

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 55: Noblesse Oblige

"They are not slaves, they are our "servants." We have given them homes, food, clothing, and a purpose. We have given them a life."

"So, tell me about the lightning rods," I asked Glory as we rolled northeast away from Grimhoof. We were snaking our way between the skeletal shells of old commercial buildings, their decaying walls sporting layer upon layer of gang graffiti. I wondered who the 'Neverenders' had been and how they'd been replaced by the 'Hells Ponies'. Then the 'Nightmares' had spray-painted over that. One wall ahead boldly declared 'Fuck Big Daddy', but that message was punctuated by what I suspected was the desiccated body of the author impaled on rebar jutting from the wall beside the declaration. "I need to know exactly how they work."

"I don't know the specifics of their operation," Glory replied, looking at me in concern and chewing on a wingtip. "All I can give you are generalities." I gave a small nod. She took a deep breath, then let it out in a huff before going on, "Well, lightning rods were produced at the end of the war. I'm not sure how many are left abroad. Some think that the Neighvarro forces scrapped theirs when they couldn't maintain them. They have a spark generator that builds up a charge and then blasts the nearest target with a bolt of lightning. It actually has about the same power as one of a Raptor's main guns, as I understand."

Which meant that getting shot would likely be an instant kill for any of us, even Lacunae. "How do they find their targets?" I asked as we drove through the desolate district. I magically pulled the macabre remains of the graffiti artist from the rusted metal as we passed, letting the ganger corpse clatter down to the rest of the bones scattered along the sidewalks. Better to be more anonymous bones amidst the rubble than some grisly fetish on a wall.

"Blackjack, are you sure..." Glory began, not certain how to respond to me. I couldn't blame her; after meeting the Legate, I'd gone through a whole new storm of pondering who he was, *what* he was, and why he'd let me live. That whole 'not embraced your destiny' line was either terrifyingly strong faith in higher powers or a load of contrived bullshit. The whole fight felt like the Legate had done everything he could to not kill me. In fact, the Legate worried me far less than either Lighthooves or Dawn at the moment.

Oh, I was still concerned. He'd beaten me, something that I found infinitely galling. A part of me wanted nothing more than to find him for a sound rematch... but, ultimately, whatever was going on with him wasn't as immediate as Lighthooves's biological weapon or Dawn's actions with the Harbingers. As infuriating as my defeat had been, I had to focus myself elsewhere. He'd put me off for the time being, and I'd do the same with him. So, since we'd left Grimhoof, I was thinking of everything I could to head off Lighthooves's threat first. Any second, Lighthooves could push a button and start a massacre. And I would be partially to blame for not stopping him sooner.

Just like with Clink...

"I'm sure," I answered, frowning as I looked out at the night. Maybe it was the Twilight figurine in

my saddlebag, or perhaps it was the need to win gnawing at me, but I couldn't just sit back and rest again. I found my thoughts focused sharply upon my goal: getting to Shadowbolt Tower and stopping Lighthooves, and maybe finding the next destination of EC-1101. I had a creepy suspicion that I knew exactly where it was headed next.

"Well, Dusk would know more precisely, but as she explained to me, their sensors detect magical energy sources. For the Thunderhead-area rods, that sends an alert to the tower, and somepony then targets the intruder and sends a fire command." She rubbed her mouth with a wing, her brows furrowed in thought. "I think it used to be completely automated, but there was a friendly fire incident a decade ago and they disabled that."

"What counts as a magical energy source?" P-21 asked with a frown, holding the slumbering Scotch between his hooves.

"A spark battery? A missile?" Glory suggested. "Maybe even a charged gem cartridge? Any kind of magical generation device would set off the sensor. Of course, every lightning rod also has a half dozen cameras keeping a constant observation of the ground."

"Have you ever heard of surfacers reaching the Enclave?" Rampage asked, looking at Glory with a small frown. She'd been cross ever since the fight with the Legate. He was, as she put it, a 'big bad freakily familiar fucker', or BBFFF for short. "Every now and then you hear stories about somepony slapping together a hot air balloon or something."

Glory turned her face away. "No. Patrols usually find those." She glanced back at Rampage with a shameful expression and went on, "It doesn't end well for them, I'm told. Something about giving surfer ponies 'flying lessons'."

"Of course," Rampage muttered. "Why are we saving these assholes from eating each other, again?"

Glory flushed. "In any case, Blackjack, it wouldn't matter what you used to get up there. Your cyberpony body itself counts as a power source."

I looked away, scowling, and then I thought of something. "So just unplug me?" I asked with a hopeful grin. Glory gave the 'Blackjack is not a smart pony' sigh. "Come on. There had to be some way to turn me off."

"Does *anything* do that for you?" Rampage asked with a smirk, and I rolled my eyes.

"No. I'm pretty sure she--" the pegasus began, then groaned as I flushed. I wasn't that bad! Glory covered her face with a wing. "Blackjack, we can't just deactivate you! Those systems control your heartbeat and respiration."

"Okay..." I said slowly as I thought it out. "So... what if you did what you did when I was going to Tenpony to get cyberized? Hook up my veins to Rampage. Completely power me down and make me the Wasteland's biggest paperweight? Would that work?"

"Oh, I see how it is," Rampage muttered. "Make one little crack, and she turns you into life support." She rolled her eyes, then caught my concern and snorted. "Oh, don't worry. I'm just pissed at the moment... least I can be of some use."

Glory opened her mouth to argue, and then hesitated. "It... might?" she finished tentatively. Then she shook her head sharply. "But you don't have to do this, Blackjack! Thunderhead's problems aren't yours, and you already have enough problems that are."

"I'm pretty sure the Enclave can handle it," P-21 agreed.

"Right. Between Dawn and that striped motherfucker, I'd say your plate is pretty full," Rampage said, then frowned and wiggled her nose, pinched one nostril shut, and blasted a load of snot out the other. Glory looked on in disgust as Rampage wiggled her muzzle. "Mmm... miss the old claws. Just can't pick my nose with power hooves." She met Glory's nauseated expression with a baffled, "What?" Meeting only silence, Rampage turned back to me and continued, "Maybe you should leave this up to the feather brains?"

"No," I replied, glaring up at the clouds. "The zebras pretty much have their own things going on. I don't know what the Remnant are up to, but I do know what Lighthooves is. Till I can talk to Sekashi, Xenith, Zodiac, or someone else who knows what they might be doing or how I can stop it, I'll focus on things I can deal with."

"But are you sure?" P-21 asked with a small frown.

Of course not, but it was the only step that made sense to me. I saw it as a card game with the stakes being the future of the Enclave. "Maybe Twister will reach help in time. Then Neighvarro will have to go all in. They will attack the tower and Thunderhead. If their attack is successful, then Lighthooves will call, launching his weapon. Maybe one gets through. How many thousands will die from the cannibal plague? Maybe it doesn't. Then the Neighvarro will crack down hard. Worse, they might capture the disease themselves. Call me cynical, but I don't have a hard time imagining the Enclave using a rain-delivered bioweapon on the Wasteland."

"But what if Lighthooves is right and the Neighvarro back down?" Glory asked with a hopeful smile.

"Then Thunderhead wins. Huzzah. Neighvarro will have to submit and watch as their power crumbles away to the economic and technological might of Thunderhead." I put a hoof across Glory's shoulders and asked, "Do you think they'll fold like that?"

"They might..." she began. Then she closed her eyes and hung her head a little. Finally, she answered in a tiny voice, "No. You're right. They'll fight. Wage one final massive battle."

"Lighthooves is betting that the Grand Pegasus Enclave won't risk it. He's probably counting on some backroom deals being made so the Enclave leaders save face." Too much Goldenblood made me painfully aware of such arrangements. I stared off at a lone monolithic skyscraper with the Stable-Tec logo on the side, remembering the meeting. "But I saw High General Harbinger in a meeting, and he was ready, actually eager, to attack even with the possibility of the bioweapon."

Rampage frowned at me. "Did that bullet knock some extra smarts into your brain, Blackjack?"

"Hush," P-21 said with a small smile. "So what's your plan? I assume it will involve running for our lives at some point?"

"My plan?" I frowned at him a moment. "Getting to Thunderhead, meeting with Honored Councilor Stargazer, and having her put the brakes on this crazy train."

"And if she can't or won't?" Rampage asked.

"We bust into Shadowbolt Tower and destroy the plague ourselves," I answered, glossing over the fact that I had no idea how we'd accomplish such a thing. "We give them Lighthooves as a rogue element and remove the excuse for an attack. And if they attack anyway, we stop them." Again, just *how* we'd do that was lost in the nebulous cloud of conviction that somehow I would pull it off.

Glory stared at me with a small smile, then said, "Only you could say something like that with utter sincerity and still have it actually sound possible."

I smiled and rolled my eyes a little. "Oh, I don't know. I'm pretty sure that LittlePip or the Stable Dweller could take on the Enclave and give them a run for their money."

Funny how that little comment seemed to shake their confidence a bit, and, oddly enough, I imagined a tiny lavender unicorn groaning and covering her face. I had no doubt, though, that if I did fail or fall, somepony else would step up and finish things. Maybe P-21. Maybe Glory. Maybe even Doof, if he truly wanted to change his ways. If I could do it myself, though, I would. I'd already damned and broken myself so many times over that I'd happily spare another if I could. P-21 leaned over and started talking with Glory about ways that they might handle the lightning rods and what they'd need to plug me into Rampage. The striped mare entertained herself by hypothesizing on ways to kill the Legate involving meat pies and balefire eggs.

That gave me a chance to address something else.

"Are you okay?" I thought at Lacunae, glancing at the alicorn flying silently above us.

"Of course. How could I be otherwise?" Lacunae replied in her familiar, soft voice. Yet there was a tension beneath it all that bordered on snippy. I just waited patiently, and after a few moments the mare said, in more familiar, worried tones, "The Black Book is coming."

I thought back to Project Eternity. "Rarity's Black Book?"

"Yes," Lacunae replied, an unfamiliar tremulous edge to her voice. "It is... disturbing..."

"I thought that the Goddess *wanted* the Black Book. For alicorn stallions or something like that." Given what the Goddess was, though, who could really tell?

"You don't understand," Lacunae said in an anguished voice I'd never heard before. "There is... considerable disorder in Unity at the moment. More than ever before, even over the course of centuries."

Your... your intrusion and lineage, Red Eye's inevitable betrayal, LittlePip's aggravation, and now this. It concerns Unity... this fear that the Goddess cannot hold. The Goddess is forcing our doubts like a river into me. What magics are within? Will they allow us to create male alicorns and become a truly viable race? Will the book affect us? Corrupt us? The Goddess is confident she is beyond its influence, but Unity whispers despite her guidance. Even that is terrifyingly new. We whisper. For centuries, the Goddess has been a constant in all of us. Now... change is coming."

"Not all change is bad," I countered. "Look at what we're doing here." Lacunae went quiet for a moment, and her silence gnawed at me. "Lacunae, what is it? Something is bothering you."

Again, it was a long pause. "Blackjack, you are a good friend. Despite your faults, and they are many, you have always attempted to act in the best interests of others. Your sacrifices are admirable, and your hope that good can ultimately triumph is an inspiration." Another pause before she added in a mental whisper, "I do not want to wrong you again, Blackjack."

"When have you ever wronged me?" I asked back. "I mean, pulling me out of 99 was rough, but better in the long run. I forgive you for that. Besides, I think that that might have been the Goddess. But other than..."

I froze as I heard the mental sob and looked as surreptitiously as possible at my friend above and the tears on her cheek. "Lacunae, what is wrong?"

"You are a dear friend, Blackjack," Lacunae replied. "Since you joined Unity, I have tried all I could to shield you from her. But the Goddess has plans for you, Blackjack. Plans soon to come to fruition. And I can think of no way to protect you or help you! I can do nothing!" she wailed, and I imagined I could see the Goddess looking on in mirth.

"Lacunae. Stop and talk to me. What is going on?" I asked as she wept.

The sensation was like a brush from my mane to my tail, a pressure that reminded me of when I had eardrums to pop. "The Goddess suggests you not worry about this one. This vessel is full to bursting, and the Goddess suspects it will not last much longer."

"Stop it!" I mentally snarled futilely, grimacing.

"Oh... this is well past the point of 'stop'," the Goddess purred. "So many treasonous thoughts and feelings. Weakness. Compassion. Guilt. Shame. Pity."

"You're killing her!" I said mentally as I clenched my eyes closed, aware that Glory was talking, but I was focusing entirely on that cold voice within.

"Killing her? She was never alive. Besides, where will all those horrible weak thoughts go if she dies?" the Goddess sneered. "No. Soon all those nasty, weak memories will drown this little joke of a personality she pretends to have, and she'll be full to the brim with poisonous thoughts. The Goddess shall lock her up somewhere with a nice barrel of radiation." I felt that pressure grow over my entire body. My horn glowed and drew Vigilance.

"Blackjack? What is it? What's wrong?" Glory asked. P-21 looked from me to the gun and back

again. "Are you okay?"

It took every bit of willpower I had to put the gun away. That was all I could manage to do. "I'm fine, Glory. Thought I saw something, that's all." I thought a second later at the Goddess, "You cunt." Given my company, it seemed appropriate.

"Such language. Such impudence." The Goddess chuckled. "You should be more respectful. After all, when this Lacunae is broken, the Goddess will need a new cesspit." The sensation of being gripped became one of being squeezed. "Guess who the Goddess has in mind for the role?"

If only my friends could read my mind... could hear me screaming...

"Oh yes, Blackjack. The Goddess has plans for you. Such plans. And soon," she said in a tone of supreme satisfaction. "Continue your little quest. The Goddess doesn't want your friends to interfere before it's time." There was a pause. "Oh. And if you behave, I won't have you crush your little blue lover's head like a grape."

"Are you sure you're okay?" P-21 asked as Glory put her hoof on my shoulder.

"Yeah," I said with a happy smile. "I'm just fine. Fine as I'll ever be."

Overhead, Lacunae shed tears for both of us.

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"You still haven't been very clear about this flying machine," P-21 said as we moved northwest out of the ruins and into a stand of long-dead trees.

I might not be able to complete my plans now, but I couldn't exactly tell my friends that. I sighed. "Okay, to be fair, I don't actually know someone who has a flying machine." P-21 frowned, his ears lying flat. "More like, I've seen a person who had one. A long time ago." Glory knitted her brows together with a smile that made me wonder if she was reminding herself that she loved the not-smart pony, "I don't know if the flying machine still exists, if it can still fly, or if I can get my hooves on it if it does and can." P-21 sighed and pulled his hat over his face, masking his mutters.

Glory coughed delicately. "I don't suppose there's a 'plan B'?"

"Yes," I replied sarcastically. "My plan B involves going to the Skyport and trying to smuggle ourselves on a Vertibuck. And if that fails, we could try using EC-1101 and a MASEBS tower to try to talk to Thunderhead's leaders." Doubtful I'd get to do either, but I could get Glory home at least.

I could do that for her.

The ruins had given way to a cracked driveway snaking back towards the reservoir. Dead trees rose like scattered spears across the landscape, many more lying in heaps and piles where Enervation had kept rot at bay. I noted a great deal of garbage mixed in with the rot, heaps of refuse scattered here and there. Blue bars were scattered here and there too, and once I spotted a scavenger hiding from us as we passed. We drove by a small caravan of three armed guards escorting a dozen wretched-looking ponies, but when the armed trio saw me atop Deus they immediately broke for the woods.

Aside from one or two who fled the opposite way, the captive ponies simply stayed put in the rain.

A stockade of skywagons, wood, and scrap metal rose up before us as we approached the large wrought iron gate rising ahead of us. Two large towers flanked the entrance, and there were others built up along the length of the wall. As we approached the front entrance, someone began beating frantically on a garbage can drum, and sentries rushed into position. Deus's engine let out an unimpressed snort as he halted in front of the entry. There were still flecks of gold leaf clinging to the metal; I imagined the grandeur that the occupants clung to was just as fragile as those tarnished yellow curls.

Elysium Gardens.

"H... hold," shouted a stallion through a bullhorn from the far side of the gate. Deus grumbled his engine as Scotch Tape and Boo roused themselves from their naps. "S...state your name and your b... b... business with the Society." More ponies were moving up onto the top of the barricade, mostly possessing simple hunting rifles. Not a missile to be seen. It didn't mean that they weren't keeping bigger stuff in the rear, though.

"Security. I've come to speak with King Awesome," I replied with a small smile.

"Reapers have no jurisdiction here," the stallion squeaked nervously. "I must ask you and your... tank... to leave immediately!" P-21 frowned and moved the tired Scotch and Boo further back on Deus's turret while Glory bit down on Vigilance's mouth grip. I'd loaned her the gun since her own had been scrapped. Rampage, though, rose to her hooves in one sinister, almost sexy movement.

"Oh, that was stupid, wasn't it, Deus? A real Deus-ee." Rampage laughed and grinned, then turned her full attention to the gate. "You got three Reapers here, two of the fucking top ten, and Security, and you're thinking to keep us out? That's funny. That's real funny." She scraped her hooves on Deus's armor with a screech as she grinned at the pony. "You know what would also be *really* funny? Us driving this tank right up your ass." Deus revved his engine in agreement.

"Rampage, that's enough," I said as I stood beside her, trying to suppress my smile.

"Enough? I hadn't even started!" Rampage replied with a pout. "At least let me get a barrel up there."

"I just want to speak to King Awesome. A quick question, and I'll be gone," I said as reasonably as possible to the stallion.

"Absolutely not! I have orders! You must leave immediately, or we'll shoot you all! Really! I mean it!" I sighed; I really did not want to do things this way. "O...one! T... two!" he began in his high-strung voice. I watched the milling blue bars. Red and it's dead...

"Oh shut up! You're going to get yourself killed," a mare snapped from behind the barricade. The guard ponies started in alarm.

"Your Highnesses! The Reapers are attacking! It's Security!" the stallion quailed. "We need reinforcements!"

"You moron!" the mare snapped. "If they were attacking, you'd have been dead two minutes ago!"

Honestly!" A moment later, a blue glow surrounded the gate. It swung wide and a trio of white unicorns stepped forward. A shield protected the three from the misting rain. Clearly, these were not Wastelanders, and one I knew.

"Blackjack," Prince Splendid said with a generous smile, wearing absolutely pristine combat armor. "Welcome to my home." The white, blue-maned stallion who I'd met months ago outside the Fluttershy Medical Center still stirred a base, fundamental part of me. I reminded myself he was head of an organization of slavemongers. That, and his warm, handsome gaze no longer made my mare bits quiver receptively like they once did.

To his right approached a cross, younger-looking mare that shared his coloration so closely that I wondered if they might be twins. She wore gold and sapphire jewelry and a delicate tiara. She also wore neither barding nor any weapons but an elegant dress that wouldn't have lasted ten minutes past this gate. Her firm blue eyes locked with mine without fear or hesitation. "Security," she said in a cool voice as she eyed me.

On his left was a unicorn filly Scotch Tape's age, white in coat but possessing a bubblegum-pink and magenta striped mane. She wasn't quite as formally dressed as the other two but had a grin that could give Rampage's a run for its bottlecaps. She eyed the severe, blue-maned mare, who had to be Splendid's sister. "Do forgive Grace. She's been given a double dose of bitch pills every day from birth," she said with a snicker. "Splendid, you know. I'm Princess Charm. Are you here to kill somepony?" the pink-maned filly asked eagerly.

"Oh, I like her," Rampage chuckled.

Grace scowled at the younger filly and stepped forward, saying quickly, "We don't want any trouble, Security. You can come and see my father, but the tank and your weapons stay here. If you try to force the issue, then things will get uncivil."

"Celestia forbid *that* should happen," Charm quipped with a roll of her magenta eyes. Then she grinned at Rampage. "Make it happen. Please?" The armored mare snickered in reply.

"Ahem. Sisters," Prince Splendid said behind a faux cough. Glory gave a little, sympathetic smile to the stallion as he said apologetically, "I'm afraid Grace is right. Abrupt, but correct. We can't let you in so... overarmed." Funny, I didn't know a pony could be 'overarmed' these days.

Still, that was refreshingly straightforward. "We're not going in unarmed," I said with a smile. "You know you can trust me, Splendid."

"I know I can, but there's fifty other Society ponies who don't have the best opinion of you, Blackjack," Splendid said diplomatically.

The well-dressed mare seemed to consider all of us, her gaze lingering a little longer on Lacunae than the rest, before declaring firmly, "If you can't concede to this, you can take your business elsewhere."

Charm rolled her eyes once again and pointed her hoof at her sibling. "When you start the summary executions, could you begin with her?"

"Charm!" Splendid rebuked, "That was uncalled for."

"Tank. Rampage. Security. Hello?" the filly said as she gestured to all of us.

Grace considered us and then sighed. "You won't be helpless, you know. You and your alicorn have magic, you have a broadcaster to call for help, and you have a tank to come to your rescue," the blue-maned mare said with a toss of her head.

Well, that was unsettlingly accurate. I glanced at my friends, who looked equally nonplussed. P-21 frowned at her, "You're well informed, Princess..."

"Princess Aquilina Augusta Awesomeness the Graceful," she said with exaggerated formality. "Grace will do," she added with a smile, helping suppress a small gnawing sense of annoyance I was feeling towards the princess. There was just something frustratingly familiar about her, but I knew I'd never met her before. "When it comes to ponies like Security, it is wise to be informed."

I looked back at my friends. Rampage glanced at Deus. "If you don't mind, Blackjack, I think I'm going to stay with Deus. I'm out of Mint-als, and Society ponies make me want to hurt things. Trust me, you'll feel the same pretty quick," she said with a grin.

"Well, if you're sure," I said as I looked at the rest of my friends. Glory was already unarmed, except for the loaned Vigilance, and she shrugged. P-21 just wore a little smile that said they'd be lucky to find any weapons he'd secreted and gave a little nod.

I hopped off the front of Deus and trotted towards the princess, curious about the mare. "Grace, hmm?" She didn't seem scared by my clearly metallic components, but there was a canny concern. We were dangerous, a grave threat, but we weren't unreasonable. But well-informed as she was, she couldn't know what business we had here. Meeting with us in person was still a considerable personal risk.

"Indeed. I believe you've met my twin, Prince Splendid?" So I had been right! She nodded to Boo and Scotch Tape. "The rest of your friends are welcome to join you, of course. The Society will extend our hospitality to you, in exchange for civility."

I looked at my friends and then gave a shrug and turned back to Rampage and Deus. "Listen in on the radio and stay close. If things turn... uncivil..." I glanced back at Princess Grace a moment, spotting a small roll of the unicorn's eyes. "Show them what Reapers can really do."

"All right," Rampage sighed. "I suppose we can go hunting radroaches or something."

"With a tank?!" Glory said, gaping.

The striped mare smirked back at her. "What do you think?"

"I... you... they... seriously?!" Glory blurted.

"Don't blow up anything friendly," I replied casually as I passed over my guns for storage inside Deus. I lifted the sword and said, "I'm keeping this." The princess glanced at them, then gave a small, accommodating nod.

"You had impeccable timing, Grace," P-21 said in a low, untrusting voice once we'd given Deus our weapons. I had no doubt he had some grenades hidden... somewhere...

The pristine unicorn smiled at once. "Hardly. The moment the report was radioed in, I teleported straight to the gates," she replied with another little roll of her eyes. "Honestly, trying to deny entry to that kind of firepower... what were they thinking?" The guards all looked on sheepishly.

"Yeah. Who'd have ordered that?" Charm said with a little eye roll of her own – what, were derisive gestures a family trait or something? – as they started back through the gate. I turned to my friends for a moment, and not feeling much better about this at all, followed.

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"If I hadn't seen Tenpony Tower, I'd think this place was ridiculous," I said as we walked through the marble foyer of the three story 'country club' perched on a hillside overlooking the reservoir. Every effort had been made to preserve the building from the ravages of time and decay; it resembled a tiny pearlescent bubble of the old world. The Society ponies were almost exclusively unicorns, with perhaps half a dozen well-dressed earth ponies talking amongst themselves. Overhead, a massive chandelier filled the hall with warm, magical light.

It was a far cry from the grubby shacks outside. Clustered on some old clearings for something that Splendid had called a 'golf course', they'd been groups of a dozen or so buildings surrounded by fences. I hadn't seen many ponies, though, only a few elderly and children taking care of chores like tending their own weedy gardens. The barbed-wire-topped fences, I'd been told, were to keep the serfs from fighting with each other in the middle of the night and to protect them from occasional radigators from the lake.

Right. And Stable 99 kept the males locked up so they wouldn't exhaust themselves.

The problem was, while I felt for the dingy ponies in those hovels, I couldn't see a way to help them. There were more ponies here than anyplace I'd seen yet. It wasn't surprising now how poorly armed those guards at the gate had been; the Society must have had a hundred or more ponies keeping watch. The ponies outside the marble building wore Steel Ranger power armor. Apparently, blowing up the *Celestia* had given some of the Steel Rangers a career change. Fighting the Society would take some heavy firepower... heavy firepower that could be brought to bear without shelling slavers and slaves alike. Deus wasn't exactly a precision weapon, and I did *not* want another Fallen Arch.

"Nice place," P-21 muttered. "Bought with slave labor."

"Serfs," Splendid corrected immediately. "Not slaves."

"Forgive me if I don't appreciate the distinction," P-21 replied.

"There isn't one," Charm said with a shrug and a happy smile.

"There is," Grace countered with a frown. "Stop being obnoxious." The pink-maned filly simply smirked in response.

Splendid cleared his throat and said in a voice of pure reasonability, "Serfs are not slaves. All our

serfs willingly agreed to work for the Society. We provide food and security, and they provide labor. It is an equitable arrangement," he said with a smile made of reasonableness. The way he kept staring at my tail was making me feel tense.

"Right. Like the equitable living conditions," P-21 said gesturing to the sumptuous quarters.

"They choose to come to us," Grace said firmly. "We are not raiders. We don't go out and capture ponies to work for us. Every serf must sign a contract that clearly outlines their duties to the Society and the Society's obligations in turn. The contracts are all enchanted so that only a signature that is willingly signed is valid. You can't just sign a pony's name for them."

"I recall three slavers forcing ponies to sign your damned contract," I retorted. "They stuck them in a nice patch of Enervation and let it slowly leech the life out of them until they agreed."

Grace jerked as if slapped, looking from me to Splendid. The stallion coughed and averted his eyes. "There is some question as to if the contract is valid if signed under duress. After all, the perils of the Wasteland puts us all under duress in some form or another. Is starvation duress? Is sickness duress?"

"What?! There is a difference between a pony starving and a pony forced to sign or die!" Grace snapped. "Do you mean you knew about this, Splendid? Does Father?"

Splendid screwed up his face and made a vague expression. "Eh, I'm sure there's somepony investigating it. The point is that the work here is far better and safer than scrounging in the Wasteland."

"And I'm sure you work right along beside them. Share the same food. Oh, and I bet there's never a case of abuse?" P-21 said sharply. "Because the ponies with the power are always kind and benevolent." He looked at me and growled, "Please tell me you're going to kill all these fucks."

Charm giggled. "Oh, finally! Something interesting!"

"I... uh..." I blinked, at a loss for what to say. Why couldn't somepony just shoot me or threaten me? The last two times I'd tried to fix communities, it'd blown up in my face. I was definitely seeing the Society due for some kind of reckoning, but I just wasn't sure if I was the one to deliver it or not.

Splendid coughed and looked equally uncomfortable, while Grace frowned back at the shacks. "Well, somepony has to be in charge, right?" he said after a moment. "Better us than a pony like Red Eye." He tried his loin melting smile on me once more, baffled that it wasn't having the effect it once did. If it hadn't been for Stygius, I would have bucked his head clean off his shoulders.

"I suppose that if they didn't like the conditions here they could... take their chances out in the Wasteland?" Glory suggested hesitantly. But I remembered those wretches picking through the trash. That wasn't much of a future. I supposed serfdom was a tiny step up from slavery... maybe...

Still felt wrong, though.

"Well, we'll have to see about this, right Blackjack?" P-21 asked as he looked at me with a sure smile. I stared back at him in shock. "Right?"

I looked around at the others and rubbed my mane with a hoof. "Um, I don't know, P-21. I really

just want to talk to King Awesome.” And avoid another war with another group of ponies when I didn’t know all the details of this place.

“Excuse me?” he said flatly.

“Well, the ship’s all we need from him. If he doesn’t have it, then I don’t see the good that picking a fight with yet another group of ponies will do,” I said, and his stormy blue eyes narrowed.

He looked at me a moment, glanced around, and then moved behind me. “Oh, look. A bathroom. Move it, Blackjack,” he said, giving my armored flanks a shove. I was so shocked, I moved ahead while everypony just stared after us. As we entered the little filly’s room, I just stared at him in bafflement as he ducked down, checked the stalls, then whirled on me. “What in Equestria is wrong with you, Blackjack?”

“With me? You’re the one who pushed me into the filly’s room!” I retorted.

“How can you blow holes in slavers and then treat this as if it’s no big deal?” he said with a wave of his hoof. “Look at this place! It was made possible by those slavers.”

“You heard them. They’re serfs, not slaves.” But I didn’t feel much conviction, remembering again the captive ponies a few days ago near the Skyport and how they were being pressured to sign.

“Right, and I was ‘reproductive equipment’. The word ‘slave’ may not have been used, but that’s exactly what I was,” he countered. “You saw their homes! Do you seriously believe that that is any kind of a life? And we haven’t even seen their *working* conditions!”

“P-21, there’re seven of us. Eight if you consider Boo.”

His blue eyes blazed, mane bristling before my eyes as he spat, “We have a fucking tank! One that’d be happy to kill these fucks!”

I threw my hooves up. “What do you want me to do, kill the Society ponies and their guards and set everypony free, or at least those that weren’t collateral damage? Let them scatter out and be food for every raider and monster out there? Drop everything and try to... to... what? Create a fair government where somepony isn’t fucked? Have you forgotten me trying to fix Flank? Have you forgotten 99?”

He seemed to vibrate before my eyes. “I can never forget, Blackjack. Have you?”

“I remember killing everypony there because I fucked up and didn’t make sure that Rivets knew about the virus!” I roared back at him. “Do not ask me to radically change societies! I am not qualified!” I paused and took a deep breath. “All we’re here for is the airship.”

He grit his teeth as he glared at me. “So you’re the only one who gets to have a set of priorities, Blackjack? This place is wrong! *Damned* wrong and you know it. I don’t care if they call them slaves, serfs, servants, workers, employees, or bosom buddies! If they’re living and working in those conditions, they’re being used just like I was.” He stared back at me with a chilling fire in his eyes that I hadn’t seen in a long time. “But, oh, so long as they get you what you want for your next step, it’s fine.”

I gestured at the door with a hoof. “I already have half the Hoof against me, P-21!” And any day the Goddess might take me over for good. “I’d like to not add another group after my head. You’re

assuming everything is bad just from where they live. For all you know, they're *happy* to be here. They may even be grateful."

He closed his eyes tight, flinching back as though I'd struck him. "I'm sure some of them are," he muttered quietly. "There were males in 99 who were. Grateful for the shots... how lucky we were to get shots. And slop to eat. So very grateful to not be dead." He grimaced, fighting the liquid shame creeping down his cheeks. "I know I'm not being objective here, Blackjack, but I need to do something. And I need to know that you will do something too."

"Why?" I demanded, wanting my heart to thunder and my breath to snort. Wanting to show my agitation and frustration. This mechanical stillness inside me was infuriating. "Why me?"

"Because you can and I can't!" he shouted in my face, tears running down his cheeks in frustration. "Because you have the power to do this and I don't! You do the audacious and the impossible every single day and I know that if you wanted to change all this, you could!" He closed his eyes, shaking as if on the verge of breaking. "You do so much... do this..."

What the fuck was wrong with me? Why was I trying to rationalize this? I should just get a bottle or ten of whiskey, gulp it down, and kick the whole rotten mess down. But as much as I wanted to, I also knew that things weren't that simple in the Hoof. I could end up getting everypony killed if I did this wrong.

But I also knew that P-21 needed this, just as much as I needed to find Horizons. It didn't matter what I was here for; he needed something else from this place. A chance to make up for 99.

I looked at him and then closed my eyes. *It's not always about you, Blackjack.* "Okay," I said quietly, then saw the shock spreading across his face. "Let's try to not do anything drastic right away, though. We need information, and you need to get it. First chance you can, slip away and get a good look at this place. See if you can find where the serfs are working and their conditions and give me an honest appraisal. If it's as bad as you think it is... we'll think of something we can do without getting everypony killed. Alright?"

"I... yes... sure..." he murmured as if he'd woken from a bad dream and he was trying to make sure that things were real. "I... thank you for trusting me with this, Blackjack. When I saw this place and that *chandelier*," he made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat. "At least the Tenpony Tower bunch didn't have this serfdom bullshit going on."

I patted his shoulder. "Don't thank me just yet. I'll help how I can, but I mean it when I say that I don't want to slaughter the ponies in charge and trot on. I don't have the best track record with fixing settlements, good intentions or no. So if you think we have to do it, then we'll do it smart and right. Okay? And it might take us a while, given that I've got Lighthooves, Cognitum, the Legate, and who knows who else to deal with right now." And the Goddess, an enemy that I couldn't even tell any of them about!

"Right. Just... right..." he said and took a deep breath, scrubbing at his face with the back of his fetlock. "Okay. Thank you."

"Just don't get caught, and talk to us before you do anything," I said as I patted him carefully. He didn't flinch away; I supposed maybe we were past that for good. "Okay. Stay safe. I'll pass things on to

Scotch and the others.”

He nodded, and I trotted out of the bathroom. Grace, Splendid, and Charm gaped in bafflement, Scotch Tape and Glory in concern. “Nice... ah... toilets. Very shiny.”

Glory looked on speculatively, but Scotch Tape simply grinned at the baffled noble unicorns. “Yup, this is the mare you’re all terrified of. Fear for your commodes!”

“Quite,” Prince Splendid murmured, then finally closed his mouth in a smile. “I’m afraid that I have something to attend to. Do see that she gets to Father, dear sisters.” And he turned and quickly trotted away.

“Not it!” Charm laughed. “Gotta get the rumors started!” she said as she scampered off.

Grace stood there, her mouth weakly working for a moment, and then she covered her face with her hoof and growled, “Ugh... fine! Somepony has to!” Turning, she muttered, “This way.”

“Did I miss something?” Glory asked.

“Splendid is going to talk to the Du Trots, the Steeples, and the Oranges about your arrival, probably going to say he single-hornedly stopped you from blowing the guards to bloody flecks. And Charm is going to be a little pain in my nethers,” Grace said with a sigh, then straightened. She took a deep breath, holding a forehoof to her chest, and let it all out at once and regarded me. “Well then. Let’s get you to Father’s study. Then I’ll take your friends somewhere they can freshen up while you’re our guests.”

“You take your responsibilities seriously,” Glory observed as the princess led us away from the well-dressed ponies.

“Somepony has to. Being a princess is more than simply getting what you want,” Grace replied primly. “Contrary to what my siblings believe.”

She trotted down a hall and up some stairs to the third floor, then stopped outside a door. “Father’s study. He seemed to think you’d like to wait for him in here to talk alone. He’ll be coming in a short while.” She turned towards my friends. “Now, for the rest of you. Would you like meal, a bath, a nap, or a tour?”

“Food,” Scotch Tape said with a raise of her hoof.

“A bath would be lovely,” Glory said, brightening up at once.

Boo let out a body shaking yawn.

P-21 backed down the hall. “Sure. I’d love to be shown around.” Lacunae said nothing. She stood as still as stone.

“Of course...” Grace muttered with a sigh, and then gave a small smile to me. “Well, I’ll take care of your friends and then come back for you when you’re finished with Father. Be brief and to the point. His health is fragile, and he tires easily.”

I watched her lead my friends down the hall and then opened the door. Really... I just had a simple little questi--

'Office of Interministry Affairs'. The banner was hung across the far wall in understated black and white. I stared at photographs of Ministry Mares, Garnet, Onyx, and even Goldenblood. I walked slowly around the desk, checking out the terminal, then looking at a grainy photograph of Goldenblood shaking hooves with Princess Luna. 'Goldenblood assumes minor role in Princess's new government,' read the caption. A much clearer picture showed a metal stand and a large purple and green dragon blasting a black pony silhouette with green flames. 'Traitor executed for crimes against Equestria.'

There were maps of the Hoofington valley and the whole of Equestria on the wall with colored pins all across them. A large newspaper article in a frame asked, 'Just what is the O.I.A., and who is in charge of it? Answers not forthcoming from Princess or the ministries.' I saw a rank of golden memory orbs in a glass case that nearly had my horn twitching. Unfortunately, I knew a lock that was out of my league... maybe P-21 could come in here and borrow them for me?

The terminal on the desk was logged in. There had to be dozens of audio files on it. It'd take me days to listen to them all, but I couldn't help myself and picked one at random.

The file started to play, filling the air with familiar rasping breaths. "--have to make sure that Clovertail remains on the 'exclusion' list at the M.o.M. If Pinkie Pie arrests one more vital member of the M.W.T..." the stallion grumbled.

"Goldenblood?" a stallion said in a brighter, healthier voice that was naggingly familiar. "You're late. Garnet's already started the meeting." There was a long pause. "You look terrible."

"Pinkie Pie arrested Clovertail again, Trottenheimer," Goldenblood rasped, then thumped his hoof. "Doesn't she understand that Clovertail's company makes the arcane spell matrices for Steel Ranger power armor? If Clovertail is removed, the company will shut down till they can elect a new CEO. Clover's set up a legal nightmare to protect himself. It'd take them a month, two if Applejack decides to try and play Ministry Mare. That could be more than five hundred units delayed." He let out a long-suffering sigh. "Why can't Pinkie Pie keep her 'law enforcement' to annoying the aristocracy and stop interfering in the running of the country?"

"I doubt she sees it that way. Clovertail is scum. You know what he's done," Trottenheimer said in a harsh voice.

Goldenblood let out a hissing sigh and said, "Scum we need for a few more years. A few months, at least. Then the Princess can round up Clovertail and me along with all the others when she cleans out the garbage." There was a pause, and then Goldenblood said in a mutter of shameful resignation, "He's a lesser evil."

"There're a lot of those in Equestria these days," Trottenheimer remarked. "Is that why you look like hell?"

There was no answer for a long minute, and then Goldenblood replied, "I haven't been eating much. Sleeping less. I've been trying to keep Luna out of my dreams."

"Oh, well, that's brilliant. Hunger and sleep deprivation are wonderful assets for any leader

looking for complete burnout. Are you drinking as well, Goldie?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Goldenblood snapped, and then his voice softened. "I'll be fine. We're so close. Just a few more things to wrap up... and then..."

"I'm worried about you, Goldie. Everypony at the office is," Trottenheimer replied. "If they knew your plan..."

"Their concerns are misplaced. Better to worry about the Princess and Equestria," Goldenblood said, then let out a long, tired groan. "Just a few more months. Perhaps even just a few weeks. Twilight Sparkle will have her damned alicorns if she keeps poking around Hippocratic Research as she has. I'm half tempted to simply tell her what it will cost. Maybe that will change her mind."

"And after Twilight mass produces alicorns, what then?"

"That will probably be the point when the plan can finally be finished. Luna will have a government that will last a thousand years. Equestria can finally return to normal. And Twilight will be executed for crimes against equinity and undermining the regime. Goddesses, if only she stopped..." There was a tired longing in his voice. As if he would give anything, even his life, especially his life, to have that.

"Bully for her. What about you?" Trottenheimer asked. There was a ping, and for several seconds a long low tone rang out. It sounded... familiar... but it couldn't be that. "Put that thing away, Goldie. I hate that sound."

The note faded away. A few seconds later, Goldenblood answered grimly, "Likely summary execution. Hopefully it'll be quick. But banishment to the sun would be quite a spectacle."

"That's not funny. I wish you wouldn't joke like that," Trottenheimer muttered.

"Somepony will have to pay for all we've done here. Likely many ponies. Hopefully fewer than I originally planned." He coughed and wheezed. "Ironical. I fully expected to die ten years ago. Ten years... now I wish I had."

"Before Fluttershy?" Trottenheimer asked sharply.

"I was a broken bird to be mended by her. A pet she foolishly fell in love with, and who foolishly loved her back. Too bad I ended up hurting her too grievously to ever forgive myself or her," he muttered wetly. "She deserved somepony far finer than I."

"Oh please. If this gets descends any further into a self-loathing pity party, I may be sick. There is no reason for this, Goldenblood. Talk to Luna. Do something really radical and talk to Twilight or Fluttershy. You're not alone." There was a ping, and another long tone filled the air. "And throw that thing away!"

"It helps me concentrate," Goldenblood retorted.

"I don't care if I gives you wings, that stuff is no good. I work with it as little as possible." The tone trailed off. "Maybe it's time to admit that the plan isn't working."

"It's working fine. I just have to hold on for a little longer. Just... just a few more things... if we can get a second or third Celestia One built so we can target the interior, their front lines, and their launch islands. Or finally get the Tokomare online and connected to the Hoofington megaspell facility. Or perhaps see if I can work out a deal in the back channels..." There was another ping and long screaming note.

"Goldenblood, enough. Just, stop. This plan you came up a decade ago has gone too far. Go talk to Luna. Tell her everything and resign."

"And who will take my place? Horse? Oh, he'd love that. Garnet? You?" He snorted and blurted, "Celestia?" He let out a long, tired sigh. "No. I'm already quite thoroughly damned. I won't condemn another to my position. I've done enough to deserve all that's happened to me. All that will happen. All that matters is Equestria. That when I'm finally removed, everything can return to those better days. We'll have a Princess who can rule the kingdom as she needs to rule it, and there won't be a need for war or the Ministry Mares anymore. And things will be... better. I just have to hold on a few more months." Trottenheimer didn't say a word.

Goldenblood suddenly emitted his rusty chuckle. "You know, it's funny. I was born in the zebra lands. Learned their tribes and language. Tutored by zebras. I was more striped than any pony before the war, and when Mother died, I didn't want to come back. But when I stepped off the boat and saw this green and bright place, I knew that there was something special about it. That there was a goodness here that I'd never known or imagined. A promise that, if you were good and tried hard, everything would turn out okay. Goddesses, I loved Equestria. With its strange and silly and delightful inhabitants and their odd and baffling ways. And yet, no matter how I tried, I was always apart from that goodness. Terrified of it. I'd watch Equestria from afar with longing, see the ponies and their friendships and day to day concerns, and I'd stare in wonder and terror. It was like a precious bauble of spun glass, and if I dared touch it, it would shatter from my careless pretension. I wasn't worthy of Equestria."

"That's quite a monologue. I remember when you couldn't say four words without gasping."

"I've been practicing what I'll say for my last trial. Or right before my execution." Goldenblood gave a hollow, grim little laugh. It soon died, and Trottenheimer didn't share it. Finally, Goldenblood said with quiet conviction, "It will get better, when it's all over."

"And if it doesn't?" Trottenheimer murmured, barely audible in the recording.

Goldenblood didn't answer him, but I could imagine him gazing off. "Well... if everypony loses, Twilight has a contingency for that. And if Equestria is lost... I do."

There was a long pause, and then a knock followed by a mare saying, "Director. Flim and Flam are on the line for you. Twilight is being persistent again."

"Thank you, Emerald. Give your sisters my regards and thanks." There was a long sigh after the door closed. "Thank you for stopping by, Trotty. I appreciate your concern, but I started this nightmare. I'll finish it."

"You don't finish nightmares, Goldie. You wake up from them."

The recording came to an end, and I sat there, thinking about what I'd heard. It hadn't been

anything... important. Nothing about Horizons at all, really. But to hear him talk about his own execution so casually... and that talk about loving Equestria. It had to be an act. It simply had to be. Goldenblood was a villain and a murderer who'd done unspeakable things. I looked over at the front page of the Canterlot Times and the silhouette of Goldenblood being consumed by green flame.

"I thought you might appreciate this," a stallion said behind me, making me whirl towards the door. The speaker, an elderly unicorn with a mane like guttering blue fire and a coat the color of spoiled milk, sat in a wheelchair with a blanket covering his hind legs. Unwholesome blots of blue and purple hovered beneath his papery skin, and one eye the color of fog peered at me. The other, however, was a piercing azure, and I was struck, despite his clear infirmity, by a strange vitality that hovered around him. Elderly though he might be, a charisma and life clung to this old stallion like a royal cloak that no ravages of time or ill health could strip away. And from the keen glint in his eye and the way it roved over my body, I felt a sudden annoying flush of embarrassment. He looked like he was barely able to stand, but I wasn't so sure that that would keep me safe.

"King Awesome, I presume?" I asked, forcing as polite a smile as I could.

"Naturally. Could that apply to any other?" He gestured to the pictures, news clippings, and memory orbs. "What do you think of my collection?"

"It's... astonishing," I admitted as I examined a bland pamphlet that read, 'Office of Interministry Affairs: Career Opportunities'. It looked as if the designer'd gone out of their way to make the available positions seem as boring as possible. "I never imagined I'd see so much... stuff... associated with it."

"Stuff?" Awesome asked as he raised a bushy blue brow.

"Um... nice stuff?" I amended, but then he chuckled, and I suspected he was teasing me.

"Well, better than 'garbage' or 'shit Father collects', I suppose," Awesome said with another chuckle, looking at the collection as his horn glowed and pushed the wheels of his chair. "I've always been taken by the O.I.A. Such a curious, little, unobtrusive part of the Equestrian government. Most of the Wasteland doesn't even know it once existed, and the few who do couldn't care less that it did. It's like the ministries themselves, a relic. Unimportant now."

"I don't believe that," I said. "In fact, since I learned about it, I keep finding the things Goldenblood did to be more and more relevant." I raised a hoof, turning it over and looking at it. "Their secret projects are still around... still causing problems."

"Oh, you know about the Projects?" He seemed impressed. "But of course, you should. Zodiac told me about two of them. The secrecy. The conspiracies. But who cares about what a bunch of dead ponies did two centuries ago? Better to hunt down raiders and hoard bottlecaps and bullets." He sighed, shaking his head. "Most ponies believe my interest is just a sign that my wits are slipping. Wastelanders concern themselves with the here and now, not the once was."

I had to admit, if I didn't have the mystery of what Goldenblood had done, I probably wouldn't have lasted long in the Wasteland. First I kept going to keep EC-1101 away from Deus. Then it was the puzzle of Horizons and what he'd really done. Now I was driven by a strange urge pulling me to find the answer and stop whatever he'd set in motion. Otherwise, I probably would have ended up a Reaper, or perhaps working security at Megamart. I wouldn't have been pushed to further and further extremes and

hazards.

"I care," I replied, looking at the collection. "But I have to admit, I don't understand why he did all of it. The ministries. The Projects. It just seems so stupid."

He rubbed the snowy stubble on his chin with a hoof. "Have you ever done anything behind a friend's back?"

"Ohh... just a lot," I muttered, flushing as I looked away.

"And did you know it was wrong?" he asked, and I frowned but nodded. "So then why did you do it without telling them?"

I thought back to Scotch Tape. While she'd forgiven me for removing her memories, it still bothered her. It also made me wonder, for the first time, if there were other things she'd seen or heard that she wished she didn't remember. "I did it because I thought it needed to be done. And I didn't tell because... because I knew that the truth would upset them."

King Awesome nodded once. "I suspect it's not much different than Goldenblood and the O.I.A. Most of the things he did were things that he believed were needed not only for Equestria to win the war but to put Luna in a position of power where she could rule much like her sister had. He fostered secrets not to protect himself from the law but because he didn't want to see Equestria upset by his necessary action."

"You think he wasn't just hiding so folks wouldn't stop him?" I countered, skeptically.

"He planned to be stopped. You heard that recording. Everything he'd done was planned to eventually be exposed. I think, instead, it was that he knew how shocking it would be for ponykind to contemplate that anypony could do the things he'd done." He shook his head with a sigh. "I think he bloodied his hooves so that other ponies didn't have to."

I thought of Psalm and shivered. It made a horrible kind of sense. "Still fucked up," I muttered.

"Evil is when we rationalize the wrongs we do to others. And Equestria was full of little evils during the war. The war. Politics. Business. National pride. Racial pride. Victims. There were so many little excuses for so many horrible things ponies visited on each other. Even today," he said with a chuckle. "Somehow the wicked always seem to find ways to justify their actions."

I thought about the Legate and his grand talk about destiny and how full of shit it was. "And the Society? Does it do the same?"

He was silent a long moment, his blue eye locked with mine. "I suppose that that depends on which member you ask, but personally, yes. I suppose we do." He sighed and shook his head, his gaze turning far more calculating. I glanced around at the O.I.A. paraphernalia and the back at King Awesome. "So, I suppose it would be fair to ask the question most pressing on the minds of my followers: have you come as a bloody conqueror seeking to liberate the unwashed masses and put the heads of their over-cultured oppressors on pikes before giving the whole operation to Big Daddy and the Twilight Society?"

I stared at him for several seconds, processing all that before summarizing my response in a nonplussed, "Huh?" Shaking my head, I frowned at him. "Look, I could have saved all of you the pain and aggravation. I'm here for an airship for my friend. That's it." Well... my priorities might change depending on what P-21 discovered, but I'd gas that stable when I had to.

He blinked at me for one moment, then threw back his head and cackled. "You're here for *that*? The *Fleur*? Oh my, the gossipmongers will be so disappointed. They were absolutely certain you'd come to liberate the serfs." He wiped his eyes with one leg as he said with a smile. "Take it."

I frowned. "Wait... just like that?"

"Just like that." He replied with a smile, narrowing his eyes. "If it will get you on your way elsewhere, I'll happily give you a piece of antiquated machinery if it will avoid other unpleasantness." He waved a hoof errantly. "It will take a little time to get skyworthy, and the Society will quite happily show you the utmost hospitality until you leave. You're actually in time for the Society's Grand Galloping Gala tomorrow night." He suddenly frowned. "Though getting a proper ensemble together will be tricky."

I was so ready to barter, threaten, argue, or beg for the airship that simply being given it was making my head spin. "Well, thank you."

"You can show that thanks by not trying any drastic changes to the status quo. The Society has gotten very comfortable of late and they are extremely nervous that you are here to end that comfort," King Awesome replied with a chilly smile. "So... Security's really not here for more than the airship?"

"Maybe..." I frowned, and he arched the brow over his brilliant blue eye. I felt a surge of P-21's righteousness well up inside me. "Well, maybe I am. I don't see much difference between serfs and slaves, and some of my friends aren't happy with what you're doing here." He just smiled, claspings his forehooves together as he regarded me thoughtfully.

"Believe me, it could be much worse." He leaned back in the chair, narrowing his bright blue eye. "When I met them, the Society were a gang of thugs with slightly better than average manners and elocution. There were slaves then, toiling to grow food in the Enervation-weakened soil of the old golf course. I had to teach the gang the concept of nobility. Of being superior not only competitively but in breeding, conduct, and spirit. If they were truly nobility, then they had obligations to fulfill. The distinction between slave and serf may not seem like much to you, but it's the difference between raiding settlements, slapping bomb collars on prisoners, and working them to death and accepting volunteers, giving them safety and food, and working them for half the day."

I scowled at that, then shook my head. "I really don't know about that either way. Slavery is wrong, but I don't know if what you're talking about is a form of slavery or not."

He considered me shrewdly for a long moment. "It's a semantic question, Blackjack," he said as he folded his hooves before him. "Do we keep our serfs here when they wish to leave? Yes. It prevents infiltrators. Do we require them to sign an agreement to become serfs rather than slap a bomb collar on every able-bodied pony we can? Yes. And are there some that use coercion to circumvent that rule? Yes," he finished, his face solemn and stern. "Ultimately, the Society is not perfect. No more than the Reapers or the Collegiate."

"It's not semantics to me. Wrong is wrong, and the Society has a lot of wrong going on as far as I

can see. Keeping intelligent seaponies in some kind of zoo for your amusement? Using a minotaur to force ponies to sign your agreements so that you can pretend to be better than common gangers? It reeks of a whole lot of brahmin shit,” I said with more severity than I originally intended.

But to my surprise, King Awesome looked more amused than offended. “Of course it does. But what you keep failing to understand is that the Society was, and can be, far worse. The distinction between serf and slave may not be much, but it *is* a distinction. Far better than the terms given by Red Eye. Should we force them to labor in irradiated pits for their freedom? Work them for five years in conditions few will survive? Make them fight to death for our amusement? That used to happen before I became king,” he said severely, his blue eye intensely boring into me before he gave a sigh and a shrug, “As for the other accoutrements... well... the Society is always desperate to set itself apart as sophisticated and special. Which is why they’re so terrified of somepony like you coming along and challenging their complacency.”

I felt a little unsure now, even embarrassed. Was he agreeing with me? “So... you think this serfdom thing is wrong too?”

“I think that I’ve been King of the Society long enough to appreciate what little distinctions we can have. But perhaps a better pony might improve things. Who can say?” he said with a little chuckle, making me question just what was going on.

I rubbed the back of my head as I looked away. My uncertainty had robbed me of my former righteous indignation. “Well... It just seems like you’re getting a better deal,” I muttered lamely, no longer certain of what to do. Accept a lesser evil? Overthrow it, and invite a greater evil? ...Or stop, listen, and learn more about what was going on?

“Aristoponies always do,” he replied with a smile and a shrug. A wistful look filled his eye as he gazed at his collection. “A fact my old friends failed to accept. But that’s ancient history. Few care about such things. History is an irrelevancy, even to the Society. Nopony cares about the past.” He spoke with quiet bitterness and heartbreaking resignation.

I frowned and glanced around at the room again, and then back at King Awesome. Finally, I smiled at the old stallion. “I do.”

* * *

We talked for nearly two hours about everything. The Society. The O.I.A. Goldenblood. His companions. Dawn. His recently departed wife. There were some parts that kept me riveted, like hearing about the final breakup and a paternal King Awesome protecting Dawn from a lecherous, uncouth Big Daddy. Other parts, like him claiming to be the great grandson of Shining Armor, Twilight Sparkle’s brother and the entitled heir to the Crystal Empire, seemed too farfetched even for the Wasteland. But then, as he told me, “If you’re going to be anything in the Wasteland, why not be a king? And if you’re going to be a king, you better be a fucking awesome king.” Hence the name.

It was just crazy enough to be true.

Grace peeked in on us a half dozen times before her father told her to knock it off. In that time, I’d learned that he’d approved of Sky Striker’s marriage to Dawn, as any stallion who would ride a flaming dragon from on high had to be a decent protector, but had wanted them to stay in Elysium. I found out

that Keeper had a weakness for strawberries and that Big Daddy's hooves were ticklish. I returned the favor by sharing a few secrets I'd learned, like the details of how Goldenblood's affair with Fluttershy had ended and how her baby had survived to become the Reaper Psychoshy. That alone seemed to astonish the old stallion.

More surprising was how good it felt to be able to talk about Goldenblood, Horizons, EC-1101, and all the trouble they'd brought to my life. None of my friends had viewed the memory orbs I had, or heard the recordings or... or anything. None of them cared. They cared about me, sure, but not what moved me. We discussed various theories about what Horizons might be; he preferred a megaspell while I was tantalized by the idea of a massive moonstone/starmetal reaction. We both agreed how very odd it was that he could have gotten away with so much at the O.I.A. Had Luna maintained plausible deniability, letting Goldenblood blackmail and leverage others into silence? Had she been fooled? Complicit? I didn't know which scared me more.

"My word. I don't think that I've talked this much in years," he finally said with a yawn, arching a brow again. "Do you really care about all of this? Or are you simply trying to butter me up?"

"I do care, Awesome. The past keeps coming back to bite me, and I'm scared of some of the futures I've imagined. I don't want this world to be a terrible place. I want to make it better," I replied simply.

He took a deep breath. "You're a fool, Blackjack. But a good fool, and that's better than all the other kinds in this world." He yawned and slumped back in his chair. "Thank you, Blackjack. It was... quite nice to speak to another like this. I've got quite a few dozen memory orbs from the O.I.A. regarding the various Projects that I think you should see." He separated one and floated it to me. "Certainly some of them should come in useful. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'll inform Grace that the *Fleur* is to be made ready for flight again. We'll have to check the bag and patch any holes. Little things like that."

"You're sure that it can still fly after all this time?" I asked with a little skepticism. I would be sure to have P-21 and Scotch Tape check it as well before we went anywhere.

"Of course," he said with a canny chuckle. "The Society weren't stupid. If they ever had to flee this place, there were few methods better than by air. It will take some time to prepare, though, and I think that I should stress that this is a loan. The Society will definitely want her returned, for sentimental reasons if nothing else." He tapped his hooves together. "You'll come to the Grand Galloping Gala as my personal guests, of course. Though there is the question of what you'll wear."

"You let me worry about that. I know a filly who owes me a fancy dress or two," I replied, not having a clue as to what I'd actually do at a party. Drink and stand in the corner? Probably safest. At least I wouldn't look like a complete embarrassment, though. "In the meantime, I need to investigate a plantation somewhere east of here."

But he'd fallen asleep in his chair. I rose to my hooves, took one look at the collection around me and what answers it might have, and started to leave. Then I stopped and regarded the slumbering, elderly unicorn. I'd never really had a 'father' or 'grandfather' before. Whatever pony had sired me in 99 hadn't filled any kind of mentoring role. I hadn't even understood the word before leaving Stable 99, but as I saw him lying there, I got an odd feeling that I'd never had before and wasn't sure what to do with.

Finally, I trotted to his side, made sure he was actually asleep, and then gave a polite kiss to his cheek.

It seemed the civilized thing to do.

* * *

“Glory, why are you turning their kitchen into an abattoir?” I asked as I looked at the bloody meat in one heap, the pile of bloody cybernetic components in the second pile, and the spread of cleaned cyberpony parts. Boo and Scotch Tape sat in front of the pantry, building a small wall of provisions. The kitchen staff worked as well as they could, watching the blue pegasus with poorly hidden expressions of horror. “What are you even doing with the zebra body parts?”

Glory was a fright, blood smearing her hooves and spotting the cloth tied over her mouth. “I needed to remove these components from the Brood,” she said, gesturing to the pile of gory machinery. “This place had the best equipment. Knives. Scrub brushes. Alcohol. Lots of water. Perfect for removing and cleaning these parts for study. The eyes might be identical, but I want to see if there are other similarities and differences.”

“Okay. Why?” I asked as I levitated over a bottle of whiskey. Really... cleaning cyberzebra parts with this. I disapproved. The kitchen staff seemed to be waiting for somepony with the courage to come and tell us to leave, but for the moment I couldn’t blame them for keeping their distance. Boo and Scotch Tape, their fortifications built up, proceeded to bombard each other with grapes, berries, and Fancy Buck Cakes. I wasn’t exactly sure Boo knew what she was doing, but I had to admit that her mouth was formidable protection from Scotch’s snack cake barrage.

“For one, you need to know what they’re capable of if you have to fight them. Are they strong like Deus, fast like your recon legs, or agile like your Shadowbolt upgrade?” She scooped up a round piece of equipment. “This motor’s exactly like the ones installed by Rover a few days ago, but its placement wasn’t nearly as precise. There was abrasion on the bone at the joint. Would hurt like hell. But this...” She reached over to the bloody pile and lifted a smaller piece covered with gobs of blood and chunks of brain. “This is different from your own neural interfaces. It’s a newer design. It completely replaces their pain centers. I don’t think that the Brood can feel pain. And from this abrasion, I’m skeptical as to whether they have a healing talisman like yours.”

Two very good things to know. “Okay. Just try not to scare these folks. No animating the dead for your army of cyberghouls,” I teased, noticing the horrified looks on the faces of the servants listening in.

Glory blinked at me in confusion and gestured to the bloody heap. “But there’s not enough materials here for even one cyberghoul.” It took every last bit of restraint I had not to burst into laughter at the shock on the servants’ faces. She set down the component. “I haven’t seen P-21.”

“He’s... around,” I murmured.

Glory caught my eye. “We’re not going to do anything rash, are we?”

“I’m not sure yet,” I replied, looking at the cooks on the other side of the kitchen. They watched with wary eyes. I had to think of how odd we must seem to all of them, like we were crude and not-quite-invited houseguests and they just hadn’t quite decided whether it would be more trouble to put

up with us or throw us out on our rumps.

"I'm not opposed to the idea, but please be careful. I'd hate for us to repeat what happened at Flank, or Fallen Arch," Glory said, then reached over and bit a wire scrub brush, took up a piece of metal in her hooves, and began scrubbing away chunks of clinging flesh.

"I'm going to find Lacunae, Rampage, and Deus and take care of that errand for the Collegiate," I said casually. "Should be back quick. Come with me?"

She seemed surprised, looked down at the messy business before her, then raised her bloody hooves. "I'm up to my withers in zebra here. But you go. And do come back quick."

"I'll be good." She looked at me skeptically, and I added, "I will. I promise I'll stay out of trouble." I errantly rubbed my collar.

She pulled off the mask, wiped her forehooves on a wet rag, and just sighed with a gentle smile as she trotted towards me. She hugged me and nuzzled my ear. "Blackjack, you are utterly incapable of staying out of trouble. If trouble doesn't find you, somepony sends trouble to you, and if that doesn't happen you'll stir up some trouble simply by trotting along. Sometimes I think that you need trouble to survive." She pulled me close and gave me a little smooch. "Stay safe. Don't get hurt. Come back soon. I can live with that."

I smiled and kissed her back. Scotch Tape gave a little 'awwww'. "That's so sweet. A little disgusting," she added as she looked at the bloody specks on Glory's mane and coat, "but sweet." Then her inattention was rewarded with an orange bouncing off the side of her head. "Ambushed!" Scotch Tape snapped, then lobbed a Fancy Buck Cake that exploded orange filling across Boo's face. "Direct hit!" the filly crowed.

Boo's pale eyes appeared amid the dripping orange filling. Then her tongue swept up and collected all the dripping confection in one long circular pass and swallowed it with a gulp. Scotch Tape blinked in shock and flopped over. "No effect..." she whimpered. As I started to walk away, Boo scrambled to her hooves and trotted after me. "Hey! Come back!" Scotch Tape sulked as Boo stayed beside me. "What am I going to do now?"

"To the defeated goes the chore cleaning up the mess," I replied, giving a nod to the cooks as we passed out of the kitchen. Scotch Tape gaped at us and then collapsed on her back in a powdery heap.

* * *

"Thirty-one!" Rampage crowed as we wound our way northeast towards the navigation tag Triage had given me. "Might have been more, but you know, after you feel the blast, you lose track of things."

"You make it sound like sex," I muttered as we rolled along. While most of the terrain was tangled, dead woods, there were a few odd buildings mixed in with rusted, bold plaques like 'Carrotech' and 'Radish Fabrication Research' on them. 'Technology parks', I supposed they were, once. Really, what did you fabricate with radishes? I saw the large Stable-Tec R&D building and wondered if I might make a side trip to my side trip.

"Bang bang," Rampage said with a shrug. Boo blinked, cocking her head, and I reached up and

scratched her ears. She gave a happy little murr as Rampage looked on. "I really don't get her. She doesn't talk, but she seems a lot smarter than just some critter."

"She's different, is all," I said, sighing as I peered out at the crawling landscape. "Ugh, I hate waiting."

"Yeah. Deus does kinda take most of the fun out of the Wasteland. All the random, deadly shit just doesn't compare," Rampage said as gestured to her left. "Feral ghoul?" She swept her power hoof to the right. "Tank." Then she repeated, gesturing left then right with each group, "Pissed off Steel Ranger? Tank. Ornerly radigator? Tank. Zebra army? Tank. I can see why Dawn was so confident. Tank beats everything."

"Except a chance at being a better pony," I said, and Rampage smiled and snorted scornfully.

"If you can't beat 'em." She looked down at the turret. "Hey, Deus! We need to paint you bright pink to lure in more things to kill. This auto travel is boring!" Deus revved his engine in a very negative tone. "Hey, it was a suggestion!"

I gazed up at Lacunae flying silently overhead, and Rampage followed my gaze. "Is she alright?" Rampage asked softly.

"Huh?" How could Rampage possibly know?

"Her purplecorniness. She's acting a lot stranger than normal. She doesn't talk. She doesn't eat. She just stands there looking like she's going to cry," Rampage said with a small frown. "I mean, she's always weird, but is she okay?"

I glanced up at Lacunae, but she gave no indication that she'd heard or acknowledged Rampage's concern. I felt the giant metaphorical hoof hovering over my brain. "No. She's really not." Rampage arched a brow as I felt the Goddess start to press down. I closed my eyes, struggling to get even the simplest explanation out. "She's dealing with some alicorn stuff." And so was I. I struggled to move my jaw and spit out something... anything... that could be a hint for what the Goddess was doing to me!

"Uh-huh... anything I can do to help?" Rampage asked casually. I could have hugged her! I wanted to! But the Goddess slowly crushed my will beneath her hoof. My mouth moved silently, my face screwing up as I struggled to spit out two words. But the pressure became a physical pain. "Blackjack?" Rampage asked, frowning in concern.

"N... no," I stammered on, feeling a will besides my own carefully manipulating my mouth to go on, "She's fine. I'm fine. Nothing wrong at all, Rampage. Brain damage!" My lips pulled back in a rictus grin as Rampage stared at me in concern and bafflement. "Just wanting some booze and to get laid! And to shoot some shit because that's what I do!" I was grinning like an idiot, and Rampage just gaped at me. I felt the Goddess's strings quiver in frustration. "How are you?" I added, and finally Rampage relaxed a little.

"Just... trying not to think about it. Running around with you is a lot easier. Doing anything is easier," she replied. "If you squish a bunch of souls together, does that make a pony? Do I have a soul of my own? Or am I just a freak?" She sighed and gave a little shrug. "Finding out more about Shujaa

and the other memories you snagged helped, but I still don't have those answers."

I felt the strings quiver as the Goddess plumbed my mind for what I should say. I replied with the most colorful insults I could; oddly, she didn't seem impressed. "You are what you say you are," the Goddess answered for me. "Never think otherwise. It doesn't matter if you have a soul of your own."

She cocked her head at me, and I felt the awkwardness rolling off the connection. I wondered how often the Goddess had truly interacted with a pony outside of Unity. Red Eye, at least, but what others? I had vague impressions of awed missionaries spreading the promise of Unity to an uncaring Wasteland, and seeing the subtle manipulation of their hopes to be transformed into alicorns themselves. Rampage looked doubtful.

"R...r..." I stammered, trying to get a word to her. Rampage was immortal; the Goddess couldn't kill her. And there was Deus too. I had to tell her. "G...She... Co... I..." I blathered like an idiot. My lips twisted as I struggled to spit out a few simple words. The pressure built till I was sure my brains were going to explode out my eye sockets. Then a memory orb floated out of my saddlebags. I looked up at the blank face of Lacunae above as the orb touched my horn. A flicker of magic, and the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Damn fucking Goddess! I wanted to shove a string of balefire eggs up her huge mutant ass and light them all up! Worse, even in the memory orb I could still *feel* her. It was like body heat radiating behind me, a telepathic breath in my ear. She'd given me a time out, and I could still feel all the little twinges and tweaks going on within me.

What was she doing while I was stuck in here?

First things first. Where was 'here'? At first glance it appeared to be some sort of indoor junk heap. Mounds of multifarious parts were piled high up the walls of the room I found myself in, and a mountainous heap of haphazardly connected electrical components sat in the middle. A dozen massive screens mounted on the central technological mishmash glowed with static. I knew the body I was in quite well. The slow burn with every breath. The painful scars that tugged with each step. The ache deep in his bones that made every step a punishment. Goldenblood stood in some kind of strange laboratory with a dozen other ponies. He floated a clipboard before him, idly drawing houses in the margins of some banal-looking form.

"You aren't supposed to be doing that," a dark pegasus muttered beside him. He glanced at her, then looked around at the assembled ponies. I noticed the unicorn zony Silver Stripe examining the hulking piece of machinery with rapt attention while Psalm stood quietly at the rear. The black unicorn wore the ominous riot armor, sans helmet, as she watched with hollow, haunted eyes.

He gave a small snort. "Oh please, Eclipse. The Princess isn't going to need this report."

"You never know. She might," the pegasus said with a mysterious little smirk.

Then the mustard-yellow Horse trotted out in front of us with an easy grin. "Fillies and gentlecolts of the O.I.A., I just know how much you love these little demonstrations. So, with no further ado, may I present the Crusader, 1.2! A marked improvement over the original Stable-Tec design in terms of

processing power and capabilities,” he said, turning towards Goldenblood and giving a small bow. “Thanks to your painstaking work of looting Equestria’s patent office, I’ve been able to extend to Equestria as a whole a maneframe superior to anything produced by Stable-Tec.”

“One would think he’d be a little more humble about copying Apple Bloom’s work,” Eclipse murmured.

“Horse is allergic to humility,” Goldenblood replied in his gurgling rasp. “I’ve seen the real thing. That device is twice the size and power draw of a real Crusader. I’ll be impressed if it has half the processing power of the original.”

“If only Stable-Tec was willing to sell them to us directly...” Eclipse muttered with a frown.

“Stable-Tec opposes the war. We should be glad they’re only wasting their resources building bunkers. They could be a much larger problem if they decided to really assert themselves,” Goldenblood muttered. “We’ll have to make do with Horse’s contraption.”

Horse grinned enthusiastically to the crowd as the robotic Sweetie Belle trotted out to join him. “Now I know what you’re thinking. Yes, that is a Sweetie Bot. But the other thing you’re thinking is ‘what is the big deal, Horse? What makes your Crusader better than the original?’” Horse chuckled and pulled out from the side of the central machine a strange mesh of gold wire studded with tiny talismans. “Well, I’ll show you. By now you’re all familiar with the mind transference system that Stable-Tec perfected. But really, what good does a permanent transfer do? With the new and improved Crusader 1.2, you can upload as many minds as you need to. Swap between them. Scan for information you need and simply use a part of it.” He jammed the golden spider web onto his head, and the dozens of tiny talismans began to flicker and blink. On the massive terminal screens, symbols began to stream and dance, showing flashing lines of data scrolling by.

Suddenly, a massive digital head of Horse appeared on the screen. “Voila!” The audience gave appreciate ‘ooohs’, and the digital head split in a massive grin. “Of course, that’s not all!” he crowed, and then he looked down at the Sweetie Bot. Her eyes flashed and scrolled green lines of data. Then the robot adopted a grin exactly the same as the one upon the screen.

“Once connected to the Crusader 1.2,” the robot said, a faint synthetic warble the only thing marring an uncannily accurate emulation of the real Sweetie Belle’s voice, “you will be able to remotely access and control any properly modified robot connected to its system.” The robot then adopted a sympathetic look right along with the immense face on the screen. “We’re already adapting this for smaller, dedicated systems for poor colts and fillies crippled or suffering from illnesses too severe to be treated with our current technology.”

I really wished I could feel my blood run cold as I imagined the bloody word ‘PLAY’ painted on hospital walls.

Horse removed the delicate golden netting, and the attendees moved closer. “And with a push of a button!” He pushed a large red button on the side of the machine. For a moment, the Horse on the screen looked alarmed, but then it was replaced by a field of static as the pony Horse proclaimed, “The upload is purged and can be replaced by any other mind you may wish. Come on up and try it.”

Silver Stripe was first to place the golden mesh on her head. Sweetie Bot trotted around and

spoke to the other attendees in Zebra. The button was pushed, and the next tried it. And the next. And the next. With each push, the machine let out more ominous buzzes and crackles. Technicians emerged and began to check the machine's panels and displays with nervous looks. As the demonstration went on, with each pony giving the computer and Sweetie Bot a trial trot, Horse kept giving glances over at the scarred stallion.

"What about you, Goldie? Care to try it out?" Horse taunted as he waved the net at Goldenblood.

"No thank you," Goldenblood rasped, his eyes cool and contemptuous. "Your machine looks a little unstable. I don't recall Apple Bloom's Crusader buzzing like that."

"It's buzzing from sheer awesomeness," Horse said, the veins in his temple throbbing as he grimaced in annoyance.

"Thank you. We shall consider it," Goldenblood said dismissively as he turned his back on Horse. Suddenly there was a shout and a shove, and for a moment, something metal touched his mane. Then Psalm was there, darting in, and there came a muffled shout as Goldenblood was shoved to the floor.

"Are you okay?" Eclipse asked as she knelt beside him. He glanced up in time to see the glittering mesh descend down and land firmly atop her inky head.

Suddenly, the machine let out a massive mechanical shriek, and the screens went wild. One exploded in a shower of sparks as the reek of burning electronics filled the air. The gold glow of Goldenblood's magic yanked the mesh from her brow. In an instant, Psalm was on Horse, kicking his legs out from under him and following it up by magically pressing a pistol to his temple as she pinned him. The Crusader finally let out an immense pop, and a cloud of rolling black smoke erupted from the top as the machine let out an anemic whine.

"Hey! It was a joke!" Horse said as he squirmed beneath Psalm, his brown eyes staring at the gun she pressed against his temple. Everypony suddenly seemed intent on either looking elsewhere or walking away.

Goldenblood ignored him as he helped Eclipse to her hooves. "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. I'm just fine," Eclipse said as she rubbed her temple. She turned her eyes down and stared at Horse with a calculating gaze that chilled me. Psalm looked to Eclipse, and the dusky lavender pegasus gave Goldenblood a long glance, then a small shake of her head. Goldenblood let out a long, low sigh, then locked eyes with Horse. I felt his brows furrow and his teeth grind.

"Do not play jokes on government officials," Goldenblood said firmly, gesturing with his hoof for Psalm to let him up. Horse slowly rose as Psalm backed off, the humiliated stallion glaring at Goldenblood with unabashed loathing. "Now. You seem to have a computer to fix. Do so, and maybe then we'll talk," he said as he turned on his hooves and walked out of the lab with Eclipse and Psalm. I heard Horse shout about fixing his Sweetie Bot first. Wonderful priorities there, given that it had only suffered a small scratch to its flank...

Once they were out in the hall, Goldenblood muttered, "He was probably hoping to have a peek in my mind." He scowled as he walked, the other O.I.A. officials avoiding his gaze. He looked at Eclipse. "Are you sure you're okay? I can have him removed in fifteen seconds and Robronco taken over in half

an hour.”

Eclipse fluttered her wings and tossed her head. “I’m fine. Just a little disoriented. If he wasn’t already involved tangentially, I would. We’ll just use it as a reason for him to behave. I’m more interested in his discovery. See what we can commandeer and sneak out from him. I doubt his security is as tight as Apple Bloom’s.”

“Espionage on her own subjects. What would Her Majesty think?” Goldenblood said in an almost teasing voice.

“Princess Luna knows nothing about it whatsoever. Princess Luna sits on her throne and makes impressive speeches while the ministries do all their acts behind her back. Poor Princess Luna,” Eclipse giggled as the world began to blur away.

oooOOOooo

Normally when I come out of a memory orb, I’m in a heap somewhere reflecting on what I’d seen. This time, I came out and found myself standing beside Deus and looking down at a large factory-style building. ‘Roseluck Agrifarms’ was written across the third story in fancy red cursive script. The next second, his main guns roared, and I flopped back on my side; thank Luna for reinforced hearing or I’d be deaf right now. Below, a sentry bot exploded in a shower of steel. Two more followed it, mindlessly firing missiles and gatling guns at the war machine before the cannons fired twice more and eliminated them.

Rampage trotted out from behind Deus with Boo crawling along after her, looking quite spooked by the noise. “Nice job, Blackjack. Go get some more.” Lacunae watched from a distance.

“More... wha... huh?” I rubbed my ears; even though I wasn’t deaf, the noise had given me ringing feedback in one ear. “What’s going on?”

Lacunae spoke quietly in my mind. “You’ve been controlled by the Goddess. She has had you running in, shooting the sentries, and rushing out again on auto pilot. Apparently, she finds it quite... entertaining as she waits for LittlePip to arrive.”

Great. I was a toy. Worse, I felt chains in my mind. While I’d been out, the Goddess had been busy. She had enough control over me to use me when I was unconscious. How long till she could control me like any other alicorn? What would she do once she could?

I heard a snide little chuckle in my mind as I pondered that.

“Right... so... where are we going?” I asked, shaking my head. “That last shot rattled me a bit.”

“You’re the one going in, remember? On account of all the Enervation? Find out what’s causing it and see if the Collegiate can use it?” Rampage frowned at me. “Are you sure you’re okay? You’ve been acting strange all day. I swear, refer to yourself as ‘The Blackjack’... Is this a getting shot in the head thing? I never said ‘The Rampage’ when I was shot in the head.” I tried to will her to put it together, but then she chuckled and said, “Heh... The Rampage likes...” Damn it... I should have brought P-21...

“No. No. I got it,” I said as I stood and dusted myself off with a hoof. “I’m going.” I trotted down towards the building, looking for red bars. From the dozen or so smoking sentries arranged in front of the

building, I'd been busy. The Enervation scream began to cry out in my mind as I approached the blown-in loading dock door. "Are you coming?" I asked, as I glanced back at Rampage.

"Uh... remember?" Rampage said as she trotted towards me with a look of irritation. As she walked, her flesh began to sag. Bloody rivulets began to trickle between the gaps in her armor. I stared in horror as one eye popped in a slurry of pink foam, only to regenerate a second later. "I mean, I can go down there if you want, but it's really gross."

"No! No. Stay here and keep Deus company. I'll bring more sentries if I find them," I said, turning away. I couldn't feel sick, but oh how I wanted to throw up. I walked alone into the factory, hearing the distant Enervation scream struggling against a cool, soft note that radiated from inside me. It sounded so... familiar. Ugh. Stupid Goddess brain damage was making it hard to think.

The interior of the factory was largely a warehouse stacked high with heaps of wooden crates. Corrosion streaked the metal walls and girders, and water sloshed coldly around my hooves. Some of the crates were open, holding rusty equipment which I guessed was for farming. Others were full of plastic barrels filled with pulpy mush with 'seed stock: corn 21A' printed on the side. I saw labels for sacks of fertilizer that had split open, the contents forming white crystalline structures creeping in cascades of niter down the side of the sacks. There were still a dozen red bars on my E.F.S., and so I maintained constant vigilance.

"Lacunae? Can you hear me?" I thought at her, but it didn't pierce the Enervation scream. How had the Goddess used me? Had she programmed me like a robot? Could I be programed like a robot? I had a horrifying image of myself like Sweetie Bot, the Goddess copying herself into my brain. The thought made me shiver. And worse, I couldn't think of any way to tell somepony!

As I moved deeper into the factory, leaving the warehouse area and moving into some offices, the floor creaked and the saturated carpet gushed with every step I took. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, exactly. Something that would definitively let me tell Triage that I'd checked out the building. There were labs filled with pulpy seed that had soaked but couldn't rot. Water dripped from sprinkler pipes over planter trays that had long ago corroded away. Debris shifted underhoof with every step, grinding softly.

I ran into two still-functioning turrets. The machines strafed me with machinegun fire, but with S.A.T.S. and the marksporny carbine I managed to shred them without taking too much damage. Still, even with my resistance to Enervation, I noticed that I was barely healing from the shots. Even I had my limits.

Wow. When was the last time I'd actually needed bandages? As I dug through my saddlebags for something I could use, I spotted a rusty safe set into the wall of an office. Heh... speaking of 'last times'... I had some bandages wedged way down deep next to some old, crumbly Stable 99 grass chips. Once I'd staunched my wound, I dug out my bobby pins. Then I took a long look at the rusty lock, pursed my lips, and simply hit the door as hard as I could with my hoof. It let out a brittle snap and swung open. P-21 would not have approved.

Inside were some gold bits in a box marked 'petty cash' and a few healing potion bottles filled with black tar. I also saw some file folders. Most of them were spoiled by water, but I saw a note that had survived. 'Geez, Rose. Where is Hippocratic getting these sales figures for our pest solutions?'

A mouthwritten reply read, 'You know Flim and Flam. They can sell fire to a phoenix. It wouldn't surprise me if they're marketing to the enemy to make these figures.' Right, because during a war, selling anything to the enemy was a good idea.

Nothing else of use in the office. Then I spotted a door with faded paint barely legible through the rust. 'Pest solutions'. Below it was another sign. 'Designated emergency shelter'.

Slowly, I shoved the door open, the rust screeching and setting my teeth on edge. These walls were solid concrete. Even with the metal decay, this chamber still seemed quite sturdy. There weren't even leaking pipes. It was dark in here; everything was in shades of gray in my augmented vision. The floor was ankle deep in viscous fluid as I walked along tables stacked with long-still fabrication machinery. I could taste metal in the air. Coppery.

Across the room, a lone terminal beckoned with its flickering screen. I slowly picked my way to it, feeling the thick water concealing uncertain impediments that shifted underhoof when trod upon. At the green glow of the terminal, I saw that the screen said 'Roseluck Agrifarms: Emergency Protocols'.

Step one: Evacuate all personnel to designated emergency shelters.

Step two A: Wait for the all clear to be given by emergency personnel and management.

Step two B: If evacuation warning is sounded, proceed to the north parking lot. Remain calm. Walk. Do not run.

Step three: When the all clear is sounded, contact your division manager for damage and risk assessment. Do not simply leave the premises.

I carefully began to explore the information on the terminal. There were a lot of banal, uninteresting reports about meeting quarterly goals. Then I spotted three letters that perked my interest: O.I.A.

>Are you sure the O.I.A. is involved? We don't have anything to do with the other ministries.

>I'm sure, Lily. That freaky metal in pest solutions? They provided it.

>I thought it came from Hippocratic. Flim and Flam wanted to see what we could do with it.

>Oh, like that's suppose to make me feel better, Lily!

After that, I started to look for anything to do with pest solutions, O.I.A., or Hippocratic. It took me a while before I found something that jumped out at me.

> I got another nastygram from our legal department.

>Something serious?

>Treason count?

>What?! What's going on?

>Intel found the zebras using an 'arcane device' identical to our pest solutions. Ring and all.

>WHAT?! How! They can't produce those without unicorns, and, even if they had unicorns, we're the only ones with the designs.

>Hence the nastygram.

I peered around the cavernous, reinforced space. The Enervation was setting my teeth on edge. Starmetal was being used here to create... pest control stuff? I examined a cardboard box beside the terminal. 'Roseluck Pest Solutions. No chemicals. No talismans. 100% safe sonic technology.' On the back were diagrams of a pony installing a box next to a garden, then wavy rings spreading out from the box and driving away rabbits, birds, and little round bug things with wings that looked a bit like colorful spritebots. 'Ministry of Peace Approved' was written, along with a picture of Fluttershy hugging the box. I opened it up and stared at the metal case. I could feel it humming in my hooves. After biting off and eating the lock, I popped the casing open and checked out the hoof-sized metal ring. A shimmer of green light flickered along its edge.

I found another short exchange in the terminal records.

>Roseluck, are you sure about keeping Pest Solutions open? That's the 8th incident this quarter!

>It's just Wartime Stress Disorder that made Brownbuck snap. We're all feeling it. The MoP will set him right.

>But there's something wrong in that whole division, Roseluck. The metal used in those rings must be toxic. A three hundred percent increase in health problems isn't normal!

>All our tests show that it's safe and neutral. The MoP confirmed it. Besides, we got the metal from Hippocratic. If there was really anything wrong with it, don't you think that they would have noticed?

>Rose! What about the ponies getting sick? We have to tell somepony.

>Fine. Notify Garnet. She can tell the MoP there might be something off about this stuff. Meanwhile, keep production going till we have to shut it down. Hire a second shift and rotate them out more frequently. Maybe that'll help with the health problems.

>But the investigations...

>It's not our fault if some damned sympathizers are buying our pest solutions in bulk and sending the rings to the stripes. That's the MoM's job. Or the military's if they just want to bomb their fields.

Profits over ponies. There were more files, but a lot of them were corrupted. I found an audio log that crackled to life, though, speaking out into the still, metallic gloom around me.

"Lily? It's Apple Tart over at Horizon Labs. I want you to know we put this metal through every test we could and found no contamination or hazard. It's completely neutral. We're seeing a lot of it lately, though. Twilight just sent us a bullet made of the damned stuff! We're going to try cutting it open next week. I can tell you this... I don't like it either. Something about it just feels bad. I did a little 'non-scientific' research. Took me forever to contact a researcher in 'esoteric energy', and she hypothesized that this metal somehow draws and manipulates souls. She said that if ponies died around

the stuff, it would pull their soul right out and send it... somewhere. Worse, the more souls that pass through it, the stronger the pull would become. Lily, just how much of this stuff have you used?"

I looked at row after row of work tables. These starmetal rings had gone all over Equestria... no... all over the *world*. Each one a tiny, self-contained, indestructible siphon pulling souls through them to their ultimate destination. I knew this... some fundamental part of myself just knew it was so. How many raiders had killed with one of these quietly soaking up the soul of their victims? And if they grew more powerful with every death, it explained why Enervation was so damned strong in the Hoof! This place was one giant basket of death and destruction. It was so strong that, here, the soul-stealing field was actually palpable. But they were everywhere. Tenpony! The zebra lands! I wondered if they could be found in Enclave Raptors. The only place they hadn't been used was apparently Stable-Tec, which explained why we'd never experienced Enervation in 99.

Then the rusty door behind me let out a shriek as it banged closed! I whirled, marksporny carbine raised as the monitor cast out its feeble glow in a dim green cone across the murky fluid under my hooves. My augmented vision helped, but there were dark corners that even that couldn't penetrate. "Who's there?" I shouted. Nine or ten red bars filled my vision, and not all of them were still.

A low laugh filled the air, setting my mane on edge as I began to move sideways along the rows of worktables. Robots didn't laugh like that... Something moved overhead, the laugh echoing again in the cavernous space. I fired up in its direction, the bright muzzle flashes blooming in the darkness, but my bullets found nothing but concrete.

"You're wasting time," a mare whispered, her voice quiet but permeating the copper-reeking room. "No... you're wasting lives..." she hissed maliciously. "Murderer..."

My blood ran cold as I looked around the gloom. "Dawn...?"

"It took me so long watching and waiting. When you came here... I knew you would be alone," Dawn hissed softly.

Don't stop moving. The fluid sloshed around my knees as I kept in frantic motion, looking in all directions I could as I made a slow circuit around the room towards the door. Then I found it: the rusted door bucked shut. I shoved hard against it, but it didn't budge. The thick metal hinges and frame were bent. "I had to wait. Had to have my doubt removed. You made me doubt her, Blackjack. You really did. Your selfish words. Selfish," the darkness whispered. I pointed the gun upwards just in time to see something streak away through the shadows. "She fixed me. Made me stronger. Removed my doubt. My weakness."

That certainly raised her a few points on the crazyometer. "I don't want to kill you, Dawn. I want to help," I said as I made my way further along with slow, deliberate steps.

"You want to help?" Dawn asked in a barely audible murmur. Like a mechanical angel of death, she swept down from the rafters, swooped in low over the viscous slime, and slammed me against the concrete wall. Griffin-like talons popped wide and seized my reflexively-raised forelegs. Baleful green eyes stared into my red ones as her razor-sharp wings spread wide above me. She screamed in a mad cry that matched the machine scream I'd heard in the depths twice before, "GIVE IT TO ME!" The green glow of the Core illuminated her maw.

Fortunately, I was a unicorn. S.A.T.S., four magic bullets to the head. Four point blank blasts rammed into her and ripped her synthetic, dark gray hexagon-patterned hide to expose the wire-like muscles beneath it. I'd hoped that, if I had to kill her, it would be quick and clean. Weird fluid, hydraulic or coolant, sprayed my face as she reared back. The left side of her face was a tattered and torn nightmare. Her metal talons ripped lines in my armored forelegs as her wings slashed wildly, gouging a two inch deep slash in the concrete right beside my head.

She landed, covering her ripped face with a hoof; no matter how much of her body was machine, she'd been a mare once. I knew what it was like to have half your face torn off. Still, no time to let up. I raised the carbine and fired as fast as my horn could pull the trigger, at the same time dropping back to all four hooves. Her bladed wings snapped up, the bullets sparking as they deflected off the metallic vanes.

When she started to move, I threw myself aside, rolling in the muck as she flashed through the air and slashed where I'd been standing an instant before. The razor edges of her wings caught the carbine trailing behind me, tearing it out of my grip and slicing through the barrel, then tore through the concrete wall and flung out chunks of debris. I slammed a magazine of shock rounds into Vigilance as I rolled up to my hooves, the dark fluid covering the floor dripping off me as I crouched and fired. Letting out an inequine cry, she launched herself back into the air, avoiding my next shots as I tried to follow her.

Damn it, I needed light. The wan glow of the terminal and her eyes simply wasn't bright enough!

I could hear the whoosh of her wings as she powered through out of sight above me, and I kept moving, following the edge of the room. I tried to pick her red bar out from the others; it certainly had to be the one moving the most. Still, it was difficult to-- I felt a little pink pony and tiny blue Glory thump my brain and sent me diving forward as Dawn divebombed where I'd been standing just moment before. Green energy crackled as the muck fountained around her. I twisted, flailing as I brought up Vigilance and used S.A.T.S. to plant a single electrical shot in her tattered face. The blessedly blue blast made her eyes flare.

"Stop!" Dawn shrieked as she gave a little hop, and I half scrambled, half backstroked away from her as her wings tore into where I'd come to rest. "Shooting!" she snapped as I continued flailing in the general direction of away as she pounced again. "My!" I turned, kicked off of the wall, and slid across the floor as she leapt once more. "Face!"

I came to a rest under one of the metal tables, rolled onto my side, and shot her once again with another glowing blue bullet, the shining blue mixing spectacularly with arcing green. A clean hit to her chest this time, but she didn't seem to care at all; she jumped up onto one of the tables. *Don't stop moving* was all I could think as I used the legs of the tables to pull myself out of the way as her wings swept out and ripped right through the steel. Floating out Duty and Sacrifice, I blasted up wildly. I wasn't sure if the heavy rounds would penetrate the tabletop -- heck, I wasn't even sure where I was aiming -- but it'd be better than nothing.

I suddenly ran out of table, kicking off of the last legs to slide out and using my fully recharged S.A.T.S. to ram a barrage of eight rounds into her armored torso. The heavy dueling pistols punched deep into her mechanical chest, and more of that dark fluid leaked from her body as she fell back. "Mistress!" she cried out as I came to rest, reclining in the coppery ooze.

Suddenly there was an electric crackle and buzz as, one by one, the rows of lights came to life.

Dawn flew back, landing on the far side as power was restored to the room.

And to the silver rings.

They were everywhere. They dangled from partly constructed cases. They were hanging on dozens of racks overhead, wired up for testing. And as the equipment glowed to life, the Enervation scream suddenly became much clearer and distinct. That counterpoint inside me wasn't enough to keep it at bay. As I lay there, I felt something inside me spasm. A burst of sour blood poured out of my mouth as I felt the scream grow.

"Weakness of flesh..." Dawn replied as I rose to my hooves... and realized I stood in a field of gore. Red fluid, not water but the liquefied remains of the ponies who had sheltered here, coated me. They'd come into this solid, reinforced room expecting shelter from bombs and bullets. With the death of the bombs falling, the rings' Enervation fields had spiked and transformed them into this oasis of gore. They'd never rot. They could only liquefy.

"Fucking Hoofington!" I screamed as I scrambled to my feet and blasted at her with my pistol and revolvers. Now Dawn was the one flying for cover as I staggered, fighting against the starmetal rings that threatened to liquefy me. I stomped after her, not sure what was my blood and what was the blood of all those unfairly slain as I fired again and again.

Then a purple mare smacked me hard upside the head. I needed to get out and get to my friends. If I killed Dawn and was liquefied anyway... There were other doors, larger powered doors likely for moving inventory to and from the warehouse. I raced to the access, firing behind me at random as I slammed a hoof against the 'up' button.

Two talons grabbed my shoulders as the door slowly ground up, and Dawn slammed me against the wall. "Oh no. You're not leaving now. You've kept the Goddess Cognitum waiting long enough!"

I didn't talk. I pressed all three of my guns to her steel body with my magic and pulled the triggers. Three explosions sounded around me as she screamed and slammed my face into the wall. Focus. Endure. If a little white pony inside me could handle her soul being ripped to pieces, I could handle a little pain. Sparks shot down my horn as it was rammed into the concrete wall again, but I fought every instant to keep it together and pull the triggers again.

She shoved, but I was stronger. A little orange mare gave a whoop in my mind. I pushed hard off the wall and rammed her spine into the table behind us. Her talons tore free of my shoulders as I twisted around to face her. "I! Am! Sick! Of! Goddesses!" I roared as I reared and slammed my hooves into her over and over again. Every impact rammed her further and further into the twisted table. Her razor wings shredded the metal as I slammed her back. The bloody wings became tangled in the metal. Her body was rent and wrecked, dripping machine fluids into the gore. I pushed the guns to her head as I stared into her glowing eyes...

And saw myself...

I was a mix of machine and meat. She was a synthesis of synthetics and steel. Both of us wanted the Wasteland saved. Both of us had ponies we'd loved. We'd suffered. We'd fought. We'd killed. Two sides of the same coin. Were it not for my friends, what would have stopped me from becoming just like her? She was mad, corrupted... violated... my enemy... a pony who nopony, not even

her daughter, would blame me for killing.

Be kind, a tiny yellow pony inside me begged.

Fierce red eyes stared into blazing green for a minute longer, and then I pulled away as she shrieked in rage and frustration. My magic hit the 'down' button on the door as I passed out into the warehouse. The door dropped behind me as I staggered away from the room. Razor wings ripped into the door as I staggered for the exit. I saw Deus, Lacunae, and Boo on the hillside above me. Rampage, her body falling apart and regenerating even as mine was, came beside me and helped me out of the Enervation field. We collapsed together before the massive machine.

"Triage... is going to be... disappointed..." I muttered as I struggled to regenerate my injuries. Despite it all, I smiled. I hadn't killed her, and that might come to bite me in the ass later... but lying there in the Hoofington rain, the blood being washed from me... I suspected that Twilight and her friends would say I'd won. Heh... I could have hopped on my broadcaster and... wait...

I sat up with a groan, staring straight ahead. My broadcaster! Why hadn't I thought of it while I was inside? I could have told everypony about--

The Goddess's smugness enveloped me, and I imagined a condescending pat on my head. Of course, we were going away now. And she wasn't going to let me go back into the Enervation field now that she'd let me think of that. Oooh...

'I hate you...' I thought viciously at the consciousness in the back of my mind.

'Lesser beings usually do,' she replied grandly. I muttered to myself as we returned.

* * *

"I certainly hope that your expedition was fruitful," King Awesome murmured over a cup of tea when I returned. I hadn't yet met up with P-21 to decide what had to be done; presumably, he was somewhere out discovering the inequities of the Society. If he was in trouble, it would simplify matters considerably.

"I met Dawn," I said as I looked into my cup of boiled weeds, having no interest whatsoever in drinking it. He sipped delicately from his glowing cup. "She's a robot now. And crazy." He set the cup back on the saucer. "I didn't kill her," I added as he stared at me with his deep blue eye. "I think I could have, but I didn't."

"I see..." he replied calmly. "Might I ask why?"

"Kindness," I replied lamely, gazing back into my cup. I set it down on the table. "I looked into her and saw myself. Just as stubborn. Just as committed. Just as monstrous and..." I'd be going to say 'manipulated', but one of the Goddess's chains yanked tight and stopped me. "Should I have killed her? Would it have been kinder to just finish her off?"

"You say you saw yourself?" King Awesome asked politely. I nodded and he asked, "Would you want to be spared, or slain in her position?"

"I'd..." I closed my mouth. Pushing past my nasty self-destruction habit, would I want to be saved

or destroyed? The idea of simply being done, of my life ending, was terrifyingly seductive. And if I'd been answering a few weeks ago, I'd have happily suggested it. But now... now I hoped that I was a better pony. Somewhat. "I'd want my friends to save me," I admitted softly.

"Then you made the right choice," King Awesome said tiredly. "If you can be true to your own ethics, you can be a better pony."

"What about raiders and slavers?" I asked archly.

"The former have no ethics, just survival of the fittest. The latter is the application of economic acumen to the former." He gestured to the marbled walls. "When my friends and I came to the Hoof, we found dozens of different tribes of raiders. Varying kinds of scum who'd carved out their own little niches. Kill one band, and another would pop up. With the exception of Meatlocker, there weren't real settlements. But when we encountered the ponies living here in Elysium Gardens, I knew that they could be more. Because they *wanted* to be more. They pretended and imagined that they were descended from blue-blooded aristocracy. Doubtless a hoofful were, but most were of no different stock than raiders you'd find anywhere else."

"So what changed?" I asked with a frown.

"Ethics." He took a sip of his tea and then looked at me. "They had pretenses of grandeur. I used those pretenses as an excuse to improve their behavior. By getting them to adopt ethics, the idea that they had to hold themselves to a better standard, I was able to curb the backstabbing inclinations they possessed. You ask about the difference between serfs and slaves? Well, one is that I stressed that the serf was to be protected. Slaves were disposable, both in labor and in war; just go out and take more to replace any losses. Instead, the idea became that serfs were lesser ponies requiring the Society's help."

"How is that more ethical? You're saying that you're better than the serfs!" I retorted.

"As opposed to raiders who merely kill whomever they wish?" He shrugged. "I never said it was perfect. But Equestria, in ancient times, used a form of serfdom that created the aristocracy of Canterlot. Eventually we grew out of it, and the aristocracy became a superfluous holdover from older days. Eventually, the Society will follow the same path." He looked at me evenly. "That is why I agreed to meet with you, Blackjack. Too many would see what we've done and dismiss it as simple slavery. It's not. It may not be much better, but it is better and will become much better still. I hope that you can recognize what my friends could not." A shadow of tired sadness crossed his face.

"They didn't understand?" I guessed.

He shook his head. "To them, I was just another slaver. Worse, a sellout. The Society fed thousands with our plantations, and that increased the demand for slaves." He rubbed his brow with a hoof. "Big Daddy, with his gang of thugs. Crunchy with her weapons. Keeper with his bottlecaps. Zodiac with her books. All of us certain that we knew the best way to fix everything."

"And Dawn, looking for her one solution," I murmured.

"So you *do* understand her," he chuckled. "Yes. She was always so certain that if we just found or did that one magical thing, everything would be better. The Enclave. Or the Core. Or something." He

sighed and shook his head again. "Well, she was the youngest of us."

"She's a lot like me..." I murmured, dropping my eyes. He studied me for a long moment, then smiled.

"She is. But you're a bit more. After all, you still have your friends." He sighed again and leaned back in the wheelchair. "Excuse me, Blackjack. But I'm feeling very tired again. Perhaps we can continue this later?"

"Sure," I said as I rose to my hooves and slipped out of his room of pre-war curiosities. As he began to softly doze, I closed the door quietly behind me.

"Blackjack!" Grace shouted down the hall as she stormed up in a furious huff. Two power-armored ponies followed, another unicorn behind levitating a fifth pony. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Huh?" I said as I sat down on the floor.

She waved her hoof at the two armored ponies. Slowly, they moved aside to reveal that the levitated pony was a battered P-21, his hooves tied and his mouth gagged. "You sent this pony to spy on us! We caught him in the plantations, interfering with an overseer." I felt a dangerous calm overtake me as I began to think about how best to neutralize the two former Rangers.

"Of course I did," I replied calmly. "And I want him back, and healed," I added firmly.

"Don't bother trying to deny--" Grace began, then blinked at me absently. "You... I... I see..." She pondered a moment, then turned to the unicorn levitating P-21. "Don't just stand there. Let him down, untie him, and get him healed at once." The pink unicorn mare blinked in shock, and then bowed her head and began to remove P-21's bonds. Grace took a deep breath and turned to face me once more. "Okay... why...?"

"I wanted to see how you really are. How you treat your serfs, and if I needed to do something about it," I replied evenly, relaxing a bit as P-21 was freed.

"Do you know what you've done?" Grace said as she started to pace back and forth. "Half the society believes that you came here intending to do that in the first place! Now they'll think you sent your stallion here to make contact with the serfs to foment rebellion."

"He was molesting her," P-21 spat with venom as he glared at Grace. The pink-maned unicorn cast a spell, mending some of his contusions, but he pushed her away and snarled at the white aristocrat. "That was why I stomped his head in!"

Grace flushed. "I heard it was consensual, not forced..." Grace muttered.

"Consensual! When you control every part of a pony's life, where *precisely* does consent come into it?" he spat at her, making her back up as he trotted over to me.

Grace turned even redder before she looked me boldly in the eye. "If that's the case, he'll be stripped of his authority. But understand that things are very tense right now, Blackjack. Every member of the society has armed themselves, and they're bringing in more bodyguards for your inevitable coup.

There are suggestions that we should take hostages. Invite the Harbingers to deal with you. Poison you. Make some other attack before you act. I beg you to please consider this! I'm trying to keep everypony from getting killed!"

She looked on the verge of tears in her frustration. I sighed. "I don't want anypony to die either. Please believe that and pass that on. But I also can't do nothing."

Grace sighed and slumped. "I see." She then straightened and said sharply, "You understand that every minute I try to convince others not to act, I put my own wellbeing on the line. Try to conduct yourself more discreetly." She then turned and nodded for the trio to follow her back the way they'd come.

* * *

We all found a safe little corner on the roof where nopony could overhear us. Lacunae wasn't able to summon her shield spell to protect us from the rain due to her treatment by the Goddess... Worse, I couldn't explain why to the others. I couldn't even show my frustration! However, though it took me a dozen tries, I was finally able to get the umbrella-like rain shield spell from Twilight's book to go off and protect us from the drizzle... mostly. Well, wet manes were still better than being completely soaked through by the roaring downpour.

"So... what did you find?" I asked P-21, trying to copy Mom's 'no exaggerating' look.

He took a deep breath and let it all out in a huff. "It's not good. Not as bad as Fallen Arch, but still pretty bad." He pushed his hat back. "There's probably two or three hundred serfs. They're fed decently enough, I suppose... better than out in the Wasteland. But there's no doubt that they're getting the short end of the stick here. They can't leave, have no say in the work they do, and if they refuse to work then the overseers can whip them, lock them up in steel crates, starve them... anything to get them to do their job."

"How long do they work?" Glory asked with a small frown.

"More than half the day. They get a small break for meals and sleep. Then it's back to work." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Once a week they get a break. That's when most of the maintenance is done down in the plantations."

"Seems pretty civilized for the surface," Glory replied. "It's not really all that different from sky farm settlements in the Enclave. Not a pleasant life, but safe."

"Oh yeah? Do your supervisors force workers to fuck them?" P-21 asked as he rounded on her.

"Some do, yes. And when they're caught, they're punished," Glory answered him plainly. "Is that the case here?"

P-21 sighed and looked away. "That's not the point. Most of them do it, no matter what the rules say."

"Are the overseers nobles or serfs?" Glory asked.

"What does that have to do with anything?" P-21 countered.

"My point is that you seem utterly determined to condemn this place because of your own personal experience. I understand why," Glory said evenly as she gestured towards the golf courses and the shacks spread out across them. "But I look at what these ponies are doing, and while I think it's not perfect, it's absolutely a step in the right direction."

"They work until they're dead. Colts and fillies prepare food. Old ponies do what little chores are left over. How is that a step in the right direction?" P-21 growled.

"They're not killing and they're not getting killed. That seems like an improvement to me," Glory said before looking at me. "I had a very long and very interesting talk with Prince Splendid while you were out. It seems that he is of the opinion that the Society can do more, far more, for the Wasteland. Right now, a great deal of their wealth is being squandered on pointless celebrations. Like this 'Grand Gallumping Gala' or whatever it's called. He thinks that, with a little effort, the Society could expand as they did in the Fluttershy Medical Center. Provide security and safety to the Hoof."

"On the backs of slaves!" P-21 snapped.

"Serfs. I think the distinction is quite clear," Glory countered. "And I think that a Society that is actually working to stop real killers and raiders is doing far more good."

"Well, I'm with blue boy," Rampage replied, then grinned. "Not because I care about the serfs or slaves or whatever. The Society are a bunch of asses. I want to kill them on general principle. So freeing the slaves or serfs... eh..." she gave a little shrug. "Whatever. Most of them are probably fucks anyway."

"Thank you for the barbarian perspective," Glory replied primly.

"Oh, trust me. It gets better." Rampage grinned. "I have it on good authority that if we put the right ponies in charge, we will make a fortune. Caps. Weapons. And, not that it matters to me, but memory orbs about a certain 'Project Horizons'? Thought you might like that."

I felt an electric jolt pass through me. "What?"

"Yeah. Apparently the Ministry of Morale had a field day with a guy named 'Goldenblood' and yanked out all kinds of cool memories. They're yours if you're interested," Rampage said with a little shrug.

Scotch Tape scowled thoughtfully. "Is there any way we can do all three? Like... make things better for the worker ponies, help the Wasteland, and get the memory orbs?"

"Kid, you pull that off and I'm nominating you to be in charge," Rampage replied. She then looked at me. "So, what's your call?"

I had *no* idea. In fact, I was started to feel a little panicked. It was like Mom throwing a pop quiz at me! "I... don't know. I just came here for an airship! I didn't..." I stammered as I stared at P-21, then at Glory, then at the others. "Why is everypony looking at me to decide this? Remember Flank and 99?"

"I also remember Riverside and what you created there," Glory replied with a small smile.

"And you helped in Chapel," Scotch Tape added immediately.

Rampage shrugged. "While it was pretty decent already, you didn't do Meatlocker any harm either."

I sat back hard, looking from P-21 to Glory and back again. I had no idea which would be the better choice. P-21 had a valid point, but then, so did Glory. Maybe Rampage was right and I should simply take what I could get and leave somepony else to pick up the pieces? "Can we... um... can we see which option shoots at me first? That's usually how I determine if something is good or bad." Glory and P-21 groaned almost in unison. "What! It's a perfectly fair indication!"

"You could choose none of the above?" Scotch Tape offered.

P-21 shook his head. "Blackjack won't do that."

"Of course not. She's going to help protect the Wasteland," Glory replied firmly.

"No, she's going to help the serfs!" P-21 snapped back.

"Serving the Wasteland is much more practical and the greater good!" Glory retorted, not backing down.

"Why you stuck-up little Enclave..." P-21 began. I felt the sense of panic rising inside me, seeing my friends fight like this. I really didn't know which one I should support. They were both right!

Rampage let out a scornful, "Oh, will you two just shut up and fuck already? I'm sure Blackjack would love that too!"

Glory and P-21 gaped at each other, at her, and then at me all in perfect unison. "With her?!" blurted P-21 as Glory gave a scandalized, "With him?!" They concluded with a simultaneously disgusted, "Gross!" The utter similarities between the two had me burst into laughter, and I reached out, grabbed them both in a headlock, and pulled them into a huge hug.

"I love you guys," I said, laughing and crying at the same time. I was sure P-21 would angrily shake me off and grump and groan, but to my surprise, I felt the tension in his muscles draining as I held him close. Scotch Tape and Boo, not wanting to be left out, immediately jumped in as well.

Rampage pouted. "Oh sure... No hugs for..." she started to mutter. Then she stopped in alarm as we all looked at her. "Oh no... no no no... Don't you... ack!" she shouted as all of us, even P-21, piled atop her in a massive heap. The sheer ridiculousness of it all had us all laughing together.

At that moment, perhaps completely by luck or perhaps by a bit of divine providence, I glanced up at Lacunae. The massive purple alicorn watched us all. Her face was not blank or anguished; her expression was of simple, heartfelt happiness. For an instant, I was reminded of that memory orb I'd seen so long ago and the image of Celestia and Luna in that tent. For an instant, I wasn't looking at some freaky mutant lackey of a snide and vicious 'Goddess' but at a true alicorn. One loving and accepting and nurturing of us all.

Finally, the moment passed, and we let the striped mare up. I smiled and wiped my eyes. "Well... in any case... I think that King Awesome has everything in hoof here. I'm not going to do anything until he..."

But my voice trailed off as I saw a strange earth pony approach. Behind him were dozens more ponies trotting up onto the roof. None of them were armed, but all of them looked quite unhappy at the moment. He was a ghoul, which was impressive enough; I hadn't thought that the Society would allow a ghoul in their company. The gray undead stallion had one of the most intricate and stunning manestyles I'd seen on anypony, ghoul or not. A pair of violet glasses completely obscured his eyes as he approached with a velvet wrapped parcel on his back.

"Blackjack, I presume?" he said in a voice just oozing sophistication, despite the undead rasp. He nudged down the glasses enough to look at me with filmy purplish eyes.

I frowned as I slowly approached him. Grace, Splendid, and Charm all struggled to push themselves to the front of the crowd, each wearing expressions of outrage and shock. "Yes?" I asked as he pulled the velvet parcel from his back and started unwrapping it.

"King Awesome has passed away," he said as he revealed a golden crown decorated with diamonds and rubies. I gaped, unable to think as he jammed the crown atop my head. "All hail Queen Blackjack, new leader of the Society! Long live the Queen!"

"Long live the Queen," shouted the crowd, minus the contributions of Splendid, Grace, and Charm. "Long live the Queen!" My friends stared in amazement.

I sat there, my shield dropping in shock and the rain dumping down on me. I said the only words that I could think of at a time like this: "Oh, fuck me..."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: I'd like to apologize to everyone for the long delay in getting this to you. We had to fix up 54 and unfortunately real life has made things difficult. I'd like to thanks Kkat for creating FoE, Hinds and Bro for making it worth reading, and for all the folks who catch all the problems that we miss. I'd also like to thank a lot of folks who helped out by donating this month. Unfortunately, quite a few got lost in my E-mail. Sorry.

Next one will probably be in a month as well. Unfortunately things have gotten way off track and real life is making things difficult. I'll be looking for work as I lost my job (long story. Best to sum it up as being a 'failteacher') and the others have other issues too. I'm still determined to end this as it needs to be ended and to give you all the ending you deserve. I'm sorry if it's slow. I'm hoping things will pick up soon....

Anyway, thanks again for reading, giving feedback, and helping out. I really appreciate it.)

(Note from Hinds: Somber is above using 'failteacher' to mean 'teacher who failed students who neither turned in their work nor showed up to class but who had connections in the school administration'.)

(Re note from Somber: Actually it had to do with my honors class, not their work or attendance.)

(Hinds: Oh, sorry.)

(Bronode, AKA Niphl: Actually, I think I had a fair part to play with the real life stuff. Don't worry, folks, the self-flagellation has already begun in earnest.)

(Additional note: The chapter quote is from First Citizen Lynette in Fallout 2.)