the evening gloom deepened, I started wishing that the Harbingers would attack. I scanned all around for some red bar which could alleviate this tedium, but there wasn't anything that could provide a distraction. Not even a radroach or bloatsprite dared to challenge our passage.

"You're pouting, Blackjack," P-21 said as he stared out at the gloom.

"I am not," I replied, pouting as I glared at the darkness. "Think they're out there? The Harbingers?"

He shrugged, checking his grenade launcher. "I'm certain of it. They're watching us. Thinking of ways to separate us from Deus, you from the rest of us. Maybe a lucky shot from those big guns of Steel Rain's... though they can't risk destroying EC-1101. Maybe when you go to that plantation. Dawn threw away her family and her life. She hasn't quit. Quitting leaves her with nothing."

I sighed, looked out into the growing gloom, then glanced over at Glory speaking in low tones with Rampage. She met my look with a momentary one of apprehension, then a forced little smile. When I didn't return it, her expression turned concerned for a moment. Finally, I managed a small half smile. Only then did she finally give me a sincere smile. She might have looked like Rainbow Dash, even had

her athleticism, but she was still not far removed from the timid mare I'd discovered beneath that terminal. She didn't love me, and maybe I didn't love her. Life was a tempest, and she clung to me as the one and only constant in her life. The collar she'd put on me was a hollow symbol. A lie.

But sometimes a lie was something to live for.

Someday she'd find someone she did love. Someone who didn't hurt her all the time. Someone better. We might be together for days, months, or even years, but eventually I'd do something to drive her awa--

Then P-21 smacked the back of my head. "Ow? What did you do that for?" I whined.

"You're getting that look again," P-21 said with a smirk as he tugged his hat lower on his face.

"What look?" I asked as I rubbed the spot where he'd hit me.

He shook his head. "That look like you're trying to think and arriving at all the wrong conclusions. Relax, Blackjack. I'm sure that we'll be attacked sooner or later. Don't stress yourself till then."

I huffed and then groaned. "I can't help it! I get all wiggly when there's nothing going on!" My metal legs kicked the air before I huffed and lay limply. "I hate being bored."

He glanced at me and chuckled. "Don't you have a memory orb or something you can go into?" he asked with a small roll of his eyes.

"I don't want to be all memory orb'ed if the Harbingers attack," I said with a sigh as we rolled along.

"Then sleep," he said with a shrug. "Or whine more quietly," he added, then spat a grenade into the breach of his weapon and clacked it closed. I looked at him skeptically but then sighed and closed my eyes. Really... how could anyone take a nap... on a... tank...

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"This doesn't look good," Jetstream muttered, looking about at the rocky valley as the Marauders stepped out of the skywagon. The open area was a mile across, two miles long, and filled with gray boulders and scrubby yellow grass. In the middle were a number of black-and-white-striped figures underneath a white open tent. "They could hide a whole legion in those rocks, and we wouldn't know it till the firing started." Two dozen soldier ponies, a dozen pegasi, and a half dozen red-striped zebras moved out from two other skywagons.

"Ayep," Big Macintosh said stoically as he chewed on his grass stem. The rest of the Marauders slowly fanned out. Dark thunderclouds overhead boomed and threatened rain. "Orders?" he asked as he looked back at Vanity with a small smile.

The emerald-maned unicorn gave a sheepish curl of his lips in return. It was clear that while Vanity might have the officer's crest, Big Macintosh was in charge. "Secure the meeting area. The command post will be here at the skywagons. The Third Battalion should be deployed somewhere southeast of us, preventing any large numbers of enemies from moving in. Our real concern is assassination."

"You really think they'd kill Celestia?" Twist asked with a scowl.

"Yes," I said softly. "There's real concern that this is a trap." That drew some surprised looks, but I flushed and looked away.

Big Macintosh nodded. "I'll be in the center with the Princess." He gestured towards the skies with his hoof. "Jetstream above with the fliers. Twist, move into those rocks with the Proditor. Doof, take that high point in case we need suppressive fire pulling back to the wagons. Applesnack, take a dozen and set up a line to the north. Captain'll take the other squad to the south." He paused, then looked at me. "Pick your spot for a field of fire." He looked at Vanity for confirmation.

"That sounds good, Sergeant. Carry on," the unicorn said, then turned to Echo. "Get in touch with the Third as soon as you can. Four squads aren't going to be nearly enough if this goes bad. I know Celestia ordered no troops, but there're just too many ways this can go wrong." The white unicorn glanced at me for a long moment. "Make sure you've got a dedicated channel between Psalm and Big Macintosh. If there's trouble, she'll be the first to spot it. Everypony move out."

I turned and walked to the skywagon for my gear. I was carefully assembling my precision weapon when a stallion said behind me, "Hey there, Becalm. Long time no..." I turned, levitating the sniper rifle as I regarded the orange unicorn carrying saddlebags bulging with scrolls and papers. His yellow eyes focused on the rifle floating beside me, and he finished lamely, "...see?"

"Cheddar?" I murmured. "What... what are you doing here?"

The orange stallion snorted. "We haven't seen each other for years and that's all you can say?" he asked, his eyes moving once more over to the gun. "You've... changed."

"We've all changed. I'm fighting for Luna now," I said quietly as I tried to hide the rifle behind my back, a futile gesture given that it was longer than my body. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here with Celestia's peace envoys. The Princess believes that my talent with languages will be useful. There're over twenty different dialects spoken in the Zebra Empire... and... um..." He swallowed, his smile growing more tense. "That's a really big gun..." he murmured.

I sighed and stopped my pointless efforts at concealment. "This is Penance," I said as I levitated it before us. "Magically augmented and designed by the M.W.T. and M.A.S. for unicorn snipers. It's a prototype and, given all the fuss it requires, probably won't be put in production soon. It fires a variety of fifty caliber loads ranging from explosive antipersonnel rounds to armor-penetrating bullets." I removed the magazine, showing the jet black bullets within. "These are dragonkiller rounds, in the event of a dragon attack. A... friend... provided them for me." Said scarred friend was exchanging terse words with Big Macintosh and Vanity at the moment. Though he met my gaze, Goldenblood only frowned. He looked mad... no, not mad. Fearful.

Cheddar stammered at me in horror. "What... how... why in Equestria would you bring something like that to a peace meeting?"

"It seemed prudent." I swallowed as I looked away from my teacher and turned back to my childhood friend. "Don't you understand what will happen if Celestia is captured? The zebras could use that to force a surrender. Or they could kill her. After all, they wanted Luna to be here rather than

Celestia.”

Cheddar pressed back, “And we asked for the Caesar to come. Instead he’s sent a tribal elder to negotiate for him.”

“A tribal elder?” one of the Proditor asked, looking over with a frown. It took me a minute to recognize a younger Shujaa. “It is Briarthorn, yes?” Cheddar looked away a moment, then nodded. The zebra mare looked contemplative. “I see. Elder Thorn is only a few years ‘elder’ to I. She is of the Mendi tribe, who have always objected to the war, much like Ministry Mare Fluttershy. Mendi are as respected as the Ministry of Peace. If it were Elder Earthquaker of the Achu, or Elder Longsight of the Propoli, however, it would be far more promising.”

“We have to start somewhere,” he said plaintively, but the Proditor was clearly skeptical. He sighed and covered his face with a hoof as Shujaa continued after Twist. “This is exactly what Celestia was afraid of. You people don’t understand. These ‘security’ arrangements are going to unravel everything before we can even have a chance to talk!” He looked at me, practically begging me to agree. “Don’t you understand? If we don’t show them at least a gesture of trust, we’ll never have a chance.”

A few years ago, I would have agreed with him. I would have taken the risk if it would mean an end to the fighting. But I’d heard the atrocity of Littlehorn. So many students I’d known... if the zebras were capable of that, then they were capable of anything. “Trust them with something less precious than the Princesses. Send Rainbow Dash. She can at least fight if they try anything.”

“Listen to you!” he stammered. “Try anything? What happened to the filly I helped wash the floors with?”

She killed people. Lots of people. And if I just served Luna loyally and faithfully, everything would be fine. It wouldn’t be for nothing. “You can’t understand.”

His eyes hardened. “No. I guess I can’t. Try not to let the zebras see you with that thing, Psalm. Contrary to what most ponies think, zebras revere their elders as much as we do the Princesses. Even if they’re not from a fighting tribe.”

He turned on a hoof and trotted away. I knelt, cradling my gun. Everything would be all right in the end. I’d serve Luna, and she’d forgive me. She’d absolve all my sins. Make all the zebras I’d killed worthwhile. “Please, Luna. Please...” I prayed silently.

“We’ll need the Marauders more than simple prayers,” Goldenblood rasped wetly as he trotted up. “Big Macintosh will be present at the pavilion. We can only hope that things get mired in bickering.” He rubbed his face nervously. “I can’t imagine what Celestia is thinking. This is precisely why ambassadors were invented!”

The scarred and emaciated stallion looked even more frazzled than usual. “Do you really think they’re going to try to kill Celestia?”

“If they think she’s Luna, yes,” he said as he paced a little back and forth. “Everything is a mess in the backchannels. I don’t know if they think it’s going to be Celestia or Luna. I’ve told them it’s not Luna, but they’ll question it. For all I know, they might think it’s *more* likely after I warned them.”

“Maybe it’s sincere,” I offered, mostly as a token to my childhood friend. “Maybe they want

peace.”

He snorted skeptically and shrugged as if peace were inconsequential. “Perhaps. I’m more concerned about Celestia forcing this and negotiating personally.” He ran a hoof along his golden mane as he stared at nothing. “Maybe she’s trying to atone for starting the war... this is some elaborate form of suicide. No... unlikely. But perhaps she wants to be captured. Maybe she sees this as a way to force a conclusion to the war.” He rubbed his cheeks. “Or maybe she plans to defect... she’s never approved of the ministries or the expansion of the war effort. Always trying to nudge her way back towards power.” He looked on the verge of a nervous breakdown as he stared with his bloodshot eyes into empty space.

“Have you... talked... to Celestia about it?” I asked, guardedly.

He gave a hollow little laugh before breaking into wet coughs. When he finished he gave me a wan grin. “I’m not high on Celestia’s friends list at the moment, or ever again.” He rubbed his face. “We can’t let them take her. It will mean the end of Luna as ruler. Celestia is still frightfully popular.”

“Don’t worry, Teacher,” I said as I put my hoof on his shoulder. “I won’t. No matter what.”

He gave a sad little smile. “I hardly think it’s fair to call me that. I’ve never taught you much worthwhile. Rocks and gems and metals... hardly the education you deserved.”

“You taught me about devotion and conviction,” I said with a sincere smile. “Don’t worry, Teacher. I won’t let them take her.”

He sighed and nodded. “I’ll need to go to the radio wagon. Listen to the backchannels and see if there’s any hint of what they’re planning. I’ve never heard things so chaotic in the Empire since Luna took the throne. There’s no telling what the Caesar is planning. Or the elders. Or the legates...” He gave a wan smile. “Equestria isn’t the only place with shadowy politics. The zebra invented the damned game.” His smile disappeared and he turned, trotting quickly to the radio wagon.

I kept the gun floating at my side as I moved towards an ideal firing position, a rocky outcrop five hundred yards from the tents. It’d give me a field of fire overlooking the tents and beyond. I climbed up on the rocks and took a position where I could look between the stones. Most snipers worked in pairs of shooters and spotters, but a few unicorns had the talent to levitate a rifle and aim it steadily for hours without straining their eyes or their horn. I unraveled my cloak and spread it over myself and my gun. The magic couldn’t match zebra invisibility, but it did manage to blend in with the surrounding rock enough to make me appear to be just another stone.

One quick radio check with the sergeant, and I was set.

It was an hour later that the winged chariot arrived. In that time, I’d used my magic scope to pick out three dozen zebras ranging from sniper pairs to hoof to hoof specialists. Each location was relayed to Echo, who’d pass the information on to the rest of the Marauders.

Then brass horns sounded, heralding the arrival of the Princess on her golden chariot. From the other side of the valley thundered ram’s horns, and a young adult scarlet dragon flew over the mountains, landing and depositing a trio of zebras. The dragon then pumped his wings and took off once more as both peace groups trotted to the tents. I tracked the dragon till it disappeared back behind the horizon.

Maybe this would be okay...

From over the radio connection with Big Macintosh, I heard the envoys greet each other with Cheddar interpreting. Sweeping my scope over the valley, I watched as the zebra elder greeted the Princess with clear surprise. Shujaa had been right. The elder wasn't much older than myself. Still, from the security arrangements, they seemed to value the bead-bedecked zebra mare as more than just a throwaway.

Over the radio, I could hear Cheddar talking back and forth. To hear Briarthorn speak, the war was becoming ever more burdensome to the Empire. More and more was being asked of the tribes to fight the Maiden of the Stars. Soon it came to the sticking point: Luna's rule was a non-starter. So long as she remained in power, the Caesar could not entertain the topic of peace. I watched Celestia through my scope, the magical lens peering through the tent at her. I saw the pain and indecision clearly etched on her regal face. I imagined it to be exactly how she'd looked after Littlehorn.

I should have been watching the others. I spotted only a tiny bit of movement in the back of the delegation and a flash of green.

From inside the tent came a pop, and suddenly a brilliant green cloud billowed up and filled the space. Everyone began shouting, screaming, and coughing as they struggled and milled about. The tent collapsed, and then, with a flare of magic, Celestia ripped the canvas and let the billowing smoke roll out. She swayed and collapsed as Big Macintosh staggered over her prone form.

"Cupcake! Code Cupcake!" I shouted over the radio to Echo. "The Princess is down! Code Cupcake!" I immediately started looking for targets in the delegation.

Then things went from Cupcake to Roadapples. The ground beside the tent collapsed, and instantly zebras began swarming out of the hole. Many of them sported strange wings and took to the air as soon as they were above ground. I heard the orders coming fast and furious as the pony delegation staggered and flopped back around Big Macintosh, finding a new appreciation for the huge stallion.

Yet one didn't. Cheddar waved his hooves as he jabbered to the zebras who advanced out of the hole in the earth. The zebra envoys were shoved and kicked aside as the newcomers moved in on the fallen Princess. The elder tried to move in beside Cheddar, snapping in rapid-fire zebra. Some of the zebra attackers, with almost contemptuous ease, scooped her up and tossed her onto another zebra's back, and she was swiftly borne away from the fighting.

"Get behind me!" Big Macintosh thundered.

"No! Please! Peace! We want peace!" Cheddar shouted as the zebra attackers advanced.

"Have it," a stallion replied calmly. The powerful zebra rose and brought his hooves down in one thunderous stomp that exploded my friend's head like a grape.

My round returned the favor a moment later, the enchanted bullet magically punching a hole the diameter of my hoof through his head. I'd fired before his blow fell, but the distance had prevented my friend's salvation by a half second.

Forgive me Luna, for I have taken the life of another.

Chaos reigned as the zebras engaged the security force on all sides. Big Macintosh, in only his armor, stood between the Princess and her attackers. The zebras were as unarmed as the red earth pony, but they moved with the deadly swiftness and strength of Stampede. Four on one, they flanked and surrounded the stallion who met blow with blow. The zebras, however, had to keep back and moving; they knew I was out here. No doubt a sniper was looking for me this second. I couldn't count on headshots, but I could punch a hole through any zebra that dared to stop for more than a moment.

"Where is the Third Battalion?" I heard shouted over my radio. Was it Vanity? "We're pinned down!" Doof's minigun maintained a spray of firepower at any zebra that dared to get close to the skywagons. The gray stallion bled from a dozen holes, but he only stopped firing to chug a healing potion and let somepony reload the gun. Overhead, Jetstream and the other fliers worked to keep the bat-winged zebras from spreading out and assuming air superiority. Twist and the Proditor moved through the rocks, taking down the sniper teams as fast as they could.

But they were still after the Princess. If they managed to get her, they could flee back to zebra territory if the Third wasn't in position to stop them as planned. It was a huge window, and there were far more zebras in the valley than our own people.

Something heavy landed on my back, hooves trying to grab my head through the cloak. I didn't dare look away from the red stallion struggling against his attackers. If they hadn't been trying to capture Celestia, they would have simply gunned him down. If I looked away... I couldn't look away. My horn pulled my sidearm, pressed it to the batwinged zebra atop me, and started firing. I heard a mare scream, struggling to snap my neck as I maintained focus. Then the hooves around my throat grew weaker as blood soaked my cloak and hide.

The peace envoys struggled to help Big Macintosh, but they weren't soldiers. They'd been poisoned, too, and several, like Celestia, were either unconscious or sickened. The best they did was to slow one of the zebras long enough for me to blast out their throat. Too many were kicked and lay where they fell, dead or close enough that it didn't matter.

I couldn't let them take Celestia. Please... somepony... anypony... help. All I could do was shoot things. That's all I could do.

Big Macintosh, bleeding and bruised, refused to fall. His coat shiny with blood, standing to protect what were likely broken ribs, one eye matted with blood, he stood on. He would not fall. Could not fall. One of the zebras darted in for a shattering kick, but the stoic pony took the blow and grabbed the hind leg between his hooves. The zebra struggled and flailed, and my round punched through his chest.

The last attacker made a charge on the injured red stallion. As he was beaten by a dozen savage blows of horrific strength, I felt an icy certainty that he would fall, Celestia would be taken, the war would be lost, and Luna would be ruined. I couldn't let that happen. I tried to lead the shot, but the blood of the slain zebra dripped into my eyes and smeared my vision with a single blink. I fired, but my shot went wide. "No," I whispered in horror, tears dripping as I struggled to adjust my aim before it was too late.

Then, despite all his injuries and the debilitating poison, Big Macintosh turned as if to run. The zebra let out a scream of triumph. But Big Macintosh's body wasn't set for flight. As the zebra dropped to attack, Macintosh's hind legs pulled back and unleashed one final immense kick that connected with

shattering force. The striped stallion careened away and hit the dirt, lying prone on the ground like a sack of broken bones and meat. Then Big Macintosh collapsed on the grass beside Celestia.

But he wasn't done. I could see another two dozen zebras racing towards him from the head of the valley. They were only minutes away. "We need evac for Celestia and Big Macintosh now! Right now!" I cried out as I shoved the zebra corpse off me and struggled to clear my vision.

"We're pinned down," Applesnack snapped. "Can't move two steps without the damned stripes climbing all over us."

"It's hoof to hoof in these rocks," shouted Twist, followed by a battle cry.

"Damned zebras have reinforcements. We should be there in five minutes," Vanity swore. I looked at the striped attackers racing towards the ruins of the tent. Big Macintosh and the Princess didn't have five minutes, and from the firearms the zebras brandished, I doubted they'd let Big Macintosh get off another kick even if he was in any state to try. I checked my ammo. Two rounds left. How'd I gone through it all so quickly?

"You've got to get Celestia out of there, Macintosh," I said as I slid the magazine into place and pulled back the bolt. "Please! Please, we can't let them take her."

"Anope," he replied simply as he rose to stand over Celestia once more, and then his rear leg gave out and he slumped beside her, grimacing in pain. "Can't get myself out of here, let alone the Princess. Just got to delay for Vanity." I entertained the wild notion of somehow running the five hundred yards and carrying them both to safety... a mad idea.

Madness. There was only one thing to do. "We can't let them capture her, Big Macintosh." I slowly moved my aim down till it was pointed at her unconscious royal head.

Maybe it was the sound of my voice, but with a grunt of pain he rose and turned to face my firing position. "What are you thinking, Psalm?"

"Better Celestia a martyr than a prisoner," I said in an almost fevered whisper. "If you can't get her out of there... we'll have to... to... remove her." Luna would understand. She'd have to.

"What?" Macintosh gasped, and at once he stepped between me and the Princess.

"It's the only way. They'll be on you before help arrives," I said, trying to be as reasonable as I could. His green eyes stared at me, not with anger or rage but with a tired resignation, as if five years of fighting had settled on him all at once. "Move, Big Macintosh. Please!"

"Anope," he replied, his gaze level. "Our mission is to protect Celestia. Understand?"

"They'll be on you in a minute! They're going to take her," I pleaded over the radio. "Please, move!"

He smiled. "I reckon if they do, you and the Marauders will get her back. Understand? I ain't going to move," he said calmly, steadily, doing what was right. What was right and honorable and true.

"Please, Sergeant. Please..." I begged, tears running down. They'd overpower Big Macintosh in

a few seconds, and there were several with batwing talismans. "Don't make me shoot you."

"Anope. I know you won't, Psalm," was all he said as he gazed back at me. Slowly, he smiled, trusting me to do what was right. "I know you're a good pony." He was the best of us. Honorable. True. A good pony with a noble and caring heart.

I put a bullet straight through it.

He wilted slowly as his face relaxed, fighting every second to protect Celestia. When he crumpled, I had a perfect shot at the alicorn's head. I could barely aim through my tears. I just had to take two more lives, and then I'd be done. The Princess's, then my own. There was no living with this. Not this. But at least Luna would still be able to save other, better ponies than myself and maybe, somehow, someday, she might...

"Forgive me, Luna, for I have taken the life of another," I breathed, blinking away tears and staring at Celestia's head in my crosshairs.

Then the skies were split by a ripping boom as a dozen trails of crackling clouds coursed through the air, led by a single rainbow vein. Like streaking missiles, the Shadowbolts broke formation and engaged the zebras with terrifying speed and force. Rainbow Dash herself looped like a rainbow-maned goddess of death and slammed right into the body of zebra racing for Big Macintosh and Princess Celestia. The blast scattered them far and wide as a polychromatic cloud rose from the impact crater.

At that point, the fight was over. The Shadowbolts finally made the zebras give up and retreat with their elder. I just watched from five hundred yards away as the Marauders raced towards the blasted pavilion, hugging Penance to my chest and rocking as I stared. I could barely make out Applesnack through my tears, but I couldn't miss his howl of pain as he threw away his gun and knelt beside the fallen pony. I heard Twist's painful sobbing, punctuated with thumps of hooves against unfeeling rocks, Jetstream's stunned denials, and Doof's obscenity-laden rant. Echo was murmuring in a stunned voice that Sergeant Big Macintosh was down.

That was when I promptly leaned over, vomited, and shut out the world and what I'd just done.

The Shadowbolts found me and carried me back to the wagons, where I sat apart and hugged my rifle. Celestia was flown away, pain and sorrow etched into her features. I had doubts she'd ever attempt anything like this again. All anypony could do was weep and rage for the fallen hero who'd courageously placed himself over Celestia's body to take the bullet. No pony had yet figured that the direction was all wrong to be a zebra sniper, or that the bullet had been one of mine. Only Goldenblood looked critically at me as I curled up, clutching Penance, praying for some salvation I didn't deserve.

The scarred, exhausted stallion trotted next to me. "What happened?" was all he asked.

"I thought they were going to take her. Luna forgive me... I... I begged him to move..." I whispered. His golden eyes met mine, and I broke, sobbing hysterically. He wrapped his hooves around me, holding me close. One damned pony commiserating with another...

~ ~ ~

I woke to Glory shaking my shoulder and started, looking up into her eyes. "She killed him," I

whispered.

"What? Killed who?" Glory asked in confusion as I sat up, my body aching. Tanks needed to come with mattresses.

"Big Macintosh. I saw how he died," I said as I tried to shake it. Such a pivotal moment... had Big Macintosh lived, would Twilight have left the Ministry of Arcane Sciences? Would the world have blown up, or would something else entirely different have happened? I saw the cameras of the tank on me; Twist watched me from the depths of Rampage's eyes. I could almost feel the Dealer listening in.

It surprised me when Twister said from above, "Yeah. Killed by a zebra sniper at Shattered Hoof Ridge. Horrible fight. It's said he leapt in front of the sniper to shield Celestia from his bullets. His funeral was probably the most heavily attended in Equestrian history. If several elements of the Third Battalion hadn't turned traitor, it never could have happened." The pegasus looked down at me. "What? A mare can't have a fancy for military history?"

"History... isn't always what the books say," I murmured as I looked away, then frowned. Deus revved his engines; was it just me, or did his motor sound... annoyed? I scowled and looked around. "Where the hay are we?"

"On the edge of the badlands," Rampage said with a yawn. "You missed Flank. Place is a wreck with Caprice gone. I swear, in five years, they're going to be nothing more than a gang of drugged out fiends infesting the ruins," the mare said contemptuously.

Even though it was the middle of the night, my eyes could see well enough to make out the oddities in the terrain. It looked like somepony had taken an immense pencil and drawn lines back and forth across the land to the south. Walls of crumbling concrete and rusted heaps lay scattered as far as I could see, some with long-abandoned rifles rusting silently away. Many of the lines were muddy ruts and ravines left in the landscape. Rusted artillery pieces lay with their red barrels threatening the skies. And there were bones. Everywhere I looked were bones and skulls sticking out of the earth as if the remains struggled to keep fighting each other. A reek of sulfur hung in the air, and patches of dense mist skulked along the deformations in the crinkled land.

"It's a battlefield," I muttered in stunned disbelief.

"Not a. The. For almost four years. Everything from here to Dawn Bay is a mess of trenches, bunkers, fortifications, and bases," Twister said in a subdued voice as she hovered above.

"Surfacers are idiots," Boomer commented, punctuated by a yawn.

"It was genius," Twister disagreed. "It's estimated that almost three million zebras died assaulting Hoofington, while pony casualties were less than two hundred thousand. That's three million that weren't attacking Manehattan or Canterlot. Hoofington was such a critical target that they simply couldn't ignore it."

But this place was more than just a military target. A cursed city. Nightmare Moon's city. The Maiden of the Stars's city. And looking at all the sorrow this place had wrought, who could say that they were wrong? The Tokomare was here, and if the zebras were right, it was something far worse than just a machine. The idea of something so mind-bogglingly powerful staggered me. And if it was just some super power source, what would happen if Cognitum or Dawn got their hooves on EC-1101 and used it to

control that kind of energy? Would anything stop them at that point? I'd seen the dormant factories underneath the city and the machines moving on their mechanical trains back and forth.

Sweet Celestia, I hated this place.

To the northeast I could see a massive lake, so large I that couldn't see across it. In the growing gloom, I looked at Twister and gave a little frown before asking, "What do you know about Nightmare Moon's battle with Celestia?" The pegasus stared, nonplussed, and I felt a little apprehensive. "I remember hearing that she fought Celestia here."

Twister, and everypony else, looked a little surprised by that. "Wow. That's ancient history. But yes, hundreds and hundreds of years ago, Celestia brought her armies here for a final confrontation with Luna. Accounts differ. The one I like is that Celestia punched through into the valley but was cut off from her main forces. Apparently, everypony expected a duel to the death atop Mt. Hoof, that big granite knot at the south end of the Core. Somehow, Celestia banished her sister to the moon instead and scattered Nightmare Moon's batpony forces back to her hidden citadel."

"How do you hide a whole castle?" Scotch Tape asked curiously as she perched uneasily atop Deus's turret. Given that Luna was Princess of the Night, I could only imagine...

"Nopony knows. It's said that ponies could only find it with the express permission of the Princess or her top generals." Twister gave a small shrug as she flew beside the tank. "Regardless, it was so long ago that nopony knows how or why things happened back then."

My thoughts were interrupted by the sight of a bridge spanning a narrow in the reservoir. The sight of the cantilever structure made me look at Deus. "Is that going to hold him?"

Rampage snorted and rolled her eyes. "Blackjack, given all you've seen, how can you doubt Equestrian engineering? Even after two hundred years, it's probably as strong as it's ever been."

"When you have four anchors for legs, *then* you can tell me not to worry," I said with a scowl as I walked to the front of the tank. When Deus stopped, I hopped off and trotted ahead. "Just let me go a little bit ahead and check for weak spots."

Glory landed on one side of me, and P-21 trotted up on the other. For a moment it was almost like when we'd first set off in the Wasteland, even if Glory looked like Rainbow Dash now. Why, we even had Deus following us!

Rampage turned out to be correct: the bridge was entirely sound and we reached the central span of the structure without incident. Then I spotted a red bar straight ahead of us. Then more. I stopped and drew the markspoon carbine with my magic. P-21 disappeared off to the side almost instantly. Looked like the Harbingers had picked an excellent place for an ambu--

"Lookie here! Two fine ladies wanting to use our bridge," a stallion called out as a half dozen bandits trotted out from behind the cover of a rusty skywagon lying on its side in the middle of the road. The mustard yellow unicorn wearing patched-up spiked barding gave a cocky grin as he approached, his black mane pulled into something that might vaguely be a style. Then his eyes landed on Glory. "With a Rainbow Dash impersonator. Whatever is the Wasteland coming to?"

A badly scarred brown earth stallion stepped up next to the unicorn as the first pony twirled his

goatee with a hoof. He eyed us both in wary confusion. "Um, Snide? Shouldn't they have brahmin if they're traders? I mean, she's got a beamy gun, and her legs are metal. Maybe we should let them by."

"Nonsense!" the unicorn said with a toss of his head as he looked at us. "The toll is one hundred caps each. If you two make like good little ladies and don't raise a fuss, we'll let you go without trouble." He smiled broadly. "You have my word."

"That means we take all their money, right, Snide?" the scarred brute asked. "After they take it out and stuff?"

"Oh, do shut up, Numbskull," the unicorn snapped.

"You're... just robbers?" I asked slowly as I looked around at the half dozen ponies. "You're not with the Harbingers?"

"My, somepony is slow on the uptake," Snide snorted, rolling his eyes and getting a chuckle out of his men. "Now, make like good ponies and hand over the caps."

I gave a crooked smile to Glory. With S.A.T.S. we could vaporize the lot of them in a flash. "Um, maybe you should listen to your friend there. Haven't you heard about a cyberpony trotting around here? Calls herself Security?"

"Yeah, right. Everypony knows that Security never comes this far south," Snide said with another snort.

"I don't know, Snide. I mean, she does got them metal legs." The big one rubbed his chin with a brass hoof. "I really think we should just let them by."

"See? That's where you messed up, Numbskull. You used the word think. The thinking is my job." He turned back to me and sighed, rolling his eyes once more. "Good help is so very hard to find. Now, where were we?"

I sighed and rubbed my face. "Look. I understand that you're just trying to get by. I do. And if you actually protected travelers as they crossed, I probably wouldn't mind. But your friend is right. I am Security, and if you try and shake me down, it's going to go very badly for you."

"Please! Do you really think you're the first mare who's claimed that? If we let everypony saying she's Security through here then we might as well just throw in the towel." He squinted at my legs. "Probably sheet metal. And Security's legs are white, not black. Or so I heard."

But there was one in the back, a dirty brown stallion with a pair of hoofcuffs on his flank, who seemed to have second thoughts; a terrified, haunted look crossing his face. He didn't just think I was Security. He knew me.

"I dunno Boss. Maybe we should tell her the sob story? You know, the one you told us in case we ever ran into her?" The scarred brute turned to me. "We was all part of a nice and peaceful settlement long ways from here when we was attacked by a lot o' bad ponies. So now we is here to be good ponies! And we don't do nothing bad. Ever! Cross me heart and hope to cry and... um... something 'bout eyes." He crossed his brass hooves over his chest. I felt a rumble through my hooves.

"Oh shut up!" the unicorn snapped, smacking the scarred pony upside his head. "We only tell

that story if we're sure it's Security! Now get over there and take all their caps, you idiot!"

Then the lot of us were painted by Deus's headlights. The two cannons and machine gun turrets oriented right towards the band of raiders. Three power-armored pegasi and an alicorn flew above him like an avenging wing of death. Rampage lounged on the hood in her spiked armor, pressing one hoof to the metal just hard enough for the magic talismans to release one small arc of electricity. "We got tired of waiting."

Snide gaped at the sight of more death than he'd probably ever seen pointed at him in his life and then stared at me, his pupils constricting to points as he adopted a rictus grin. "Loveliest settlement you ever saw! Most peaceful ponies in all the Wasteland, we were."

"Skip it," I replied with a small smile.

"Quick! Use the failsafe!" Snide shouted as he whirled to run, and was struck in the face by a chunk of metal tossed by P-21.

"Your failsafe was garbage," the blue pony retorted. "Ten fragmentation grenades and a half dozen bricks of C-4 wouldn't even dent the underside of this bridge with your layout."

"Oh. That's... good to know..." Snide held the scrap of metal in his hooves and then dropped it as he turned back to me. "Oh fine! You got us! Another scourge of the Wasteland destroyed. Huzzah! Just make it quick."

I just sighed and covered my face. "Contrary to popular belief, I don't play judge and executioner. I haven't heard anything about a band of raiders raping and murdering everyone trying to use this bridge. If I search that skywagon, am I going to find a bunch of raped and brutalized ponies?" I asked slowly.

"What? No!" Snide said quickly, looking repulsed, and uneasy. "We can go to Flank if we want that! We're just... trying to get by," he finished lamely as he spread his hooves.

"And I can respect that," I said in low, reasonable tones. "In fact, if you can keep this bridge safe for travelers, I imagine most wouldn't mind paying a small fee." When his gaze turned sly, I added, "Small, reasonable, manageable fee!" He immediately bobbed his head, the relief evident as it spread across his face.

Glory leaned in. "Are you sure this is okay, Blackjack?"

"No," I replied, trying not to look uncertain. "But I'm not an executioner. I've worked with gangers before. I have to give them a chance." But the brown earth pony stallion was still acting quite skittish, and finally it got on my nerves. I looked right at him and snapped, "Is there a problem?"

He didn't answer, but P-21 did. "You!" the earth pony shouted as he charged the wastelander. The others watched in astonished bafflement as the blue earth pony slammed the brown stallion against the rails.

"Get off me!" he spluttered in anger, but I saw the fear in his eyes... eyes that were on me.

"He's from the *Seahorse*!" P-21 shouted. "He's one of the stallions you spared!"

A strange calm stole over me and I felt a wire drawn tight inside me. "I see," was all I could

manage as my horn slowly lifted Vigilance. "Tell me... this pony... has he raped anyone the last few days?"

"Shut up!" the brown earth pony shouted.

"What? Clink?" Snide looked at the brown stallion in bafflement. "What if he did?"

"Because... I gave him his life once when he wronged me." I was astonished by how calm I felt. Serene, even. "So tell me, has he?"

Snide coughed and looked away. "Well, you see, one can't be that picky recruiting help and..."

"Course he did." The confused, scarred stallion frowned and answered, "That caravaner's daughter. Remember? Wanted to keep slaves and all."

"Shut up!" Clink screamed as he shoved P-21 away and started to run. My bullet flew with all the accuracy of S.A.T.S., right through the back of his rear right knee, and he collapsed, screaming. I'd screamed like that once, recently. Slowly I advanced with sublime calm. Screaming obscenities, he flopped and writhed, and yet I had no problem blasting another knee cap.

"Please!" he begged as he tried to shield his face. "You said you weren't an executioner! Please!" He cried out as I calmly advanced.

Be Kind!

No, Fluttershy. Not this time.

Do better!

It's not for me to do better. It was him. Now I am going to do better...

I pointed the gun right at his head as he lay there in a spreading pool of filth. I was fairly certain he'd be crippled for life; perhaps he'd bleed out. But I looked down the barrel and stared right into his eye. I'd given him mercy and he'd squandered it. He'd hurt others. It was every bit my fault. If I'd killed him, he wouldn't have hurt another pony...

All I had to do was become a killer.

I stared straight into his eye, everyone watching both of us, as I tried to summon up every iota of pain, shame, and humiliation I'd suffered that horrible time. I needed only a few pounds of pressure to kill him. The bullet would tear through his brain like a sledgehammer. Glory watched with a mix of sadness and concern; was she afraid I'd do it, or that I wouldn't? P-21 just stared with quiet certainty. If I didn't, he would. All the others left it up to me.

"Why?" I whispered, whether to him or to myself, I didn't know. "Why do you have to make it so... fucking... difficult?!" I spat as a tear ran down my cheek. Would the Wasteland not be happy till I'd shed that last little inch? Till I lowered myself into the blood and slaughtered like my enemies? I wasn't a killer. Wasn't an executioner. That was it. My last tiny connection between that poor clueless mare who'd left 99 and this half metal monstrosity I was now...

"I'm sorry! Please! I'm so sorry..." the stallion groveled.

A thread of integrity. It was all I had. Kill this stallion; give him the gift of death. Punish him and prevent him from harming another. And worst of all: I wanted to. I wanted so much that my muscles ached with the need to harm him. To cast away that last little inch of integrity. To do what any mare in all the Wasteland should do; would do at the drop of a hat...

But I wasn't a killer.

Maybe the stallion saw it in my eyes, but the fear in him melted away. The corner of his mouth twisted in disbelief that I was weak enough to spare him twice. Even with a glowing pistol pointed right at his face, he knew I couldn't pull the trigger.

The round ripped right between his eyes and sprayed his brains across the crumbled asphalt.

No...

I stared at his limp body. That... that hadn't happened. Couldn't... never... Then I heard the most gentle whisper through my mind.

'Forgive me, Luna, for I have taken the life of another.'

* * *

I didn't talk to anypony for almost an hour after that, walking along behind the tank and lost in my own thoughts. Glory tried talking to me every few minutes before giving up and leaving me alone. Snide had promised everything from his firstborn to his mother not to be next; apparently summary executions were quite persuasive. No wonder they were so common. If I'd just started killing people from the outset, the Hoof would probably be fixed by now.

Unfortunately, my friends didn't seem to remember that I had augmented hearing. "I'm sure that Blackjack will be fine, Glory. You said that if you ever came across any of those four that you'd kill them too," Rampage said.

"I know what I said, but I didn't think Blackjack would do it," Glory retorted. "She's always been so adamant on not being an executioner."

"Yeah. Softest heart in the Wasteland," Rampage drawled. "Look, everypony has to bust their murder cherry eventually. Blackjack finally popped hers. She'll get over it."

I didn't want to get over it. I didn't want to do it at all.

"You know something's wrong with Blackjack though," Glory said with a glance back at me. "She's changing. I can see it."

"We've all changed. You're Rainbow Dash now, remember?" Rampage said.

"Please don't remind me. We're moving so slowly it makes me want to scream," Glory replied sharply, then sighed. "I don't know. I worry about her all the time. It's like there's something inside her and it's twisting and turning her about. If only she'd talk to me..."

If you only knew, Glory. If I only could...

"It boils down to this: do you trust Blackjack?" P-21 said to the others.

"Pick a day. Sometimes she's so good she makes me scream. And then she pulls something like this," Rampage replied. "I know I'm the group bag of crazy, but you have to admit that BJ's right up there with me."

I waited to hear Glory disagree with her. Her silence contorted inside me.

"We just have to be there for her. As simple as that," P-21 replied. "As much as she's been there for us."

"It will work out," Glory said with one last glance back at me and the smallest smile.

She still had hope... even after everything I'd done.

"You know better," the Dealer rasped beside me. I looked at the gaunt, pale stallion with a twinge of annoyance. How easy it was for him, riding along in my PipBuck, when I was the one who pulled the trigger.

"What do I know?" I snapped back at him. "That it's wrong to kill ponies? That I should try and do better? That--" I saw Glory and everyone looking at me oddly and said sarcastically, "I'm just talking to the invisible pony that lives in my PipBuck, folks." Everypony just pointedly looked away.

"What you should know is to skip this whole cycle of hating yourself and then pitying yourself. It's really not healthy and it makes you really whiny," he said as he walked along with a scowl. "If Clink had lived two centuries ago, he would have spent the rest of his life in Hightower, or worse. There was always 'worse' towards the end. And I know his victims wouldn't have shed a tear."

"I killed him. Or I've finally snapped and gone full Crazytown." He cocked his head. "I have Psalm in my dreams, and now I'm hearing her in my thoughts when I'm awake. So between her, the... nnnghhh... and you, my brain is getting pretty damned crowded at the moment!" Dealer just looked at me with a mix of patience and resignation. "Did you know it was Psalm who shot Big Macintosh? Not a zebra. One of our own! Trying to kill Celestia!" I gave a little scream and smacked my head with a metal hoof. "And now that... that thing... is inside me!" I'd pitied Psalm. Now I was turning into her.

"I knew. I'd heard the transmission," he said grimly. "But Big Macintosh's body wasn't even cold before the report went out. There was no investigation of his death. It wasn't even a day before Goldenblood disappeared her into the O.I.A."

"And you didn't tell anypony?"

"Who would I tell? Pinkie Pie? Rarity?" He snorted. "Everypony wanted to believe it was a zebra that killed Big Macintosh, so it was. The triumphant hero sacrificing himself for the greater cause while protecting the Princess. I would have been labeled a crackpot conspiracy theorist, or worse, disappeared myself. I sometimes think that Goldenblood took me into the O.I.A. just because I knew. Don't you understand? History isn't truth. History is what everypony decides to settle on as what happened. But behind that there are a thousand little causes and twists and permutations in the cracks that shape events. You're seeing everything I saw. And if you're feeling disillusioned, then

congratulations! You've finally stumbled onto the truth."

"You know what else is the truth? I'm a murderer. I killed him." I grit my teeth, feeling everything fall apart. "Damn me... I wanted to so badly. I wanted him dead. But I couldn't... and then..."

"Then I pulled the trigger," a solemn voice said inside me. For an instant I was sure that Psalm was now talking to me, but it was the comforting voice of Lacunae. The large purple alicorn landed next to me. "You aren't the only pony with magic, Blackjack." She'd been all the way back by the tank; how had she reached that far?

"You... but... *why*?" I mentally stammered back at her.

For the longest moment I felt a baffling deluge of emotion pouring off Lacunae. "Do you know what would have happened if you hadn't killed him? If P-21 or somepony else had been forced to do it for you? You would have become a joke, Blackjack." Her words were firm and decisive, not at all like I was used to. But behind that was a reek of shame and guilt that I couldn't ignore.

"Lacunae... what's wrong?" I asked. That sense of guilt increased, pungent like ammonia in my mind.

"Nothing's wrong. I simply did what had to be done," she said, so cold that I wondered if somehow this was the Goddess. Except the Goddess wouldn't have been trying to reassure me. "You want to change the Wasteland? Well, unfortunately, fear has a powerful effect on others. If it became known that you were so merciful that you couldn't kill your own rapist just because he said 'sorry', then every raider with half a brain left would wring their hooves and recant their ways only to return to raping and killing as soon as you had disappeared over the horizon. Your friends would have to kill on your behalf, and it doesn't matter how loving or tough they are; that would poison your relationship with them."

Speaking of relationships... "Lacunae..."

She ignored me, almost in a rush as she thought at me, "So I pulled the trigger. It's my fault. Understand, Blackjack?"

"Lacunae..."

"Do you want to be a killer?" Lacunae snapped, half desperate as she looked down at me with an expression of almost frantic need for agreement.

That finally provoked a response. "No... I don't want to be a killer," I said quietly. "I don't want to turn into Psalm. I know what I did at Yellow River... what I'm capable of."

The Maiden of the Stars shall bring death and destruction.

"It's not your fault, Blackjack. It's mine. Put it out of your mind," Lacunae said solemnly. "I'll do whatever I can to keep you from being an executioner."

Lacunae's strange behavior almost distracted me from what'd happened, but I couldn't put it out of my mind. Ever since I'd first dreamed of Psalm, I'd felt myself changing. I wasn't completely sure who was in charge of me anymore. Was Blackjack at the controls? Psalm? The Goddess? The Dealer? The stars? I felt like I was dancing on strings and had no idea who was pulling them. Even Goldenblood and his damned projects were tugging at me from two centuries in the past. They were woven into my

very body.

The problem was that the idea that I wasn't in control of myself was so wonderfully seductive. All I had to do was simply believe it, and the burden of responsibility would be lifted from my shoulders. It was the refuge of every madpony and monster: don't blame me, I can't help it. And the most terrifying thought was that it might be true. What if I wasn't in control? What if any one of those things was manipulating me? Everything I'd ever seen looked manipulated and contrived; how could I be any different? Even now, Lacunae's assurances felt superficial and false. Maybe she was just lying to try and make me feel better about Clink. Maybe the Goddess was making her lie. How could I trust anything at this point?

The Marauders had broken apart. Dawn's companions had too. Maybe friendship itself was a contrived convenience so we wouldn't feel so lonely and vulnerable. Were we even friends?

I wanted to cut those strings so badly I could scream.

But I knew I couldn't do it alone... I'd tried that, and I'd gone far too close to full madness than I ever wanted to imagine.

I looked up at those ponies riding on the tank and sighed, then looked at Lacunae. "Can you give me a lift?" The alicorn nodded and carried me up onto the tank turret, where they made room for me. "Hey," I said as I took a seat between Glory and P-21, putting a hoof around the former's shoulders and giving her a nuzzle. "Mind if we talk a little about what happened?"

Glory nearly cried as she smiled and nodded. "Sure."

* * *

Okay, so it was a bit of a mess, but over the next blubbery hour we talked. I told them everything I could that didn't involve the Goddess or Lacunae's claim that it was she who'd pulled the trigger. I confessed my fears and frustrations, the idea that maybe I wasn't in control of myself as much as I should have been. There wasn't much my friends could do besides listen, but they did. And afterwards, I found that, despite everything, I did feel a little better.

We were now further southeast than I had ever been before. The bare dirt was studded with rocks and the detritus of ten years of war. There were the hulls of tanks and skywagons left to rust, crumbling fortifications and blast barriers that leaned this way and that along the road. We drove by the massive remains of what I suspected was a Raptor. A little to the northeast was a building so wide and massive that, at first, I'd thought it was a more angular mountain.

A mystery for another day; we'd reached the turnoff to the base. A bullet-holed sign pointed the way off the main road and to the southeast.

The wide, low rise the base lay upon was shrouded in mist. Wisps and vapors curled around us as we moved slowly along the road towards the clusters of reinforced buildings. A sulfurous scent tanged the air, and muddy patches of steamy water bubbled and trickled beside the road. The detritus looked almost like a scrapyard, there was so much ruin. A monument to squandered blood and treasure. Then a discolored plaque on a bullet-chipped concrete block came into view: Grimhoof Army Base. Beyond, I could make out the vaguest hints of huge, squatting buildings half hidden by the mist.

"Oh, this has bad written all over it," Rampage said as she hopped off Deus and down to the crumbling gates. Even Deus seemed to be trying to be quieter in the concealing fog. "Is there anything you can do about this?" she asked Glory and the Neighvarro trio.

"We could, but everything would know we're here," Twister said as she looked around, her beam rifles humming softly. "We'd be stealthier without the tank, you know."

"Maybe. But I've met a hellhound. I definitely want superior firepower if we need it," I muttered as we reached the twisted and rusted gates. "Why would the Enclave be interested in hellhounds in the first place?" I asked Twister. P-21 took one look at the rusted lock on the gate and gave a shake of his head.

"I don't know. Intelligence, that is, Thunderhead, said they'd make ideal and easily controlled shock troops," Twister said she popped the rusted-over lock easily with her power-armored hooves. "But if we're maintaining our separation policy, what do we care what's on the surface? We can't house hellhounds in clouds. Can't control or monitor them on the ground. It didn't make any sense."

"Hell. It'd make more sense to back groups of earth pony mercenaries," Boomer muttered. "Give 'em weapons, food, and supplies and have 'em conquer the surface for us." I thought of Harbinger and his talk with the Goddess, the Goddess providing support and security and the Enclave providing firepower.

"Or you could actually engage the surface peacefully," Glory snapped at the trio. "Trade food for materials? Things like that?"

"As thrilling as politics are, aren't we trying to be quiet?" P-21 asked as he moved forward. Smart pony had a good point.

Deus had a momentary pause at the gates, and then the front of the machine opened up and two mandibles began to pull the gates into the front of the tank. Though I winced at the popping and jingling, it was over in just a few seconds. I guessed that was how the tank recovered metal for its repair talisman. Since nothing came after us immediately, I guessed we'd dodged a bullet.

Moving into the base, it was clear that these reinforced buildings had been heavily targeted by the enemy. My radmeter began to tick immediately and spiked whenever we drew close to the hulking structures. Some looked as if they'd been directly targeted by tactical balefire weaponry, the concrete blackened and the reinforcing steel melted and warped. There were larger weapons that had been reduced to distorted figures of rust, their twisted barrels thrust defiantly upwards in the mist.

And there were red bars. Everywhere I turned there was a red bar moving this way or that. Were there Enclave pegasi flying silently in the fog above us? Were hellhounds hiding in the ruined hulks of the structures around us waiting to spring an ambush? The quiet rumble of Deus was the only sound I could make out. Lacunae, Glory, and the Neighvarro trio hovered above us. Rampage and I flanked Deus. P-21 had disappeared into the mist. Scotch Tape and Boo rode on the turret. We had more firepower in one place and time than I'd ever had before.

So why was my mane going crazy?

Scotch Tape began to struggle with Boo, and the olive filly said as loudly as she dared,

"Blackjack? What's wrong with her? Settle down, Boo!"

But Boo wasn't settling down. She struggled to get away... away from what, though? Deus was the safest thing around. But I trusted the white pony's instincts and said, "Let her go." Scotch looked at me skeptically, then released the blank mare. She immediately scrambled off the tank and backed away from it... and then she suddenly looked down and jumped aside, then jumped yet again. Like there was something wrong with the ground...

Dogs dig...

I watched her, then slowly knelt down, turned, and pressed the side of my head to the cool, wet asphalt. For several seconds I felt completely ridiculous. Then I heard it: a deep, hollow scraping noise, followed by another and then another. Then there was a pause... followed by the whine of a magical energy weapon being primed right beneath my head.

I fell back just a second before a crimson beam tore up through the asphalt and into the sky. "They're below!" was all I got out before the ground exploded and a massive canine monster tore through with one claw while the other brought the largest energy pistol I'd ever seen to bear. I floated out Vigilance and jumped immediately into S.A.T.S., firing five rounds into its snarling brownish-black face. The bullets turned its face into a bloody ruin of meat and bone, but they didn't kill it; the beast wasn't even injured enough to retreat! Instead it clawed the air in front of me, claws ripping four furrows in the asphalt as it began to fire wildly. The energy weapon crackled with unstable malice as it unloaded again and again.

There were two more pops, and two more hellhounds emerged from the asphalt, bringing even larger magical weapons to bear. The scarlet beams flamed in the air as they tore up at our fliers. The radiation pouring from the holes spiked my PipBuck; I didn't want to imagine the source. Every one of the hellhounds wore a bizarre chrome helmet that seemed out of place with their crude weaponry and claw-cut and hammered armor.

Overhead, Lacunae carefully sighted down her scope, ignoring the hissing hellhound energy weapons as she sent armor piercing steel through their skulls like a smiting Goddess. There was a desperate edge to her telepathic voice that belied the cold expression on her face. "No more..." she repeated over and over again. One of the emerging hellhounds started to strafe in my direction, and Lacunae actually shouted aloud, "Leave her alone!" before blowing his head apart in a shower of brain and skull.

Deus gunned his engine, his machine guns swinging forward and spraying the hounds in their holes, but they disappeared almost instantly, as if ready for it. I pressed myself to the ground and fired the entire ten-round clip into the hellhound in front of me before it finally dropped back into the hole. Victory?

No. Boo, staring wide-eyed at the walls, still appeared as scared as before. "They're not gone!" I called out as I loaded a fresh magazine filled with armor piercing rounds. Then the wall of the massive building beside the tank gave a crack and detached from the rest of the structure, tipping slowly at first, as the foundation crumbled. P-21 ran up alongside the tank and Scotch Tape jumped onto his back. The filly clung for dear life to him as he beat a hasty retreat. Just behind him, the great slab of wall fell like a descending drawbridge and with a squeal of metal and explosion of dust collapsed onto Deus.

I'd have been concerned about P-21 and Scotch Tape, but even with his burden he practically

danced around the chunks while I scrambled for safety. The pair disappeared in the cloud of pulverized architecture. Emerging from the gap left by the fallen wall were four more hellhounds. Two dropped to one knee behind a chunk of rubble and sprayed the skies with a hissing, crackling gatling variety of beaminess while the other two lunged for Rampage and me. The heavily-plated hounds dragged their claws along the asphalt, the long edges of their talons filling the air with an ominous scraping as they closed the distance.

Rampage didn't wait for the hellhounds to close; the adolescent mare roared a challenge of her own and charged. She leaped and smashed all four power hooves against the first hellhound's face. The energy cells discharged, blasting her away to backflip through the air and land as the hellhound staggered. Rampage wasted no time, charging again right between the hellhound's legs and running the serrated spine of her armor against something quite tender that tore a howl from the hound. The razor wire woven into her tail caught in the matted crotch of the beast, and with a yank pulled the hellhound to sit on the broken pavement. Rampage then rose and brought down her hooves in a flashing storm of blows to the hellhound's neck and skull till something cracked inside.

I didn't have the luxury of her size or pointed edges as I drew my silver sword and swung it in a futile effort to keep the beast attacking me at bay. Even though the edge was sharp enough to cut through the heavy steel plating, I didn't have the magical strength to push it through on my own. The hellhound leered as I danced back, the razor sharp claws of one hand slashing around as I tried to block the other. Vigilance punched holes in the hellhound, but I wasn't really doing much in the way of damage. Worse, I suspected from the lack of blood that the creature might be regenerating!

Not good.

I swapped to the shotgun as I gave ground, but the buckshot mostly deflected off my foe. I swapped to the markspony carbine, but the close quarters meant that I was firing wildly at best. I suddenly felt a wall behind me, and the hellhound sprang. Sword and forelimbs stopped claws that could carve through stone. Quickly, I twisted to the side so I could give more ground. "Damn it! I am not breaking these legs!" I swore as the claws carved shallow channels into the black metal with mere glancing blows; Celestia help me if those things landed a direct strike!

The hellhound suddenly lifted its powerful forelegs and flipped me with a crash onto my back. It spread its mighty arms wide and let out a shattering roar of victory.

A dull 'thhmp' went off in the mist behind me and the hellhound's yellow, bloodshot eyes widened in shock as it clutched its throat. A second later its torso erupted in two jets of gore spurting up and down as the grenade went off. P-21 trotted out of the shadows with Scotch Tape behind him, looking scared, and shoved me back to my hooves without a word, and I felt myself go red.

Right now really wasn't the time for this...

Glory and the pegasi were keeping the two shooters busy, trading fire back and forth. Deus's engine roared as his treads clawed at the asphalt, slowly pulling himself out from under the slab. Suddenly, though, a piece of the road next to him gave way with a crash. The hellhounds were trying to undermine the tank before he could pull free! If he got buried... "Deus! Fire!" I shouted. "Get clear!"

There was a muffled explosion as the section of wall split into three smoking chunks and flew away from the front of the tank. One arched high and came down on a hellhound more keen on shooting Lacunae than paying attention directly above him. It landed with a resounding crunch. Now freed of the

wall, Deus retreated several yards as the road collapsed in a sinkhole just where he had been. Four hellhounds blinked up as they stared at the twin cannons in horrified realization.

Not even hellhound hide was tough enough to withstand that! Still, there were a lot more of them. They clawed their way out of the ground and poured out of the irradiated army buildings, their crude but powerful energy weapons crackling and filling the air with buzzing beams of death. "We need to move!" I yelled. Lacunae levitated Scotch up onto her back while coolly taking aim and blasting a hellhound through the skull with her anti-machine rifle.

The tank rolled forward and launched up the far side of the crater, then climbed over the crumbled wall. Machine guns chattered as they chewed into the hellhounds trying to climb out of their holes; he led the way, Boo, Rampage, and myself following in his wake. Lacunae and the pegasi rained down fire behind us to deter pursuit. The shielded alicorn seemed to be an irresistible target to the hellhounds. Maybe they had some issue with alicorns I wasn't aware of?

"They must be being controlled by the Enclave through those helmets!" Glory shouted from above. "That's what's making them attack us!"

"I hate to disagree, but this is fairly typical behavior for their kind," Lacunae pointed out as her shield flared under the barrage. She then flew to one of the rusted rooftop weapons, teleported above a trio of hellhounds with the lump of metal, and dropped it on the beasts. The hellhounds tried to dive aside, but it managed to crush one beneath its oxidized hulk. Red and green beams from the pegasi swiftly turned his two friends to dust before they could disappear into the earth. There were more coming, though.

"Move, move, move!" I shouted as I ran.

P-21, panting, struggled to keep up. "Always with the running thing," he muttered. I dodged behind him, ducked my head, and with a lunge I scooped him up onto my back. His forehooves hugged my neck as I raced to catch up with the others. "Okay... this works..." Then he shook his mane, pulled out an apple grenade, tugged the stem, and let it fly behind us and into the ranks of the hellhounds. The shrapnel didn't kill them, but at least it kept them from blasting us for a few moments.

"Why do all your fights turn into running battles, Blackjack?" Rampage asked. Two hellhounds poked their snouts out from a blown-out door, taking a bead on Boo. Rampage, with swiftness that shocked even me, charged the pair. The armored mare rolled and body slammed them with her spikes, knocking them back. Their crackling, sizzling weapons fired wildly, and the two beasts amazingly dusted each other!

Rampage stood and shook the glowing powder off with a baffled look. "Huh; that's new." The bloody mare beamed at the blank pony. "Good job drawing them out, Boo." Boo just trembled in fear, looking as if she wished nothing more than to be back in Star House with a Fancy Buck Cake.

"Anyway, as I was saying," Rampage continued, "don't get me wrong. This running and fighting is a whole lot of fun, but I'd really appreciate a little variety in the future!"

"Sorry to be so predictable!" I jumped and rolled aside as the ground gave way beneath me, blasting the hound with the levitated shotgun as it emerged, not doing much harm but surprising the creature. I might not be as sneaky on these hooves, but it was clear that I could still move as quickly when I needed to. Then I saw Deus driving beneath a footbridge between two of the large buildings and

saw the pack of hellhounds perched along the edge. "Look out!"

But it was too late. As Deus passed under them, a half-dozen of the armored beasts dropped down and began to rip into his armor with their claws. He tried to strafe them with the machine gun turrets, but the creatures wrecked the turrets with rending rakes from their talons before he was able to do any real damage. "Hold on! We'll help!" I shouted as I raced to try and pick them off the tank.

Deus had other ideas. He suddenly swerved and, engines roaring, blasted the reinforced wall of a building ahead and charged straight into the hole. A cacophony of screaming metal, roaring engine, and ripping steel filled the air, and a great storm of dust blew out the windows as he passed. From the crashing within, I suspected he was taking the roof down as well. Suddenly there was another concussive blast, and Deus erupted back out onto the street from another newly-made door, his scoured armor free of any clinging hellhounds.

He rolled to a stop, trailing dust and smoke. "Or... that'll work," I admitted. Deus's engine gave a guttering laugh as the rips and tears slowly started to repair themselves. Scotch Tape shuddered and averted her eyes; I could understand why. The rent machine looked like a banged-up skull. Lacunae and the pegasi, having seen that we were free from pursuit at this particular moment, flew down to join us. I glanced back the way we'd come; that was a whole lot of red bars... "We can't keep running and shooting. Grawnerer or whatever his name was said that the Enclave were controlling them. We need to find out how and stop it. Personally, though, I'm more interested in why the Enclave is here in the first place than the gadget they're using." The Neighvarro pegasi gave firm nods of agreement.

Scotch Tape staggered down from Lacunae's back and onto mine. Glory looked at my forehoof critically. "If they're broadcasting a signal, you should be able to pick it up on your PipBuck, Blackjack. Just try to find a frequency in the P band and..." She met my flat gaze and adjusted. "Look for the strongest channel. It'll probably be a lot of buzzing and screeching terminal talk."

"Thank you," I said as I looked behind us. "We're going to have to split up. These hounds really seem to love chasing Deus. He can take them for a run. Sunset, Boomer, and Twister can help keep them away. Lacunae can keep contact between us." I wouldn't elaborate on how. "If we stop the broadcast, then hopefully the hellhounds will let us go. If not, then we run and tell Rover to teach his cousins about gratitude."

"Sorry. We're going to need one flier with you," Twister said firmly. "We were sent to find out what Thunderhead is up to. I can't run the risk that you withhold information."

"Fine. You can--" I started to say when Sunset stepped forward.

"I'll go," the mare said in a firm tone that allowed no argument. Twister looked a touch surprised at the mare's assertiveness. Sunset went on, "You're a better fighter than I am, Sergeant, and you'll need Boomer's missiles." Twister looked at Boomer, who merely shrugged, and then back at the black armored mare.

"Alright, Sunset. Keep a sharp eye and report back whatever you find," Twister said before taking to the air again. Deus gunned his engines and roared off back down the road with the two power-armored pegasi and alicorn in flight. We moved off to the side, and a minute later I felt a vibration underhoof. Nobody should be able to dig that fast. Perhaps they were taking existing tunnels and just digging the final stretches on the spot? When I started to move, P-21 reached out and stopped me. A second later I saw the slower red bars. Hellhound flankers moved along, sniffing at the air as they

pointed their ponderous, cobbled-together weapons about warily.

For an instant, I was sure that we were doomed. I started to lift the carbine, but P-21 gave me the softest nudge; I glanced down and watched him give his head a tiny shake. I had to trust the smarter pony. A minute later the hellhounds straightened and took off after Deus as well.

"We're downwind," P-21 said simply as he slung Persuasion around his neck once more. Boo had relaxed as well; I supposed that that would do.

I frowned as I looked around, but had no idea what I was looking for. A giant Enclave flag? A map with 'Hellhound Control Center' clearly marked would be nice. I looked at Glory with a hapless smile. "Ideas?"

Glory frowned and flew up a short way, turning this way and that before she landed. "Can I see your broadcaster?" she asked. I thrust out my PipBuck, and she began to fiddle with it. "Wouldn't use a broadcast band... P band... yeah. There!" A screeching, buzzing noise emanated from my PipBuck, and I immediately turned the volume way down. "That must be it. Now..." She repeated the same process with her own PipBuck, then finally worked on Sunset's armor. "Now, you stay here, Blackjack, and swing your hoof around till the noise is loudest. I'll fly a hundred yards north, Sunset can fly a hundred yards south, and we'll triangulate on the transmission source."

Did I mention how much I loved ponies smarter than me?

Following her directions, we managed to find a general direction in which the signal was stronger than others. Grimhoof had a completely different layout from Miramare or Ironmare. Dozens of reinforced structures were clustered together between large expanses of open terrain. In the distance, we saw Deus tearing across the Wasteland with a crowd of hellhounds in close pursuit. If it hadn't been for that, we never would have been able to dash across the breaks in cover. In several places we were literally tiptoeing around radioactive holes dug in the earth. While the misty fog might have given some cover from sight, I didn't know how well the hellhounds could sniff us out.

"What's down there?" Scotch Tape asked as we passed by one of the radioactive pits.

"Who knows? Dysfunctional balefire bombs? Magical waste? Leaking Stable-Tec reactors? I don't want to find out," I said. Nothing good was underground in Hoofington.

Yet I spotted what I hoped was our destination: a cluster of buildings, one of which had several large dishes pointed up at the sky. While many were streaked with rust, I suspected they still worked. The persistent cloud bank surrounding them was another strong indication of something pegasus-related.

Then there was a whoosh overhead, and two Vertibucks passed above us, stirring the air and exposing us; fortunately, the two vehicles seemed to have bigger things to worry about at the moment as they rushed towards the structure with the large dishes. "Is it just me, or does it feel like something is going on?" I asked as the clouds closed in once more. Carefully, we picked our way forward. All it would take was one perceptive hellhound or one E.F.S., and we'd be given away.

Then we found the dead zebras and hellhounds, the bodies only a few days old, scattered across the broken ground; dozens of striped corpses lay among about the dead canines. It'd taken headshots from skilled snipers to drop the beasts. From the ashes strewn about, I could only imagine how many had *actually* been killed. Still, the presence of the zebras baffled me; what were they doing here? Was this

another thing like Yellow River, or something else? It was a hell of a coincidence...

"Blackjack..." Glory said as she knelt by a severed zebra head. A hellhound claw had ripped the side of the face clean off... and revealed the metal beneath. Not a zebra... a cyberzebra. I stared in shock as I spotted more in the wreckage.

Up ahead there were sounds of gunshots, the zap of energy weapons, and hellhound roars. "What the heck is happening?" Scotch Tape asked, standing on my back and shielding her eyes as if that would allow her to peer through the mist.

"We need to get higher..." I said, looking around the rooftops. One of the buildings next to the structure with the three large dishes had a wooden scaffold lashed to the side. It creaked beneath my hooves but held my weight. We made it up to the third story. Clearly this rooftop was some kind of camp. There were glyph-marked ammo crates half-concealed underneath canvas sheets. The center of the building had long ago collapsed and lay as a heap on the first floor, leaving the roof as a balcony around a hole.

Boo hung back, looking scared.

I slowly moved to the edge of the building where somepony had left a pair of binoculars. Peering through them at the buildings next door, I spotted two that were surrounded by a barricade of rubble. Hellhounds, looking haggard and exhausted even for clawed monsters, seemed to be battling dozens, perhaps hundreds of zebras. The swamp of striped fighters was slowly wearing down the beasts. From atop the buildings, pegasi in black power armor darted out of cover to strafe the striped attackers and then returned to cover before deadly sniper fire could drop them. I saw the two Vertibucks landing on the far side of the dished building.

Then I was shot in the back.

The bullet smashed hard against the base of my neck, sparking off the reinforcement along my spine. Funny, something about the gunshot seemed awfully familiar... I whirled to look for the shooter as my friends dove for what little cover there was. What I saw were ghostly blurs in the mist on the far side of the hole. Glory and Sunset immediately started spraying with their energy weapons while Scotch Tape rolled off my back to take cover next to Boo.

I raced around the hole, gritting my teeth as the shots thudded into me, all blows that hurt but none that would down me outright. I fired ahead of me with Vigilance as I closed the gap between me and the nearest assailant. Blood dripped from the flickering air as I dove at the cloaked zebra. My hooves, however, flailed at nothing as my attacker leapt out of reach at the last second. I lay there, sprawled on the ground, and felt two hooves land on my spine and then a rifle press against the back of my skull. The stealth cloak had fallen open, and I magically jerked the rifle barrel to the side, the round biting a deep hole in the crumbled concrete.

As I struggled to keep the barrel off my skull, I glanced over at my friends. A grenade reduced two blurs into bloody heaps. Glory and Sunset fired red and green bolts of energy at the attackers. One zebra raced at Boo and Scotch Tape along the edge of the building as if were as wide as a road. Her cloak flew free, revealing a triumphantly grinning mare as she leapt into the air and launched a devastating kick at the white mare. For a moment, I was absolutely certain both were going to die, and then the zebra's snapping cape suddenly whipped across her face, blinding her and causing her hoofstrike to miss by inches. To the astonishment of both the zebra and myself, her leg punched

completely through the crumbly roof. The mare struggled to free herself until Scotch Tape rose above her and bashed her skull with a pipe wrench, knocking her out.

Okay... I'd take it and ponder sometime I wasn't fighting for my life.

Knowing my friends weren't going to die in the next few seconds, I focused on my own attacker. The shooter swore in Zebra and with even more force tore the rifle's barrel from my magical grasp. I rolled, the shooter jumping once more to avoid falling as I looked up. The barrel filled one eye socket as I stared up into the shocked face of my adversary.

"You?!" Lancer swore. "How! What oath did I swear to be cursed enough to have *you* show up now?!"

"Back off!" Glory shouted as she pointed her gatling beam gun at him, hovering over the hole. Lancer pressed his forehoof to the trigger. A sharp sneeze might blow my head off. "Don't!"

"I swear, I should have killed you when we first met in that school," the stallion muttered as he looked down at me. "We seem to be at an impasse. A parley seems to be in order."

"Forget it," Scotch Tape shouted as she brandished her wrench.

"The alternative is I die and take the cursed one with me," he countered sharply, not taking his blue eyes off mine. We might be able to kill him if the magic disintegrated him faster than he could move... but anything else would likely have him kill me in his death throes.

"Fine," I said, looking at the others. "Put your weapons away. Remember Brimstone's Fall."

For an instant I thought he was going to shoot me anyway. Then he pulled the batwing-glyphed rifle from my face and stepped off me. "You have impeccable timing, Maiden."

"What's going on here?" I asked as I rose to my hooves, not taking my eyes off the zebra. More were emerging from the lower floors; over a dozen were moving into position below us to make sure that, if the fighting started, we'd be in a tight pinch. Probably his plan. I looked at him. "Maybe we can help?" The question drew shock from everypony except P-21.

"No. You're a tempest in metal and pony flesh. I'll not--" Lancer began. Then one of the other zebras asked something and it made him grimace. "No. We don't need their help! We'll reclaim what is ours without--" Another sharp question from another zebra stallion, and he snapped back. For several minutes, a trio argued with Lancer. The sniper looked more and more anguished, his mane bristling progressively before he snapped. "Fine!" He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "We are here to take back something stolen from us. What is your business here?"

I glanced at P-21, then said, "We're here to free the hellhounds from the Enclave control."

Lancer closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Of course. Only *you* could want *that*." He looked at me once more. "We've been struggling to breach their defenses. Every hour they bring in those machines and fly out with more of our property."

"I saw the cyberzebras," I said with a nod of my head, and the stallion grimaced.

"Yes, the... Brood of Coyotl. They are formidable..." And from his scowl, not appreciated.

“Unfortunately, they are not wearing down the Enclave defenses quickly enough.”

“Any other ways in?”

“There are claw-dug tunnels, but they are suicide. We have an underground passage secured, but we have been unable to breach the armored door or hack the terminal. You cursed my finest tech specialist,” he said sourly, a hoof stroking the trigger of his gun, “so we have been unable to proceed.”

I looked at P-21, and he gave a sure nod. “One last question...” I tilted my head towards the Vertibucks. “What are they taking out of here?”

“Property. *Our* property. Taken long ago,” he replied sharply. From the press of his lips, I suspected that that was all I’d get out of him.

“Guess we’ll have to get inside to find out. Once we do...” I trailed off, arching a brow.

He took a deep breath. “If you can break the pegasi’s control over the beasts, we will be able to drive them off. I doubt they will fight for the Enclave of their own volition. We will then reclaim what is ours.”

“Fair enough. And you let us out of here,” I added. “Deal?”

He shuddered. “I should have killed you when we first met. You’ve been nothing but misfortune for me since.” Finally, though, he gave a little nod.

“Now, show us to that door...” I said with a grin.

* * *

No wonder the hellhounds carved their own tunnels; this door was made to withstand a balefire blast. ‘Northeast Equestria Satellite Tracking’ was stenciled over the front. Claw swipes had scoured the reinforced steel but not breached it. P-21 worked a terminal set in the wall with a thoughtful methodical demeanor that would have had me climbing the walls in frustration.

Lancer hadn’t offered to accompany us, and I wouldn’t have let him. Instead, a half-dozen zebras in black combat barding stood silently at the ready. These were the Brood of Coyotl; they didn’t laugh, talk, glare at me, or do much more than follow. Familiar red lights gleamed in their eyes, but that was the only hint that they’d been augmented. Half wore battle saddles with markspony carbines, while the other half wore power hooves; there was something vaguely un-zebralike about their armor and weaponry. They wouldn’t go past this point; they were here to stop any hellhounds on the far side from rushing out.

Oh what joy to be caught in the crossfire.

“Any luck?” I asked P-21.

“I’m trying to access a super-secure facility. The password is thirteen characters long. It’s not exactly easy to figure out.” He typed some more on the terminal, scowling as if it’d given him a personal insult.

“Blackjack, what’s wrong with them?” Scotch Tape asked from where she sat with Boo. The filly

stared at the armored zebras warily. "They don't talk. They don't even move."

"I don't know," I admitted. They were used two hundred years ago during the war; I remembered seeing them in Shujaa's memory. "Maybe they're just... really focused?" At the moment, I had way too much on my plate to take on new mysteries.

"That's way more than just focus," Glory said with a frown. "I'd love to do a physical exam. Take one to Rover and compare their augmentation to yours. It'd be fascinating to see if there's any commonality in designs."

"Yeah. Lancer's not going to let that happen," P-21 said from the terminal, then glanced at me with a frown of concern. "You do know he's going to betray us?"

"He's shot me multiple times in the back, and I haven't died yet," I said calmly. "Must be really frustrating for him. Worse, given that the Remnant thinks I'm the Maiden of the Stars." Scotch Tape cocked her head in confusion, and I sighed, "Basically... I'm the zebra devil destined to bring chaos and destruction to the world."

"Oh." The filly smirked, but I could see the thought process work through her head as her smile disappeared. "Oh..."

"I'm not the Maiden of anything! I'm not even a maiden! There's certain criteria a mare has to meet in order to be considered a maiden, and I blew that when I was your age," I snapped, making Boo shrink back. Sighing, I added in softer tones, "I don't want to destroy anything, Scotch."

"I didn't say you did, Blackjack. It's just... look at all the things you've done," she said with a tap of her hooves. "I know it's not true..."

P-21 hit a key, and there was a solid clunk and the sounds of working machinery from the door. "There it is. *Constellation*," he said as the door slowly swung open. Its thickness was more than the length of my foreleg. Beyond was a hallway with an icon of four stars on the wall over the acronym N.E.S.T. "Let's hurry. Now that this door is open, I give Lancer five minutes before he storms through here."

As quietly as we could, we moved deeper into the facility. Given the reinforcement all around it, it was clear this place had been designed to withstand megaspells; there also weren't any signs of looting or pillaging, which made me wonder if anypony had entered here till recently. P-21 and Boo were in the lead, the white mare as cautious as P-21 as she moved forward. Sunset and I, with our metal hooves, hung back.

The red bars didn't give me much encouragement, but three times we evaded hellhound and pegasus patrollers, once by all of us hiding in large empty crates scattered along the halls. The fourth encounter, both Glory and Sunset placed exceptionally lucky shots that simultaneously vaporized two hellhound guards before either of them could get a roar off. Scotch Tape swept the dust into a nearby garbage bin. My paranoia began to nibble at me. It shouldn't be this easy. With E.F.S. and the hellhounds' senses, we should have run into far more trouble! Was this some sort of setup?

"Blackjack," Glory said as she examined one of the many crates with a label: "Destination: Shadowbolt Tower. Contents: scrap metal 14/25 #32. *." "This is a Volunteer Corps label."

"This sure isn't a Volunteer Corps operation," I said as I slid the silver sword along the top, cutting through the screws holding the lid in place. We pushed it up and revealed a large, carefully disassembled piece of machinery. "And that isn't scrap metal."

Glory thumped her hoof against the crate, gritting her teeth. "We always wondered why Intelligence stopped blocking the VC program. They've been using us to smuggle things to the tower."

"I'm sorry," I said as I stroked her blue wings with a hoof.

"I'm not. Come on. Now I have my own payback to give these jerks," she said as she continued down the hall.

We soon found the nerve center, emerging on a terminal-lined balcony walkway overlooking a buzzing command center with rows of even more terminals. The N.E.S.T. control room had at least two dozen power-armored pegasi, another two dozen technicians tapping away at terminals or talking over schematics, and... I lost count of the hellhounds. Once again, though, we'd gotten lucky. There was only one power-armored pegasus guarding the balcony. When she trotted close, Sunset and I reached out, grabbed her by her tail, and jerked her through the doorway. One sharp blow later, the guard was unconscious, and we moved out on the balcony.

"Which one do you think is controlling the hellhounds?" I asked as I peeked down at all the terminals.

"None of them. Those are terminals. The maneframe is probably even more reinforced than this place," Scotch Tape said as she peeked down, rubbing her chin.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" P-21 whispered to his daughter.

"That if we can't get to the maneframe or the broadcast equipment, we can blow the cables connecting the two?" Scotch replied, surprising the stallion.

"Actually, I was thinking of trying to find this place's reactor and blowing it up," he said with a sheepish grin.

"Overkill, Dad." The olive filly looked down at the floor. "If I were designing this place, I'd drop the cables through the floor to maneframes below and run the broadcast cabling up an armored central trunk. Which I think is right... there." She gestured at a long square conduit running along the wall from floor to ceiling, passing right by the edge of the balcony. "The problem is I have no idea how we'd carve our way in without everypony seeing us."

Then a klaxon sounded, and at the alarm both hellhounds and Enclave soldiers drained from the room, leaving the techs working more frantically than before. I looked at everypony, feeling that sense of paranoia growing. Nothing *ever* went this well for me. We moved to the end of the balcony; the conduit was almost the size of a pony. My silver sword floated out, and I pushed with all my might, slowly carving a hole in the half-inch steel. Behind it was some sort of copper mesh. I floated both the cutout and the sword back to me while P-21 prepared some plastic explosives. Then I munched on the metal.

"Blackjack, there's probably an auxiliary channel. This place has to have redundancy," Scotch Tape said tersely as she glanced down at the agitated pegasus technicians below. "See if you can find it

and cut it.”

“Right,” I muttered, not having a clue of what it was I was looking for. Maybe a conduit with some sort of label saying ‘Back up cables, please don’t cut’ on it? I moved back along the balcony with Boo following close behind me. Some of the terminals had burned out over time, but others still flashed their obscure data and messages. I wondered just what they meant, but really, all the ‘MASTER - ES-1037C: 73%’ and ‘CBG1 CONNECTION LOST’ meant nothing to me.

>EC-1101 acknowledgement required.

I paused and went back to the unassuming terminal with the tiny command up near the top of the screen. “No...” I glanced back at Boo, then at the terminal screen. My ‘things are going too smooth’ paranoia tripled. I pressed the enter key, not sure what would happen. The screen flashed, and more text appeared.

>LNR PLC to NEST. Auth. 331-AJ762-RD997 Luna.

>EC-1101 activity detected.

> LNR PLC acknowledgement request 9,999,881 / 10,000,000.

> EC-1101 acknowledgement required.

> Project Horizons protocol pending.

I stared at the screen, but no matter what I typed, the same data scrolled. Dawn had said there was a fuse lit once EC-1101 was out of Stable 99. This ‘LNR PLC’ place was sending requests out to whoever could receive them, not realizing that Equestria had been destroyed. So what happened when it got to ten million? I suspected that whatever the LNR PLC was, that was where Horizons was too.

Still, another dead end. I had no way of knowing how to acknowledge the request. Did I have to use my broadcaster? Transfer EC-1101 into the terminal? How did I do that? Did the terminal even work? I sighed and looked at Boo. “Another hint. Sometimes I think my life is just a string of hints I don’t qui--” Behind the pale mare was a row of five metal pipes with ‘Aux brdcast’ stenciled on them. “And really freaky coincidences, too...”

Boo blinked her pale eyes and cocked her head with a happy smile.

I made two slices with the sword, cutting five disks out of the pipes and sending wire chaff all over the floor. If I set off an alarm, it couldn’t be heard over the one already sounding. I trotted back to Scotch Tape with a grin. “Cut the backups.”

“You did?” Scotch Tape said in shock, then quickly smiled. “I mean, good job.”

“Thanks,” I replied dryly, then looked at P-21. “Bomb ready?” He held up several bricks of explosive taped to a radio detonator. I floated it over and into the hole. There was a soft thud as it fell down a little ways before getting hung up on something. “Okay...” And I accessed my broadcaster. I’d done this once by accident, but this time it should work.

“This is Security to all Enclave personnel,” I said calmly. “In five minutes, I’m going to free the hellhounds you’ve enslaved here. You can use that time trying to stop me, or you can clear out.” I

paused, almost knowing for certain that he had to be listening. "Lighthooves. You know what I can do. Remember Minty? Get your people out of here."

From the shouts below, I guessed that my message had been received. I could only hope that they'd follow my advice. If they didn't... well, I'd given warning. "Let's go. Quick," I said, wanting to get out of here before they found us.

Given that all those guards and hellhounds had probably headed towards the door we'd entered through, we needed to find another way out. As it was, all I could do was move through the halls as quickly as I could. Fortunately, there weren't many red bars this way.

Just a shimmering magic field. The blue wall stretched across the entire hallway we'd started down. I tapped it with a hoof, but it was solid as rock. My eyes checked the walls for a terminal to deactivate it, but there was nothing there except for a stenciling of a rainbow lightning bolt on the wall...

"Let... let me try," Glory said as she stepped up to the field and touched it with a wing. The feather passed right through like it was water. She passed right through, and once she was on the far side, the magic field dropped, leaving a ring of deactivated gems. "Wow... it worked. Let's go." From her flustered appearance, she clearly didn't want to talk about it.

The hallway kept going up and down, and I had no idea if we were above the ground or beneath it when we emerged in an office overlooking a large warehouse space. A large section of the warehouse's roof had been torn off, revealing the open sky. On the office's wall I saw a map, pictures of pegasi wearing strange blue and yellow uniforms, photographs of the rainbow-maned flier sitting on a rock with other ponies and grinning while behind them a colossal factory burned. Another showed a burst dam, a third the building of one of the MASEBS towers.

"This... this was Rainbow Dash's office. Or one of them," Glory breathed as she walked slowly around the space.

"I always thought the Ministry of Awesome was the Ministry of Do Nothing," Sunset said as she followed Glory.

"Lots of ponies thought so. Rainbow Dash wanted to give that impression," Glory replied as she looked at the terminal. "Plenty of folks wrote her off as the dumb athlete. But she knew how to organize weather teams and be a leader."

"Till she abandoned her people. Besides, we don't really know that this was Rainbow Dash's office," Sunset said as she looked around. "It seems pretty dumpy for a Ministry Mare." And that was true. There were empty Sparkle-Cola and Buckweiser bottles on the desk and empty potato chip bags in the trash. Definitely not a place a Ministry Mare kept to impress others. This was a working space. I had no difficulty imagining Rainbow Dash in here coming up with new plans and schemes with her confederates.

But there was one surefire way to know that this was Rainbow Dash's office. It lay right beside a photograph of six young Ministry Mares in ragged and torn dresses with a dapper young dragon standing beside them, a mouth-scrawled note read 'Best night ever!' in the upper corner. It was a small figurine of a purple unicorn smiling brightly back at me, clean despite the dust that covered everything else. I lifted the Twilight figurine and turned it over to read the inscription. *'Be Smart'*.

The pony gang was complete.

"Folks. You might want to look at this," P-21 said as he looked out the window, down into the warehouse. Holding the figurine, I trotted next to him and looked myself. The cavernous space held racks and racks filled with familiar, long, tapered shapes. Of course, these weren't ablaze with blue fire.

Missiles. Zebra missiles. Dozens of them. Perhaps hundreds. In the center of the building, a sort of workshop had been set up where the large missiles were being disassembled, packed into the VC crates, and loaded into two Vertibucks. Suddenly, it all clicked into place. Lighthooves had his delivery system, targeting talismans to guide them, and plague to load them with. He really did have a weapon to kill thousands, potentially tens of thousands!

"We've got to--" I said as I turned towards Glory and Sunset... and then I froze as I turned to see only empty space beside me. I looked around in confusion, then spotted the door swinging closed on the side of the office. 'Roof Access'.

Of course a pegasus would have access to the outside from her office. I ran as swiftly as I could for the door and spotted stairs going up through another ring of deactivated shield gems. I scrambled up the stairs and slammed the door open as I emerged onto the roof. Glory lay unconscious at Sunset's hooves as her glistening stinger pried and ripped the blue mare's gatling beam gun off her and tossed the wrecked weapon over the edge of the building. The mare looked at me as I emerged, and the stinger at the end of her tail popped off. Sunset plunged her tail stub into a storage compartment on her side and withdrew it with a new tip, this one crackling with arcane lightning. I raced at the pegasus as she crouched to pick up Glory.

"No!" I screamed as I drew my gun and slipped into S.A.T.S., but Glory was now blocking my best targets. Instead, I aimed for Sunset's wing, triggering the targeting spell as I charged. The shots bit into the armored covering but didn't ground her. The power-armored pegasus launched herself into the air, carrying my love with her. "No! Glory!" I screamed at the skies, helpless to follow.

Then there was a flash in front of Sunset, and four alicorn hooves slammed into her. She coiled her tail around Glory as they tumbled back to the rooftop. "You shall not pass!" Lacunae thundered, her eyes blazing. Sunset flipped and landed atop the roof, facing me and holding Glory as a shield.

The crackling blade came around, pressed at Glory's throat. "Get back! I'm taking her with me!" Sunset shouted at me. "If she can get through those shields, she's Rainbow Dash enough for us! Back! They'll want her alive, but I'd be happy to rip out her throat and take a tissue sample instead." Twister and Boomer flew in, and I swapped to my carbine.

"Sunset! What the hay do you think you're doing?" Twister shouted as she flew towards us from the north with Boomer close behind. "This wasn't the plan!"

"Plan? There was a plan?!" I screamed as I kept my eyes locked on Sunset.

"The Thunderheaders have missiles. Cruise missiles! If we can get into the S.P.P., then we can smack them right out of the air!" Sunset shouted. "We have orders to retrieve the Rainbow Dash copy. She can breach barriers, Twister! That's all the proof we need! Take out that alicorn, and we can get out of here!" But Twister and Boomer weren't firing just yet. "What are you waiting for?!" Sunset blurted. "We have our orders!"

"Glory's told me the Enclave aren't a bunch of selfish assholes!" I shouted back, wondering if I could take the shot. A three-round armor piercing burst? Maybe.

"We have our orders!" Sunset yelled.

"I've saved your life, Twister. Remember Yellow River?" I asked as I lined up my shot. Sunset was backing towards the edge of the roof. Behind us, I heard some low hellhound snarls. Clearly our yelling and gunshots were attracting attention.

"What's your call, Sergeant?" Boomer asked, looking from Sunset to Lacunae.

Twister looked down at Sunset. "Now I know you want to do what's right, Sunset. I do too. Yes, we have orders. It's our job to carry them out, but not like this. Let Morning Glory go." I felt a deep gush of appreciation for the mare for using Glory's real name.

Hellhounds climbed over the far edge of the roof and began to race towards us, their dragging claws shrieking on the metal surface. In a moment it became clear that they were aiming just for me and P-21; apparently pegasi were off their menu while under the helmets' influence.

"Traitor!" Sunset screamed as she backed towards the edge.

"P-21! Fire!" I shouted. P-21's hoof smacked the detonator in his tail. From the tall building with the dishes came the faint sound of a muffled explosion. The hellhounds stopped short of us, clutching their heads with screams. Then their claws curled in and crushed the helmets with a shrieking of metal. They tore the helmets off.

"No..." Sunset murmured as she released Glory and turned to leap off the building. Two hellhounds who had been about to tear me to pieces instead turned and leapt after her. Their claws sank through her armor, and Sunset screamed as she was borne to the ground, claws ripping her armor and flesh to pieces. Two more hellhounds immediately began blasting into the air, forcing Twister and Boomer and Lacunae to evade their red blasts. Other hellhounds closed in to finish everypony not in power armor off.

"Gnarr sent me!" I yelled as two leapt upon me. One grabbed my throat and pulled back his hand to rip my head off in one swing. "Gnarr sent me to free you!"

The hand paused. Fierce, cunning eyes stared into mine with a palpable hatred. Then the hand around my neck released. "Leave," was all the hellhound said. Then, with a howl, the hellhounds left the rooftop. With a whoosh, the Vertibucks lifted out of the hole in the roof and made for the skies. One had a hellhound clinging to its side and struggling to rip its way to the pegasus fliers.

I checked to make sure Glory was okay; she was unconscious, but alive. I didn't look at Twister and Boomer as I said, "You should get out of here too. Tell your superiors that Lighthooves plans on using missiles to deliver his bioweapon."

"Blackjack," Twister began. "What about Glory?"

"That's up to you," I said quietly. "Rainbow Dash was Twilight's loyalest friend. Twilight always knew that Rainbow Dash would do what was right, eventually. I guess it's up to you to decide who your loyalty is to." I slipped the Twilight figurine into the saddlebag that held the others.

The two looked at each other and then took off, flying southwest. I could only assume they'd find their way.

I cradled Glory as I looked to Lacunae. "Take us out of here."

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, we were reunited with Deus and Rampage and riding the tank away from the base. Rampage had a novel counter to the anesthetic that had incapacitated Glory. The shot of Dash that Rampage administered had Glory awake and practically bouncing on her hooves. "Right! Rematch! Next time I'm going to take them all down! Ten seconds flat!" she said as she punched the air with her hooves, snorting.

"I like this Glory. She's goofy," Scotch giggled.

"Wait till the Dash wears off," I countered, hoping we wouldn't have another addiction to worry about when she crashed. I then filled Rampage in on everything that happened while we were gone.

The striped mare listened to the story of our infiltration, muttering sourly, "Wow. You have all the luck. In. Out. Killed a traitor. Freed a bunch of bloodthirsty monsters. I should have gone with you. We've just been leading hellhounds around in circles!" Deus rumbled his engine in reply.

"Yeah, well, I don't want to make a habit of it. Hope Rover's happy," I said as I rubbed my throat. "Hellhounds and sand dogs aren't even close to each other. I'll take cyberdogs over radioactive hounds any time."

"Blackjack!" P-21 called out, pointing into the still-lingering mist.

I looked up and spotted the blue bars... lots of blue bars. Dozens. Hundreds maybe. Out of the fog emerged figures walking in perfect unison, covered from head to hoof in black zebra combat armor. Every step was simultaneous and deliberate. A frisson ran through me at the sight of the black-armored horde of zebras; the Brood of Coyotl were a silent, ominous lot. Behind them were regular zebras, the snipers and hoof-fighters I was more familiar with, dressed in a variety of barding and weaponry, some wearing mistcloaks and some garbed in patched-up combat armor. They formed a ring around us.

Glory popped into the air. "Let me at 'em! I'll take them all down!" I grabbed her tail with my magic and gave a firm yank to plant her butt back on the tank. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?" she protested.

"Hush and let the non-drugged ponies talk," I said as I looked around for him. "Lancer?" I called out.

"Maiden," he replied as the zebras parted and the silent stallion advanced.

"Well, is this the point of your sudden yet inevitable betrayal?" I asked dryly, tapping the turret with my hoof with a reassuringly solid clang. "Because while you got an army, I got a tank."

"Maiden, didn't I tell you that your death wouldn't be at my hooves? Your demise has been decreed to be carried out by Legate Vitiosus himself. I would not kill you, even if I had the opportunity," Lancer said with a calm smile as he stood out in front of us. I didn't point out how willing he'd been to

threaten to kill me when he'd had guns pointed at him.

"So..." I frowned as I watched the black-armored zebras slowly back away as one. They weren't moving as if to simply let us leave, however. One red bar appeared on my E.F.S. "Oh no..."

A gap appeared ahead of us, and a lone figure slowly advanced through the mist. The zebra stallion moved with a slow gait that conveyed terrible power and grace all at once. His head was concealed by a dragon skull carved with strange glyphs. His powerful body bore innumerable scars across its surface, including a horrible Y-shaped injury across his chest. More carved dragonbone armor formed spikes at his hips and flank, strapped in place, and tattered glyph-marked cloths tied around his fetlocks snapped in the breeze; apart from that, he wore no barding. He carried no weapons that I could see, but for all I knew he could kick through steel.

Lancer trotted around the edge of the circle of zebras to join the Legate, kneeling beside him. "Legate Vitiosus, may I present for you the Maiden of the Stars, Blackjack." He then smiled at me and said, "Maiden, be honored. This is the Legate of the fallen Caesar's will. The stallion that exercises the last Remnant of the Imperial army."

"Enough, my Lancer," the Legate said in a low, deep voice. "This is not the time or place I wished for this battle. I hoped to break the Maiden upon the smoldering, melted remains of their cursed city. You have forced this confrontation prematurely, my Lancer."

Lancer stared as if struck. "F... Legate. It may be early, but she is here! You are here! Let the champion of the stars be felled by your hoof!" He paused, then added, "I know we were unable to retrieve the Talisman of the Eternal Warrior..."

"Indeed. You have failed to do a great many things. You were unable to slay my treacherous mate, you failed to retrieve the bones of the stars, and the talisman escaped you. Now you force this premature confrontation," the Legate boomed as he stared at me atop Deus. "At times I think your certainty that she is the Maiden is simply a way to cover your own failings."

"I'm not," I replied as I looked down at him. "I don't have an argument with you, Legate. We simply want to go."

He regarded me for a long moment. "You seek to save the people of this cursed land?" he asked, gesturing towards the Core with a sweep of his hoof.

"I do," I replied.

"Why?" he asked in return.

"Legate, I beg you. Do not speak with--" Lancer began, but with one baleful look from the Legate he fell silent, chewing on his unspoken words.

I considered the question, not expecting it. "Because... because I can fight. Because others need me to fight for them. If I have the ability, then I should use it. Security protects ponies."

"But who are these ponies you protect?" he asked calmly, reasonably. "Murderers. Rapists. Thieves. Slavers. The craven, the callow, and the cruel. You yourself have seen how this place corrupts, twists, and violates all within it. This land attracts the sinful and wicked. Are they deserving of

your service? Are they worth your pain?"

Closing my eyes, I could easily imagine who he was talking about. Clink. Sanguine. The Overmare. Dawn. Even the Reapers, the Flash Fillies, the Burner Boys, the Halfhearts... the Enclave. "Maybe not. I have to admit, there're a lot of bad ponies in this place," I replied quietly. I could feel all eyes upon me, and not just those of my friends. I imagined Priest watching me. Roses and Thorn. Dusty Trails. Snips. Lemongrass. Marmalade. Mother... "But even if there are bad people here, there are good ones, too." I could see Charity and Bottlecap. Rover. Cynical Triage. Keeper. The ghouls of Meatlocker and the fillies of Chapel and the ponies of Riverside and Megamart... And I smiled as I looked down at the Legate. "Maybe it's not about being good and bad, Legate. Maybe it's about trying harder to do better, to be better people. And so long as there are people here trying to do that, I'll give them all the protection I can. Security saves ponies," I finished simply.

The Legate looked up and me and smiled. "Then we are enemies, whether you are the Maiden or not. It is my solemn duty since I assumed command of the Remnant to execute the Caesar's final orders and destroy this vile place and all who live here." He took a few steps forward. "It appears, Maiden, that we are at an impasse. It is unfortunate that I cannot break you when you are at the peak of your destiny."

"Shucks. Too bad for me, then." I sighed and sat down on the turret top, frustrated that we couldn't come to some sort of arrangement that didn't involve fighting. "So. Is this something that's just between me and you, or can my friends help?"

He just smiled, and from around the ring came an ominous clatter of dozens of weapons being readied simultaneously. "Certainly, if you wish *my* friends to participate also."

That wiped the smile from my face. "Um... I got a tank on my side," I reminded him. Deus revved his engine in agreement.

This fact didn't seem to perturb the Legate in the slightest. "You do. And perhaps that alone would be enough to win. But you have many friends as well. Loved ones. Children. Can you live with them dying on your behalf? Will you so eagerly slaughter dozens to win?" The calm certainty of his smile chilled me.

"You're pretty confident. What if I win?" I countered with a frown.

"Then the Remnant will withdraw until a new Legate is chosen. Perhaps that will not happen for years. Perhaps it will never happen," he countered with sublime confidence that it would not need to happen at all. "Is it not better this way? Had your Princess, or your predecessor, faced the Caesar in fair combat, the war may never have happened. With one duel, you may end a threat to this wicked place forever."

Oh, that was tempting. He knew exactly how to push my buttons. I glanced at all my friends and hopped off Deus. "Give us a chance to talk it over?" I asked. The Legate nodded his skull-helmed head while Lancer stared on in shock, his mouth moving in feeble disbelief. We pulled into a tight circle.

"Don't even think about it," P-21 warned me quietly.

"I can take 'em all on!" Glory said with a snap of her tail.

"I'd pay to see that," Rampage laughed with a nod to Glory. "We need to dose her on Dash more often."

"No," I replied. Rampage arched a brow, and I amended, "No to the Dash. No to fighting all of them. I don't want to risk all of you against him."

P-21 rolled his eyes, "And what makes you think we want to risk *you* against him on your own?"

"I'm not going to sit by and watch you fight some... some... spooky zebra!" Glory said with a snort.

"I don't want to fight him at all," I said as I glanced over at the Legate. "And oddly, I don't think he wants to fight me, either. Something about this feels... wrong. So as soon as Deus and the rest of you are clear, I want Lacunae to find the nearest radiation crater, suck up the rads, and come yank me out if things go bad." With luck, he'd be just another zebra... but I doubted it.

"What if we want to fight anyway?" Rampage said with a scowl, and Deus rumbled in agreement. "We don't have to just walk away 'cause you say so."

I sighed and closed my eyes. "Rampage, please leave this to me." Then I smiled to her. "Trust me. If I can beat him here and now, then the Remnant won't be a problem. He's right about that. I'd rather not fight another war."

She screwed up her face, grimaced as if she had a bad case of indigestion, and finally slumped. "I don't like this, Blackjack. This guy... he feels familiar. In a bad way. A part of me just... just... *knows* him!" she said with a frustrated scowl, then added, "And I know he's bad fucking news."

I knew what she meant. Something about the way he talked, even the way he moved, nagged at me. I turned back to him. "I want your soldiers to pull back. My friends will do the same. Then we can have your duel... till one of us surrenders or is killed. Agreed?"

"Your terms are acceptable," he replied casually. "You may use whatever weapons you have at your disposal."

"No, Legate! She must be slain here and now," Lancer begged as the zebra horde pulled away.

"Silence," the Legate countered, not taking his eyes off me. "You forced this confrontation prematurely. Do not say another word to me." Glory, still muttering about how she could take them all on, gave me a firm hug and a promise that if I started losing, she'd be there in ten seconds flat. With that, the tank rolled further north with my friends, and the striped horde moved off to the east. I spotted a half dozen or so hellhounds watching from the southwest through glinting binoculars. Were they going to interfere, or were they placing bets?

I wondered what the odds they were laying on me were.

I levitated the starmetal sword and Vigilance before me; the only weapons he might have had were those wind-blown pieces of cloth tied to his legs, and I wasn't sure how effective those could be. As we began slowly circling each other, the Hoofington rain decided to start right there, hissing on the rock and dripping along my metal and his bone. I just had to beat him. Not even kill him. I could do this. I could! We trotted around each other, feeling as if we were building energy and any momen--

And like that he turned and darted in with a speed that almost took me by complete surprise. He

leapt over my swing in a somersault and smashed his outstretched hooves against my skull, rattling my focus. He landed in front of me and launched into a backwards flip that crashed his hindhooves against my jaw. I fired wildly as I staggered back, but he landed on his back legs and in a half dozen steps arched around to my left, jumped in a spin, and bashed the side of my head again with an outstretched rear hoof. The force of the blow almost put me on my backside as he landed in a crouch and twisted to arrest his momentum in that direction. A second later, he reversed the movement of his upper body, and like a snapping spring rammed his hoof against the opposite side of my head, knocking me flat on my back on the ground.

All that in ten seconds...

My E.F.S. warned me that my head couldn't take a series of blows like that again, but that was exactly what the Legate was continuing to target. He sprang like Rampage high into the air, flipping and bringing his rear hoof down in a finishing blow aimed at my skull. I brought up my forelegs, and his hoof clanged loudly against them. The sword flashed through the rain to sever the hoof pressed against my forelimbs, but he kicked off my legs before the edge connected. Rolling back upright, mud streaking along my hide, I dropped into S.A.T.S. and queued up five shots.

To my amazement, the targeting spell estimated only a forty percent chance of hitting! I triggered the spell anyway, but as soon as I did I could see why the chance was so low. Everything moved at a crawl except for him! Three rounds bit into his striped hide, but they were spread out and not near any of the vitals I'd aimed at. The shots didn't even seem as effective as they should have been, given he wore no barding in those areas. His tough hide just fought the impacts, leaving small bloody holes rather than gaping wounds.

Not good.

I rose and lifted my hooves to block further attacks to my head, but the Legate had fainted. Once again on his hind legs, he moved along the left side of my body in a single revolution and slammed both forehooves into my ribs with enough force to drive me back down to my knees. Then he snapped another forward flip that brought his rear hoof slamming right on my spine. Had I not been augmented, he probably would have snapped my back.

"Rampage says if you don't start moving, it's over," Lacunae said tersely in my head. "I can also try to shoot him from here if you can stop his motion."

"No. If the zebras see you aiming, it'll be a bloodbath," I countered. Rampage's comment was a fair point, though, and I ignored the throbbing pain and heaved myself into motion, charging him. He was faster than me and had to be as tough as me. I doubted he was as heavy as me, though. Spraying muddy water everywhere, I closed in on him. I knew he'd try and dodge, and he did, jumping to the left. I reached out with my magic to grab his hoof and...

Nothing! It was like his striped body was coated in an oil that just slipped right out of my magic. He darted in with another forward-flipping kick to my head, as before, but I lunged aside and took the blow on my shoulder. My forehooves reached up and locked around his outstretched rear leg, and then my horn flashed and fired magic bullets into him; like my telekinesis, though, the magic was reduced far below what it should have been. Using the trapped limb as leverage, he twisted around in front of me, drew back his other hoof, and kicked me square in the horn. The stab of pain almost broke my focus, and my planned swing with the sword to sever his trapped leg missed and bit deep into my own right foreleg.

As smooth as a greased gun slide, he kicked until I lost my grip, then pulled free. I didn't stay put and let him simply spin kick me yet again, though, instead backing away and blocking the attack. Perhaps I could wear him down...

Then I saw that the holes I'd punched in his side were closing before my eyes! "Oh come on! You're ridiculously fast, strong, partially bulletproof, magic resistant, and regenerating?!" I protested, pointing my sword at him. "How?!"

"You are hardly one to complain about unnatural abilities," he countered, gesturing with a muddy hoof at my synthetic limbs. "You profaned your body with metal and machines to gain your strength, violating your very essence." He smiled, and Celestia damn me if the bastard didn't flex his powerful muscles and send half the zebra mares behind the Brood of Coyotl whooping!

Still, he was giving me an opening and a breather... which was a little baffling, since he was supposed to be finishing me off. As I rose back to my hooves, he continued, "Whereas I have augmented my body with sanctified alchemy and sorcery that only the zebras possess. The fury of the spirits, the might of dragons. The ferocity of griffins. The power of things... beyond *your* grasp." He posed like a magnificent striped god before his followers.

If he'd been a little more reckless, I'd have thought him a braggart, but he never took his eyes off me and gave me an opening to knock him out. Either he possessed scary confidence in his abilities, or something was going on here. "Well... great! Good to know. So we're going to be locked in an eternal struggle here, then?" I countered sarcastically, at the same time thinking frantically to try and figure out what he could be up to.

"No. Simply until your power reserves are drained," he replied casually. "I shall not tire, and my body shall not fail. Yours, however..." He trailed off as his smile widened.

Crap. I queried my available power in my E.F.S.... and the moment my attention moved off him, he was on me. One of his rear legs swung low to the ground in a powerful circle and swept me off my hooves again. My focus snapped, the blade spinning off into the muck around us. Without stopping his spin, his outstretched hoof crashed against my descending skull and spun me away into the mud. I groaned and stayed on my back for a second too long. His circling hoof continued around a third time, changing orientation from horizontal to vertical and crashing down on my chest with such force that even my synthetic lungs had the breath blasted from them.

"Pathetic," he said as I lay there, my chest making disturbing crackles and wheezes as my lungs reinflated. "It is your destiny to be defeated by me, but I had hoped for something... grander."

"We're going to come ba--" Lacunae began to say in my mind.

"No!" I shouted, feeling the old, familiar need to win growing within me. I flushed as the Legate cocked a brow and hissed mentally, "Stick to the plan. I can handle this preening son of a mule!"

"No? You have nothing more?" The Legate tilted his head with the question, then straightened and broadened his smile a bit. "Oh... are you communicating with your friends? Some internal radio?"

I spat something that tasted of oil and blood into the mud and glared up at him. *You're stalling again. Why the fuck don't you finish me off?* "Don't worry about them," I hissed as I lifted myself back up. "Worry about me!" My horn flared as I drew Vigilance, Sacrifice, and Duty in a surge of desperation, firing

wildly at him as I charged.

The bullets tore into his striped hide, ripping bloody holes as he crouched before me. I just needed a few more shots, a few more good hits. A few more! He sprang backwards with that disturbing zebra grace, though, and flung a glob of muck directly into my face just as I entered S.A.T.S. No! I fired away blindly, blinking and trying to restore my vision.

When it cleared... wait, where'd he go?

"Above you!" shouted Lacunae in my mind as his plunging hoof smashed down between my shoulders, driving me face first into the sludge; my spine let out a crackling of bone and a groaning of metal, and I felt a horrifying moment of my body being consumed by a paralyzing numbness from my neck down. My focus broke, my guns falling out of sight in the muck. "Enough is enough! We're coming--"

"No!" I groaned as the tingling impact-induced anesthesia abated. The Legate circled me as his unhelmeted followers cheered. Lancer smiled like it was Hearth's Warming Eve. I'd win. I was a cyberpony killing machine who wasn't going to be defeated by freaky zebra martial arts. "I'll beat him!" I croaked.

"Pitiful," he said in a voice of disappointment that only my mother was allowed to use, but he just kept circling as I struggled to rise. "Why are you not greater? Your destiny is for so much more. Power. Destruction. Yet you wallow in the muck like a sow. I am half inclined to let you crawl back to your friends until you are a fitting opponent."

Lancer's grin disappeared like a popped balloon. "Father, no! Finish the Maiden before her friends come and spirit her away!" Oddly, the *Legate* wasn't smiling either. If anything, he now seemed frustrated.

"If you fear such, my Lancer, be prepared to slay her alicorn when she appears, but you will not interfere with destiny," the Legate snapped, then fixed me with a calculating glare. "Where are your friends? Why do they not come for you?" he murmured; if my ears hadn't been augmented, I likely would have missed it.

"A good question," Lacunae snapped in my mind. "I may have just enough magic to come back myself and help yo--"

"No! You heard him. Lancer and a dozen other zebras will kill you the moment you appear!" I could see Lancer prepared for her arrival. Surely there'd be others as well, hidden out of sight. "I'll beat him... no matter how he breaks me!" I could take it. I deserved it... I deserved this...

"Damn it, Blackjack! You're not Psalm!" Lacunae shouted within my mind.

The name struck across my thoughts, stunning me a moment. Psalm... I was acting like Psalm? The Legate just stared through the eye sockets of the dragon, as my eyes met his for a half dozen heartbeats. Annoyance flashed inside his brilliant, scornful yellow gaze. Finally, some line had been crossed. "So be it," the Legate said.

Like a tempest, he fell upon me. His body twisted back and forth, a vortex battering against me with a speed and power I could only defend against by lifting my hooves. I had to win -- it was what I did

best -- but I wanted to lose. That sick, insidious seed inside me liked this battering, wanted it. Hightower. Pinkie Pie. Chapel. Fluttershy Medical Center. Big Macintosh. The *Seahorse*.

His grin suddenly widened. While continuing to rain down blows, he said in a tone of false kindness, "Do not fear for your friends' safety. Those that surrender will be taken back to our base as slaves. I will take the olive one for my harem as tribu--"

My black, dented limbs snapped up and clenched the Legate's swinging forehoof between them in a grip so firm it halted his thrashing, whirling barrage. "No," was all I said as his eyes widened within that skull, his foreleg trying to jerk itself free. Then I pulled him forward and rammed my horn into the left socket of that bony encasement.

For the first time in our fight, the Legate truly screamed.

If I'd possessed Lacunae's spire, I might have finished him off there and then; as it was, only the vitreous jelly of his eye coated the end of my compact horn. His own supernatural toughness and speed allowed him to jerk back moments before magic bullets erupted from my horn. Blood, bright and arterial, spurted from the impact, and the bone itself cracked and crumbled around that wounded socket. I lacked fingers, so instead I lunged once more and sank my teeth into his neck. My jaws bit down hard enough that I tasted blood; for once, it wasn't mine. Locked so, my forehooves grabbed his shoulders in a steel embrace. He struggled to pull free, and I twisted to the side, driving him straight into the muck.

I heard Lancer shouting something in Zebra. Something edged in fear. He knew. He'd seen me like this before.

I'd win. No matter what.

The Legate's hooves kicked wildly as I began to pummel everything I could that was striped and moving. He wheezed around the grip I had on his windpipe, trying desperately to free himself. *No you don't. No more fancy zebra kicks.* I hauled him back to me through the mud, using my weight, something his augmented flesh lacked, to keep him shoved beneath me. I raked his belly with the dull blunt ends of my hooves, forcing them into his flesh as he struggled and finally ripped his throat free from my mouth.

It wasn't the first flesh I'd eaten.

Rising over him, I slammed my forehooves repeatedly into his body. The dragonbone helmet saved his head, but with each kick I felt more bones break. I knew he was striking me as much as I was him, but I simply paid that no mind. I had to end it now! My augmented body was burning through its power reserves just as it had at Yellow River.

Then I spotted a starmetal hilt poking out of the muck, beckoning. My magic reached out and pulled my blade to me. I smashed him hard, flat on his back beneath me, and my magic raised the sword high. Let's see if he could regenerate his head!

Half of my face exploded in pain that cut right through my fury and focus. The right half of my world disappeared into a wild blizzard of colors and shapes as shrieking, staticky feedback shot through my skull. I screamed as a red hot dagger of agony plunged itself through my right eye, my body arching back as my hooves clenched over the wound. The Legate gave a heave beneath me, throwing me off. Any second now he'd finish me off for good. I clenched my eye shut as I writhed.

I felt the familiar floating sensation of death surround me, and I finally relaxed.

Finally... I'd see Mom again...

* * *

I hovered somewhere dark, still, and silent. This didn't feel... familiar. It was like the darkness of Unity, but empty, save for myself. Nowhere to go. Nothing to see. Simply myself.

"Hello?" I said, my voice thin and small. Then I spotted someone else, dark and distant. A white nimbus vaguely outlined her. "Hey! Who's there?" I shouted as I ran towards them, then slowed... then came to a stop as I saw her white mane and black coat and the candle on her flank. "Who..."

Psalm turned, bringing up Penance. The sniper rifle pointed at my right eye, and a blinding flash cut through the darkness. When it faded, the unicorn was gone and I was alone once more. I trembled, unarmed and unsure. "I'd really like to wake up now... or move on... or... something!"

A faint lilac gleam appeared in the darkness, highlighting an alicorn. "Lacunae!" I shouted as I raced towards her. She'd get me out of this...

But it wasn't Lacunae. Tall, cool, majestic, and beautiful in her royal regalia, Princess Luna turned and looked down at me, tiny stars gleaming in her mane. Her teal eyes held only sadness and pity for me. "P... Princess Luna?"

Suddenly she reared up, her purple aura becoming a frigid blue corona as her delicate ceremonial yoke became starmetal barding and her tiara a cruel helmet. Her eyes blazed, fiery and dragon-pupiled. "You little foal! Thinking you can be me!" she roared as she reared up before me in the dark, and then she brought her hooves down upon my head.

Again, darkness. I curled up, trembling. A distant red glow bloomed, and I watched it tearfully. This one approached slowly, relentlessly, inevitably. The red glow grew like a flamer spreading across that vast void around the dark figure. This time, I turned and ran as fast as my white hooves could carry me. But though her slow step remained constant, the distance between us closed. I could hear the crackle and the screaming behind me as the darkness was consumed by the inferno.

"Stay away," I screamed as I whirled, raising my hooves in horror at the figure.

A white unicorn fused with black steel looked down at me with light flickering in her hard, soulless eyes. A field of strewn bodies spread out behind her as her black and red mane snapped in an ethereal wind. So many dead. Raiders. Foals. Stable ponies. Zebras. Hellhounds. Steel Rangers. An endless field of death punctuated by a rainbow mane, a bloody fedora, a broken purple wing, and an olive filly embracing a mare no longer pristine white. She pressed a gun to my right eye; I stared down the barrel's spiraling rifling and into her merciless grin simultaneously.

"Can't escape the Maiden," Blackjack said, and my world exploded once more into a white I hoped would never end.

~ ~ ~

"Blackjack?" a mare called from somewhere both close and distant. "Blackjack!" One by one, sensations returned. Cold, wet metal on my back. The rumble, accompanied by a faint vibration, of an

engine. Pain throbbing through the right side of my face. Sadly, this was all distressingly familiar.

"I got shot, didn't I?" I muttered, looking up into the wide eyes of Glory.

"Don't move," she said in concern as she looked down at me, chewing her bottom lip in worry.

I sighed and remained still. "What happened with the zebras?"

"We don't know," P-21 said as he moved on the opposite side of me from Glory. "Lacunae started screaming that we had to get back to you immediately." The blue stallion looked off in what I could only presume was the direction of the alicorn. "I've never heard her scream before. I didn't know she could." He looked back down at me soberly. "We barely saw anything of the fight. The fog cut us off. Lacunae was all but jumping in one of those radiation pits trying to get enough magic to get in and blink you out. We arrived just as the zebras were leaving." He looked off in another direction. "They are gone, though. I checked. They've moved back to the base. They left you for dead."

Me? The Maiden? The pony devil of the stars? "That... doesn't make sense..." I muttered weakly.

"Zebras..." P-21 said in return with a small shrug.

"I got a head," Rampage said. "It's only got one eye, though."

"Head?" I muttered, starting to get alarmed. "Eye?" I began to raise my head, but then P-21 pushed me back down.

"Don't move. Not unless you want to break out your eyepatch again," the blue pony said as something wet and fleshy thumped heavily onto the metal beside me. "Lacunae, make sure Scotch and Boo don't see this, please."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"The bullet went into your right eye, Blackjack. It deflected, and it's sheer dumb luck that the round exited out under your right ear and not your brain stem," Glory said in a shaky voice. "Celestia... I want some more Dash..."

"Got some right here," Rampage said brightly. "Chemical confidence in a nice little inhaler."

P-21 raised a hoof out in the direction of Rampage's voice and shook his head.

Glory took a shaky breath. "No... no, he's right... put it away. Throw it away. Take it yourself. But don't give it to me." She ducked her head out of sight, and I heard some wet noises.

"Does it hurt? Do you want a memory orb?" P-21 asked me.

"No... no... right now... no..." I said as I lay there. I didn't want to go someplace else. I'd just got back.

"So... what happened, Blackjack?" Rampage asked. "I was getting all kinds of creepy familiar vibes from that bastard."

"I... was winning. I think I was winning. Then someone shot me in the head," I muttered as I saw

Glory's head moving, her mouth holding a bloody scalpel. "Three guesses who."

"Lancer," P-21 said with a scowl. Then he sighed, "I don't care how forgiving you are, Blackjack, next time I see that bastard I'm putting a live grenade in his saddlebag."

"Guess you got lucky," Rampage said casually. "They left you for dead."

Luck? No. Not luck. Being forced to face the Legate hadn't been luck. That fight... him drawing things out... that wasn't luck. They wouldn't have left me till I was certainly a corpse.

"Pull this out, Rampage," Glory said as the striped pony moved into view. She wiggled her forehooves out of sight. There was a wet, crunchy sort of sucking noise. "Gently! It's an eye, not armor plate."

"Hey. I don't tell you how to stick eyes into skulls. Don't tell me how to rip them out," Rampage replied. Finally, there was a pop, and she held up a metal and glass orb with a few streamers of meat and wire dangling from the back. Rampage turned it over in her hoofclaws. "Whoa, freaky."

Glory scowled at the eye and took it from Rampage. "This is... impossible." She started to do something with the eye out of my sight, and I heard an unpleasant metallic scratching sound.

"What is it?" I asked in worry.

"I'm not sure. Give me a second to finish cleaning it off," Glory said tersely.

"So... are you depressed?" P-21 asked. "Last time you lost a fight, you didn't take it so well."

I huffed softly. "I don't think I lost. That wasn't a fight. The Legate could have slaughtered me if he'd pressed the attack. But he kept talking and giving me time to recover before beating me down again. It wasn't a fight..." I turned my head enough to glance over at Lacunae, and thought of the Goddess. "It was a... a show. A performance. Something he was putting on because Lancer forced him to."

"You mean the Legate spared you?" Rampage asked in confusion. "Why?"

I thought and I thought, and the more I thought, the fewer answers I could come up with. Finally, I sighed. "I don't know..." But it made my mane itchy...

Glory held up the eye. It looked no different than my old one to me. It was even the same color, now that I looked. "Now, if I'm right, this shouldn't fit, and we'll need some time to finesse it in enough for her healing and repair talismans to patch it up. Do you need more Med-X?" Glory asked as she looked down at me, holding the shiny metal orb carefully between her hooves.

"You gave me Med-X?" I asked, blinking.

"Rampage," Glory said, but I waved her off.

"No no, I'm not in pain. I'm just wondering why I need it," I asked in confusion.

P-21 coughed and looked away. "Just stick it in so we don't have to tell her. Close your eye, Blackjack." I did, and felt the pressure over the right socket. Contrary to Glory's prediction, it slid home easily within my head.

"It's a perfect fit... it shouldn't be a perfect fit," Glory muttered.

"What? It's not like zebra and pony eyes are different sizes," Rampage drawled. "I should know. I've gouged out both before."

"It's not just the size. The muscle anchors. The power connections. The data ports. They're all identical!" Glory said as she did something to the side of my face.

"So zebras stole the Steelpony technology," I grumbled. "That's not a surprise."

"This isn't stolen," Glory replied flatly as I felt her moving the flesh on the right side of my face. I guess that scalpel had been working on me before I woke up. "Even if the design was stolen, they'd be manufactured with different tools and standards in the zebra lands. Everything, even the barcodes on the back of the eye... they're identical to yours." She looked down at me. "The Brood of Coyotl aren't ripping off Project Steelpony. They're *from* Project Steelpony. And I'm going to check the rest of this head and see if I can find any more parts."

Right. And I needed to schedule my broadcaster for a conversation with Professor Zodiac...

* * *

Once my face was put back together again, Glory was cleaning things up, I was chowing down on a third cyberpony cake, and P-21 was keeping an eye out as we sat together atop Deus. Scotch Tape and Boo had collected my weapons from the battlefield while Rampage scavenged the remaining zebra corpses, leaving me with time to think of my next step.

The only problem was... I wasn't sure what it should be. I felt strings attached to me... tugging me this way and that, pulled by unknown manipulators. I stroked the mane of the Twilight figurine as I pondered. Did I really have any choice?

Fate... how seductive it was. Not my fault... not my responsibility... bad things... good things... you could say it was all fated to be. Had Twilight been fated to end up trapped in a monstrous Goddess? Pinkie Pie fated to become a drug-addicted pariah? Psalm to kill Big Macintosh? Maybe there was some alternate history where the war never happened. Where fate was kinder and gentler than it was today?

I looked down into Twilight's happy, smiling face. Fate was an easy answer when you looked at the strand of history. All those little causes and effects leading to now. Sometimes miraculous... sometimes monstrous...

Was I really the Maiden of the Stars...?

"How are you, Blackjack?" P-21 asked. "How are you really?"

I sighed and hugged the figurine to my chest. "Different. Haven't been in a fight like that in a while. Not since..." Yellow River. Was that really only a few weeks ago? He caught my uncomfortable expression, and I looked at my forehooves. "Guess what Mom said was true. There's always a bigger fishy."

"Huh?" he asked with a cock of his head and an amused, if baffled, smile.

"Nothing. Just something Mom used to tell me," I said with a sigh as I kept running my hoof over

the figurine's mane.

He sat quietly beside me. "So... what's all that 'Maiden' stuff?"

"Zebra prophecy," I said with a shrug. "I'm supposed to destroy the world. Just like Luna and Nightmare Moon." I glanced over at him. "P-21, do you believe in fate?"

"I believe in you. Does that count?" he countered with a half smile. I gave him a nudge in response, and his smile widened as he looked at Scotch Tape. "I don't know. I don't think so. I heard that ponies get cutie marks that tell them their destiny. But considering mine was openly controlled, it always seemed pretty much bullshit to me. But then, I've never known what my cutie mark was supposed to be..."

"What if your destiny is something... bad? What if it's to kill and hurt people?" I asked.

"Then you ignore it," he said simply. "Because if you accept what that bastard said about your destiny being ruin and death, then it'd be no different than me accepting the medical mares telling me that my destiny was to be a walking sperm bank who should be dead right now. We decide our own destiny."

Did I have any choice? Was I just following the strings? Were we all?

I felt I had three different paths in front of me, and whichever one I took was going to decide everything. I could go after Dawn, the Harbingers, and Cognitum and try to end that threat once and for all. Or perhaps try and find out a way to stop the Legate and his army from attacking the Hoof and all my friends within it. Or go to the clouds and try and stop Lighthooves and his biological weapon.

Then I glanced down at my hoof and opened up the panel, looking at my PipBuck. For some reason, perhaps fate, perhaps something else, I brought up EC-1101 and stared at it. Then I accessed its tantalizing routing information.

Next routing location> Shadowbolt Tower.

"Right," I said as I looked up at the midnight clouds. "Well then, I guess if I'm going to decide it, I'd better start thinking of some way to get to Shadowbolt Tower." At his inquisitive look, I smiled. "Lighthooves has a biological weapon that can kill countless pegasi. I need to get up there and stop it... and make sure Thunderhead isn't destroyed as well."

He looked at the sky and gave a little laugh. "Oh, is that all?" He shook his head. "I don't suppose you know somepony with a flying machine, do you?" he asked playfully.

I sat there a moment, looking down at the figurine and thinking, and then my lips curled in a small smile. "Now that you mention it..."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

Quest perk achieved: My Little Ponies – You have collected one of each of the six Ministry Mares statuettes. Stronger together than they are apart, they have granted you +1 Luck in addition to their normal benefits.

(Author's notes: I know that every chapter I thank my editors, but I really would like everyone to know they

worked their tails off getting this chapter out this month. I was almost certain that we'd have to push it back to March... April... May... sigh... so I just want everyone, and them, to know how special they are. Whether you liked the finale or not, I really have to agree with one thing. There is absolutely nothing like true true friends.

In other news, I know that what happened with Psalm may upset some folks. I apologize, but this is something else that's been in my head since coming up with the Marauders. I hope it doesn't cause too many problems.

Next week I'm going to be at the Las Vegas- er, Vegas convention. Meeting the hideous Somber... I hope it's not too unpleasant for folks. I'd like to thank Devon Wade, Joel Kenny, and Hiddenpony for helping me pay for the trip. Just look for the terrified writer in a social situation.

Also, I... um... well... just in case you like it... this is something I'm doing with Pantzar...
<http://requiem-pony.tumblr.com/>

Anyway. Thanks to Kkat, as always, for starting this. Thanks to folks who enjoy reading this. Thanks to folks who comment and donate. And thanks for being a part of this community. Just... thank you...)

(Oh. And hugs to Tori for Letti.)