

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 56: Royal Pains

"Stay back! I just had myself groomed!"

"You have got to be fucking kidding me!" I shouted for the third time at the gray ghoul with the magnificent coiffeur. At least this time we were doing it in the privacy of King Awesome's bedchambers. Seeing the body was the first thing I'd demanded. I'd imagined that maybe this was some kind of joke or trick or... something. Seeing him lying in repose on his bed... witnessing the relaxed expression on his face... Damn it! I'd liked the old stallion. He'd been the first pony I'd ever been able to talk to about Goldenblood and the O.I.A. He'd understood me! And now he was gone and I was Queen and... "Tell me you are fucking kidding me," I pleaded.

"Oh please. As if I'd waste my good humor on such tacky comedy," he said in fancy elocution. "The king named you his successor soon after you departed. And shortly before he did."

I levitated the crown off my head and set it in my hooves. "But... why? It doesn't make any sense! We only talked for a few hours and... and... I don't deserve this!" I said as I looked at the ring of shiny, gaudy... tasty-looking... metal in my grasp.

"Of course you don't. Honestly, do you think you were given that because you're suited to rule?" the ghoul said with a disdainful sniff. "King Awesome gave you rulership of the Society to save it from itself." He made a dismissive gesture with his hoof. "A powerful pony was needed. In fact, we sent a representative west a week ago to contact the Stable Dweller and bring her here. And if not her, somepony in Tenpony Tower. Or perhaps the celebrity DJ Pon3, if he could be tempted to mitigate his rantings. Even Red Eye, if none other could be arranged."

Excuse me? I inspected my friends to see if any of them were following this. Universal bafflement. Good. It wasn't just me, then. "I think you better explain in a bit more detail," Glory said, trotting up beside me and hugging me with a blue wing. "It'll help Blackjack get past the 'I don't deserve good things' shock if you tell her how this will bite her in the tail later on." Then she frowned at the ghoul. "I'm sorry, I don't believe I got your name."

"Hoity Toity. Equestria's finest fashion aesthete," he said proudly, clapping his hooves together. A colt scampered out from a corner of the room with a red threadworn pillow and set it down just as Hoity sat. The ghoul glanced at the boy and gave a peremptory wave of his hoof. "This is Epicure, my assistant."

The lime green colt rubbed his darker, pine-green mane. "Actually, my name's--"

"Tut tut! No time for that now," Hoity said impatiently. "I need you to go downstairs and find out what the Oranges think of this recent development. And see if you can find what Charm is saying to the Trotters. Also, find out how Grace is taking this. Oh, and if you can mention to Splendid that Blackjack seems quite composed, that'd work wonderfully."

The colt worked his mouth a moment, as if trying to remember all that, then sighed and nodded. "Yes, sir." He turned and walked for the door, glancing back at the rest of us with clear reluctance before

slipping out. Composed? I wasn't composed! The only things keeping me from hyperventilation were my cyberpony lungs!

"A good lad, for raider stock. Has a talent for finding things out informally. Not as skilled as Paintie was... but I digress." He glanced at me and smirked. "My talents at critique don't end with the latest styles. Before the war, I made it a habit to learn the mercurial tastes of Equestria's elite and made sure my fashion reviews suited their attitude... within reason of course. Then, during the war, I devoted nearly as much time to looking over information for dear Rarity as I did setting the trends for the autumn season. Information gathering is quite complementary to fashion work."

We were talking about his past now? It seemed surreal. Maybe this was all the Goddess messing with my head some more? Or maybe I'd finally snapped? "I can't imagine that was useful after the bombs fell," Rampage said with a wicked little snicker.

"On the contrary! My discerning eye made acquiring the best goods far easier," he said with a gesture of wounded pride. "Perhaps we should abscond to somewhere... else," he said with a look over at the sheet covered body. "I can give you the history of this place."

I didn't respond; it was better than nothing, so I nodded. We stepped out and proceeded through the grand structure. Mostly grand. It was clear that entropy was nibbling at the faded velvet curtains and the patches of threadbare carpet. They'd done their best to hide the wear, but even the Society wasn't immune to reality. They just lived outside it.

As Hoity walked, servants and society ponies made way, bowing deeply to me, then whispering as soon as we passed. The ghoul ignored them, saying in grand tones, "The original Society were those stallions and mares who escaped the plebeian slaughter at Blueblood Manor. We'd invested significant resources in the Prince's shelter, only to discover that it apparently didn't exist. And when the riot broke out... well..." he sighed and shook his head. "Fifty of us crowded onto the *Fleur* when the bombs fell. So overloaded and with the world collapsing around us, we found ourselves at a loss. Fortunately, the Elysium Gardens was not a priority target for balefire bombs or other attacks, and we put down here. The country club had been exceptionally fortified during the war and had quite an extensive stock of supplies for hundreds of guests. The staff, however, were in utter disarray. Some had fled to rejoin families, while others were simply in shock. The manager had committed suicide in her office. Very disagreeable. So we did what we did best--"

"Started bossing people around?" P-21 asked with a frown.

"Of course," Hoity said without a bit of shame. "Fancy Pants became our leader. We provided order when there was none. The waitstaff and servants who remained were very pleased to have us put things in some semblance of civilization. It was anticipated that we'd have to wait a few months for things to be set right. Maybe even a year." He sighed. "Quite ironic, in hindsight."

"So what happened?" Scotch Tape asked, the filly eager for the rest of the story. We travelled down a staircase, into halls where there was much hustle and bustle in preparation for the Gala tonight. Even a royal death couldn't stop that party.

"Well, we anticipated that the skies would clear and the pegasi would help us rebuild. In fact, we were counting on it." He glanced at Glory, who ducked her rainbow-maned head and looked at her hooves. Now I was the one hugging her as Hoity Toity went on. "When that didn't happen, despair set in. If it hadn't been for Fancy Pants, we'd have been undone in the first year. When the radioactive snow

cleared, we used the conservatory here to grow marginal crops while sending parties to find supplies around the Hoof. Things were... easier then. The savagery that you are so familiar with took time to evolve. Even so, though we managed our assets with care, when others came demanding we share them... well, violence was inevitable. But worse, there were elements within that thought they could do better. Fancy Pants was assassinated in his sleep by one of our own."

Hoity sighed, shaking his head at the memory. "Eventually, things decayed. Oh, there were still order and rules that made the Society the strongest group in the region, but the manners and principle were lost. Some even turned to... egghhh..." He trembled, lip curling in disgust. "...cannibalism. Not from necessity, but by choice. At that point, I had become the wretched creature you see before you and relocated to Hoofington Memorial Hospital. It wasn't until King Awesome assumed control of the Society, slew the most savage elements, and imposed expectations of dignity and respectability that I returned and assisted him. It's been two generations since then, but there are still some elements that cling to... uncivilized ways."

Maybe it was the cannibalism comment that snapped me out of my daze, or possibly it was that we finally arrived in the immense ballroom that served as the throne room. A huge, ugly, gilded chair sat on a dais at the far side of the room. My seat, for the moment. "You talked for five minutes and still haven't explained why giving me a crown keeps all of you alive," I said crossly. "If there's this much plotting going on here, maybe it'd better to just wipe you all out after all. Given half of what I've heard you've done, it'd be no less than you deserve."

"Oooh!" Rampage grinned broadly at me. "Is that on the table? Tell me it's still on the table. I will sex you right now if we can smash them all into jelly!" Hoity looked a little nervous as he pulled out a lacy white fan and began waving it briskly before his face.

Glory sniffed disdainfully at Rampage's glee. "Oh, don't be ridiculous. Blackjack wasn't serious. Were you, Blackjack?" she said with a smile in my direction. When I looked back blankly, she frowned and amended, "About wiping them out?"

I blinked, flushed, and quickly added, "No. Of course not," then turned from her and muttered under my breath, "Mostly."

Rampage let out a feigned sneeze that sounded a lot like, "Whipped!"

"Only if she behaves," Glory replied with a smile at me that made me wish the floor would swallow me up... why was this happening now? Why at all? Damn it! All I'd wanted was to borrow an airship!

Hoity stared at all the rest of us, fan frozen and jaw dropped. "Nevermind them," P-21 said brusquely with a wave of his hoof. "You were telling us why Blackjack was chosen?"

The ghoul blinked his filmy eyes and seemed to get back on track. "Mmm yes. Well, you see, there was no lack of plots and schemes for when King Awesome passed. Some of the guards were receiving almost triple their pay in assorted bribes to act or not act when it happened. I'm fairly sure it would have come down between Charm and one of the lesser aristoponies, provided the serfs didn't revolt and try for a mass overthrow."

Then he snapped the fan closed and pointed it at me. "But there were no plans in place for you being given the throne."

"But... I... he..." I stammered, then tossed the crown as hard as I could at the ground. It pinged, bounced off the floor, flipped end over end, and landed neatly on Boo's head. "He used me!" The blank mare made a better queen than I did!

Hoity sighed and shook his head. "Oh please. On a scale from one to ten for being used, this barely rates a three. Three point five, tops." I shot the ghoul a murderous glare, and he snapped his fan open once more, turning away with a cough. "I understand if it is upsetting, but if you think it through, I think you'll see things aren't so bad."

"Go on," I growled.

He took a slow, deep breath. "No pony planned for you to take over like this. Oh, there were contingencies for if you *forced* your way into power. That would have made the elements unite momentarily against you. But openly being given it? Never. So at the moment, a dozen or more conspirators are rearranging their plots and schemes to put themselves into power. Bribes have gone for naught. Weapons intended against guards are suddenly inadequate to face you and your friends. Even the serfs, who've been rumbling for years, have gone silent, waiting to see what will happen next."

"But that's hardly a long-term solution. It just paints an enormous target on Blackjack's head!" Glory protested crossly.

I sighed, rolling my eyes a little. "It's okay. I'm used to it." Maybe I was the best candidate after all...

"If she had any interest in actually staying put and ruling, certainly," Hoity said with a casual wave of his fan before leaning towards me. "You aren't really planning on giving up your quest, or search, or whatever for this, are you?"

"Of course not!" I retorted. Not like the Goddess would give me a choice. I could feel her will poking and tugging at my mind.

"So you leave. But before you go off on your merry way, you're going to need to pick somepony to run things here," he said with a sweep of his hoof at the throne room, once a ballroom for the resort.

"How is that any different from them just assuming the throne directly?" Glory asked with a frown.

Hoity sighed, "Because if they kill Blackjack's duly appointed regent, then Blackjack herself will return in a full fury of death and destruction. And out in the Wasteland, Blackjack has proven to be remarkably resilient against attack. Here, one might get lucky and assassinate her, but out there roaming the Hoof? Unlikely."

"So all Blackjack's gotta do is appoint somepony to run things here, and she can go on her way?" Scotch Tape asked.

Hoity sniffed delicately, "A succinct appraisal."

"Good! Now you can pick somepony who can make things better for the serfs here," P-21 said with the first real smile I'd seen since we'd arrived.

It was short-lived as Glory countered, "Now wait a minute, P-21. The serfs already live much better lives than almost everypony in the Hoof. Think of the good the Society can do for the entire

region!"

Rampage snorted and rolled her eyes. "Please. These bastards couldn't do good with a gun to their head. Just take whatever you need and move on. This place isn't worth your time."

I felt the Goddess pressing on my skull. Unicorns. I should use the Society to send unicorns to Maripony! An alliance with the Goddess! It'd facilitate her creations of new male alicorn stock once LittlePip arrived with the book.

I staggered and swung my head back and forth as Glory said sharply, "Blackjack, tell him that it's better to help the many rather than a few who are already better off!"

"I... but..." I tried to think.

"Blackjack, you promised!" P-21 snapped, his eyes hardening. "Or is this part of the plan?"

"No. I..." If everypony could be quiet a second and let me put two thoughts together.

"These people, with a little reform and effort, have the ability to help more ponies in the Wasteland than any! If you'd stop being so overemotional and apply a little reason, you'd see that!" Glory said in exasperation.

P-21 huffed, his eyes narrowing to very shooty slits. "Oh. So I'm being hysterical, huh? You sound just like the ponies in medical! I'm just a hysterical male, is that it?" P-21 snarled at her.

"Come on, Blackjack. They have a frigging menagerie!" Rampage snorted.

"Oh, we closed that gaudy thing down years and years ago," Hoity countered.

"Okay, fine. Had. We should still stomp them into jelly. I know Big Daddy would approve. Hey! Make him regent!" Rampage crowed eagerly.

"Certainly not. Only a Society pony would do!" Hoity retorted. Rampage began to grin murderously at the ghoul.

"You're not thinking straight because of 99!" Glory yelled in P-21's face. P-21 looked ready to tackle her! And I couldn't think of way to stop them; they didn't recover from bullets to the brain, after all. I was witnessing my friends tearing themselves apart before my eyes.

"Hey! You don't get to bring up 99! You don't know what they did to my daddy!" Scotch Tape snapped. "I think he's right!" P-21 blinked and looked in surprise. Still, while Scotch had dissipated a little of his anger with her support, I could see he was one dismissive remark from exploding.

I wanted to shake, but my synthetic body wouldn't! I wanted to breathe hard, but my body couldn't. All I could do was twist up tighter and tighter within myself. I trotted away from the others. "Quiet," I ordered. They didn't notice as they continued to shout and jabber louder and louder. The Goddess was a thudding headache bashing at my brain. I grit my teeth as I stared at the throne at the far side of the ballroom, a Goddesses-awful eyesore of gilt metal. I didn't know if it was the Goddess or my own frustration and anger. "Everypony! Shut! Up!" I screamed at the top of my lungs.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked from behind me.

"I beg your pardon?" Hoity blustered.

"Look, if you want me to start killing we can work alphabetically..." Rampage began, reasonably.

I whirled on all of them, feeling a rage building up inside me. "Leave!" I felt the surge building more and more inside my horn. "Me!" I roared at all of them. "Alone!" I wanted to be somewhere else! Anywhere else!

And then the world disappeared in a lavender burst of light.

* * *

I crashed to the floor in Awesome's collection, smashing a table and scattering leaflets everywhere. The shock of the spell had momentarily silenced the Goddess's endless pushing and prodding. Lying there in the middle of the room of the stallion I'd shared tea with just hours ago, I clenched my eyes shut. Why me? Why leave it to me?

Was it all a scam? Maybe this was something Hoity was pulling. Or Cognitum. Or Dawn. Or... or some other higher scheme that put me right in the place I didn't want to be: in the middle of a moral mess. Or maybe this had been Awesome's desperate throw to try and preserve something not worth saving. It didn't have to be me. It could have been anypony powerful enough to hold the title but without reason or interest in actually ruling; I just happened to come along at the right time and be liked by him.

But that wasn't why this hurt so bad. I'd liked Awesome. I would have liked to have talked to him about the serfs. Find out how the Society could have done better. Speculated on Goldenblood. For a little moment, it had felt like I'd had a family again. Only this time, instead of being silenced by Looks and imperious parental tones, I could have shared my thoughts with him.

And he'd *used* me. He'd brought me into this room and showed me understanding and empathy and then he'd died and dumped his solution on my shoulders. He hadn't asked. He hadn't even told me. He simply made his plans with Hoity Toity and then kicked off to leave this mess in my hooves. And most galling of all: it would probably work. I wasn't going to wipe out the Society, no matter how much P-21 or Rampage wanted me to. And I wasn't going to stay here to rule, either; I was terrified of the responsibility of simply picking a regent. But I was also too responsible now to simply walk away.

Goddesses... for once I actually wanted the Goddess to take me over and end this complicated joke that was my life. Then the urge to send unicorn peace envoys to the Goddess slammed into me like a ton of bricks. I even started crawling to the door to give the order.

Suddenly a horn dipped down from above and touched mine, and the impulse abated immediately. I slowly turned my head, looking up at Lacunae. For a moment, I was simply Blackjack again. "Lacunae?" I asked as I looked up into the sad eyes of the alicorn, then looked around for memory orbs. "Keep back. I'm not ready to join the Goddess yet!"

"I know you're not," she murmured softly. "I'm sorry, Blackjack. She wants you soon. She wants you in Unity, and it's all my fault."

"It's not your fault, Lacunae. It's the Goddess. If you wronged me, it was her doing. Not yours," I

said as I looked away. The shelves full of memory orbs were empty. Also gone were some of the papers and articles that had been on the desk. Only minor artifacts remained, curiosities that wouldn't have told me things about Horizons. I'd wanted to look at the memories with Awesome, talk about what we saw within.

"It is my fault, Blackjack. It is all my fault, and before you or I are too far gone under her control, I have to ask for something I have no right to. Your trust," Lacunae asked as she closed her eyes. "Before I'm too far gone, I want... I need to show you something."

"Too far gone?" I asked in worry.

"The Goddess is readying herself. Anything that could undermine her... doubt... compassion... kindness... is being purged into me. I feel as though... like I'm an over-pressurized container. That I might explode. That all the swirling feelings and memories inside me are condensing into something volatile. But this time may be our only chance for me to show you this before the Goddess refocuses on controlling you," Lacunae said, her body shuddering. "Please. I need to show you."

"How do I know this isn't some kind of trick?" I asked with a scowl. It was true; at the moment I couldn't feel the Goddess scratching at my brain. Her attention was elsewhere... or was it? This could be some kind of trick. Like Awesome and... and...

What was the matter with me? Had I finally hardened to the point that I couldn't trust my friend? I looked up into her desperate, purple eyes. "Please, trust me," she pleaded. I stared into hers and finally closed mine.

"All right. I just hope it's quick, before the Goddess makes me crown her as regent," I said as I looked back at her.

Lacunae pressed her horn to mine, and the world swirled away.

~ ~ ~

Well, this was new. I stared at the dark, riot-armored mare as she walked through a blackened strand of forest. The charred trunks still hissed steam, despite the green snow lying around them. I hovered as translucent as a ghost behind her. Across from me stood the spectral Lacunae. "So is there a reason I'm not experiencing this first-person?" I asked as I watched the black-armored mare trudge through the forest towards a ridge far above.

"This is not within you. It is a memory within me," Lacunae whispered.

"Something the Goddess crammed into you?" I replied. She didn't answer, though. Instead, she bowed her head as we floated after Psalm. I could trot... well, float... around her but if I tried to move away I was swiftly dragged back. "Where the hell is she going?" I asked as I watched the mare trudge to the top. I could hear her PipBuck ticking like crazy. The rads had to be through the roof here. "Lacunae, what is going on?" I asked in concern. I saw tiny spectral motes floating into Lacunae.

Then Psalm crested the ridge and stopped at the lip of the valley, and I saw it: a massive, hulking block of a building beside a luminescent hole full of chaotic, flickering light. Glowing fissures radiated out of it, and a malevolent polychromatic glare filled the valley beyond. Things... glowing, protoplasmic things... crept along those deep ravines. Scattered amongst them was a patchwork of sundered

foundations, the outbuildings of the base itself ripped to shreds. From the buckling in the roads, it looked as if the entire area had been shaken like a bedsheet and left rumpled.

The structure itself appeared to be a hulking industrial building reinforced with thick steel beams and concrete walls to withstand almost anything the enemy could throw at it... almost anything. Not even the enchantments of the M.A.S. had spared it from colossal devastation. The building was intact, but the ground around it had partially collapsed and left almost a full third of it hanging out over the sinkhole, the gargantuan structure still in one piece only due to ridiculous Equestrian overengineering. Along the side facing the ridge, in scorched purple letters, was the word 'Maripony'. The name Twilight had given Big Macintosh in a blurt of panic...

"What the hell is she doing here, Lacunae?" I asked, staring at the devastation around us as she moved through the ruins, avoiding the malevolent glow by ducking through the blasted foundations and skirting along the rumpled terrain. She never stopped, and I couldn't blame her. Either that suit had some superb radiation shielding or she was triple-dosed on Rad-X, or both. She didn't even slow when she levitated out packets of RadAway, draining them as she moved. I could see the glowing malformed moving things. Some had the vaguest canine appearance. Others were bloated ponyish shapes that wandered mindlessly.

"This was Twilight's last reported location. She's come here to kill her," Lacunae replied softly.

I gaped at the transparent alicorn. "But... but Partypooper was a lie! Garnet set it off. She admitted it!" I spluttered as Psalm moved to a delivery dock. The twisted, broken hulks of skywagons lay fused in a heap like some perverse sculpture.

"Serve Luna and you will be forgiven," Lacunae whispered. Psalm checked the dock's door into the building, but it was locked.

I expected bobby pins but was in error as I watched Psalm apply a wad of plastic explosives to the lock and move aside. "But Luna is dead!" The blast echoed across the eerily howling valley. "This is insane!"

"It doesn't matter. Serve Luna and she will save you. The order was to execute the Ministry Mares and other compromised members of Equestrian command," Lacunae replied hollowly as Psalm went inside and we were dragged through the wall after her. Once inside, the radiation dropped to slow ticks. A rate that would kill in days rather than minutes. Her horn flickered, and one by one the clasps of the respirator were detached from the helmet.

What lay beneath more resembled a ghoul than a pony. Only a few tattered wisps of white mane remained, and her black hide was pale and riddled with sores. Bloodshot eyes stared wearily out as she tried to levitate another packet of RadAway to her mouth, clutched her stomach, and vomited a slurry of red and orange. Again and again her body hunched over as she retched but brought up nothing. She collapsed on her side before the foul pool, sucking in gulps of air and coughing wretchedly.

"She came here to die," I whispered softly.

"No. It was in service to Luna," Lacunae insisted. "To serve was to earn forgiveness for sins."

"How? How does this earn forgiveness?" I asked as I gestured at Psalm with outstretched forehooves as the black unicorn pulled herself to her hooves. One up, she steadied herself, then

proceeded to move through the balefire-gutted structure.

"You know," Lacunae answered solemnly.

I watched the exhausted mare move onward, dying but devoted to action. Every now and then, the memory around me blurred as she struggled to maintain consciousness. I saw myself racing on, exhausted and terrified of sleep, till I finally had arrived at Yellow River. Till I had crippled an innocent filly after nearly crushing Dusk's head. Of course Psalm wasn't looking to die. No more than I was being self-destructive while swearing to never attempt to commit suicide again. It was a delusion I knew only too well.

"Did Twilight even survive the bomb?" I asked as Psalm moved deeper into the structure. Here, there wasn't as much char. The bodies were intact, mostly soldier ponies with nowhere to flee. "I mean... she's in Unity." I lowered my eyes. "Sorry. Stupid question."

Suddenly, Psalm entered a corridor that wasn't just intact, but lit! The emergency lighting flickered despite the gaps in the wall. From somewhere came a sharp, hysterical screaming. I'd heard screaming like that... the pain... it was the scream of a mare getting her cutie mark burned away. Psalm levitated her sniper rifle, checked the magazine loaded with explosive rounds, and peered down the hall, slowly sweeping the weapon. I remembered its enchantment allowing Psalm to see through solid objects.

She then looked down and froze. The gun clattered to the floor, her bloodshot, yellow eyes wide. "No. It's impossible..." She slowly backed away, the expression of horror growing. "What... what unholiness..."

"What? What is it?" I asked Lacunae, but she didn't answer. So I poked my head through the floor. I was a memory. What could it...

I stared down into an enormous room of vats and glowing blue flesh. There'd once been six of the great open tanks, but two had ruptured and filled the floor with purple and green sludge. Only my experience in Horizon Labs came close to the thing I saw below me. It was nearly impossible to tell where the undulating flesh ended and the metal began. A chaotic storm of blue energy flickered and flashed over the living, magical mass, occasionally coalescing into the shape of a twisted, agonized mare.

I watched in horror as a frantic peach-colored unicorn mare in a tattered white labcoat clung to the railing of the catwalk. A blue tentacle of magic wrapped itself around her torso and pulled. "No! No! Celestia, no!" she screamed, clutching with such desperation that the catwalk started to groan. But the tendrils pulled relentlessly on. The mare's screams took an even higher pitch as her limbs broke and she was wrenched from the walkway and into the blue sludge. She flailed her hooves, but instantly her broken legs took on the consistency of soft wax. The peach hide melted away into the great blue mass. Elsewhere, pieces of flesh were being drawn together: wings, limbs, heads, and horns, forming slowly like budding plants before my eyes. The creation of alicorns, some blue and others green.

Then I was yanked back through the floor because Psalm was running. Though dying from radiation poisoning, Psalm refused to let it stop her. The hallway smeared into a blur as her recollection broke down, but she pulled herself back together and pushed on. She seemed to know the layout of Maripony well enough; I supposed she'd memorized the plans from her time in the O.I.A. She pushed her way into a lab marked 'Experimental Weapon Development', around which were strewn thousands of pieces of junk, talismans, and half-completed weaponry.

She lifted a targeting talisman, went to a terminal, and started typing. Her years in the O.I.A. had clearly involved more training than just shooting things. I watched over her shoulder, then looked over at the ghostly Lacunae, who kept her face averted. With focus that would do P-21 proud, she ignored the blood dripping from her nose and mouth. She connected the talisman to the terminal, linked to the MASEBS network, used an O.I.A. backdoor, password 'Littlehorn' and...

Hoofington Megaspell Command.

"Dear Luna..." I breathed as I watched in horrified fascination. The network informed her that the facility was locked down due to EC-1101, and Psalm gave a frustrated sob, wiping away the blood and sweat from her ashen face.

Then I heard it. The whisper of the Goddess, growing stronger with every passing second. "Come to me. You're dying. Let me save you, Twilight. I can save everypony now."

Psalm gave another sob as she typed furiously. "No. You're not Luna. I don't know what you are, but you're not her!" she whispered furiously as she typed. Every attempt to override the lockout ran into the same wall. "Luna, forgive me and take my soul. Forgive... please forgive me... I serve you, Princess Luna!"

She managed to get into a monitoring program, then snuck into maintenance, and finally into manual discharge. 'Warning! Megaspell primed. Manual discharge not advised. Target?' She gave another sob and smile as she turned the talisman over and began to type very carefully a string of numbers and letters written on the back.

Then she hit Enter. The targeting talisman turned from a milky white to a blood red. She gave one more sob and smile. "For you, Luna." She tapped a button and relaxed with a look of bliss.

The screen flashed. 'Manual discharge of Megaspell overridden per EC-1101 command. Discharge aborted.' The talisman returned to its milky white. Psalm stared at it for several seconds.

Then the Goddess whispered, "You... You don't belong here. What are you doing?! Why are you trying to kill me? I can save you! I can save everypony! Just like Twilight and her friends did."

"You are not Luna!" Psalm screamed, flinging the stone away as she scrambled back into a locker. "You are... a thing! I have seen true Goddesses, monster!" She swore as she looked at the bottles and ate a tablet of Buck, sucked some RadAway, and healed herself with a potion. Then she continued poking through experimental weaponry, looking at the crates' labels closely.

"You come from outside. I can see your memories..." the Goddess said sympathetically. "I can feel your torment. I know that feeling..."

Psalm clutched her eyes, pressing her hooves to her head. "Out! Get out!" She returned to motion, mumbling. "Blessed Luna, full of strength, be a shield against the darkness and the nightmares. Be my silent protector against the darkness and our enemies. Grant me your mercy and protection," she prayed aloud as she went from one to the next, trying to drown out the Goddess. Then she saw one crate, then smiled. "And empower me with the might to strike down your enemies." She flipped the lid open and stared down at a strange device nestled in padding with a half dozen green orbs flickering with a rainbow sheen. 'Balefire Egg Launcher' was written on a label next to technical information.

"You're insane," the Goddess whispered in horror. "Who are you? What are you thinking?"

Psalm lifted the device from the padding and loaded an egg. "I serve Princess Luna. In service, I am forgiven for my sins."

"You've killed... I can see it... You monster! Stay away!" the Goddess screamed, and glowing blue tendrils pushed up through the floor, waving wildly as they tried to catch Psalm. But she pulled her helmet back on and started to move, the B.E.L. floating above her. It might have been the Buck, or perhaps the RadAway and potion, but I believed sheer zeal kept her moving so quickly down the halls.

"Oh, Celestia... I can see... I can see your thoughts! I can see... Manehattan? Canterlot? Hoofington? All gone?!" the Goddess wailed, and I heard the ghostly wails of other ponies already linked in Unity. "There's nothing left out there but death, and you're trying to kill me? I can save your life! Just like how I just saved Twilight's! Please!"

"I don't care about my life!" Psalm shouted. A half dozen glowing tendrils streaked down the hall towards Psalm. She raised the B.E.L. and shot the flickering green egg, then leapt to the side through a hatch. She'd barely closed it before another explosion shook the building. From the rumbling and rippling, I could guess that part of the building was falling into that sinkhole. "Only Luna can save my soul!"

She pulled herself to her hooves and kept moving. "Your soul? You're worried about... that..." the Goddess trailed off in horror. "Oh... you... you've killed..."

"Yes, I've killed. For Luna! All for Luna! So it's all right!" Psalm cried as she moved through another hatch. "I've hurt so many! Killed so many! But I serve Luna!"

"Psalm... that's your name, isn't it?" the Goddess said so softly, so compassionately that I wondered how it would be possible that she'd ever been this way. "I know what it's like to do bad things. I know what it's like to need forgiveness. Please, don't do this."

"I came here to kill Twilight Sparkle," Psalm spat as she staggered into some industrial works and started making her way down. "That was the order! Kill the Ministry Mares..."

"That order was a lie. You didn't come here to kill Twilight..."

"Shut up!" Psalm whimpered as she kept moving down through the works. "Luna... protect... strength..." Psalm muttered in terror.

"You came here hoping that Twilight was alive... so she would kill you," the Goddess said around us as we floated after her.

"Quiet!" Psalm sobbed as she finally came out above the enormous blue mass with its budding alicorns. She pointed the B.E.L. down at the mass. "Luna... Luna... Luna..."

"I know what it's like to do bad things too. I was once under the effects of something evil, but the bad things I did came from me. I know what it's like to want forgiveness so much it hurts." Psalm stood on the edge, looking down as the blue motes coalesced into a blue mare's head. "I can give you the forgiveness you seek, Psalm. I can save you, if you let me. If you don't pull that trigger."

Psalm's glow flickered. "I just... wanted... to serve her..." Psalm whimpered, and then dropped

the B.E.L. to the catwalk. She pulled off the helmet as she sat at the edge. "I don't want to die. I don't want to be forsaken! Not again! Luna was supposed to forgive me. She was supposed to make it all... all right..." She suddenly frowned and lifted the B.E.L. again. "No. I... I won't lose faith now... I can't..."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the Goddess replied. Then a blue tendril wrapped itself around Psalm's throat. Her eyes bulged as she tried to aim the B.E.L. downwards, but more tendrils of magic curled around the weapon and twisted it away. Psalm's eyes watered as more hooked around her body, starting to pull her downward.

"No! Luna... Luna..." she gasped. The B.E.L. went off, the ceiling exploding in green flame that rained debris down upon Psalm. Her mane alight, she screamed and thrashed wildly.

Then there was a crack and she was lifted into the air, blazing like a torch as her body hung limply, radiation and pieces of the ceiling showering her. "I will save you, Psalm. Whether you like it or not." And with that, she was dropped like a burning doll into the blue mass. We fell with her, and suddenly Maripony disappeared in an endless sea of blue.

For a moment or an eternity, we floated there. Then the whispers started. Horrified. Shocked. Angry. "Murderer... traitor... killer... butcher..."

"No!" Psalm's voice cried out as the blue grew darker. "I had to! For Luna!" A ghostly Psalm hung in the void between us.

"Luna would never forgive a monster like you," hissed the darkness as it closed in around us.

"No! Please! You said you'd save me!" Psalm cried out as she looked round in terror and starting to scream as parts of her transparent body were torn away.

"And I would have, if you hadn't spurned my offer," the Goddess replied coldly. "But I think I can find something useful to do with you."

"Please! Somepony! Luna! Celestia! Twilight!" Psalm cried out in hysteria. "Help me!"

"You tried to kill Celestia," a pair of mares said softly. "We can see it in your thoughts."

"Twilight! Please! Don't let them do this to me!" Psalm begged as only her head remained. Then the disintegration stopped. For a moment, hope bloomed in her agonized eyes.

Then the darkness was silent for an age before Twilight whispered, "You killed Pinkie Pie..."

And then Psalm screamed and screamed till only Lacunae and I were left. I wasn't sure if the memory had ended or not as I stared at my friend. "It's... my fault," she said quietly.

"Your fault?" I countered as we floated in that vasty blackness. I tried for a grin and failed. "How is anything your fault?" But then she looked at me, and I knew. The pain in her dragon-slitted eyes was every bit the same as the pain I'd seen in Psalm as she'd been ripped to pieces in a vengeful Unity. "No..."

"Yes. It's all my fault. The Goddess. Your pain and misery. What happened to you on the *Seahorse*. Dying in Hightower. Even your link to the Goddess. It is all my fault," she said as she trembled and closed her eyes. "When you connected with me in the Collegiate, I took the opportunity... in

my selfishness... to put pieces of myself inside you. You were so selfless and they were so small that I convinced myself they could not be harmful." She sniffed and bowed her head. "But I was wrong. I've seen my memories poisoning you with every passing day. Corroding your confidence. Filling you with the self-destructive need that I've felt for two centuries."

I stared at her, not comprehending. "But... the Goddess?"

"I was the poison. The first raider. The monster most ponies couldn't imagine. The Goddess initially wanted to save ponykind. She still does, but I gave her the hatred. I was the original sin!" she wept, shaking as she hugged herself.

"Huh?" I struggled for some explanation or reason. I was a master of self-abuse. "You can't know that, Lacunae. It could have been something in the Goddess, or the magic, or even Twilight herself." I didn't want to imagine it, but I couldn't accept one pony as responsible for every wrong the Goddess had committed. "The Goddess is making you feel this way."

"The Goddess didn't make me contaminate you with my own memories," Lacunae retorted as she looked at me in anguish. "Would you have allowed yourself to be violated and tormented if I had not filled you with my own urges for my own relief?"

I actually laughed, bringing her up short. "Probably." She paused and gaped at me as I smiled at her. "Come on, Lacunae. This is teenager-grade angst. You're blaming yourself for the Goddess? Why don't you take credit for the last war while you're at it?" That made her sob even harder inside my mind. I shook my head. "You can't take the blame for my actions either. What I did is my own fault. Not yours."

She trembled and grit her teeth a moment before she spat out, "But I can take the blame for the Goddess's control through Unity."

Now my smile disappeared. "How's that?"

"When I transferred my memories to you, it created a link between you and I. That link has grown since. No amount of taint would have connected you to myself and Unity!" she cried and shook her translucent head. "Through me, the Goddess is connected to you."

I stared at her silently. I knew where this trail ended. "I see. Why are you telling me this?" I knew why. She was setting me up for this.

"Because, the Goddess plans to use you as I was used and this must not happen. The only way to sever the connection permanently is for you to kill me. I cannot do it myself," Lacunae said as she closed her eyes again.

My answer was without hesitation. "No way."

"You must!" Lacunae replied. "When we break this vision, you'll have only a few seconds to kill me. Do it, and all the emotions transferred into me will return to Unity. The memories I've infected you with will be broken!"

"It's not an option," I countered almost casually.

Something in her broke, and she swelled up, turning black, her eyes blazing as her forehooves seized me. "Stupid cunt! What do you think you're trying to save? I am nothing! Worthless! A collection

of unwanted memories and useless emotions housed in the shell of a mare who murdered your ancestor! I am less than nothing. For once, do what is right and selfish and kill me! Save yourself! You can save countless more if you just end me.”

“No,” I answered calmly as I stared up at her.

She loomed over me, her eyes bright as balefire bombs. “You... I used you, Blackjack! I slipped the trash I couldn’t bear into you as the Goddess did into me! I gave you my poison just as I passed it to her! End me! Please!”

But I couldn’t, and wouldn’t. And she knew it too. She trembled, her eyes blazing with a harsh purple light as she quivered, then slowly shrank smaller and smaller, growing pitch black as she shrank to the size of a filly. “Please...” she whimpered. “Why? I deserve it. Why?” she whispered as I embraced her.

“You’re my friend,” I replied quietly. “I can’t kill you. Not even if you want me to. Not even to help myself,” I said as I closed my eyes and nuzzled her mane, listening to her sniff and weep softly. “I’m sorry. I’ll help another way if I can, but I won’t help you destroy yourself.”

“Why?” she asked as she pulled away, tears on her cheeks.

“Because I’m a monster too, and you didn’t let me die when you could have. Friends don’t let friends die. Not when we have a choice,” I said quietly as I petted her hair.

As we hovered there in the great black, I glanced up at a gargantuan blue head with immense blazing eyes and two green unicorn mares flanking her shoulders. Behind her, a purple-maned mare looked away, yet I could perceive the slightest peek of her eye watching us. I glared up at the four, daring them to make one comment of the scene. One insult. One unkindness...

They didn’t. The blue head turned away, then the two greens, and the darkness returned. It was a small mercy, probably one they’d purge soon to rid themselves of weakness. But for this second, I was glad for it.

~ ~ ~

When we were out of her mind and sitting side by side in Awesome’s collection, I rested my head on her shoulder. “Is there any one of us that isn’t emotionally screwed up?” I asked as I looked out the window and into the rain pouring into the reservoir. “I mean, is that just me? Or the world? Or what?”

“Boo, I think,” Lacunae replied quietly. “And it’s not just you. Everyone has their own share of pain. You’re just able to handle so much of it that it’s easier to share with you.”

I sighed and closed my eyes, listening to the distant hiss of the rain on the water. “Someday, I want one good day. A day with music and dancing and good food. Some time when we can all be happy. Do you think I can just command one?”

“I don’t see why not.” Lacunae answered. “Have you decided what you’re going to do with the crown?”

“Toss it in the lake,” I grumbled, then sighed and met her amused gaze. She was actually smiling. “Okay. Probably give it to Splendid. Or Grace. Or Charm. Or just throw it in the middle of a

crowd and run for the nearest exit.”

Lacunae was silent for a long moment. “The Goddess is going to take you over soon.”

“Maybe.” I stared out at the gray waters and the hazy distances beyond.

“She’s purged herself of her doubts and mercies. She’s determined,” Lacunae said as she closed her eyes. “She’s going to take the black book and then kill LittlePip.”

“Maybe,” I repeated calmly.

“And you can’t warn LittlePip or tell anypony. And neither can I.”

“Maybe. P-21 and Glory are a lot smarter than me. They’ll notice,” I said, as much to myself as to Lacunae. That is, if they weren’t at each other’s throats over who they thought I should give the crown to.

“And the Goddess plans on turning you into the next Lacunae,” Lacunae murmured.

“You never know. I might get lucky and be assassinated before she has her chance,” I said with a small smile. Finally I sighed and closed my eyes. “Well... no time to waste here.”

I turned and started for the door when Lacunae said, “Blackjack?”

“Mhmm?”

“I wish you and Psalm could have been friends. Before Psalm joined the war,” Lacunae said regretfully. “I think... I think you would have made her a better pony.”

I snorted and smiled back at her. “Of course not. I would have gotten us both stinking drunk, tattooed like zebras, and thrown in jail.” She sighed, but smiled and shook her head with a smile of resignation.

* * *

The funeral of King Awesome that afternoon had four mourners: myself and his three children. All the rest of the attendees clustered on the edges, watching with shifty eyes and whispering softly to some of their fellows while giving hard glares to others. My E.F.S. had a dozen red bars in the crowd, but short of halting everything and sorting out the hostiles, there was little I could do. Glory, P-21, and Rampage kept an eye out for me so I could focus on Awesome’s departure. The blue duo had struck a temporary truce not to bug me about what I should do.

We’d gathered out on the shore of the reservoir. His body had been wrapped in sheets and placed within a rowboat filled with wood. Bottlecaps were heaped around his hooves and golden bits gleamed in the rain where they’d been sprinkled on his body. White lilies, actual flowers grown from some serf-worked plot, lay wreathed about his head like a crown. A wooden sword rested on one side, an assault rifle on the other, and a shield at his feet.

On his chest, hidden beneath his crossed hooves, was my own contribution: a memory orb of Goldenblood at the Grand Galloping Gala. I’d wanted to share it with him, and in this small way I could. I didn’t listen to Hoity’s pomp and ceremony, and from what I could tell I wasn’t the only one. Most here

were just going through the motions, playing at dignity and respect. Of his children, Charm seemed completely desolate while Splendid adopted a stoic poise. Grace's eyes shone with regret.

Finally, the body was pushed out onto the reservoir, and I gave a nod to P-21. He raised Persuasion and fired it as true as I knew he could, an arc of smoke lancing up towards the gloomy skies before plunging back down at the old rowboat. A moment later, the incendiary grenade went off and the boat burst into flame. For an instant, all eyes were on the craft as it drifted further and further out on the water. I'd expected it to sink quickly, but to my surprise, and strange relief, it stayed afloat as it moved off into the darkness as a lone torch. The crowd dissipated soon after that, leaving just a dozen or so together.

"Come on," Scotch Tape said to the weeping Charm. "Let's get you inside, Your Highness." Charm gave a snotty sniff and nodded. Rampage started to follow, but I gave a shake of my head. Lacunae and P-21 both moved in her path. Rampage adopted a surly look. As they departed, I noted the uneasy looks of Grace and Splendid. Were they seriously worried that I'd give Charm the crown out of pity?

I waited till the flames finally began to gutter before I turned away. It was all pretense. These ponies lived in a dream world. Out in the Wasteland, a pony was lucky not to end up as carrion. These ponies created a whole display of disposing of one of their dead, one they didn't even care that much for. Could they do better, and if so, then what could I give them? I mulled this over as we trotted back to the resort with an escort of servants around us.

"Death to tyrants!" screamed a stallion behind me as I felt a prick in my shoulder. I turned, looking at one of the unicorn servants whose magic glowed around a carving knife stuck an inch or two into my body. Chaos broke out as there were yells and screams, but these dwindled away as everypony realized I wasn't screaming in agony. I could feel the tip of the blade caught in the augments under my hide.

Splendid reared dramatically beside the unicorn attacker. "Don't worry, Lady Blackjack! I'll save... you..." Splendid started to say as my friends looked at him incredulously. My look was more... shooty. He slowly dropped back down to his hooves as he looked at the blue unicorn and then back at me. Things seemed to have skipped off script. "Um... guards?" Still nothing.

"Seriously?" I asked, levitating out the knife, looking at Splendid. When he didn't reply, I glanced at Grace in time to catch her eye roll. I looked at the servant. "I've been shot at, blown up, burned, had my limbs ripped off, replaced, ripped off again, and you use... a knife?" I levitated the blade to my mouth, flicked off the blood, and then began to eat it from the tip. Chewing each bite deliberately, I maintained my stare, and since I didn't have to blink, I could do it a very long time. Finally I had only the bottom of the knife and the grip remaining.

"Do I get to splatter him now?" Rampage asked eagerly.

"I... um..." the servant muttered, dropping his gaze. "They promised my family would be paid and set free from our contracts."

"A pity story..." The striped mare sighed. "Great. There goes my fun."

I swallowed and pushed the truncated knife back into his hooves. "Take that to whomever put

you up to this and tell them that they're going to have to try a whole lot harder to kill me."

"Um... sorry..." the servant asked weakly as everyone who didn't know me stared in amazement.

"Aren't you... going to kill him? That is what typically happens to assassins," Splendid said in clear confusion.

"For any sane, normal pony, sure," Rampage said with a roll of her eyes. "But for the Saint Blackjack of the Wasteland..." She pointed a hoof at me and said sourly, "Do you have any idea how many ponies she's stopped me from killing just because she bought their sob stories? I swear. The most potent weapon against Blackjack is a good tearjerker."

Grace smiled at me in approval as Splendid seemed to work it over in his head. Grace looked at her twin coolly. "Well, let's hope the next assassination attempt is as much a show as this one."

Splendid returned her cool glance. "Certainly you don't believe this was me?"

Grace adopted her brother's voice, "Don't worry, Lady Blackjack! I'll save you!" Splendid immediately flushed and put on an air of bruised dignity. I lagged behind a little and gave Hoity a look.

"Am I going to have to deal with this a lot?" I asked the ghoul sourly, gesturing back at the 'assassin'.

"Until you pass the crown, most certainly. And the longer you're here, the more serious the plots will become. That was quite an amateurish attempt, if it truly was an attempt at all. But I'm sure the pressures on you will become more intense as time goes on." The ghoul let out a rusty sigh, and Rampage looked back at us as he said, "For a time, King Awesome managed to temper the worst elements, but I'm afraid his solution won't last long."

"Now you see why I hate these fuckers," Rampage growled. "Sure, Reapers kill each other, but we're honest about it. These assholes take pride in stabbing each other in the back."

The gray ghoul sighed as we stepped back inside after everyone else. "Crude and barbaric, but accurate. I never quite understood why, either. I knew the rich and famous well before the bombs, and there was never this degree of severity with their intrigues. Oh, there was the occasional assassination attempt, but it was never so... recreational."

"It's the Hoof. What do you expect?" I replied, wondering if that were true or not. Was all this killing and scheming the result of the Eater, or simply a local, brutal, phenomenon? "How much time do I have before things get out of control? In your expert opinion?"

Hoity pursed his lips, rubbed his chin, and looked at me. "By the end of the Grand Galloping Gala tonight. If you don't move by then, I fear they might start targeting your friends. At that point, I'll be heading back to Meatlocker."

"I think that sets a record for shortest reign in Equestrian history," Rampage said with a smirk. "Just pick someone at random, get all the loot from this place you can, and go. Don't listen to Glory and P-21. They'll get you sucked in with politics and morality debates and all kinds of other shit. Flip a coin. Toss it at random. Take the airship and go."

I rubbed my chin. "I'll think about it," I finally said, doubtful I'd be able to do it, but it was so

tempting.

* * *

"Being Queen sucks," I muttered telepathically to Lacunae as I lay on King Awesome's bed -- technically my bed now -- hugging a pillow and sulking. I'd sent my friends away after they argued for half an hour about what I should do. Thankfully, neither Glory nor P-21 had played the friend card yet. I'd sent Glory to find out more about Grace and P-21 to learn about Splendid. Rampage would do whatever she damn well pleased. "Seriously, everything I have going on and I have to... to play at being Queen? This is foolish shit... and when *I'm* the one saying that, you know it's bad." Lacunae sent a telepathic chuckle from the museum, where she was watching the ponies readying the *Fleur* for our eventual departure.

I'd spent an hour inspecting the subterranean plantations. The Stable-Tec testbeds were amazing; I can only imagine what stables had been rich and extravagant enough to have entire orchards growing underground in perfectly secure environments. The Society had cleaned everything up for my arrival. Not a whip in sight, and every serf looked like they'd been given a bath and an extra meal and commanded to smile at the 'regent'. They'd actually sung a half-hearted song as we'd walked through.

Then somepony had taken a shot at me. A bit more serious than a knife. The sniper pony had missed the first shot by luck, but a serf near me had been wounded. My E.F.S. gave me the direction and my S.A.T.S. helped me target the mare's head. Four magic bullets had streaked up to her position at the mouth of a vent. One had gotten lucky, punching right through her eye and out the back of her skull. I didn't correct the onlookers on their assumption that I could kill with a thought from a hundred yards away.

P-21 had found a bomb under the bed when we'd returned; he'd disarmed it. Hoity's prediction seemed more and more accurate, and with this great big party being prepared there were so many ponies running around that I couldn't keep track of who was coming and going. One thing was for sure: eventually, they'd target somepony I cared for.

There was a knock on the door. "Yes?" I called, floating out Vigilance and loading AP rounds.

"I wanted to speak with you, Your Majesty," Grace said smoothly.

I sighed and rubbed my brow. Keeping the Goddess back, dealing with these annoyances... and now this? "Do you have to?" I whined.

There was a pause outside. "I suppose not, but I would appreciate it."

I closed my eyes. Well, if she tried to kill me, that'd winnow down my choices, wouldn't it? I opened the door with my magic. Grace, wearing her spectacular gown, entered with caution. "You don't look so good, Your Majesty."

"I've got a lot going on," I replied acidly.

She walked over and sat down on the edge of the bed, looking at me. "I can sympathize. It looks like I'll have to flee this place soon."

"Why do you stay at all?" I asked as I rolled onto my side. "These ponies are crazy."

She looked mildly insulted, but gave a small shrug. "They have something rare in the Wasteland:

luxury. Most descend from common raider stock, pretending to be well bred and exceptional. They're not. We're pampered and spoiled, wasteful and living off the toil of others." She sighed and shook her head. "Well, once it's clear that I will not be your choice, I'll have to head to Tenpony or... elsewhere. There are individuals who won't want the risk of me becoming a spare."

"You're counting yourself out already?" I asked, curious.

"I always knew I was the weakest candidate. Charm is more... sympathetic. Her age. Her manners. Or if not her, Splendid can give you far more than I can. He's long wanted to invest our excess in the Hoof. His successful foray into the Fluttershy Medical Center, for instance. I never would have thought of that. Father favored me, but..." she gave a little shrug.

"Splendid said he wanted to extend your father's life," I recalled as I pushed myself up on the pillows.

"Of course. He was least favored. So long as Father lived, he'd have a chance to maneuver into a better position," she said with a small smile. "You saw that horribly rushed attempt at gallantry outside."

I sighed and shook my head. "I hate all this political bullshit."

She looked amused, "Why? By all accounts, it's more civilized than the tactics of most of your enemies. It may be mentally taxing, and horribly frustrating, but when the battle is political at least nopony's going to be holding a town of foals to ransom. And politics is still a game with the highest stakes. Win, and you stay in power. Lose, and someone else takes what used to be yours."

"Politics doesn't show up as red bars on my E.F.S.," I retorted sourly.

"I suppose," she said as she looked away. "I don't have as much skill at it as I should. Father always favored me but never named me heir. I think he was always waiting for Splendid to step up, or maybe he knew naming me would have put a target on my head instantly." She walked over to the window looking out over the reservoir. "He was never clear. Never straightforward. He would hint at his approval, or make little suggestions. He could change his mind whenever the political winds shifted. When he died..." she sighed and glanced at me with a small frown. "Well, his move was unexpected."

I considered the pale, blue-maned unicorn as she gazed out the window. Mother and I had issues, but I'd always known she loved me. And I never had to compete with a sibling for her favor. What would it have been like to have had siblings to contend with? "It was a surprise to me too," I said with a sigh.

She gave the ghost of a smile. "You should have seen Charm when she got the news. My, what a vocabulary." She shook her head and looked at me. "Have you thought about the Gala tonight?"

I needed a segue just as much as she did. "I'm no good at parties!" It was yet another thing in a growing list of things I didn't have time for. So meaningless in the scheme of what I was dealing with that it seemed surreal.

"You never had them in your stable?" she replied, curiously.

I laughed a little. "I was security. It was my job making sure that nopony was having sex in the bathrooms or raiding medical for party favors," I replied with a sigh. "I can count the number of parties

I've been to on my hooves."

"Your friend Lacunae said she'd handle your accoutrements. That just leaves dancing." I blinked slowly at her, and she smiled politely at me. "You have no idea how to dance, do you?" Grace asked with a small cock of her head.

"Dance? Ponies dance at parties?" I replied, only a bit facetious.

"Oh dear," she said as she slipped off the bed. "Come on," she said as her horn glowed. A phonograph in the corner whined to life, then dropped the needle to the record.

"Come what? What are you doing?" I asked as she took my hoof and tugged me off the bed.

"I'm going to teach you a few dances so you don't look like a complete fool tonight," she replied. "And trust me, there are ponies who want to kill you with embarrassment if they can't kill you with bullets. In fact, there are some who'd find that great fun."

"Every second, Rampage's suggestion seems to make more sense to me," I muttered as the music began.

"Hush," Grace replied with a smile. "If you can fight, you can dance. It's just movement in unison. It's as easy as one, two, three..."

Dancing was one of those things other ponies did. Yet... I thought about how I'd learned music from Roses and Octavia, and magic from Twilight's primer. Maybe I could learn this? Bit by bit, she walked me through the steps of a waltz. One two three, pivot, one two three, pivot, one two three spin, bow, repeat. It was all patterns, timing, and repetition. Grace slowed down to match my awkward pace and sped up as I became relaxed with the motions. She then moved into a back and forth variation, a formal dance. I must have looked like an idiot, and I said as much, but she just smiled and kept me going.

If teaching me to dance was an incredibly convoluted way to get the crown, it was working.

We stopped after a minute, she enjoying a bottle of purified water and I munching a ruby. "Does it hurt?" she asked as she looked at my metal forehoof.

"Huh? Being a cyberpony?" I asked, and she nodded. I gave a little smile as I raised the limb. "Not really. Not in the sense you think of. I don't know everything, but apparently they turned down my ability to feel pain. So, what I feel is like a memory of feeling things. Like when you get a leg cut off. Even when it's gone, and you know it's gone, you can still feel it there." She wore the oddest expression. "What?"

"I've never had a limb severed," she replied delicately, sympathetically.

"Oh. Right. Sorry. Stupid thing to say," I muttered, then rolled my eyes. "Anyway, no. It doesn't hurt. Not really. But I can't feel anything else. I don't have a heartbeat. I don't feel blood rushing through my veins. Don't get short of breath. Don't feel a whole lot of things. I've got a few very precious nerve endings in my hind end that I'm very grateful for, and that's about it. It takes some real extreme stimulation for me to feel much at all."

She blinked, her eyes popped wide, and her face immediately assumed a rosy shade. "Ah. I... I

didn't know that."

I gave a little smile. "You know, back in 99, I never really appreciated my--"

"Blackjack!" she blurted with an exasperated half smile. "There is such a thing as knowing too much!"

"Ah." I blinked and grinned. "Sorry." I looked at her for a moment with an odd sensation and said, "You're descended from Twilight Sparkle's brother, right?"

"If Father was to be believed, yes. Why?"

"Well... If I'm Twilight's descendant, and you're the descendant of her brother, what does that make us?"

She hesitated a moment, opened her mouth, closed it again as she thought a little more. "I believe it makes us cousins several times removed. Hardly a relation at all, really. More of a coincidence," she said matter-of-factly, but then saw my stare. "What is it?"

I gazed at her and then threw my hooves around her. "Cousin! I have a cousin! Three cousins!"

She struggled in my hooves. "Several times removed!" she reminded me in a gasp, but I didn't care. I had family... okay, it was one step above a complete stranger but still, family! "Need air!" she wheezed desperately.

"Sorry!" I said at once, releasing her and grinning a little sheepishly. "I just... I never had much family."

She laughed and shook her head. "I'd been told how unpredictable you are, but I had no idea." But I'd gone from laughing to crying at the same time. Her smile melted to one of concern. "Blackjack? Are you... are you okay?"

I wanted to tell her so desperately, but the Goddess's prohibition clamped down tight. "It's just... my life," I said with a sniff, a chuckle, and a little sob. "Times like this, I really wonder if I've lost my mind. I got so much to do, so little time, and here I am dancing and giddy that I've found someone I can call family, no matter how far removed. It seems almost... surreal."

She sighed and looked towards the reservoir. "Yesterday, I was terrified you were going to level everything. Today, I'm giving you dancing lessons when I should be doing everything I can to undermine Charm and Splendid... because tomorrow, I might be quietly pushed out the gate, killed, or running for my life."

It isn't always about you, Blackjack. I huffed as well, lying back on the bed, staring at stars painted on the ceiling. "Is there something about Twilight Sparkle's family tree that insists we live interesting, messed up, adventure-ridden lives?"

"It would explain a lot, wouldn't it?" she replied with a sad smile. Then there was a knock on the door.

"Don't come in! I'm having wild royal rutting in here!" I called out in a surge of recklessness.

Grace's eyes grew wide.

"You better not be without me!" Glory said, pushing the door open. My laughter died into a squeak as it was my turn to go red.

P-21 and Rampage followed her in. "Oh, she was being sarcastic?" Rampage quipped. When she saw Grace, her expression became smug. "Ooooh. Doing some personal interviews?"

"Dance lessons," Grace replied primly, all hint of embarrassment gone as she turned, bowed her head once to me, "Cousin." Then she turned and walked out. Oh, she was good.

"Dance lessons?" Glory asked.

"Cousin?" P-21 asked a second after.

I opened my mouth to start to complain, then closed it and shook my head. "Nevermind. What's up?"

P-21 and Glory shared a look, and then he said calmly, "First, Glory and I wanted to apologize. We know this choice is important to you. We're sorry for making it more difficult."

"I'm not, but that's just me. I still say you should auction it to the highest bidder. Maybe give it to the Society janitor. That'd be a hoot," Rampage quipped.

"I'll keep that as plan B," I said dryly.

Glory smiled. "Second bit is that the airship should be ready tomorrow morning. I think that, with you unplugged and Rampage as life support, we should make it. I'll coat the ship with clouds, and with some luck, we should be able to sneak right up to Thunderhead. If we pick up Father on the way, we should be able to see the councilor pretty much as soon as we arrive."

"I went over the ship once, and it looks like it's on the level. I'll check again before we go," P-21 added.

"And I have a message," Rampage said with a smirk. "I was supposed to give it all sneaky sneaky like, but, eh. Fuck that." She shrugged. "Anyway, there's somepony that wants a trade. He wants the crown to go to Charm. In return, he'll give you ten thousand caps and King Awesome's complete collection of memory orbs." She paused and added, "He also said that if you give the crown to anypony but Charm, he'll give you a bag of crushed memory orbs."

Glory sucked in her breath sharply. "No, he wouldn't!" she gasped, looking at me in worry.

"I'm pretty sure he would," Rampage replied. "He acted a lot like me, so I'm pretty sure he'd follow through. I don't know if this is his own game or something he set up with the filly. Personally, I'd go for it. Maybe hold out and see if he can give you fifteen thousand."

"Blackjack isn't going to sell the crown!" Glory scoffed, then looked at me. "Right?"

"Ehhh..." The thought of Goldenblood's memory orbs, any one of which might have answers on Horizons, being destroyed chilled my blood.

"Glory, remember the part where we agreed we'd let Blackjack make this choice and support her one hundred percent no matter how we feel about it?" P-21 told the cyan pegasus. She immediately screwed up her face as she struggled with her own internal conflict.

"Sell! Sell! Sell! Sell!" Rampage chanted, earning a glare from Glory.

"Stop," Glory growled, getting a tongue stuck out at her by the striped mare. "What are you, five?"

"What are you, my mother?" Rampage retorted.

"I'm going to go looking for my daughter," P-21 said as he started for the door. I turned to watch him g--

"Red bars," I said as I drew Vigilance, staring at the door. "Five, right on the other side."

"I really miss my gun," Glory muttered. "Weren't there supposed to be bodyguards outside?" I floated my markspony carbine over to her. She looked at it skeptically, then bit down on the trigger bit guard and secured the gun in her hooves as she took cover behind the bed. P-21 looked at Persuasion, then joined her. I made three. The bedroom only had one entrance, for security.

"I never met a guard immune to bribes, bullets, or blowjobs," Rampage commented.

"Okay, I think I know what we need to do," I said, a complex plan coming together.

Rampage rolled her eyes. "Oh fuck no, Blackjack. I've played nice and haven't killed one of these fuckers all morning. You don't get to take this fun!" She stepped out in front. "Come and get us, you mother humpers!" Rampage roared as she turned and charged the door.

Apparently, the challenge was enough for the door to be kicked wide, and four ponies, two high and two low on either side of the door, looked in with the fifth in the middle. They wore spiffy, brand new combat armor, two with markspony carbines and two others with anti-machine rifles. The fifth, who'd kicked the door open, wore a battle saddle with two miniguns mounted backwards. As one, they began to spray bullets into the bedroom. The bed didn't provide much other than getting us out of sight.

Of course, nopony is ready for Rampage. The minigun rounds sparked off her armor as she charged the stallion in the middle and lowered her head, keeping the bullets out of her eyes. Like a ponified saw blade, she darted under the hind legs of the stallion and, once beneath him, gave a great heave. The stallion's blood poured down on her bladed steel, and he clenched his bit in his dying spasms. Rampage twisted like a turret, and sprayed the two on the left with a barrage of minigun fire before the impaled stallion went limp.

"Catch!" she snapped, heaving again and tossing the remains on the pair on the right side of the door. The body crashed into the two, knocking them back out of sight behind the door jamb. Like a flash she was on them, kicking and stomping with her power hooves. I couldn't see the damage inflicted, but I could see the spatter.

The first pair struggled to their hooves. "Tag!" she shouted in glee and launched herself after them. There was a scream, a wet pulpy noise, and the chatter of a carbine.

I glanced at P-21 and then at Glory as there was a soft chunky noise and a bloody pony was

kicked back in front of my door. “Hoofington... rises...” he... or maybe she... it was hard to tell through all the blood... said weakly before falling over limply.

Rampage strolled over, standing in front of him, her armor coated in blood and viscera. “Really? That’s the best you can do?” She then looked at me, a length of purple intestine dangling to the side of her face. “What?”

“You know, you might be really obnoxious, but there are moments I’m glad you’re on our side,” P-21 said in complete honesty before he approached the slain ponies.

“Aw, come and give me a hug!” she said, spreading her blood drenched forelegs wide as she grinned.

“And the moment’s over,” P-21 said.

I stepped past them and looked at the dead attackers. Definitely Harbinger gear. I looked down the hall to where my ‘guards’ stood staring with gormless looks on their faces. I cocked a brow as I stared at the four until one declared lamely, “I had to shit. I dunno what the other guys were doing.”

I rubbed my face. Luna save me, I had to get out of here! “All I wanted was an airship,” I muttered.

* * *

The attack had gone nearly unnoticed by the Society with all the party affairs being conducted. Oh, I had no illusions that everypony didn’t know, but something as simple as an attempted regicide was apparently nothing compared to a social affair. The Society wanted to get to their fun and games, and I was the four hundred pound cyberpony futzing everything up. The only silver lining was that over a dozen lesser plots and schemes had completely fallen apart, leaving Hoity quite amused and myself a worsening Societal irritant.

Lacunae was out picking something up. Glory was checking the dead Harbingers, looking for something that might identify how they had gotten in. P-21 was triple-checking everything that might explode, since that was the next logical course of taking me out. Boo lingered by Scotch Tape as she was chatting with Charm. And Rampage, after multiple demands for her to wash and not wear pony entrails as a fashion statement, sat boredly at my side as my ‘champion’. I’d publically declared that if I were killed, Rampage had full carte blanche to take my revenge on the perpetrators and left it vague as to if that meant the actual assassins, the Society, or everypony in the Hoof who’d looked at me wrong. Apparently, according to Hoity, it’d gotten three to abandon their plots for the time being.

That left me languishing in a stuffy conference room with Splendid talking at me about the Society’s finances. Apparently they were loaded; being one of the most reliable food suppliers for a post-apocalyptic wasteland brought in the caps. I’d also discovered that the Society didn’t have a firm monarch when it came to the money. Profits were split into a mind-numbing array of shares, half shares, quarter shares, and eighths, and sixteenths. That was after expenses, which were surprisingly high. Still, the Society took their money and bought everything from guns to old world relics, facilitating trade.

Which meant, as nice as the thought was becoming, that I couldn’t just trot off. I had a chance to affect the biggest player in the Hoof. I just had to decide which was the right answer...

"Splendid?" I asked as he started in on last year's figures. The white stallion paused beside a chalkboard with rows of numbers on it. "Why the fuck are you telling me all this?"

"As leader of the Society..." he began, and I raised my hoof, cutting him off.

"Not leader. Let's drop that pretense. I'm not leading anything. I'm picking the leader. That's the deal. And you're smart enough to know that. So why tell me all this?" I asked sharply.

He coughed, looking away. "You're a lot smarter than when we first met."

"I'm also a lot more metallic." I folded my hooves on the table. "If you want to give me a sales pitch, give it."

He took a deep breath, touching his chest, and let it out before saying bluntly, "You should make me your regent if you want to help the Hoof in a substantial way."

I met his gaze with my own stare. "Go on."

"Charm is too spoiled, and Grace too gutless, to understand what the Society could truly be. You saw what we achieved at the Fluttershy Medical Center. That's just a start." His horn glowed and he flipped the chalkboard to show a map of the Hoofington Valley. "With a few changes to the way the Society does things, we'll have the resources to secure not just our own territory but the rest of the Hoof as well. We can hire mercenaries to take the Paradise Mall back from the slavers inhabiting it and lease it to the Finders. That opens up trade with the pegasi at the Rainbow Dash Skyport. We can also take and secure the Ironmare Naval Base on the bay and distribute goods to the north end of the city. But more importantly, with pegasi and the bay, we'll be able to send our goods farther than ever! We can reach Manehattan by boat or air infinitely faster than on foot or via caravans."

He looked back at me. "With Society supremacy, the Collegiate and Finders will have to abandon their petty little issues with us or be completely marginalized. With their help, we'll turn the Hoof into what it once was: a cornerstone of Equestria. Hoofington will rise bigger and stronger than before and help restore true civility to the surface."

Well. Somepony had aspirations. I had no idea if he could pull it off, but he seemed confident in his abilities. "So why is it Charm or Grace couldn't do the same?"

"Charm has no interest. If she had her way, the society would exist to serve her every whim. And Grace doesn't have the stomach to admit what it would take," he answered. "We've argued over this since we were foals. She'd rather waste time and energy trying to reform the Society. Kick out the bad apples, give the serfs more rights and shorter hours, even pay them a few shares! What would serfs do with money?"

I could think of a few things. "And your way?" I prompted.

"We've got more than half our security force keeping the serfs in line. If we employed more stringent methods to get them to work, that would free up ponies to secure the rest of the Hoof. More liberal use of explosive collars. Using chems to keep them working longer and more productively. More energetic recruitment." With a huff, he continued, "They come to us, begging for food and safety. The second we provide it, they work as absolutely little as possible. Worse, they grow resentful, and some

even become threats. If we crack down harder, we won't need so many here."

"Civilization built on the backs of the oppressed. Wonderful," Rampage said with a snort. "Not even the Reapers are this messed up."

"We're not oppressing them. We're making them live up to the agreement they signed when they came to live here. We feed them and their extended family. That's far more generous than the Wasteland," he retorted.

"Right. Thank you. Well, I'll go ahead and ponder that for a while when I make my choice tonight at the Gala." I gestured towards the door with my hoof, waiting for him to leave. When he did, I buried my face in my crossed hooves. "Remember when my only concern was finding out what EC-1101 is? Or what Goldenblood had done? Or just running away from people trying to kill me? Can you believe I actually miss those days? Really!"

"That's because you're trying to be the saint of the Wasteland and do better and all that. Personally, it's absolutely amazing to me. I would have killed half these fuckers in the first five minutes if I were in your horseshoes." She chuckled and then patted my back. "If it's any consolation, I admire what you're trying to do. I think you're stupid for trying it, but when is that any different?"

I turned my head enough to look at her with one eye, then re-buried my face in my hooves. It wasn't particularly comfortable. "How are you doing, Rampage?"

She blinked in surprise. "Me? I just got to slaughter five heavily armed ponies. I'm just grand." She grinned, and it lasted all of ten seconds before it slid off her face. She immediately took out a tin of Mint-als and popped two into her mouth before asking, "Do we have to talk about this?"

"No, not if you don't want to," I answered, but it didn't seem to put her at ease.

"I've watched some of the memories you've picked out of my head. Some of the stuff... like that doctor? And I thought Glory was boring..." She tried for a laugh, but it didn't last. "I don't know. I watch it and it's like... somepony else. It doesn't feel like me. Even if it's a part of me, it's like... like..."

"Like my cyberlegs?" I suggested.

"Yeah! Something that was stuck on to me," she said with a smile and a nod.

"What memories do feel like you?" I asked as I sat up.

She thought a moment. "Everything from when I was yanked out of that crater by those ghouls on. Sure, there are gaps, but I don't think of those memories as somepony else's." She cocked her head. "Why are you asking me this? Not that I'm not thankful, but don't you have something more important to do?"

I laughed, leaning back. "Oh, let's see! Get to Thunderhead and stop a biological weapon from being deployed. Stop the Harbingers, Dawn, and Cognitum from killing me. Deal with the Legate. Find out where EC-1101 is trying to go. Find out what Horizons is supposed to do. Oh, I think I have 'clean out Paradise' on my list somewhere, too." I rose to my hooves, not mentioning the most pressing... any second the Goddess was going to make all that moot by turning me into the next version of Lacunae. I started trotting back and forth. "There's a certain point where you have so much going on that helping

your friends is the only thing that feels like it really matters. Save the Society. Save the Enclave. Save the Wasteland. I can't even pick who's the right person to give a crown to!"

"Blackjack?"

I kept moving faster and faster, "I wonder if this is how Twilight and her friends felt? Having a thousand things that hundreds of thousands of lives counted on and not being able to ever really get any headway because once you finish one then another pops up and there's nothing you can do. So you push harder and think harder and hope harder while you're terrified that at any second it's all going to fall apart and you'll find out how many you killed--"

Rampage started to look worried, "Blackjack!"

I continued on. This was a time where I wanted my heart thundering and to gasp for air. I needed to, but my artificial body refused. So instead, I felt myself grow even more anxious. "But no pressure! It's not like thousands of ponies are going to die if I screw up! No, wait, they are! I mean I'm seriously trying to weigh if saving the lives of who knows how many in the Wasteland will be worth the suffering of hundreds of serfs! I mean, if it really does work and helps the Wasteland, then isn't it justified? Which is the lesser evil? Can't things just be easy? Like tell everypony trying to kill everypony else to just kill Blackjack instead. They can kill me and then they won't have to kill each other and--"

She hit me. The blow knocked me right off my hooves and sent me sprawling. I didn't get up, lying there, head pounding and staring at the wall. Then she trotted over, picked me up, and gave me a hug. "Idiot," she muttered.

"Can't I just die for them and call it good?" I whispered as I pushed my face into her neck.

"No. Dying's easy. Killing's easy. You never do the easy thing," she said as she held me. My shoulders trembled, some of the dwindling number of muscles still wired to my brain betraying my anxiety. "I know what I'd do. It'd be selfish and quick and probably hurt a lot of folks, but I wouldn't care."

It took me a few minutes to relax. Finally I removed my legs from hers. "Sometimes, I wish I could be like you."

"No you don't," she replied, soberly. "Because I would have quit a long time ago, Blackjack. I would have sold that program, or picked a fight I couldn't win, or simply wandered off. I am not a strong pony, Blackjack. I can rip people to pieces, but ask me to do the right thing on my own and I just won't."

There was a rapid knock on the door and I clenched my eyes shut. "Unless one of my friends' lives is in danger, piss off! That's a royal command!"

Then the door was pushed open, admitting a frantic looking Charm. "Blackjack! They've taken them!" I closed my eyes, feeling the urge to sic Deus on this place rising by the second. "They took Scotch Tape and Boo! They said if you don't make me in charge, they'll kill them!"

I opened my eyes and fixed her with a gaze that could cut through stone. "Really?" I asked, hoping that this was some kind of sad, elaborate joke. She nodded, looking terrified. I closed my eyes a moment, fighting for composure before I let out my breath in one slow hiss.

Time to do this... "Right," I muttered, activating my PipBuck.

"Guess they thought you weren't going to accept the bribe," Rampage said with a sigh. "Pretty good guess."

"Maybe, but I'm certain they'll do it. I think they believe they can use me," Charm said in a desperate rush. I rose to my hooves and started walking. "I mean, I know I'm young, but I promise I'll do a good job doing whatever you want," she continued as she trotted along beside me. "I was going to get the guard, but they said they'd kill them if I did, so I came to you." We continued walking down the hall. Some of the guard ponies saw us walking and fell in line. Her panic gave way to confused indignation. "Did you hear me, Blackjack? They're going to kill them if you don't make me your regent!"

"Mhmmm," I replied as I stepped out the side door and started walking across the lawns. "Did you hurt either of them?"

"I... wha... you think I'm involved in this?" she gasped, pressing a hoof to her chest.

"Did you hurt them?" I asked again, and Charm shrank back. Clearly, this wasn't following her script any more than the "assassination" with the knife had. Maybe it was genetic...

"I'm certain *they* might have!" Charm blurted. "Those two didn't go quietly. And where are you going?"

I headed towards a large shed that looked like it'd once held lots of little white carts that now lay nearby like heaps of snow. "I'm following her PipBuck tag," I replied evenly and saw her eyes grow a little wider. "Do any of you know what I've put up with today? Do any of you know what my week has been like?! I've had assassination attempts on me. I've been manipulated and betrayed more than once. I was shot through my fucking head! I am not in a fucking good mood, I am regretting ever coming here, and I am sincerely motivated to cull the lot of you and let the Collegiate take over running everything here! Do you understand?!" I roared, seeing five red bars and two blue within.

I turned and kicked the large front doors with all the power I could muster. They might have been barred within, but one blow and they broke free of their hinges and fell down to either side of me. Within, I saw the mare and stallion I'd encountered trying to pressure ponies to sign serf contracts. They sat at either side of a table, playing cards, and stared at me in shock. Next to them were two astonished-looking stallions who had been wrestling with Boo. In the back was the minotaur, Pain Train, holding onto a bound Scotch Tape with one huge hand. "You have one chance. Release them. Now!"

"You! How did you find--" the mare began, but I entered S.A.T.S. and shot her through her foreleg with a single magic bullet. She writhed on the ground, holding her leg, screaming.

The pair dropped Boo and struggled for their weapons as they backpedaled away from the mare. One tripped, falling on his back and shooting wildly into the air. The bullets struck the chassis of a cart hanging from hooks on the ceiling. With a crunch, the chassis fell free, striking both scrambling ponies with a resounding crunch. Boo immediately scrambled for safety behind me.

"Watch out! They're going to kill the hostage!" Charm shouted, glaring at the minotaur and ex-card-player. The unicorn stallion started to raise a gun, his eyes wide and terrified. He had reason to be. Like an immense hunting cat, Rampage launched herself at him, clearing the table and latching her claws in his shoulders. With a scream, he went down on the far side. Charm looked at Pain Train as he picked Scotch Tape up and stood, looking way down at me. "He's going to break her neck! Any second now! He's going to do it!" She looked at me, then at the stoic minotaur holding Scotch Tape by the neck.

“Do it!”

I locked eyes with him, just as I had that last time we'd met. Then he looked at Charm, reached down, and carefully undid the ropes on Scotch Tape's legs. Aside from looking pretty scraped up, the olive filly was uninjured. Charm looked as though a spring in her brain had just gone 'spoing' and she was trying to comprehend what was happening. Charm stared at Pain Train, her left eye twitching before looking at me and grinning from ear to ear. “She's free! Huzzah! How wonderful!” she said with ebullient glee.

I looked up at Pain Train. “Thanks,” I said as I knelt beside Scotch Tape and checked her over.

“We're even. Was a stupid plan anyway,” he muttered.

Scotch Tape rose to her hooves and her blue eyes landed on Charm. “You!” Charm's grin twitched as she took a step back. “Funny how they came for us exactly when you went to the bathroom!”

“I... I don't know what you're talking about!” Charm said as she backed away.

“Get over here!” Scotch Tape roared, and tackled Charm before the filly got three steps. “You're sick! You make the Overmare look nice! I felt sorry for you!” Scotch screamed as she rolled, bit, hit, and kicked Charm. Finally, she got a hooflock around the princess's neck. “Honestly, foalnapping us! Where do you get off?!”

“Ow! Stop it! You can't do this to me! I'm a princess! You can't prove anything!” Charm squealed as Scotch Tape bit her ear and growled like she was going to tear it off!

“Enough, Scotch,” I said with a chuckle, carefully disengaging the battered white filly. Scotch swung her hooves wildly. “Did she say this was the plan?”

Scotch Tape glared at her, then spat out, “No. But she trots out and a minute later they trot in easy as you please. They threw me in a sack! Talked about the great life they were going to have when Charm was regent. They were going to get a share, whatever that means.” Scotch Tape swung at her again. “You are so lucky. I swear, next time I'm going to give you the mother of all swirlies! I'll rig a toilet that'll suck your horn out your back end. You just wait!”

“Good hooflock, though. The ear was a nice touch,” Rampage chuckled. That finally made her stop fighting, though she still growled at the other filly.

I looked at Pain Train. “Did she plan this?”

He gave a laconic shrug. “I just do what I'm told. Ponies don't involve me in planning their schemes. I'm just the dumb muscle.” Then he looked at me. “Though I knew it was stupid. You beat me once. You'd probably beat me again.”

I looked at the battered filly. “Well?”

Charm sniffed and rubbed her eyes. “Why is everypony yelling at me? I just do what I'm told to do!” she said, giving a choking sob. I didn't twitch. Finally, she slumped and scowled at me, her eyes dry. “Fine. Believe what you want. But that deal that was made? It's still standing. And you want Daddy's memory orbs, Blackjack.” She rose to her hooves. “I saw what Goldenblood did with Horse's machine. I know what this Horizons thingy is. And if you want to know, you can give me my crown.

Otherwise, I'll send you them pulverized in a box. Got it?"

I twitched as I looked down at her. Scotch Tape still looked murderous. Rampage appeared amused. I really didn't have time for this shit. "How about this? You hand them over and I make sure that Grace or Splendid don't boot you out for good?" I counter-offered.

She narrowed her eyes in a spiteful glare. "I'd rather you drive yourself crazy thinking about what might be in them. And I can't wait till you come crawling back to me, asking me what I saw. And I'm not going to tell you. So there!" And she pulled her mouth wide and stuck her tongue out at me.

I rubbed my head. "Scotch. She's all yours. Don't kill her. She might come to her senses. And don't let yourself be taken hostage by her again. Otherwise, I'm letting P-21 handle it. Understood?"

Scotch blinked at me, and then her lips curled in an expression of sheer deviousness. I swear her ears seemed to pull into horns as she looked at the white filly. "Mmmm... come here..."

"You're insane! Stay away from me! Nooooo!" she shrieked, running for her life. It was probably the first time she'd ever had to do it; there was no way she was going to get away if that was the quickest she could flee.

I glanced at Rampage. "Make sure she doesn't mess Charm up too badly, okay?" Boo curled up next to me, making it clear she wasn't parting company with me any time soon.

"What about you?" Rampage asked.

I rolled my eyes. "We've got three hours till this party starts. I'm going to find someplace quiet, lock myself in there, and think about what to do. I doubt there's much else anypony here can throw at me."

"Famous last words," Rampage replied. "Well, if another hit squad comes after you, let me know. You do attract interesting fun." Then she turned and raced after Scotch Tape. "Don't let her get away! I'll show you how to torture a pony with a loogie!" I laughed, despite myself. Sometimes she seemed not much different from a filly herself.

* * *

I returned to Awesome's stripped collection. So many questions, like what happened when Dawn left. Had it been as Keeper said, or had Awesome been telling the truth? Somehow, I had trouble believing anypony so fascinated by Goldenblood could be honest. But then what did that say about me? I poked my head out the door at the ponies who were supposed to be my guards; hopefully they were more diligent than the last pair. "Okay. I don't care what happens. Short of fire, explosions, or my friends being hurt, I want no pony to come in here, no matter what. Is that understood?"

"Yes, ma'am," they replied, saluting briskly.

Boo scrambled to the far side of the room, looking around as if checking for possible attackers. I looked around myself, then closed the door and locked it. Then, for good measure, I levitated over a chair and wedged it under the handles. Then I shoved a table against the door. *Then* I threw a few O.I.A. ashtrays against the wall in frustration.

This wasn't the worst day of my life, but it was by far the most frustrating. I'd never had so many

obstacles and interferences thrown in my face. These ponies... these Society ponies... I wanted to help them! And they were creeping and plotting and trying to kill me and threatening my friends and I just wanted to scream! Of everything going on in my life, why was I stuck dealing with this shit? Why didn't I just hop in the airship and fly away? Punt the crown into the crowd like Rampage suggested?

"I am so not qualified for this," I growled.

I glanced and saw Boo looking nervous and smiled. "Don't worry. I'm done throwing things for a while." She tentatively approached, and I gave her ears a good rub. Instantly her apprehension disappeared. "How about you? Who do you think should run the Society?"

She blinked her wide, pale eyes at me and then nosed about the wreckage I'd tossed in my tantrum. She lifted a picture of an M.o.P. meeting with Fluttershy and Garnet and blinked at me. I chuckled and stroked her ears. "Sorry. I don't think either of those ponies will do." Her ears drooped, and she let the picture fall to her hooves. I held her, giving her back a pat. "It's okay. I'm no better at this than you are."

"That's because you're doing it wrong," rasped a voice that I hadn't heard in a while. I looked over at Dealer, calmly shuffling his cards.

"Hey," I said with a smile. "You've been quiet, lately."

"Getting old," he answered. "Two centuries is a long time by anypony's reckoning." He did look tired; there were dark shadows under his eyes, and he didn't shuffle with the same briskness as before. "I probably would have died in 99 if EC-1101 hadn't been broken out."

"How can you die? You're a soul." I couldn't keep the concern from my voice. "I thought you'd just... go on." Boo looked around, as if searching for whoever I was talking to. I laughed and gave her another pat. "I'm just talking to a pony in my head, Boo. Don't worry about it." Boo cocked her head, and, so help me, even looked a little skeptical. She did relax, though.

"Nothing lasts forever. Not even souls," he replied with a small sigh. Then he looked at me again. "Anyway, you're making the same mistake the Ministry Mares did."

"Oh?" I asked as I took a seat.

"You want both order and virtue," he replied as he drew two cards, one showing me at the head of an army and another of me hugging Rampage. "But you can't have them. Not at the same time."

"Why not?" I asked with a frown. "I thought good and evil cancelled each other out."

"Because one has to have priority over the other. Doing what's right for an individual is different from doing what's right for a group of people. Order screws people. It has to. When you're trying to prevent discord and chaos, you can't tailor the law to try and make every situation right. Likewise, if you try to do what's best, inevitably some ponies are going to buck the system. The Ministry Mares didn't understand that. Applejack tried to make order with her power armor, then was upset when her cousin mass produced weapons that could kill ponies using it. Fluttershy tried making everything better without once thinking what kind of a crime it is to modify a pony's memories against their will. If she'd truly cared about virtue, she would have let the cases of Wartime Stress Disorder mount as opposition to the war.

She didn't," he explained calmly in his soft, weak voice.

Boo let out a snort and seemed to even roll her eyes a little. I looked down at her, and she blinked cluelessly up at me. I stroked her gently for a moment, and then looked back at Dealer. "And I'm trying to do the same thing?" I frowned as I thought about it.

"You want order in the Wasteland. You want the fighting to stop. The battles to end. The misery halted. You want things safe. None of these are bad things in and of themselves. But when taken to its extreme, there is precious little virtue found in order. Splendid's plan might work. Let's say it does and he manages to bring an end to the fighting. Is life better? All the people he's going to force to work, he may as well not even call them serfs any longer. Is that pacified Wasteland worth living in without freedom?" He nailed me to the floor with his gaze. "Is your goal to turn the Wasteland into one enormous Stable 99?"

"Ouch," I winced.

He gave a small smile. "Virtue, on the other hoof... that's harder. You know that. You've done so much trying to do the right thing and do better. I've never met a pony, except maybe Big Macintosh, who honestly and sincerely tried to do the right thing as much as you, Blackjack. But part of virtue is letting others choose to be virtuous, and living with them when they choose not to be. That's freedom. It's a messy business at times. And it's hard. Damned hard. But at the end of the day, you can look yourself in the eye and know you're the better pony."

"And I can't have the best of both worlds? I can't have order and virtue at once?" I asked with a frown.

"You can, but one's got to take priority over the other. And once order is more important than virtue... oh, you can go all kinds of nasty places. Usually under the premise of 'protecting' virtue. It was everywhere before the bombs fell. Pinkie Pie ordering spritebots to record conversations and conducting random arrests. Rainbow Dash carrying out sabotage missions in zebra lands that killed tens of thousands of noncombatants. Twilight pursuing magic that she knew was going to be used in megaspells. Even Fluttershy, at the end, allowing modifying the memories of ponies who dissented. So much virtue sacrificed in the name of 'protection'. Till in the end, any virtue that was left was hollow. An empty claim long ago abandoned in reality."

Boo gave a disgusted little noise, sticking her tongue out. I looked at her again. She couldn't... but that was ridiculous. There was no way she could be hearing Dealer. It was impossible. I rubbed my chin and smirked. "You know, you get really talky when you show up, Dealer."

He blinked, then chuckled dryly. "I interact with all of one pony. Forgive me for thinking up speeches in my spare time." Tugging his hat over his face, I think he was actually blushing! After a moment or two he flicked the brim back up, looking at me once more.

"I'm trying to be smart about it. Thinking which way I should go. Isn't that what I'm supposed to do?" I asked plaintively. "Isn't that what princesses and queens are meant to do?"

"Sure. But you're not a queen. You're Blackjack. And you are not a thinking pony. If you were Twilight, sure. You could compare and debate philosophies and histories and crunch numbers and try to deduce the right course of action. Did you do that when you heard that Scotch Tape was being held

hostage?"

"No." I frowned. "I just activated her tag and went and got her."

"Exactly. You're instinctive. You're a gambler. You could have gotten Scotch Tape killed if the situation had been different. Easily." I flushed and opened my mouth to argue. "But you didn't, Blackjack. And that's the point. You do what is right because you're a good pony. You concern yourself with being good, and you're not even sure what your personal virtue is. I don't even know, and I've been watching you since Miramare." Boo gave my cheek a nuzzle, making me smile.

"But... what if I fuck up?" I muttered. "What if I choose Grace and the Society gets torn down from the outside? What if I chose Splendid and the Society takes over the world? What if I choose Charm and she becomes the Society's Overmare?"

"You live with it and accept it. You can't gamble and expect not to fail, and nothing in this life comes with zero risk. Trust yourself and decide, and then move on to all those big things that you need to do. Let somepony else deal with this nest of vipers." He then looked at me shrewdly. "Or is it you don't want to? Is something else wrong?"

I stared at him, fighting against the compulsion not to talk about it. "You know... my life is weird... right? And how... strange stuff happens? To me..." I felt the pressure growing. It spread like ink through my mind, staining everything with its touch. "Things... weird things... are happening to me... right... now..." I spat, struggling. My skull started to pound as the outside will squeezed down on me. "Please!" I managed to spit out. Boo backed away in shock, her pale eyes wide.

"Blackjack. What's wrong? What's happening to you?" he asked as he walked to me quickly and stared into my eyes with his intense gaze. "Blackjack... is something affecting you?"

I felt myself shoved back into my own mind, like an immense hoof reached around, grabbed me by the neck, and yanked me away from the terminal of my mind. Four magic bullets flashed through his head as I gave a wild swing. Of course, my hoof passed right through him. Despite being pulled out of my own seat, I fought to get back to the controls of my own mind. "Leave me alone! You stupid, annoying figment! You are nothing!" my body shouted. I overturned a table on the Dealer, sending O.I.A. paraphernalia bouncing across the floor.

Boo immediately rushed to the desk and ducked behind it, poking her trembling head out and watching fearfully. Then, suddenly, she seemed overtaken by an odd calm and simply looked out from her protective little nook. If I wasn't wrestling for control of my body...

He just narrowed his eyes as he passed right through the table. "Who are you? You're not Blackjack."

"Enough," my body said with a scowl. "The Goddess has her now. The Goddess shall recall the Lacunae and have her teleport Blackjack to us! You cannot interfere."

"The Goddess? How did you get inside her? Where are you taking her?" the Dealer demanded. Boo frowned and looked up at the ceiling, her ears twitching.

"To the Goddess's seat of power at Maripony, fool. And once she and the black book are in the Goddess's possession, the Goddess shall save this Wasteland and all within it... save those that have

vexed the Goddess. Oh yes. There will be a special fate for them all!" she crowed. A purple flash, and Lacunae arrived. "Good. Teleport this one to the greens outside the valley. The Goddess is through waiting."

Lacunae lifted a tied up bundle off her back. "Yes," she said as she looked at me with infinite regret. Then I heard a ping at my hooves and the Goddess looked down to see two bolts lying at my hooves. Then a third dropped.

That prompted me to look up.

And *that* resulted in me catching the air grate with my face. I staggered to the side, the Goddess fumbling for my guns. Lacunae raised her shield, but what came down was not an onslaught of bullets or energy blasts, but a spark grenade and a strange black river rock with a spiral carved into the surface. The world flared to white static, then darkness, as I perceived the most curious slurping sensation. It was as if something was being sucked through my entire body. Then the Goddess let out a scream that trailed away to nothing.

"Hello?" I asked. But I couldn't move. Couldn't hear. I could only wait for my systems to reboot. I could feel myself being moved. Then myself being blindfolded and something hung around my neck. "Glory? Honey, thanks, but this really isn't the time." I laughed, wondering how... Then a gun pushed to my head. "Okay, not Glory." What did it say about my life that I knew exactly what a gun to the head felt like? "If you're asking me questions or are here to gloat over my death, I can't hear you. You're going to have to wait till my hearing comes back," I said, probably loudly. "So take some time to compose yourself while you have a gun to my head!" Honestly. I was going to fire every last guard here. From a cannon...

My hearing returned with a squeal of feedback, making me hiss in pain. Of course, I had a blindfold on and tied tight. It'd take me a while to undo the knot with my TK and be impossible to hide the glow. Really, why hadn't Twilight developed a spell for that?! So no magic bullets. My legs felt tied together too... hmmm... if it weren't for the gun I might be getting excited. Ugh... why was I so crazy today?! "Okay, if this *is* something kinky, thanks but now really isn't the best time," I said, hoping to not say whatever phrase would result in a pulled trigger. "And we really should ask Glor--"

"Release your curse on him," a stallion muttered from behind me. Soon as he spoke, my back began to itch.

"Lancer," I muttered. Sexy thoughts retreated... a little.

"Release your curse on him now, Maiden. Or should I call you 'Goddess'? I won't ask you again," he muttered. "And don't bother yelling for help. Your friend is unconscious and the batspeech talisman makes you quite silent to any not wearing another talisman."

Okay, bound and helpless with a male who wanted to kill me. How to sort through these emotions? Panic? No, I'll clamp down on the hysteria. I've been in this position before and lived through it, more or less. Rage? Blew that charge with Charm. Best I could do at the moment was huffy resentment. Lust? What the hell was that even doing in my head right now!? Reason. Okay. Reason with the crazy pony. Sure. And... stop getting stupidly turned on. This was NOT the time for that!

"I don't know what you're talking about, Lancer. I've never cursed anyone," I replied, stretching out on my belly and tugging the bonds on my legs. Smooth metal wasn't the easiest thing to tie. I could

probably yank a hoof free if he gave me a window.

"Lies!" he snapped. "Free him!"

"Who?" I had a guess...

"My father..." he growled, long and low. "Remove whatever spell you cast upon him to... to make him spare you!" He kicked me over onto my back and pressed the gun under my throat.

"If I had a spell like that, don't you think I'd be using it on you right now?" I countered. "I didn't curse your father with some kind of magical mysterious Maiden powers. I'm not even a maiden. You can check yourself if you want!" What?! Why in Equestria did I blurt that?! This was not tied up sexy time! This was tied up and going to die time! Get with the program, libido!

He was silent. Sweet Celestia, tell me he wasn't checking! Finally he spoke in a tense, trembling voice. "He should have killed you. My father is the finest hoof combat specialist of this age. He crushed the dragon Bleakflame with his bare hooves. How... how could you beat him? How could he possibly allow you to live?" He pushed the gun against my throat again. "Release him and I'll grant you a quick and clean death. I won't even kill your friends."

"Touch either of them and you'll wish I cursed you," I countered in a snarl of my own, making him pull the gun away. "I don't know why your father spared me. I've fought ponies before and you're right, he was good. Damned good. Better than me, even. But he kept stopping and letting me recover. He left openings. That fight was all wrong." He was silent and I added, "And you know it."

"Silence!" he snapped. "How did you curse him? How do I break the spell?"

"Why are you so certain I cursed him?" I asked in reply, relaxing a bit. He needed me alive. If he thought killing me would break it, he'd have shot me already. Even bound, I could take control of the situation. So long as he didn't do anything to Lacunae. "I might be a unicorn, but trust me, I don't know any magic capable of doing that. If I did, my life would be a lot easier."

"My whole life, my father has told me about how he was going to defeat the Maiden. He'd tell me all about the epic, final battle where he'd crush wickedness from the world. He'd even play them out with me and my sisters. And I knew... I *knew*... he would defeat you. And when you were found at that base, I saw the moment had arrived. I sent word to all that you were here and he was to defeat you!" he said from above me. "And then... he arrived..." Lancer's voice broke.

"And he wasn't happy. The timing was wrong. Or fate wasn't right. Or whatever," I said as I lay there, imagining the strong, striped, masculine body above-- Stop. It. Now is *not* the time!

He huffed. "No. But it shouldn't have mattered. The prophecy doesn't say when the champion of the stars is defeated, only that they must be. What better time than then and there? And yet... he didn't fight as the father I knew. You should have been broken! And when you were ready to slay him... I couldn't take it. And yet... when I tried to kill you... he was not the father I knew. Not the champion of my people. So you did something to him. Cast some... some vile Equestrian spell. Like you're trying to do now!"

"Now?" I asked, nonplussed.

"With... your body... and the thoughts you're trying to put inside my head! Desist! Now!" There was a note of panic in his voice as I gave a little squirm, smiling. "That! Stop... that!" A rather disturbing level of my subconscious positively purred. Maybe I was the one who was cursed...

"Lancer, I'm just laying here. I didn't curse your father, or Xanthe, or you. I can't even pick who to give a crown to. I just want to get Glory home so she can stop a madman from killing tens of thousands of her people. Then I get to deal with a different madpony named Cognitum. Then I might have to deal with your father if he won't leave the Hoof alone. But I didn't curse him to spare me."

Lancer was silent above me. "You know there's something going on with your father, don't you?" I finally asked, suspecting the answer.

"Mother... Mother said Father was not what he seemed. I called her a liar! One of his wives shouldn't speak so dishonorably to him! But... but she persisted. She said there was a wrongness in him. And she took my sister and other doubters and fled." His voice shook. "Father told me to prove my strength. My loyalty. My honor. And I did. I tracked them down. Made my heart as hard as stone, ignored what she'd told me, and slew her."

"Sekashi's your mother?" I asked, and then cursed myself for the slip of my tongue and tried to catch myself. "She was, wasn't she?"

"Yes," he said in a confessing tone. "Now, all I have is my father. I must free him. Now tell me how to break the curse you've placed on him!" And the gun was pressed between my eyes. "Tell me, or your death shall free him!"

Not the direction I wanted, at all. "Okay. Okay. I know a counterspell that might work for... whatever. But I can't speak it aloud. I can only whisper it." Oh come on, there was no way he'd fall for this! Then the pressure of the gun relaxed a little. "Come closer," I said, unable to hide my smirk as I lay there, helpless, giving a little flex. He couldn't... he wouldn't...

The gun was pulled away and I heard him moving over me. Damn it, I couldn't stop grinning as he moved his head closer to me. "Closer..." I whispered. "You know, when I first saw you, I couldn't help but think how strong and powerful you looked."

"Stop it," he muttered, and I felt him move over me. "Stop your... magic..."

"Closer," I purred, images of black and red maned zonies frolicking in a part of my mind that had gone quite crazy. I could imagine his strong striped body above me. Felt his strong, lithe frame above me. Felt the tickle of his breath on my muzzle. Felt his... it...

"The counterspell is..." I breathed...

Then rammed my metal hind leg as hard as I could up between his legs. I felt it connect to something particularly firm and vulnerable and he let out a squeak as he went rigid above me. I then brought my forelegs up and felt them connect with his head. Grabbing him, we rolled over and I came to rest on top. I magically removed the blindfold and looked down into his stunned face.

"Evil..." he whispered, and then went limp.

"If it's any consolation, I really wanted to..." I replied as I pulled the binding from my forelegs.

That crazy little part of me gave one last purr of regret as I looked down at him. He didn't look so good, now that I saw him properly. His face and body were covered in bruises and one eye was swollen completely shut. I slipped off with a little petulant groan and trotted to Lacunae. The strange black rock with its carved spiral lay close beside her, its surface cracked through the spiral. "Lacunae? Lacunae? Are you okay?" I asked as I shook her. Boo emerged from behind the desk and trotted over, giving Lacunae a little nudge with her nose.

She groaned, then blinked and looked at me. She frowned. "Why are you squeaking like that, Blackjack?" she asked aloud, furrowing her brow in confusion.

I blinked, then looked down at a small stuffed bat that hung from a leather thong around my neck. I tugged it off, and then tugged a similar bat off of him as he started to stir. "Are you okay?"

"I... I believe so." Her horn flickered twice, then she physically reached over and picked up the rock. "A voidstone. I never imagined I'd see one."

"Stable pony here. What's a voidstone?" I asked as I reached over and took his sniper rifle... no, not his; this one looked standard-issue.

"A zebra anti-magic grenade fetish. Very rare and dangerous. They disrupt magic in a wide area," she said as Lancer pulled himself into a sitting position.

"You are wicked... vile..." he muttered bitterly. "Tempting me..."

I looked right at him. "Right now, Lancer, if it wasn't for the fact you might have killed my friend and I, I might have actually done it." And that stupid part of me still wanted to! "I am feeling that crazy right now. But I didn't curse your father, or you." Now I saw shame exploding across his features as he dropped his eyes. I guessed the tears weren't just from bruised testicles.

"What do you want to do with him?" Lacunae asked. Boo looked at me with her big pale eyes, and I could practically feel Fluttershy staring into my soul.

"Take him out of here," I replied, then knelt beside him, searching him for any other voidstones... but no. "You are one scary, messed up zebra. I hope you find some peace, Lancer," I said, and kissed his cheek. He was a murderer, true, and would probably try to kill me again, but then so was I and I couldn't honestly say I didn't deserve it.

Lacunae left in a purple flash. I considered the Goddess... yes, she was still there. The voidstone had scrambled the connection a bit, but I was still locked in Unity. I tried to speak about her aloud, but my tongue refused to form the words. The voidstone had bought me some time. Hours. Days if I was lucky.

Then she'd be one pissed Goddess. But until then, there was something I had to do...

I cleared the door, poked my head out into the hall, and eyed one of my bodyguards. The two stallions jumped. "Yes, Your Majesty?" one asked. Stringy. Not what I was looking for. I eyed the other. Better, but not quite what I wanted. If I couldn't imagine the babies... *And*, I thought with a sigh, *Glory would kill me*. And not in a fun way.

"Nevermind," I muttered as I stepped back inside and closed the door. Well, in the meantime, I

had the old Stable 99 standby... Sticky hooves...

* * *

When Glory stepped through the door a while later (the guards not trying to stop her, I noticed), we wore matching expressions of tired and awkward. Boo trotted out immediately, flushing and looking like, at the moment, she wanted to be anywhere but here. Glory gave her a curious look as she departed for said anywhere else, but then shrugged, walked right up to me, pushed herself into my hooves, and snuggled down atop me. "Make me stop thinking about boys," she groaned as she nuzzled my neck.

"You too?" I asked with a small, sympathetic smile.

"I hate this time of the year," she growled softly. "This is when most stallions get sent on long distance patrols so mares back home don't have to think about them. Stupid biology," she growled and huffed.

"So... have fun with them," I said, and immediately she flushed. "What?"

"Nothing!" she said in a way far too quick and defensive for it to be nothing. I watched her start to crumble and kissed her firmly.

"So who was it?" I asked with a small smile.

"You're not mad?" she said barely above a whisper.

I sighed and shook my head. "Glory, you could rut every stallion in this place and I wouldn't be mad with you. Every stallion and mare. At the same time! I wouldn't be mad with you, or disappointed," I said as I stroked her mane. "Stable 99, remember?"

She sighed, rolled her eyes, and gave a disgusted huff. "You don't understand, Blackjack. I don't like stallions like that. But... he was nice and handsome and... ugh! I can't believe I did it."

"So, who was it?" I asked with a smile. She hid her face in her wings. "Please tell me it wasn't P-21, because if it was I think I'm going to need to go find him quick if you did."

"No..." she muttered. "I thought about it... a lot... but no..." She sighed and looked away. "Splendid."

Ah. Well, I couldn't fault her taste. "And was he?"

She smacked me with her wing. "Blackjack!"

"Well, was he?" I pressed, grinning at her. "You got to throw me across the room for my little indiscretion. The least I should get is saucy details!"

She whined, then deflated. "He was... okay. He was gentle, but it was still... weird. Not what I was expecting for my first stallion. Definitely not as fun as with you, but it was bearable," she finally admitted. "But I am not going for a repeat performance, thank you very much." She chewed her lip a moment. "Probably..."

"So are there baby Dashes in the future?" I asked, and she shivered.

"I hope not. Just..." she trailed off and tapped her forehooves together. "Ask me when I'm a little more myself, okay? Honestly... I hate thinking about males like this..." She looked around the office and then looked at the pile of cloth that Lacunae had brought. "What's that?"

"I think our dresses for the Gala," I answered with a small smile, then kissed her ear, making her smile.

"You seem... better," Glory said with a smile, looking me over.

"I had a friend die, was made queen, had three assassination attempts and one fillynapping, and almost had sex with a zebra who wants to kill me. Being queen sucks." I snorted.

"*Almost* had sex with a zebra?" she asked archly.

I tapped her chest. "*Did* have sex with a unicorn," I teased

"Touche," she sighed, pouting a little. "Fine. You can have a stallion too, if you want. Just one! And I better not hear about it over the radio. In fact, I'd rather not hear about it *ever*."

"I love you," I said with a laugh, holding her.

"I'm getting used to the fact that... you're just not like me... like that." She sighed and shook her head. "It really is just sex to you, isn't it? Just... orgasms?"

"Sure. It's fun. It brings the stable together. It passes the time. Oh, yeah, and fun. Just don't do it in public or with family, and make sure it's all consensual," I said with a bitter smile. Pity I had no idea what consent actually meant back then. "I never meant to hurt you, Glory. And if it does, I won't do it with another pony. I'll want to. But I won't."

She closed her eyes and sighed, then smiled a little and shook her head. "No. If it happens, it does. Just... keep it discreet. One pony, for now. We can take it case by case."

I gave a squee and kissed her hard enough to curl her hooves. I wondered if I could catch Lancer again and give him a reason not to want me dead. I'd show him curses! I'd curse him with the inability to walk straight! I'd... I blinked and caught Glory's flat look. "Um... thanks?" I said tentatively.

"Try not to drool too much," she replied with a touch of sarcasm before cuddling with me. After a moment, she asked in a much less arch tone, hugging me with her wings, "So, you seem... happy. Have you made a decision about who to give the crown to?"

I paused, frowned, then realized. "You know... I think I have..."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Buh... I swear, sometimes these chapters just reflect real life. May was a nightmare for me. Lost my job. Got a year older. Found out some very unpleasant news about money. Yeah. It's been frustrating. But I'm glad to get another chapter done. I'm incredibly thankful to Hinds and Bro for helping me get this chapter out relatively quickly. Thanks also to Kkat, as always. And thanks to

everypony for reading. Once again, donation cup is out as I'm going to have to move somewhere in 2 months and will accept assistance through paypal. David13ushey@gmail.com. Thanks again everypony!)