

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 57: Best Night Ever

"I can't believe we're finally here. With all that we've imagined, the reality of this night is sure to make this... The Best Night Ever!"

I've never been good with parties. I'd had a few celebrations at 99, but, by and large, parties were things that happened to other ponies. Even after getting outside, I always got a little squirm in my gut from the idea of being in a social situation where I was the center of attention. Cuddling with Glory and talking about 'psychosexual metamorphic influences' was more appealing than being in a place where I was expected to actually interact. If it meant I'd be alone with her, I'd happily speculate with Glory all night about whether or not her different body accounted to her being receptive to Splendid's offers of 'comfort' after I'd gone off to sulk.

Unfortunately, the day was almost over, and the guests were arriving. I had no clue who would be attending, though. While I'd assumed that the Gala was Society only, apparently it was more than simple revelry and excess. It was an opportunity to invite important outsiders and bedazzle them with demonstrations of all that the Society had to offer. I supposed the point was so their guests would return home and sulk all year long that they weren't as good as the Society.

Hoity arrived, looking quite pleased. Glory excused herself, muttering about a bathroom. "It looks as if this is going to be the greatest Gala in generations. Almost everypony invited is attending." I supposed the Gala was the best social event in the Hoof, and he flourished at social events. "So, Your Majesty, there is just one last tiny detail to cover. Have you selected your regent?"

"I have," I replied, and opened my mouth.

He quickly raised his hooves before I could speak, though. "And please don't say me. I won't do it. I'll support whoever you select, but I have no desire to put my undead *derriere* on the throne and my excellent coiffeur in the crosshairs. I am a majordomo *par excellence*, but many ponies have difficulty taking my advice straight and undiluted."

Hmmm... well... that killed one idea... "Can I make three ponies my regent?" I asked.

"Only if you want two of them dead," he replied casually. "Triumvirates don't last long."

And that spiked that idea. "Can I make one regent and have the other two swear an oath to help them out or get kicked out?" I asked in a huff.

He pondered it a moment. "Yes, I imagine that might work. For a time, at least. Who did you want as your regent?"

I told him.

He blinked. "Really? That's quite... are you certain?"

"I am. And I expect you to do everything you can to help," I replied with a smile. "With luck, this will be a turning point for the Society."

"Yes... well... I'll go make the proper arrangements," he said and trotted out.

I had to take a quick trip outside to take care of one last bit of work. Deus was parked next to the reservoir, his cannons pointing out over the water. "Hey, how are you doing?" I asked, tapping his armor.

Something in him released a wheezing sigh. "Yeah, I hear that," I said with a smile. "I need to ask a favor." The engine emitted a low grumble. "Yeah, I know I'm the last pony you want to do any favors for, but I need your help. We're going into the sky soon, and there's no way we can take you with us." Silence. "I need you to stick around the Society a little while." He swung his turrets towards me, and his engine snarled, the cannons waving back and forth.

I raised my hooves defensively. "Hey, I know you don't like it. I don't like them much either. I put the fear of Rampage into them, but I'm afraid that when she and I go, they're going to resume their old bullshit games. So I want you to stay here. If anything deadly happens to the regent and Hoity Toity, I give you full permission to take over and give this place to Big Daddy, the Collegiate, or the Finders; whoever you want. If this place stays sane for a couple weeks, go back to Chapel and keep it safe. Just keep a radio ear open. You can travel faster and safer than almost anypony."

I think it was the word 'pony' that did it. His cannons raised and dropped, and then the turret pointed back over the water. Call me crazy, but the image seemed so... lonely. I tapped his armor again and he swiveled a camera at me. I reached out and hugged his tank tread; it was too wide for my legs to fit around, but it was the thought that counted. "Thanks. I mean it. You're a better pony than the one I met in 99."

That started his engine rumbling softly.

One last bit. The Society's jail was a cinder block-walled storage shed built into the side of a hill. Despite the heavy metal door, I suspected that the occupants inside could have escaped if they wanted to. The power-armored guards outside might have been a bit more of a challenge, though. I stepped through the door and looked over at Lancer sitting quietly in the corner. While I'd wanted him released, Hoity had convinced me that letting a zebra sniper go was simply asking for trouble. I hoped he might get me more of those anti-magic bombs and give me more time away from the Goddess, but apparently they were exceptionally rare, even for zebras. I walked up to the large gray minotaur. "Hey," I said, noting that he'd yanked the chains right off the walls. There were others I could have asked, but I'd seen what passed for loyalty for most of the Society.

"You," his eyes glittered in the dim light.

"You let Scotch go without a fight, and I appreciate that. I've come to make you a deal," I said as I sat before him. "You've been working with the Society for a while, haven't you?"

"I was in that king's menagerie for years before they shut it down," he said with a low growl. "There's always folks that need muscle, though. I'm guessing that's why you're here, too. Ponies only talk if they want something."

I took that in. "I do want something. I want you. You seem a decent enough sort. You let Scotch go and knew a stupid plan when you heard one. You've also seen what passes for bodyguards in this place. Mine let a squad of five Harbingers in to kill me. I don't want to pick a regent only to have them slaughtered because someone makes a deal. I want you to protect my regent."

His dark eyes bored into me. "And if I say no?"

"Then you go home. Or I'll write you a letter of recommendation for the Reapers, if you want. If they let Gorgon fight, they should let you." He let out a snort. "Isn't that what you want?"

"Ponies..." He slowly rose till his horns scraped the ceiling, and despite myself I took a few steps back. It was silly; I'd faced far worse things than him, but there was something about the sheer presence of him. "Do you think I really care about fighting? My kind were a strong race, removed from your petty war. We had no interest in either side; your war and the things you battled over were trivial. We're not

catcrows like griffins. We were not mercenaries peddling our strength to the highest bidder. We simply wanted to be left alone. And now you come here and assume I'd want to... that I would choose to... continue to be wrapped up in your petty conflicts."

My, he was much more talky than I recalled. "Alright then. What do you want to do?" The question seemed to surprise him, and he scowled in thought a moment.

"What I want is respect. What I want is to find another of my own kind. To know whether or not my species is doomed to extinction or not. To learn if my home still exists. Fighting. Politics. Petty squabbles for transitory power." He turned his head and spat to the side. "None of these matter to me."

I looked up at him and smiled. "You're right. It is stupid. And that's exactly what I've been thinking since I got here. All this backstabbing and scheming... it's insane. It's the exact opposite of what the world needs. So I need someone who can rise above it. I need a person who isn't going to be bribed. And if you stay, well, word will get around. And if any of your people hear of it, they might seek you out. At the very least, you'd be in a position to hear news of abroad for when you decide to leave."

The minotaur pursed his lips as he looked down at me. "This is a bad place," he finally said in his low, slow voice. Lancer's eyes watched me with a silent stare, but thanks to the little pink pony in my head, I caught his minute nod.

"Oh, I know the Society has a lot of rot to it, but--"

"Not the Society. Are you so removed from your roots that you can't feel it?" He snorted, and his muscles flexed powerfully. His fist smashed right through the cinder block wall. Two more punches and he'd pulverized a hole. I started to think that he might have gone easy on me our first battle. From the hole he pulled out wet earth and muddy pebbles. "This land is poisoned. All of this land. It is a poison seeped into the very stones," he said as he turned them over. He turned the pebbles over and then met my gaze. He seemed to be searching for some comprehension from me, and when it didn't arrive, he snorted, "Pah. I don't know why I bother."

"No! Please. Continue," I said, as I stepped closer. "What do you mean?"

He seemed to consider me, working out if I was serious. After a moment, he answered, "This land is poisoned. A sickness seeps away its life. My kind has felt the cries and weeping of the earth for centuries. Since before your war." He smashed a pebble between his fingers. "They are dead. Lifeless."

"The stones are... dead?" I asked in bafflement.

"Stones contain a life and spirit all their own. Strength beyond mere rock. Some ponies once cultivated the life of stones, encouraging the growth of gems and strong bones of the world. But the very bones of the world here are rotten." He snorted and flung the dirt away. "I came here as a young bull to discover the source. More the fool, I."

I began to scoff, but then stopped. "You're talking about Enervation. You're saying that it's sucking life out of the *rocks*?" He scowled at my question, then nodded. I frowned, idly rubbing my chest. I remembered... was it a dream or a memory? "A long time ago, something happened to Equestria. A disaster. Do the minotaurs know anything about it?"

Now he appeared surprised, but gave a small nod. He lifted a rock. "The stone remembers. Eons and eons ago. A calamity from the skies that fractured the very earth. But how do *you* know?"

"Because we found it," I said, frowning. "A machine... or... something else. Something powerful."

We found it and tried to use it. I think it's generating the Enervation."

His harsh glare relaxed a touch. He seemed to be reassessing me. "Never have I heard your kind speak of important things. It has always been war, power, and greed." His earlier scorn was now giving way to sincere consideration. "Our world is dying. It is more than the radiation. More than the taint. Such poisons eventually fade. This is growing. It chokes the life from the very stone."

"Can the world be restored?" I asked, remembering layers of stone and trapped bones. The glowing gems above the fossil-bearing layers.

He looked troubled. "I... don't know." Pain Train knelt and stared into my eyes. "You seek to end this?"

"I just want to save ponies," I muttered, at a loss. "That's what Security does."

"Just ponies?" he asked with a scowl.

"No. I mean... not just ponies. I want to save the lives of everyone I can. Griffins. Minotaurs. Zebras. Everyone," I added and then looked at the pebbles he held and levitated one out of his grasp. "Even little rocks, if they're alive." Lancer looked up at me, his eyes dark and unfathomable.

The words made Pain Train actually smile... a little. "Very well. If you can be selfless enough to protect my kind, and little rocks, I will do the same and protect yours. For now," he replied.

* * *

Since King Awesome's bedroom was full of holes, Glory and I'd relocated to Grace's room to get ready. Lacunae, Scotch, Boo, and Rampage had hijacked Splendid's bathroom, and Hoity had sworn to take care of P-21. I'd never seen so many real flowers before, precious decorations placed all over. I recognized the roses, and I assumed some others were tulips or daffodils from pictures in books, but there were others of such delicate beauty that I had no idea if I was supposed to sniff, look at, or eat. Besides the flowers, her room was decorated with laces and fine soft cotton sheets.

Unfortunately, her tub didn't have room for two, so after I washed, I dressed while Glory bathed. Standing in front of the vanity, I looked at the collection of makeups, brushes, and ribbons, and just stared at myself. White hide and black steel didn't really promise a good look. The clothes I was supposed to wear lay in a heap of purple on the bed. I'd be lucky if I didn't simply rip the dress Lacunae had picked up... wait. Where did she get these dresses? I'd tried to ask her telepathically, but after that grenade the telepathic link had been rising and falling like a tuning radio. From the shrieks of rage I'd picked up through Unity though, the Goddess was *not* happy.

Just get me through tonight.

Grace stepped in, already looking positively gorgeous in her silver-threaded blue ballgown. It appeared as if she was dressed in sapphire flame. "Aren't you going to get ready?"

"I... um..." I waved a hoof a little. "I'm just trying to figure it out."

She sighed and shook her head. "I take it there's not much call for makeup in the Wasteland," she said as she levitated a brush and began to stroke my mane into line.

"Actually, this is the first time I've ever worn it," I replied a little sheepishly. "I mean, there were other ponies in 99 who did. Made themselves look nice all the time and the like. I was just always on the night shift, so it never really mattered how I looked. And then once in the Wasteland..."

"I see," she replied. "The Society puts a great deal of stock in appearances. It makes substance

an undervalued commodity.” She levitated two more brushes and gave the same attention to the rest of my body. I had to admit that it felt good! “Did my brother do something this afternoon? He’s been acting... smug.”

“Glory had sex with him.” I had a feeling he’d thought it would give him an ‘in’ with me. I frowned in annoyance, then saw Grace gaping at me in shock and added, “He behaved himself, didn’t cross the line.” At least Glory hadn’t said he had. If that changed... But Grace seemed even more disturbed. “By all accounts, he was okay at it.”

“Blackjack,” Glory called from the bathroom in that tone that meant I was doing something Blackjaky.

“What?” I asked looking over at her through the door.

“Most ponies don’t talk about other ponies having sex with other ponies,” she said, looking through the door from the tub, folding her blue forelegs under her chin. She spoke exactly like Mom when explaining to me that guns were dangerous.

“They don’t?” I blinked in confusion. “That was at least half the gossip in 99.”

“Really? What was the other half?” Grace asked with an amused smile.

“Everything else,” I answered.

Grace furrowed her brows, then her expression turned a touch baffled. “I’m afraid I don’t get the joke,” she replied.

I looked from Glory in the tub and back to Grace. “I was making a joke?” Glory covered her face with a hoof as Grace flushed, staring at me.

Glory sighed, smiling and shaking her head. “Blackjack...” she began helplessly.

“What? We did! There’s not a lot to talk about in a stable, day to day!” I said defensively, spreading my hooves and pleading for understanding as Glory started to laugh.

Grace seemed to process this thoughtfully, her flush fading as she composed herself easily. “I see. I suppose we can chalk it up to candor,” she said diplomatically. She set down the brush. “Well, he was always the charming one. I suppose he told you how tough your life must be, and how much he admired you?”

Glory frowned and sat up. “Yeah! How’d...” She slumped in the tub. “Let me guess. He uses that line a lot?”

Grace gave a small sigh. “To be fair, no. He’s actually quite discriminating. He was likely sincere, too, in his own way,” she said primly as she took up a little brush and began to put some powder on my face. “Splendid is always good at whatever he sets his mind to.”

“He was the first male ever openly interested in me,” Glory said with a frown. “Couldn’t believe it was happening, and by the time I really processed it...” She shook her head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Normally all guys get from me is a constant string of mental ‘no’s. He managed the first ‘maybe’ and turned it into an ‘okay’.”

“Maybe he used some sort of sex spell on you. Zap. Instant lovings,” I suggested. If that were true, it would really simplify how to handle him. I had experience with that.

Grace let out a patient little sigh and smiled as she levitated the bundle of purple off the bed.

"Doubtful. Splendid simply knows how to talk to mares. A blend of flattery, semi-honest praise, and somewhat sincere admiration is a potent mix. I never had the talent myself, but then, I'm usually fending off the hollow flattery." She paused and stared at the violet and silver-threaded dress. "Sweet Celestia... this... this is a Rarity!"

"Yeah, I imagine dresses are pretty rare in the Wasteland," I replied.

"Not 'rarity' as in scarce. 'Rarity' as in one of Rarity's own designs." Grace turned it about. "They were precious even before the war. I think I recognize it from old copies of Image Magazine. This was from Luna's Nocturne Ensemble five years before she assumed the throne! And this!" She lifted Glory's dress, the rainbow colors still magically vibrant and the trim still fluffy. "It's one of her original designs for Rainbow Dash's very first attendance at the Gala! Ohhh!" She gushed in delight and rubbed her cheek on the fluffy white trim. Then she caught my smirk and immediately flushed. "Aheh... sorry. I have a bit of a thing for pre-war trends."

"Like your father," I noted. I suspected that Lacunae had pulled some favors with Charity. I wondered how much I'd owe for renting priceless dresses. "Well, it's a shame to put it on me. I'll probably rip it in three steps."

"Tch. Not if I have anything to say about it," Grace said as she placed the dress on me. "This is a crime against fashion, but I think I'll be able to restore it." She said as her horn glowed.

"Wait. What are you..." And I blinked as I felt it shift over my body and become perfectly snug. I blinked and twisted my head, taking a few experimental steps, but the garment didn't catch and tear on anything. "How'd you do that?" I twisted my head and saw the spine reinforcement melded almost perfectly with the violet fabric.

"Clothing alteration spell. No Society unicorn would be caught dead without one." Only the Society would have a spell like *that* in the Wasteland. She finished with her brushes and placed the headdress on top. A few bobby pins... so that was what they were for... and she gave a little nod. "There. Now you look impressive, commanding, and beautiful."

She gently turned me away from the vanity and towards a full body mirror in the corner. "Yeah, right. It's going to take a lot more than that to make me look..." A mare stood in that mirror that I'd never seen before, wearing a dress of deepest purple with silver threadwork moon motifs on the breast and haunches and stars along the hem. Countless tiny amethysts glittered softly, catching the light to make it appear as if she were wearing a silken swatch of the night. Atop her head rested a purple headdress decorated with a crescent moon surrounded by four silver stars and matching purple feathers. She had glossy black metal limbs, but they so blended with the dark fabric that it was almost impossible to tell where steel ended and silk began. Her unblemished white hide betrayed none of the abuse and hardship its owner had suffered.

And that mare was me.

I couldn't talk as I looked at Grace, tears welling in my eyes. If only Mom could have seen me like this. "Thanks," I muttered, dropping my eyes.

Glory stepped out of the tub and shook herself, then fluttered her wings and walked up to me. "If you say you don't deserve to look like this, I'm going to thump you," she said, giving me a wet nuzzle. Grace smiled, levitated over towels, and gave Morning Glory every bit of attention she'd given me. "You're quite good at this, Grace," she commented as her rainbow mane was brushed by one floating brush while another took care of her tail.

"Since pleasant appearances are so rare in the Wasteland, they are a mark of superiority. The

Gala used to be a parody of grotesqueries with everypony pretending that they were magnificent. I always preferred substance over satire, though; I refused to look ghastly and depend on others to be cowed by my father. The game that so many here play is ridiculous in the extreme. So, simply, I raise the bar, and others are required to expend a little effort in turn. I might not be able to demand excellence, but I can model it," Grace declared grandly.

Glory winced as her mane was tamed by Grace's brushes. "It actually reminds me of home."

"It does?" I asked in surprise.

"Up above, the Enclave maintains the delusion that the Wasteland ends at the clouds. Things are falling apart from one end of the Enclave to the other, but everypony smiles and insists that everything is okay. Even when there are famines at the drop of a feather and half our cities are empty due to a lack of actual resources to support them, everypony pretends that things are wonderful because we're not the Wasteland. Thunderhead refused to follow that line. That was why the Volunteer Corps were pushed. To tear away that illusion of superiority." She gave Grace a warm smile. "I suppose I can fully support your drive for substance."

"If the Society is to be better than the Wasteland, we must be better in truth, not just in presumption," Grace said with a prim bob of her head.

"Isn't that a little arrogant?" I asked her with a cock of my brow.

She looked back and replied coolly, "Not if it's true. And even if it was, isn't aristocracy *supposed* to be arrogant?" I couldn't think of a counterargument to that.

As soon as Glory was finished, the dress's laurel headdress resting upon her rainbow mane, we stepped out. Somewhere, a band began to play classical music, and I found myself nostalgic for Octavia. Lacunae stood outside Splendid's room, talking to the closed door. "You look fine!" the alicorn said aloud in exasperation. She wore the dress that Velvet had altered for her larger frame, looking like an echo of a Princess of yesterday in magnificent burgundy and gold. As we approached, she looked at us and gave a start. "Rainbow..." she breathed as she stared at Glory for a moment, then shook her head. "Forgive me," she said with an apologetic smile. "You three look quite lovely." Then she looked back at the door and sighed. "Unfortunately, Rampage is having some issues."

"Not having issues. I'm not coming out," Rampage's voice replied, slightly muffled. "There's no way I'm coming out dressed like this."

"Come on, how bad could it be?" I asked with a smile. Lacunae shook her head, and I felt a little concerned. I pulled a bobby pin from my mane, carefully worked it in, and popped the lock. Returning the pin to my mane, I pushed the door open. Splendid's room was decorated with photographs of Ministry Mares, particularly Rainbow Dash and Applejack. Huh, who knew? Boo wore an absolutely adorable pink dress with bows and tiny stitching of cupcakes along the hem and a small round cap decorated like a cake with pink frosting. To her credit, only one tiny spot looked like she'd given it a nibble. "Rampage, where..."

"Don't look at me!" wailed a voice from the corner. A beautiful striped mare without steel wire in her tail cowered there. Her tangled, curly mane had been straightened and trimmed by what had to be magic. She was wrapped in a lovely white silk dress. It was simple, elegant, and lacked a single barb or spike anywhere. Instead, it was beaded about the waist with strands of pearls and delicate rubies. An ivory manecomb with a heart-shaped fire ruby gleamed in her scarlet mane. "I can't go out dressed like this! I'd rather go naked than like this!"

"Wha... what's wrong?" I muttered in shock.

"What's wrong? What's wrong! Look at this!" Rampage said as she gestured to the outfit. "I wouldn't have even put it on except she used her cheating alicorn magic to take off what I'd planned to wear!"

"I had to levitate her off her hooves, telekinetically unbuckle her, and scrub her like a filly," Lacunae said to me out of the corner of her mouth, then said firmly to Rampage, "Spiked armor is what you always wear. This is a special event."

"You look... amazing," Glory said, her wings fluffing up a little.

"I look soft," Rampage muttered, going pink as she hugged herself. "I feel naked like this."

"Quite the contrary," Grace murmured in clear approval.

"You're fine. I never thought that a Reaper would be scared by wearing a dress," I said as I touched her shoulder.

"Shows how much you know," Rampage retorted, going redder as she looked away. "I expected black with chains and spikes and skulls..." She looked almost near tears.

Glory rubbed her chin, "You know, I've heard that, in some cultures, white is the color of death. So really, if you think about it, you are a maiden of death."

I looked at Glory in bafflement, and she snapped my rump with her tail. "Oh, yeah! And the red... um... it looks like blood!"

"Really? You're not just saying that?" she asked as she rubbed her eyes.

"Absolutely," Grace said with utter sincerity. "If you think about it, those pearls symbolize the... skulls of your defeated enemies. And that mane pin is the heart of your foes that you've ripped from their chest."

Rampage stared at the white unicorn, then smirked. "You are so full of it. If it symbolizes that, then I should give it to Blackjack. She's actually eaten my heart." Well, didn't that comment get a somewhat disturbed look from my cousin! Rampage, though, appeared somewhat mollified. "Alright. Fine. I'll wear this stupid, lacy, frou-frou outfit." She looked to the bathroom door. "Hey! Scotch! You ready?"

"That is not a frou-frou outfit! That is a Rarity," Grace said with mild reproach.

"So's mine!" Scotch squealed as she jumped out of the bathroom. It was certainly... something, though nothing I could ever see Rarity creating. It was a one piece vivid pink bodysuit with glaring neon green slashes all across it. Perhaps it might have been tolerable, but Scotch Tape had taken it upon herself to... where did she get her hooves on bright pink makeup!? It was painted jaggedly around her eyes, and she'd styled her blue mane in spikes with some kind of stiff mane gel. "Don't I look awesome in my Rarity outfit?"

"That is *not* a Rarity," Grace said delicately. "*That* is a Sweetie Belle."

"That! I wanna wear something like that! Quick! Someone disintegrate me!" Rampage said with an eager grin. "Do you have one in black?"

"Sorry. That was the only filly-sized outfit that Charity possessed," Lacunae replied. "And she insisted on the makeup."

"What? It looks good, doesn't it?" Scotch Tape asked plaintively.

Grace, without missing a beat, replied primly, "Yes. Yes it does." Then she looked at the rest of us and asked smoothly, "Don't you all agree?" Her tone implied that, if any of us didn't, then clearly there was something reprehensible about us, so naturally we all nodded. The olive filly beamed quite happily.

As my friends and I walked along the hall towards the stairs that led to the ballroom, I looked from one to the next. Scotch Tape commented on how Glory's dress made her at least one fifth cooler. Rampage hung back, looking oddly sweet in her insecurity. Boo just seemed keen on getting to the festivities. Lacunae met my eyes, visions of Galas long ago swimming in hers as the Goddess slowly eroded what little resistance remained between her and us. The void fetish had bought me one last evening, at most.

Maybe I was squandering what little time I had left, but the Goddess had filled my brain with so many blocks and erasures that I was worn down trying to fight her. I wasn't sure I could physically say the word 'goddess' after all she'd done to me. So, I could make sure my friends could take care of everything once I was gone.

That was the least I could do after all the trouble I'd caused them.

We walked to the staircase leading down to the ballroom. Prince Splendid waited at the bottom, and Glory sighed. Then I noticed a stallion in a tux waiting casually beside him. Small, a little thin, but incredibly handsome with an impeccably combed mane. Calm blue eyes looked right into mine, and for a moment the crowd seemed to fade into the background. It was just the two of us as I descended, each step like a timeless eternity until I reached the bottom. Then he reached out, curled his fetlock around my foreleg and lifted it to his lips, pressing his lips to the end. Then he looked into my eyes, his lips curling slightly, and asked casually, "So, was all this a part of the plan?"

"P-21?" I asked, a little bemused at the sight of him. Hoity Toity stood nearby in an equally magnificent maroon tuxedo. I wondered where he'd acquired such fine garments, but I supposed that, if I were a ghoulish like him, my most precious possessions would be such clothes.

"Whoa. You look good, Daddy!" Scotch Tape gushed, rushing down the last few steps to hug him.

"He cleaned up rather well," Splendid said with a warm smile. Then he looked at Glory and said just as warmly, "Morning Glory." She went even redder as she gave an awkward nod. Then he regarded me. "Your Majesty. Would you permit me to escort you to the Gala?"

"I need to speak to Hoity a moment," I replied, and his face became downcast.

"Ah, of course." He looked to Glory, trying that same winning smile, but she'd moved to put Lacunae between him and her as they walked to the ballroom. Rampage just gave him a stomp look and walked past while Scotch Tape rushed to P-21's side to enter with him. Finally, Splendid looked at Boo and hesitated a moment as she blinked cluelessly at him. Finally, he smiled and moved up beside her, "May I?"

She looked at me, and I glanced at Grace and gave a little tilt of my head. "Perhaps you can escort us both inside, Brother? Like when we were young?" Grace said as she moved on the other side of Splendid.

He blinked in surprise and then smiled a little before he nodded. "Very well. Together then." They followed Rampage to the Ballroom.

As the trio moved off, I trotted up to Toity. The ghoulish grinned. "Nicely played," he said. "Please tell me it was intentional."

"Was what intentional?" I asked in bafflement. He just sighed and shook his head, as if I were a filly who didn't understand the rules. "What am I supposed to do at this Gala? When do I make the announcement?" I asked, a touch cross.

"I've talked to the necessary ponies. The guests have all been searched for weapons. I'll declare that the Gala has begun, and you'll say a few words. We'll have a few short introductions, then you are free to mingle. Circulate. Enjoy yourself. Dance, if you are inclined. You'll likely receive some gifts, all unwrapped, of course. No need to risk a handsomely packaged bomb. In a few hours, I'll announce your declaration, and you'll address the crowd. Then you'll retire. In the morning, you leave in the *Fleur*, and we'll deal with the repercussions," Hoity said with a carefree wave of his hoof, as if they were of no matter.

"Sounds good to me," I replied, wishing I could ask him to add 'The Goddess Resumes Control' to the party schedule. Actually, I'd love to just tell anypony at all! I stepped up beside him. "Care to escort me inside?"

"You'd want to enter with me?" he said, an expression of surprise on his mottled face.

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?" I asked in bafflement, smiling as I knitted my brows. He pulled down his glasses, staring at me for a moment. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just an interesting reminder of why King Awesome picked you to select his heir," he said with a smile as he walked beside me.

Epicure, the lime green colt, stood by the doorway and nodded to both of us. "Fillies and Gentlecolts!" he proclaimed loudly, making a gesture that killed the music. "Presenting Her Royal Majesty of the Society of Equestria, Queen Blackjack, and her escort, Sir Hoity Toity of Canterlot!"

Then we stepped through the doors, and for a moment I was overwhelmed by the lights shining on me and a thunderous noise that almost had me jumping into S.A.T.S. to determine the target. Then I realized that nopony was shooting at me... no... they were stomping their hooves in applause, cheering, and chanting my name. I froze in place, wanting to turn tail right there and run. There was no way I was going in there with hundreds yelling and calling my name! I would have been happier being shot at.

Hoity, as if reading my mounting panic, hooked his foreleg around mine and kept me from flight. "Just smile, walk to the throne, and wave when you get there," he said, giving me a forward nudge and starting me walking across the ballroom. The band... correction, the strange robopony DJs from Flank... played a grand tune from two centuries ago, and I stared straight ahead at the throne on the far side of the room. It seemed like it was farther than the moon and that I walked forever as we proceeded through the crowd. Around me had to be the greatest collection of pre-war clothing in the world; most of it wasn't as spectacular as the Rarities we wore, but all of it was formal wear to some degree.

I reached the dais on the far side of the room. The crown sat upon a purple pillow beside the gilded throne. I took a seat and looked at the hundreds of eyes all locked on mine. If I'd had a heart, it likely would have stopped then and there. Glory sat beside me and P-21 next to her. They looked at me with eyes brimming with confidence. Hoity moved to the other side of the throne. "Thank you for coming," he said to the room. "May the Grand Galloping Gala commence!"

"What?" I blinked at him a moment then back at the crowd. "Oh." I smiled and struggled to get the words out as he'd told me. Damn it! Why wasn't the Stable Dweller doing this? She could have just sashayed in and wowed them all with just her sheer awesomeness. "Um... Thanks for coming. Let's get this party started!"

The two robot-helmeted ponies I'd met a lifetime ago in Flank began to play music, a strange

blend of classical melody and modern beat as they worked the controls. "Now you'll meet the honored guests," Hoity said to me. "Shake their hooves, welcome them to the Gala, and graciously accept whatever gifts they give you," he murmured, then looked at my friends. "You can go. Mingle. Dance if you like."

"I'll stay with Blackjack," Glory said, leaning over and giving me a nuzzle. "She gets in trouble on her own."

"I wanna dance!" Scotch Tape squealed. "Dance with me, Daddy!" P-21 looked at me with the strangest smile. Happy. Simply happy as he followed her to where the Society ponies were pairing off in the middle of the floor.

Rampage curled her tail around Boo's neck. "Come on, Boo. Let's hit the buffet. If we're lucky, maybe we can find some drunks to mess with."

"I'll keep a close eye on them," Lacunae said aloud.

"Lacunae," I said before she moved away. She looked at me in surprise. "Try and have fun," I told her. She looked unsure, then gave the smallest of smiles and nodded.

"Blackjack?" Glory asked with a small frown. When I turned to her, she cocked her head. "Are you okay?"

No. I'm not. I wanted to tell her. My mouth twitched as I fought to say those simple words. Tell her what was happening. Say what the Goddess was doing to me. Let her help. A sensation like a sword stabbed into my brain and twisted, but my body simply froze. I couldn't speak. If my body hadn't been synthetic, I would have collapsed. It was only a few seconds, but finally I abandoned my attempt to speak. "I'm fine. I'm fine. Just stressed..." At least I could say that!

"Well... okay. Just... try not to mention sex to anypony you meet here, okay?" Glory asked with a worried smile.

"I'll try," I said sarcastically. What followed next was an exercise in tedium. Epicure made the announcements. All the movers and shakers of the Society. 'Full share ponies', Hoity said as if it should matter to me. As they came up, Hoity usually muttered a few suggestions of what to say. First Splendid, then Grace. The Carrots. The Oranges. The Horseshoes. All strange ponies whom I didn't know and who didn't know me. Still, I got a brand new riot shotgun, six boxes of specialty ammunition, and some combat barding that I couldn't wear anymore. Maybe Scotch would grow into it.

"Princess Charm," Epicure said with an uncharacteristic break in his voice.

I turned to address the filly... and nearly choked with the effort of containing myself. Her spectacular mane looked like she'd cut it with an air duct fan. Her tail sported only a few dozen tufts here and there. Her pristine white hide had proven to be quite accepting of at least a half dozen different colors of stains. Her horn had been scribbled black with a marker of some sort. Not even the fancy party dress she wore could cover the sheer ridiculousness of her appearance. "So... so glad you could m... make it..." I managed to get out.

If looks could kill... She gave a nasty smirk. "Oh, I didn't want you to miss out on your present, Your Majesty," she said as she levitated a bag off her back and tossed it to me before trotting off the far side of the dais. I glanced at Hoity, then opened the drawstring. It didn't sound like a grenade or anything. It clinked when I levitated it, and I peeked in.

"What is it, Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern.

I couldn't answer. I just felt... tired. I cupped my forehooves and poured a small pile of broken glass into them from the bag. Curved glass. The exact curve of memory orbs. "I guess she found out she wasn't my pick for regent," I muttered as I dumped them back into the sack.

"Do you want me to have her removed from the Gala?" Hoity asked low as the next pony I was to meet fidgeted.

"Maybe order a royal spanking?" Glory suggested. I managed a halfhearted grin... maybe not for her...

"No. I just... no," I replied with a sigh. Knowing my luck, it was just the beginning. I fully expected tonight to end in some sort of disaster or attack or... something. The Goddess creeping up on me was pretty high on that list. But what could I do? Run? Give myself a brain hemorrhage trying to spit out the phrase 'Goddess mind control me is gonna!?' Glory had a way back home. With luck, she'd get Thunderhead to listen to her. P-21 and Rampage could back her up if they didn't.

Another four 'honored patrons' passed me a bottle of Wild Pegasus, some very nice emeralds, a magic beam pistol, and some overcharged gem cartridges. The latter two I immediately passed to Glory the second the patron turned away. She examined it closely and then grinned. "Wow. Mint condition Shadowbolt sidearm!" She turned the gun on its side and cocked her head. "There's an inscription. 'Pew-Pew'? Who names a beam pistol Pew-Pew?"

"With your luck, Rainbow Dash," I teased, but she didn't share it.

"Ugh. I am so sick of Rainbow Dash," Glory said, slumping. "I'm sick of her face and her stupid mane and her boy-liking body and ponies calling me Rainbow Dash. I want to just be Glory again. Boring, plain, everyday Glory. This joke has run its course, and it's not funny anymore."

"I'm sorry," I said, giving her a little nuzzle. "Sometimes I feel like that's my whole life."

"You're not serious, are you Blackjack?" Glory asked as my attention drifted to someone keen on giving me a brightly wrapped box and guards who were finally living up to their name and escorting the pony out. I gave a little shrug, and she sighed and covered her face with a wing. "Celestia give me strength." Then her wings and hooves seized my shoulders and turned me to face the room. "Look at where you are. You're Queen of the Society. No pony is laughing at you. Everypony in this room respects you in one way or another. Sure, you can be a little aggravating at times, but a joke? Never!"

"But the shooting and the mess ups and the... everything," I trailed off lamely.

"That's life, Blackjack," she said evenly. "I trusted Lighthooves and Mother when I shouldn't have. My mistakes nearly got my father killed." She hung her head. "I was so sure I was inadequate that at first part of me was glad I was turned into Rainbow Dash. That I'd be better for you if I was somepony strong and assertive."

"Then what was all that mane dying and stuff?" I asked with a baffled smile.

"That was me being an idiot too," she said with a roll of her eyes and a rueful smile. "You're not the only pony who can be a hypocrite, Blackjack. Yes, I didn't want this, but at the same time I did. Just a little. For flying if nothing else. Being grounded was horrible... so part of me was glad to be her. Maybe that was the joke on me." She sighed and shook her head. "I never deserved any of the things that Morning Glory had. Maybe it's time I just embraced being Rainbow Dash."

"Hey," I turned to face her, staring into her eyes. "You have things that Rainbow Dash never did. You have a father whose life you saved. You have sisters. You have a mother, even if she is a madmare. You are ten times smarter than Rainbow Dash, and a hundred times a better pony than me."

Someday this curse... spell... thing will end, and you'll have the last laugh." She smiled a little, and for a moment I could see the purple-maned mare as clear as day.

Hoity cleared his throat, and I glanced out to the side at a hundred or so ponies witnessing our tender exchange. Some wore expressions of scandal, others amusement, and more than a few the detached interest of a sporting event. I flushed from ear to augment and waved a metal hoof. "Hi. I think that's enough gifts. You can just forward them to my room or something. Time to mingle!"

A ripple of chuckles rolled through the room as I trotted down to the ballroom floor, my friends mixing in with the others. At first, a gaggle of Society ponies closed in, but there was something about me that seemed to keep them at hoof's distance. Maybe it was the glowing red eyes of death? Grace, Splendid, and Charm had far more ponies lingering near them than I. I was the placeholder, and everypony knew that I was going to leave. That assurance kept me in the position of 'curiosity' rather than 'threat'... of course that wasn't enough for some of them to stop trying to kill me, but still.

Pain Train kept a watchful eye from the edge of the room. I knew he could cross the ballroom in ten seconds flat; sure it would be over a trail of ponies, but he would still make it to protect his ward. Hoity had his own audience where he reassured everypony in the Society that I had no plans to hang around. That just left everypony in breathless speculation on who would be chosen. Already it seemed clear Charm was disfavored, as only a half dozen or so crowded around her. She'd had five times as many around her at Awesome's funeral.

"Well now. From Stable Pony to Queen of the Hoof," a mare said from the throng, and I turned to the yellow mare Bottlecap. The manager of Megamart looked at my dress and then back at me as she sized up my evident fortunes. "I always knew you were going places. Granted I never expected this, but still."

"What brings you to this?" I asked with a grin.

"Splendid decided that I was worth an invitation," Bottlecap replied. "Really, I think he's just trying to set up a supply line for the Fluttershy Medical Center, but his caps are good. Right now we can certainly use them, what with our zebra problems."

"Zebra problems? In the northwest? Isn't that the exact opposite direction from where the Remnant operates?" I asked with a frown.

"I have no idea where they came from, but they're scaring the shoes off of the caravaners. They're not threatening. Not hiding. Not doing anything besides setting up camps along the road between Manehattan and Hoofington. But they're armed twenty times worse than any raider, and they're watching. It's been a boon for the arms sales, that's for sure, but everypony knows that they're going to do something sooner or later," Bottlecap said with a frown.

"You might want to think about reinforcing Megamart," I said in concern. "Between the Remnant and the Harbingers, something is going to happen soon. Maybe move Gun so it fires out rather than down. You could have some bigger problems than shoplifters soon." She looked worried, so I followed up with, "Sorry it's taken me so long to deal with Paradise, too."

"Oh, that? That was taken care of," Bottlecap said with a warm smile.

"It was? How? By who?" I felt my mane frizzing. No pony in the Hoof could fix anything besides me, if my experiences were any indication! I immediately began imagining the worst case scen--

"Keeper found four very capable people, and they were able to dislodge Red Eye's forces. Not so difficult, since most of his forces had already been withdrawn to the Everfree Forest. It was just a matter of sweeping out the dregs," Bottlecap said, giving a little shiver. "Two of them were ghouls and

one a zebra, but they were quite capable. They said they were funding a trip to Shattered Hoof Ridge of all places."

"Xanthe? Snails? Carrion? Silver Spoon?" I asked with an idiot grin.

"That's them," Bottlecap said, then grinned. "Keeper was very put out that you didn't do it, though."

"Yeah, it kinda fell off my radar with everything else going on," I muttered. Little things like the Harbingers and the Goddess's takeover really put a crimp in dealing with those little side quests.

"Oh, he wasn't upset because of that! Keeper hoped that you'd do it for free, or at least that he wouldn't have to pay you as much as a pony who can actually barter," she said with a sympathetic smile. "No offense, Blackjack, but you do way too much without ever charging appropriate rates."

"I thought it was called charity," Glory said with a cool look at Bottlecap.

"Charity? Where?" I looked around in horror for a moment, feeling poverty sneaking up on me. Then I forced myself to calm down...

"Right here," the filly snapped as she stepped up to my side. I nearly jerked away when she pinned me with her glare. "Don't you dare rip that outfit, Blackjack! One tear. One stain. One speck of dust and I'll own you. Understood?"

"What are you doing here?!" I gasped. The filly wore a light pink dress trimmed in darker purple with a large white silk flower over her chest and smaller ones decorating the trim. A band of lavender and white flowers encircled her brow.

Charity rolled her eyes. "Where do you think half these ponies bought their fancy outfits? Megamart?" The two yellow mares regarded each other coolly, small smiles on their faces. Finally Charity said in a tone of smug import, "Six."

Bottlecap smiled a little smugly in return. "Seven."

That made Charity slump a little before she looked at me. "If I figure in what Blackjack owes me, I should clear seven!"

Glory looked from one to the other as Bottlecap said, "No IOU's or outstanding debts. Don't be sad. Last year you were at four."

"Yeah. Between the manor and the gear we scavenged, I should hit seven next year. Maybe eight." She said with a little swish of her tail and a sneaky look at Bottlecap.

"Just don't make the same mistake as Usury. She was at seven too. Now she's at three. Celestia only knows what Caprice is at."

That made Charity look a little mournful. "Caprice is at zero," she said. Bottlecap looked startled. "She died in the battle for the manor. I meant to tell you earlier."

"Damn," Bottlecap said with an upset look.

"These numbers are...?" I asked with a small frown.

"Number of digits of personal wealth. The value of all a pony's property, liquid assets, and facilities. I get to figure in Megamart, Charity her... post office and vault, and the like. Otherwise, we'd be lucky to break a four." Charity sighed and nodded.

"Pardon me, but are you two related?" Glory asked as she looked from one to the other.

Charity narrowed her eyes, clearly contemplating a stupid questions fee. Bottlecap just smiled sadly. "Probably. Father doesn't keep track."

Charity snorted. "Semen's the only thing he gives out for free, and then not always." Glory turned profoundly red, glancing aside at Splendid across the hall.

Bottlecap continued, "Usury, Caprice, and I are the daughters he's confirmed are his. Charity..."

"Doesn't need Keeper's help, thank you. The Crusaders stand on our own. Adults are nothing but trouble. Case in point," Charity said with a gesture towards me.

Bottlecap sighed and shook her head. "One day you'll learn about the value of things besides money," the mare said with a genteel smile. "Blackjack," she said with an amused nod of her head before she moved off.

Charity looked around sharply, then gestured me to come closer. When I balked, she gestured once more, more rapidly. Finally, our faces inches apart, she stared right into my eyes and poked my chest. "One stain... one tear... you're mine. Understand?" I blinked in shock before she smirked. "And thanks." She turned away and headed into the crowd. I straightened up, now acutely observant for any fluids that might splash.

Glory had gotten swept away while I'd spoken to Charity, but I noticed somepony else I hadn't seen in a while. The green unicorn, Sagittarius of the Zodiacs, was in close discussion with Windclop, the ghoulish mayor of Meatlocker. "I don't know what they're up to. That's the problem. They have no reason to..." Windclop trailed off as the pegasus ghoulish saw me approach. "Blackjack! Good to see you. Hard to imagine it was only last week you left us, and now you're head of the Society." He grinned widely. "I... hope you're not thinking of running for office any time soon."

"Politics really isn't my thing. Way too much annoyance and far too few opportunities to shoot them," I replied. "How are things at Meatlocker?"

"Fine! Wonderful. For the most part..." he trailed off a bit, then sighed, his mottled ears drooping. "Truth be told, I'm worried. Even though Hightower was vaporized, the... ooze substance you described is still present in the tunnels and sewers. The... 'slimeponies' have also taken to walking out of the crater, and we've had to maintain a constant vigil to keep them from straying close. Fortunately, they seem rather mindless, but it's just a matter of time before they get in."

"I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked with a small frown.

"Don't you have enough on your plate?" Sagittarius asked, the green unicorn twirling his golden goatee.

"Actually, that's what I was discussing with Sagittarius here. We're hoping to bring in some professional help to neutralize the ooze. If we can't, we might have to evacuate the hospital and relocate to Rocket Town at the Luna Space Center. Unfortunately, we have friction with the ghouls who live there," Windclop said with a sour twist of his lips. "They believe they can use their rockets to fly away to a promised land. Madness, really, but they are my own kind. I'd much rather stay in good old Meatlocker, of course."

I nodded in understanding, then looked at Sagittarius. "I am glad I met you, though. Tell Triage that the Roseluck Agrifarms facility has Enervation fields that nearly killed me. I cleared out a number of defending robots and turrets, but, short of sending in some robots to clear every bit of debris, I don't see

you getting it working soon.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Virgo would be all over that, I think. Thanks. I’ll pass it along right away.”

“How are Pisces and Capricorn?” I asked with a grin.

“They’re well. I think they miss you. You should visit them sometime. We replaced Taurus and Gemini, and Leo retired. He never really recovered after his punting from Rampage,” he said, and frowned. “I’m a little concerned with the new Gemini; I’m not one to trust a pony with severe personality disorders, but she does bring in the bounty. The new Leo’s a griffin. Went by the name Tigerhawk before. Definitely one who’d give Rampage a run for her money. The new Taurus is from Applelanta. Tracker sort. Doesn’t talk much, but he fills the bounties.”

“Having much business?” I asked with a coy little smile. My eyes roamed freely over his fit emerald form, his golden goatee, and drifted back towards his... He cleared his throat and snapped my eyes back to his. A sardonic arch of his brow prompted a grin from me. “Right! Business! Have any?”

“Not so much around the Hoof, but across the greater Wasteland, oh yeah. There’s no shortage of ponies with caps who want somepony else dead. Still, we keep half of us in the Collegiate at all times. Things are feeling tense, and Triage doesn’t want things getting unmanageable.” He paused, then added, “The professor is back. Or her brain, in any case. Mounted it on a hover robot and she’s back to work in the observatory.”

“She is?” If I wasn’t the Goddess’s perpetual puppet after tonight, I’d look her up. Probably. Eventually! Ugh, there was so much to do! Still, I made a mental note to track her down. I had questions regarding the cybernetics in the Brood. “I should say hello,” I said.

“I think she’d like that. She seems well-appraised of your travels, despite being a brain in a jar,” Sagittarius said. *I bet she is*, I thought to myself. She gave me my eyes and ears, after all.

I looked over at Windclop and lowered my voice a little. “How’s Boing doing?”

His genteel smile fell and he squirmed a little awkwardly. “She’s... well... I think? I’m no expert on living ponies. Adapting? Coming to terms, I suppose. She works in the market, sorting things. Not... well... ahem...” The brown ghoul gave an apologetic shrug, then looked around awkwardly and spied the buffet. “Oooh! I am starving! I think I’ll go pick up a snack! Excuse me!” And with no further ado he rushed away from the unpleasant conversation topic.

I sighed and looked back at Sagittarius. “Can you do me a favor? Can you ask Triage to send a full medical healing whatchamacallit for a filly? Stick her in that healing can or something. I hurt her badly when I wasn’t well, and I’d like to fix her if I can.” I was ashamed that I’d hadn’t done so sooner, but then, I had been rather distracted. “Tell her to bill the Society Regent.” They could afford it.

“And I’ll remind her not to pad the expenses too much,” he said with a little chuckle and a nod of his head to me. “Take care, Blackjack.”

As Sagittarius trotted off, I gave a half smile. That went fairly well! My mane began to crawl, and I looked around. Bomb? Assassin? Something had to go horribly wron--

I felt someone step up behind me; aha! I whirled, ready to defe-- I was yanked off my hooves like an insolent filly and hauled into the air! I felt my body whirled around as a massive stallion crowed, “Glorious day, Your Majesty!” He held me like a cyberpony doll with one powerful foreleg while the other thrust towards the heavens. “Never would I, Paladin Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, have imagined that such a low and listless young mare would rise to such glorious heights!” He pressed his hoof to his brow

beneath his miniscule horn. "It is truly an inspiration to us all!" Luna as my witness, there were sparkles cascading around us.

A mare rapidly trotted up to us. "Paladin Stronghoof! You know you promised not to... do that!" She spoke in the odd accent from Trottingham and had a toasty-yellow-brown coat with a crispy tan mane and tail and a cutie mark of some sort of biscuit with butter atop it.

I was dropped, and he loomed over her. "Knight Crumpets, it is well known that friendship is magic and magic is strength and strength is the ability to do good in this world! Are you denying the strength of my friendship? Are you?" He quivered as he flexed his massively muscled forelegs, body pulsating. "Feel the power of my friendship! Feel!" he demanded, his mustache quivering.

Crumpets leaned back, her face flushing in complete mortification before she covered it with her hoof. "Oh for pony's sake..." Then she scowled up at him, twisted, and rammed her hoof upside his head. "Bloody well stop!" Glory's jaw dropped at the sight of the smaller mare knocking back the massive muscled stallion.

She was about half his size, but thankfully she seemed to break the spell. At least the sparkles stopped as he sat back and held the side of his head with a hoof. "Ah, so very sorry," he said with an embarrassed expression.

Crumpets sighed and shook her head before smiling at Glory and me. "Nice to see you again, Your Majesty." Crumpets was one of the least dressed mares here, clad only in a yellow sundress and matching hat.

"Likewise," I said with a happy smile at the two. "Were you two invited?" I asked as I gestured at the pair. I didn't think the Trottingham Steel Rangers were around long enough to be known by the Society. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"To be honest, no. We came on completely different business, but since we were here, Princess Grace was generous enough to allow us to attend." She paused and looked sharply at Stronghoof. "Provided we conduct ourselves with decorum."

"Manners and etiquette have been passed down the Stronghoof line for generations, Knight Crumpets. Observe my civilized and principled conduct," he said grandly as he knelt before me and took my hoof between his. "Queen Blackjack, it is an honor and a privilege to meet you once more." Then he kissed it regally.

Crumpets knitted her brows. "Better, but you better not start sparkling or throbbing again. And grabbing is right out!" Glory gave a little snirk and hid her smile behind her wing.

When my hoof was free, I smiled. "So what are you here for?" It was easier to ask that than to ask about Stable 99. The pair seemed to understand my question, though.

Crumpets cleared her throat. "Well, let me be the first to say that your stable is a marvel. Even if some of the recycling systems are a little icky, it is a masterpiece of sustainability. And I thought Stable Two's orchards were impressive. I think you could put a Stable 99 anywhere and it'd be viable," Crumpets said with a worried smile. "But I'm afraid that unless we get substantial reinforcement from Trottingham, we might not be able to stay there. It really does need a sizable population to run such a facility. If it wasn't for the survivors' help--"

"Survivors!?" I gasped, grabbing her shoulders. "Who? How? Where?"

Glory came to her rescue. "Hey, no grabbing ponies, Blackjack!"

"Thirteen!" Crumpets gasped as I released her. "In the maintenance around the reactor. They'd sealed off the lowest levels of the stable when the... first attack... happened and didn't come out. Seemed they didn't believe the all clear, so somepony named Rivets told them they could stay till they got bored and wanted out."

"She never told me!" I said, sitting down hard. "I... I thought Scotch Tape was the only uninfected pony! I..." Then a horrible feeling crept over me. "Do they... do they know how the stable was gassed?"

The pair looked at each other, all smiles gone, and I got my answer. Stronghoof put his hoof on my shoulder. "I'm sorry. In the service of doing what is right, hard choices have to be made. But that does not mean others will understand or forgive those who have to make them."

So, they knew what I had done. I hadn't ever planned on returning, but still...

"We've a medical specialist in our acolytes for biological work, mostly to identify hazards in ruins we study. He found evidence of your infection in more than twenty of the ponies killed," Crumpets said respectfully. "It was a full outbreak. If you hadn't done what you did, I think half the Hoof would be infected. We found other infected 'survivors' in other sealed areas, and seeing what they did to themselves... I wouldn't wish that on anypony."

"And your warning spared us as well," Stronghoof added. "Had we not been diligent, we would have eaten the same contaminated food. There were some," and he huffed, his mustache fluttering, "some Rangers who were less than respectful with the slain suggested that we repeat the previous mistake. Their behavior was corrected." Good.

"We purged the entire recycling system and buried the bodies outside the stable. It's hard and messy work. We've been spending most of our time just on cleaning up, which is where the lack of help comes in. We sent message to Trottingham, but with the civil war in the Steel Rangers, we haven't much hope of reinforcements soon." She looked around sharply, then lowered her voice. "Officially we're here for biomass... waste clippings and the like... to reprime the recycling system. We're also trying to bring back any Rangers that didn't join Steel Rain."

"Can you recruit from outside? I can introduce you to Bottlecap," I said, pointing a hoof in her general direction.

"If only it were so simple," Stronghoof sighed.

Crumpets nodded in agreement. "Thanks, but we need more than just willing, working, loyal bodies, which are hard enough to find. We need ponies who are used to living underground and handling cramped living spaces, and are used to the kind of social order you find in stables and the Steel Rangers. We've got thirty or so Rangers, twenty acolytes, and thirteen survivors trying to run a stable for five hundred. With two hundred technically trained ponies, we might be able to cover all critical systems."

"What is your plan if you can't get 99 going?"

"We shut everything down that we can, lock the door, return to Trottingham, and try to get enough ponies to come back and restore it," Stronghoof declared with a determined set of his eyes. "We won't abandon it to scavengers. Nor will we cast the survivors to the waste, nor condemn them to die alone in a failed stable."

"Thank you. I hope you get what you need," I said with a small frown, thinking back to what Bottlecap said. "Are there a lot of zebras around the stable?"

The question seemed to catch her by surprise, and she nodded. "Yes. They haven't been

hostile, though. They keep their distance, and we're grateful for that."

So what were the zebras doing up there? I knew they were operating to the southeast, but my stable was on the far side of the Hoof. How'd they move all the way up there with nopony seeing? What were they doing? "Well, I'll see about Hoity getting you some green waste. I doubt he can object to giving away garbage."

Stronghoof wasn't listening, though. He stared across the room, and his eyes shone with tiny stars. Like a stallion possessed, he strode away from us towards Lacunae, who stood beside the buffet. Crumpets, Glory, and I followed him with a touch of concern, though I didn't think a sparkly gaze was necessarily dangerous. Lacunae's expression started in bafflement and then shifted rapidly to alarm as Stronghoof knelt before her.

"Dear lady," he said as he clasped her hoof between his. "Such a vision of loveliness as yourself should not be left alone in such a time. Please, allow me, Sugar Apple Bombs Stronghoof, to escort you in this social affair. Beauty and grace such as yours should not be consigned to the wall."

Lacunae's mouth worked silently. She looked at me, and I waved my hoof and tried to think at her to go on, but the mental static still lingered. She looked down at him; despite her alicorn mass, they were very nearly the same size. "G... gallant sir. I am unworthy of your praise. Surely there are others here deserving of your genteel attention."

"Dear lady! You merit yourself far too little! If you are unworthy of kindest attention, then truly Equestria is lost for good. I pray, gift me your company, and I shall consider myself honored more than any stallion ever," Stronghoof said as he gazed up at her. I swear, it seemed a spotlight shone only on the two.

Lacunae looked around as if hoping someone would object. I wondered if she'd teleport away; if she did, I was going to drag her back here! "It should not be. Your order and my kind are terrible foes. It would reflect badly upon you to show such kindness to me."

"Reflect!" he said with utmost scorn. "The enmity between yours and mine is of no matter here. Not here. I have heard of you, Lady Lacunae, and I know you are apart from your kind. That you show a degree of gentleness and a good demeanor unknown elsewhere. Never would I think ill of you for that, nor would I care for the thoughts of any who would think ill of us for it!" He kissed her hoof, and her purple wings fluffed a little as she blushed. "Please, dearest lady. Allow me this honor, and I shall be forever satisfied."

Lacunae looked helplessly at Crumpets, Glory, and me. The brown earth pony waved her hoof. "Oh, don't mind me. I'm strictly for the mares anyway." Glory and I glanced at her with simultaneous, identical arched brows, and she flushed. "What?"

The majestic alicorn finally sighed and smiled to him, bowing her head and spreading her purple wings wide. "Good sir, I accept." He stepped up beside her, and side by side the pair marched out to the dance floor.

I'd kept it contained for as long as I could, but I let out a little giggle, prancing on my hooves in decidedly unregal fashion. "Yes, yes, yes, yes!" Oh, nothing could be more perfect! Then I frowned and looked around the ballroom. Something had to go wrong. Something! But what...

"You're Morning Glory, right?" Crumpets asked Glory, and the blue pegasus swapped her amused look at me to a nod at the yellow-brown mare. "I was wondering if we could talk a little. We found some notes on the virus in Blackjack's bedroom, and I was hoping you might have some advice on making sure the recycler is clean."

Glory frowned and looked from Crumpets to me. "... um... I'm not sure this is a good time..."

"You're Morning Glory, right?" Crumpets asked Glory, and the blue pegasus swapped her amused look at me to a nod at the yellow-brown mare. "I was wondering if we could talk a little. We found some notes on the virus in Blackjack's bedroom, and I was hoping you might have some advice on making sure the recycler is clean."

Glory frowned and looked from Crumpets to me. "... um... I'm not sure this is a good time..."

"Oh, go on. This sounds like something Rainbow Dash couldn't do," I said with a warm smile. Glory blinked, then smiled back. I couldn't resist, grinning and saying in a much lower voice, "And you heard what she said." She looked at me flatly as I grinned back.

"You have some kind of personal vendetta against monogamy, don't you?" Glory countered.

I spread my hooves wide. "Love wants to be free!"

"You're impossible," she said with a smile and a shake of her head. Then she turned to Crumpets. "I think we can talk a bit. Let's get a drink first."

As the pair walked off talking about decontamination procedures, I gave a broad smile and then lapsed back into my brooding, waiting for something to go horribly wrong.

* * *

Half an hour later, I was absolutely positive that everything was going too smoothly. The Goddess at bay. Lacunae. Glory getting to talk smart pony stuff! Something had to go bad. It was just the way things worked. I was so paranoid that I lifted the tablecloth of a buffet table, half expecting to find a bomb or something underneath! Dawn swooping in from above. Zebra invasion.

Nothing. I plucked a sandwich off a tray, checking for poison... or expired mayonnaise. "Blackjack, what are you doing?" Rampage asked behind me as I furiously masticated some excellent daisy sandwiches. Even the food was going perfectly!

"Just wondering when the party is going to blow up," I said as I turned and faced her... and saw her with five other very tough-looking ponies. It took me a few seconds to recall their names, but there was no way I could mistake the enormous jet black stallion. Looking as if carved from solid onyx, Brutus the Reaper looked down at me with his calm and sure expression. Bluebelle, the Highlander mare, stood beside the scarred stallion Candlewick and the lavender unicorn Dazzler. The only one I didn't recognize was a teal pegasus stallion with a Dashite brand and a Halfheart pendant. All were dressed in rough and tumble gear and were being viewed with a mixture of revulsion and fascination at the 'primitives'.

"You... I... why are you here?" I asked, astonished.

"A question I've asked all night," Rampage said with a sigh.

Dazzler smiled at me. "I think the Society expects us to go back home with stories about how awesome they are. I wouldn't even be here if they didn't bribe me with caps and ammo." She grinned at me. "You're well dressed for a Reaper, Blackjack, but it seems to be a thing." She traversed her grin to Rampage, who rolled her eyes.

"I'd love to see y'all fight in that get up," Bluebelle said with a chuckle.

"Big Daddy always makes sure some of us attend the Gala. Mostly to bear news about Awesome," Brutus said in his deep, calm voice. "It's mostly an evening of tedium. Then we get bored,

smash the furniture, and get thrown out. It's tradition."

"Not tonight, it's not," Rampage snapped. "This is Blackjack's party."

"Really?" Brutus said as he looked down at me. I tried to look tough in return, but he just shook his head. "You're no more Queen of the Society than you are a Reaper of the top ten. Everypony wants to claim a piece of you, Security. But you don't belong to any of us."

"Deep, Brut. Deep," Candlewick said with a roll of his eyes.

I could definitely see myself belonging to the powerful black earth pony. At least for a night. See just what kind of power he could unleash on a cybermare who could take it. I hitched my hips a little as he looked down at me, swishing my tail just a bit more.

Then a smack to the back of my head nearly sent me on my face. "Cool it, Blackjack. Save that kind of wrestling for when you're back at the Arena," Rampage said sourly.

"What?!" I said defensively. "I was just looking at him!" And undressing him. And me. And sidling up... and... Rampage was eying me for another smack, and with great effort I pushed those thoughts aside.

It seemed like a heck of a coincidence that the ponies I'd met were the ones who were attended the Gala, but given everything else that was going on tonight, I simply rolled with it. I turned to the pegasus. "We haven't met."

"Storm Front," he replied, taciturnly. He had that nummy flier build, but I could see in his blue eyes that he wasn't interested in me in the slightest. "Nice to meet you. I've heard interesting things about Security."

"You're a Halfheart?" I asked, and he pressed his lips together and nodded. "I'm sorry." I wondered who it was he'd lost to gain entry to that wretched bunch.

"It's all right," he answered. "We were in security operations down here on the surface a year or two ago. She didn't come back. I requested to stay to look for her. Was denied four times. Told me she was probably dead. Finally went Dashite to find her. Did."

"Was she?" Dazzler asked.

"No. Went raider. Found her screwing a young stallion with a gun to his face. Put her down myself," he said with a small shrug. "I just put down her body. Mare I knew died a year before."

Rampage sighed and gave a mirthless smile. "This is why I love Halfhearts. They're absolutely perfect for the Hoof."

"There is something about this place," Brutus rumbled. "I've fought in the pits of Fillydelphia. Walked the western waste. Battled in the shattered canyons of Manehattan. The Hoof was the only place I've been that felt like home the minute I arrived. That welcomes the broken soul and the bleeding heart." The magnificent hunk of pony shook his head. "Even Big Daddy knows."

"How is he?" I asked. "Have you recovered from the *Celestia's* attack?"

"The shells destroyed half the building. Fortunately, it was the half we did not use. The Arena will survive. We're recovering. We'll find the strongest, and we will thrive. As we always have," he said with a matter of fact shrug. "Big Daddy faced a brief insurrection. Very brief, as it was over ten seconds after he joined the battle." He gave a little half smile. "There are few chastisements greater than having

your face broken by a stallion old enough to be your grandfather.”

Bluebelle snorted. “Still no match for White Lightning. Momma’d give him a run for his money.”

“And how about the Highlanders?” I asked her with a small frown.

She seemed surprised, but the strong baby blue mare answered, “We are as we always are, fighting for our land and our kin. Momma thanks ya for the family gun, though. Gave it to my nephew. Good to keep it in our family.” She looked around the party insolently. “Dunno why Momma sent me. Almost didn’t make it past all the zebras.”

That made my mane and tail twitch. “Zebras? You’re having problems with zebras?”

“Highlanders always have problems with zebras. Usually we ambush their patrols when they try to pass through the mountains. These zebras though,” she turned and spat. “Came out of nowhere. Dozens. Hundreds, even.”

“So these zebra didn’t come through the mountains?” I asked, confirming what she’d told me. She shook her head.

“They’re also in the southwest,” Storm Front said quietly. “A dozen groups encamped all along the badlands and throughout No Pony’s Land.” My questions must have been showing on my face, because he added, “The Halfheart territory is in the southwest. I do daily patrols looking for threats.”

“Really? I didn’t know that,” I replied, surprised. I supposed there were plenty of places in the Hoof I hadn’t discovered yet. “And what are the zebras doing?” I suspected the answer, but I couldn’t think of why.

“Nothing,” he replied, confirming my suspicions. Bluebelle scowled, but nodded as well.

“They’re in the north, too. Near the old Ironmare base,” Candlewick replied. “Don’t know how they got there, but they just sit around. They’ll blast you if you get too close, but otherwise they just sit with their striped heads up their asses. Why? What’s the problem?”

“And they’re well-armed?” I asked with a frown.

“Assault Carbines. Anti-machine rifles. Miniguns,” Storm Front replied. “Only six to ten or so in each camp.”

I imagined a little purple unicorn in my head writing on a chalkboard. Eight zebras per camp on average times at least twenty camps equaled... a potential huge problem. Zebras from nowhere. Well-armed. Doing nothing. The purple unicorn wrote ‘WHY?’ and circled it. “Why?” I echoed her.

“Maybe the Wasteland is magically repopulating itself with small groups of zebras to kill so we can take their stuff?” Rampage said with a grin.

“Like that would ever happen,” Candlewick snorted.

“Hey, you have no idea! For the last four or five weeks, we’d get armed bands charging out of nowhere to kill us. Scavengers. Or Sanguine’s ponies. Or those damned Harbingers,” Rampage snorted contemptuously. “We’d just be walking along and here they come! Least their gear always paid the bills.”

“What are you thinking, Security?” Brutus asked in his low, deep voice. For a moment, I wondered if he was being sarcastic, but when I looked again I saw he listened in earnest. Even the scarred, boiled-looking Candlewick seemed to be listening to me.

Well, if they really wanted to know... “I don’t care that they’re zebras so much that they’re all

around the Hoof. Even if the individual camps aren't that big, there's a lot of them. And no one just sits around in the Wasteland admiring the scenery. They're up to something."

"Might be they have something to do with all the raiders getting hit across the Wasteland," Brutus said deeply. I cocked my head curiously at him, and he went on, "For the last week now there's been attacks on raiders. We get stragglers coming this way and joining up with other gangs. Whoever is behind it hits fast and hard and doesn't leave much in the way of survivors. Stallions. Mares. Young. Any group out on their own gets hit. Most get dusted, others taken. Then gone without a trace."

"That sounds like something zebras might do. They're scary ambushers. If that's the case, though, why let the survivors past?" Dazzle asked. "If they were planning on trouble, wouldn't it make sense to cut us off from all possible sources of reinforcements?" She shook her head. "What do you think we should do?"

"What I would do is get ready for something bad. Arm yourselves. Reinforce your numbers from survivors if you have to. But don't do anything stupid and fight each other," I said, feeling a certain rightness in my guess. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe the zebras were there for some inconceivable zebra reasoning I couldn't imagine, but I didn't like it at all.

For several seconds I thought they might laugh at me or make a sarcastic quip, but the four nodded in agreement. Candlewick said that somepony named Napalm would be tough to convince, but nopony wanted to get stomped by zebras or Security. I tapped Storm Front's shoulder and nodded to the side. He frowned, but joined me off away from the others. Rampage seemed to think I was flirting.

'Security operations...' A little pink pony in my head whispered questions to a purple unicorn. "Were you a part of Enclave Intelligence?" I asked. He frowned at me, seeming to weigh how much of his past life he could discuss, but nodded. "Do you know anything about Lighthooves?"

"You mean he who must not be named?" Storm Front replied with a small smile. "Yeah. I knew him. Smart bastard. Scary conviction. We all love Thunderhead, but I'm pretty sure he wanted to make Thunderhead the Enclave."

"Do you know about his biological weapon?" I asked in a low voice.

"I heard rumors about it before I left," he replied. "Some surface plague he wanted to weaponize and disperse more widely. Neighvarro gave him the okay since it didn't affect pegasi."

"It does now," I said grimly. "Lighthooves created a new strain. He has plans to use it against pegasi loyal to Neighvarro."

Storm Front's eyes widened in shock. "That's... that's insane!" That was my general reaction. "Unless he plans to use it to turn other settlements against Neighvarro. Or keep them out of the fight. Or... no, he can't be thinking that."

"Let's just imagine he is and you tell me," I replied patently.

"The Enclave is... on paper... a democracy. We elect our mayors and our councilors. Of course, only members of the Enclave can run, but every settlement gets a vote of confidence on the Grand Pegasus Enclave every ten years. It's a joke, really, because Neighvarro controls the guns and always makes sure that everypony knows that it's in charge. So really, it's treated as a vote of loyalty. Fail to vote for Neighvarro and you get cut off." I recalled somepony telling me how the Enclave staged 'spectacles' every so often. "If Neighvarro failed a vote of confidence, leadership would pass to the settlement with the next highest amount of resources. New representatives would have to be appointed. Neighvarro would have to either stand down or be revealed for the thugs they are."

"So where do biological weapons come into an election?" I asked, a little baffled.

"It's a counter loyalty ploy. Vote for Neighvarro and your crops might get infected." I was starting to feel shooty, and it must have shown. "I don't think he'd actually do it," Storm Front added quickly. "But it'd allow those settlements to vote in support of Thunderhead without fearing reprisal from Neighvarro."

I think politics made my brains hurt worse than the Goddess. "Doesn't that sort of undermine and demean this whole democracy thing? 'Vote for us or we'll shoot you.' 'Vote for us or you'll eat your children.'?"

"You talk as if the Enclave has ever had a fair election," Storm Front replied cynically. "But something you need to realize is that most of the Enclave doesn't have much love for Neighvarro. They're thugs, skimming the cream of the crop for themselves and leaving other settlements to struggle. You either have to suck up to them like a tick, or get used to a lot of requests getting turned down. A lot of the settlements would support any contender in the hopes of improving things, even Thunderhead. Thunderhead has it good. The Tower is a bit of an issue, but beyond that, their trade with the surface is bringing stuff the skies need."

I sighed, feeling the headache grow. "Okay. Point is, I'm not leaving a weapon like that in anypony's hooves. Even if he doesn't use it against the rest of the Enclave, the Neighvarro might deploy it against the surface." He nodded thoughtfully. I loved smart ponies. "Where would he keep a weapon like that?" Please say on the surface!

"Shadowbolt Tower," he said without a moment's hesitation. "Absolutely. The Neighvarro want to capture the Tower, so they wouldn't shell it directly. Likely near the top, above the unicorns and below Shadowbolt command."

"Right." I took a deep breath. "How could some ponies break into the tower if they had to?"

"They can't. It's impossi--" he started and then silenced himself.

"You were going to say impossible?" I asked, and he gave a little nod. "Has anyone ever gotten in?"

"Twice. The first was Contrail. Old ex-Wonderbolt a hundred and fifty years ago. Flew above the top of the tower and landed on the roof... which is quite a feat. Had to bring his own oxygen source, and he still died even after getting inside command. The other was the wife of some war hero. Flew in low over the Core. Craziest thing I ever saw. Aside from the very real chance of getting dusted by the city's defenses, she was in the Enervation. Somehow she made it to an old maintenance accessway below the living areas and got inside. Damnedest thing I ever saw."

"Blackjack," Hoity said from behind me. "It's almost time."

"Alright," I replied, looking back at the others Reapers and gangers. "Remember what I said. Tell your people. Get ready for a fight." I turned and walked away alongside the glorious-looking ghoul. "I think I'm going to need to talk to Grace, Splendid, and Charm alone for a second beforehand."

"I'll summon them. Though I'm not sure where Splendid and Charm are off to."

"I'm sure you'll find them." I looked at him, then around at the party. "Everything else is ready?"

"It should be a consummately *horrendous* melodramatic display," he drawled, then chuckled. "Which means the Society will love it. It's something that should stick with them for a while." He tapped my chest lightly. "You are somewhat skilled at this, Your Majesty."

"Skilled? Hoity, people tried to kill me four times today and foalnapped one of my friends!" I said

in disbelief.

"And you survived," he replied with a grand smile. "Dearest Blackjack, survival is the greatest skill of all in politics. Some might say it's the only one that truly matters." He trotted away, leaving me alone with my worries. Rampage and the gangers behaving themselves? No one had tried to kill me yet. Was it truly possible that tonight was going to go off without a hitch? It seemed... inconceivable.

"Your Majesty," a smooth, familiar stallion's voice said behind me. "Congratulations."

I froze at the sound, and then actually smiled a little. "I knew it," I muttered as I turned and looked at the kindly purple face of Steel Rain. The stallion was dressed in a tux every bit as fine as Hoity's; I supposed that, being with the Harbingers, he could get his hooves on anything. "I knew things were going too smoothly."

He arched a brow and gave me a sardonic smile. "If you're under the impression that I'm here to cause trouble, you're quite mistaken," he said genially. "I am here with an invitation from Princess Charm." He pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, and I batted it away. He sighed, "You're under quite a bit of stress. I understand. Social events like this are quite a hassle." He reached over to a passing waiter levitating trays of champagne and snagged a glass. "Though I will admit that the Society offers quite a few pleasurable amenities. Almost makes it worth playing their silly games."

"So, let me guess. As we speak your forces are surrounding this place and if I don't give you EC-1101 you'll storm in and kill everypony?" I snapped.

"My, that would be dramatic, wouldn't it?" he countered with a smirk that made me want to shoot him right there. "I don't suppose you'll be amenable and just surrender it? It'd be such a shame to ruin such an excellent party." He looked at me as he took a sip and then added, "Lovely dress, by the way."

My magic bullet shattered the glass in his hoof and he grimaced as he drew back. A few ponies looked over, but the disturbance hadn't been noticed. I advanced on him, crushing glass underhoof as I growled, "I will never give you EC-1101. Ever. Stop asking."

"Pity," he said as he wiped champagne from his sleeve. "Well, you needn't worry. As delightful a target as the Society is right now, its wall to wall security would make taking it by force unlikely. We're going with a plan B. And since it doesn't involve horrible, hideous violence, I am here attending to other business." He gave a little smirk. "Contrary to what you might believe, not everything the Harbingers do is about you."

I actually queued up four shots to his face in S.A.T.S. If I was going to be an executioner, I couldn't think of a better pony to start with. I just had to execute the command. Just push the button...

Damn it...

He snagged another passing glass from a waiter and downed it all in one go. "So what is your business here?" I asked him.

"Why, none of yours. But if you must know, there's a certain person here that we loaned a few of our soldiers to in the assurance that they could bring us your forehooves. I thought it a long shot, but they insisted they could pull it off, and all they asked in return was the crown. Now we need to settle accounts." He idly rubbed his chest as he looked aside. "And I saw Sagittarius here. I need to talk to him as well."

"About getting that kill implant removed?" I asked.

His smile disappeared. "Cognitum has been... pressuring me... to get certain improvements.

I've seen what she did to Dawn. I have no desire to join her. I like power you can take off at the end of the day." He frowned as he looked away and set the glass on a table beside us, glancing at my cybernetics with a barely hidden shudder. "I'd bet that Dawn's failures would translate to further trust of me. Sadly, that's not the case. She wants me more... augmented."

"Well, good luck with that," I replied. Out of his armor, I was struck again by how positively cute he appeared. Fit body. Athletic. Smart.

Ack! No! Mortal enemies was where I drew the line! Like Lancer... though I really wished I hadn't drawn that line and... he seemed to catch me staring and smiled smugly from ear to ear.

"Indeed. Things would have been much simpler if you'd simply left me the *Celestia*. But who has time for regrets?" he said with a smile. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I need to see a filly about a collection of memory orbs."

It must have been the drink that made him slip. "You mean this collection?" I asked, pulling out the bag of crushed glass and giving it a little jingle. He blinked as he took the bag of smashed orbs and opened it up. For the first time, he looked truly stunned and horrified. "Charm decided to smash it when I didn't make her regent."

"That... the technical schematics. The technology! How..." he pursed his lips and silenced himself as he fought for composure. "Tell me you punished her for this... this... insult!"

"She got to watch her hopes and dreams crushed before her eyes. Does that count?" I replied, marveling at the surreality of commiserating with a pony who had tried to kill me repeatedly. "I never imagined you like this, Steel Rain."

"Well, we never did meet outside the battlefield, Blackjack. I'm quite sociable, actually," he replied with that kind smile. "I just happen to like power, control, and the ability to destroy my enemies instantly with the pull of a trigger. Quite unsophisticated, really. Tends to spoil social events, sadly," he said with a sigh of regret. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go see a filly about respecting the technical achievements of the past."

"Oh no you don't," I replied as I took him by the foreleg.

He smiled at me in clear condescension. "Oh please. Don't tell me that you're calling for the headsman. Despite what happened on the bridge, I know you're not a killer, Blackjack. You're not somepony to employ killers." I whistled sharply and some guards appeared almost at once. "What do you think you're doing?" They started patting him down, but didn't find any weapons on him. Just a pendant that I confiscated... just because. "Give that back!" he shouted, stretching a hoof towards it.

"I've been reading the 'Pinkie Pie guide to tyranny'," I answered him with a grin. "While you're right that I have no interest in killing you unarmed like this, I also don't mind locking you up for a few days." A little purple unicorn in me gave a nod of satisfaction.

Steel Rain did not take it well. He was dragged from the party kicking and shouting about destroying me, the Society, and 'everypony'. That was more like it, really.

I'd embarrassed and humiliated a foe. Rampage was behaving herself. Glory was talking smart pony talk. The Harbingers weren't going to attack and mutilate everypony at the last minute! Lacunae was actually dancing with Stronghoof. It might actually be...

"No. No, I won't jinx it," I said, shaking my head firmly. Something was bound to blow up in my face. Some... something!

"That guest has been detained," Hoity Toity said as he returned with some disdain. "Although I suspect half of his protests were feigned. No real struggle nor attempts at bribery make me suspect that he's up to something."

"He probably is," I replied. "He came right up to me. He must have known I wouldn't kill him out of hoof. So..." Meh, I was getting that annoying sensation that maybe I hadn't gotten the better of him. I pulled out the pendant I'd taken off him and turned it over in my magic. It was a simple round, plastic-covered disk on a nylon lanyard. Something about it was familiar, though. I placed it around my neck and tucked it out of sight beneath the dress. If he'd been carrying it, it must have been important. I placed it on the endless mental list of shit I needed to do but probably wouldn't get around to doing.

I looked around the Gala. Not exactly what I'd expected for a party, but there wasn't any blood and gore yet. Boo stood with a dozen fancy ponies around her, and I frowned as I moved closer. If they were bothering her...

"Yes, clearly the political situation with the Twilight Society is one that needs to be addressed first, don't you think, Lady Boo?" a mare asked, and Boo cocked her head in reply.

"Oh, I agree completely! While the Twilight Society should be considered, it's clear that Red Eye and his army is a far more pressing concern," a fancy stallion said immediately, and Boo just cocked her head at him instead. "I'm certain that you agree, Miss Boo."

Boo seemed far more interested in the hors d'oeuvre cupcake he levitated beside him. She stretched up to take a bite, when another mare reached out and hugged her. "Oh, you are too right, Baroness Boo. We're stretching ourselves out trying to concern ourselves with problems abroad when we have so many right here! All these refugees streaming into the valley are a ripe opportunity, wouldn't you say?"

Boo's nostrils twitched and she took a deep breath. The fancy ponies leaned in raptly, and then she sneezed right in the mare's face. For an instant, all were silent. Then a stallion crowed, "Hear hear! We shouldn't be exploiting these poor folk, Wineglass! Take a page from our new queen. Exploitation might get you ahead in the short term, but we need to look at things from a longer perspective."

Boo, who had snagged his cupcake while he'd been distracted, gave a beaming smile that set all the others talking and nodding in agreement with her. I couldn't keep from grinning as we moved past. Fortunately, nopony seemed to want to bother me with their trivial concerns. Instead, they seemed to be focusing on Grace and the other ponies who would really matter once I'd gone.

"Did you find them?" I asked Hoity.

"It looks as if Splendid is ready and waiting on the dais," Hoity said with a sniff. "Sloppy, but I suppose he's apprehensive. Charm is probably sulking under the buffet table. Grace is engaged with the Oranges. I'll be hearing about my rude interruption from Tangerine for months." He gave a long-suffering sigh. "The toil of a majordomo is neverending." And he moved off through the crowd. Majawha?

As I approached the little stage, I saw he wasn't alone. Glory was there too, and I hesitated. My augmented ears weren't all *that* much better than my normal ones, but now I strained to pick up their words.

"I don't understand why. You enjoyed it well enough before," Splendid said in low tones that would not carry far to anypony without microphones for ears. "You can't deny that."

"I enjoyed it physically, sure," Glory said as she blushed and looked away. "You treated me well. Better than I thought a stallion ever could. But afterwards... the way I felt."

"I did not mean to make you feel used," Splendid said swiftly. "I meant every word..."

"Splendid... I know you did, but you don't know me. You see a young Rainbow Dash. I'm not her. I'm a gray mare with a purple mane and one wing. Who's gay," she added, a touch lamely.

"I see a mare who is loyal, intelligent, compassionate, and unappreciated for those talents," Splendid replied, his voice rising. "I love you, Glory, and no matter how you look, I'd want you as my wife."

"Hello!" I said as I immediately trotted up onto the dais, right in between the blushing pair, and threw my forelegs around each. "What a party! Did you see that buffet? And that little display with Boo and those Society ponies. Priceless!" Glory was trying to vanish into the floor while Splendid, judging by his color, appeared to be transforming into a male Pinkie Pie. "So! How are you two doing?" I asked with as wide a grin as I could manage.

"I'm fine!" Glory squeaked. "Had a wonderful chat about prion infections and cleaning with hydrochloric acid."

"The Oranges were absolutely delightful conversationalists this year," Splendid went on.

"And we discussed being gay. And... yeah... mares! Woo-hoo!" Glory said in a little cheer.

"And I must say your friends are quite the interesting addition to this soiree," he finished.

"That's nice. That's... really... nice..." I said, keeping the grin on my face. Hoity returned with Grace and Charm. Saved by the ghoul. "Oh good! You're here! Everypony is here! That's great. That's really great. Isn't that great?" I said as I released the pair.

Grace looked on in shock. "Yes... great," she said guardedly.

"Great..." Charm said in confusion.

Somehow all the eyes settled on Glory, whose eyes twitched nervously before she pointed at Charm, gave a straining grin, and said, "I really like your mane!"

"Huh?" the filly asked with a scowl.

"Oh, uh, bathroom!" And she darted into the air and swooped away, trailing a rainbow-colored afterimage.

I tried to focus less on what I'd just heard and more on what I needed to say now. "So! I bet you're all wondering why I've called you here together." Patient silence answered me. "I'm going to choose one of you as my regent. And I want the other two to swear loyalty to them."

"I beg pardon?" Grace asked with a small frown.

"You three complement each other really well." I looked to Grace. "You handle problems with poise and care and worry about what's right and wrong." I swapped to Splendid. "You've got vision and an idea for the future." I looked at Charm. "You get things done. Together, you can have a much better life than fighting and squabbling over the throne. And life here is far better than life in the Wasteland. So I want a public oath from the other two pledging their support."

"I see. And the alternative is exile?" Splendid mused.

"Pretty much. I want the Society to work better than it has been during my visit. Together, you can achieve more than you ever could alone." I saw a few shifty looks from Charm. "Also, if you think you can kill my pick and take their place, you're wrong. Besides the bodyguard I arranged and Deus, if

they get killed, then I'll pick somepony from outside the Society to run things. Understand?"

The three didn't look all that convinced as I moved to stand in front of the dais. Hoity tapped a wine glass with his hoof several times, and the ring spread out through the party. The music stopped and soon every eye was on us. "I know that King Awesome named me Queen of the Society. And I also know that while I would be honored to accept his gift, I'm going to have to pass it to another to rule in my place. My mission in the Hoof takes precedence over running one group, no matter what wonderful company they may be." A little yellow pegasus inside me gave a tiny cheer.

I looked at the crown on its pillow beside the throne. Such a heavy gold thing. The front of it was decorated with an alicorn in the middle, flanked by a pegasus and a unicorn. Apparently earth ponies didn't warrant representation. The rest of the crown was a band of gold studded with rubies. I levitated it before me. "I can't wear this crown myself, and the burden is too much for one pony to bear." And it was much too coveted, to boot.

I nodded to Hoity, he nodded to Epicure, and the green colt lifted my sword carefully in his hooves. I levitated the blade and, with a sweep of glittering silver, sliced the band. A second cut. A third. And the crown glittered in three pieces in the air before me. I lifted the front of the crown. "This piece, I give to my regent, to rule in my place until such time as I see fit to return and mend this crown." And I looked at the three. Hope danced in all their eyes, even Charm's, that I would pass it to them.

I looked from one to the other, dragging out the moment just a little. Then I knelt and pressed the gold to their foreleg. With my metal hooves, I easily bent the gold to wrap it around like a torc. Finally, I rose. Hoity turned and addressed the crowd, "May I introduce the Regent of the Society: Princess Grace!"

"No!" Charm screamed at the top of her lungs. "It should be me! Me! I'm the one who deserves it! Give it to me!" She lunged for her sister's legs, her hooves prying at the gold. Grace, for her part, seemed so bedazzled by events that she didn't punt her away at once. But then she levitated Charm up and held the filly by the scruff of her neck.

"Blackjack has made her choice, and you will respect it, Charm," Grace countered.

"Fuck Blackjack! Fuck you! Fuck him! Fuck all of you!" she shrieked as she thrashed at Grace. "I'm gonna kill all of you, and then you're going to be sorry! You'll see!"

"Right. I think that's enough of that!" I said loudly. "Scotch Tape! Rampage!" The pair rushed to the dais, looking at me with nigh salivating grins.

"Yes, Blackjack?" Scotch said eagerly.

"You called?" Rampage asked.

"Please escort Charm to her room, and teach her to watch her language," I said as regally as I could.

"Fuck yeah!" Rampage grinned at the filly. "Run, little piggy! Run!" Charm screamed as she raced for the door, pursued by the pair.

"Don't rip those dresses!" I yelled after them. Then I sighed. "Who named her Charm anyway?"

"I think she always preferred 'Princess', personally," Hoity said lightly.

All eyes then turned to Splendid. Clearly deflated by my choice, he gave a half smile. "We could have saved the Wasteland. Twenty or thirty years... I had it all worked out."

Using bomb collars and slavery... "Somehow, I don't think any one pony can save the Wasteland," I replied evenly, with a small smile. I held up the cut band of gold and gems.

He sighed, and with far more dignity than his younger sibling he addressed the crowd. "I will respect the decision of Queen Blackjack, and I do swear upon my bloodline and ancestry to support her regent loyally and diligently. Never will I raise arms against her, nor foment others to do the same. On my name, Splendid, I do so swear."

I knelt and bent the gold band against his hoof. That left me with the third piece. Since Charm wasn't going to take me up on my offer, I looked at the crowd and then cleared my throat. "This piece I shall keep, and if I need ever abdicate my position permanently, it shall be returned so the crown can be made whole again." The notion that I might give up the position bestowed by Awesome made the crowd go wild.

"Go on," I said, giving Grace a little nudge to the front. "Make a speech."

"I had one planned," she said lightly, "But... you picked me." She looked at the gold on her hoof, as if she still couldn't believe it.

"I want the Society to be better ponies. You're the best pony for the job. Once you've cleaned out the bad apples, then you can start taking over the world," I said with a look at Splendid.

"Yes. I suppose that's a place to start," she said, before clearing her throat and stepping to the front as I moved back. I'd played my role. Hoity had put the protections she'd need in place, and I'd added a few of my own to make sure she'd have the chance. I wasn't going to let what happened in Flank happen here. And as Grace addressed the crowd, I felt a little purple unicorn inside me being quite proud of what I'd learned. The only oddity was... why did I want to write to the princess about it?

I shifted back and snuck a bite of the crown. Mmmm, sweet mellow gold and spicy ruby. Then I saw Hoity staring at me over the tops of his glasses and I gave a sheepish grin and nodded to the side, off stage. "I need to find Glory." Pressing the band of gold to him. "Hold on to this for me, okay?"

"You don't want to hold on to it?" he asked in surprise.

"Hoity, I'll eat it. That gold is delicious. I can taste hints of platinum too. And those spicy rubies... no. Besides, I might get vaporized tomorrow." I glanced over at Grace addressing the Society about her father and his ideals; it looked like a few members might already be really interested instead of just humoring her. Then I turned my attention back to Hoity. "I need to find Glory. Think I can slip away?"

"I think so. Just be here for the final dances. Make it clear you didn't proclaim and run," he said, and offered his hoof. "May I shake your hoof and congratulate you on your marvelous debut? I was certain you were going to run through the halls shooting and screaming 'Emancipate!' at the top of your lungs." I shook my head, trying my best not to blush before heading in the direction that Glory had fled.

That led me up stairs and to a balcony overlooking the reservoir. And I slowed as I heard Glory's voice. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know... is it this body? Is it him? Is it me? What's wrong with me?"

Then I heard P-21 answer her. "You've gone through a lot of changes, Glory. So have we all. Yours are a lot more fundamental than most of ours."

"I can't believe he wants to marry me. I can't believe I actually considered it!" I heard the anguish in her voice and leaned over to see her kneeling here, P-21 holding her lightly. "It's got to be this body. It has to be! There's no other reason why I should be attracted to him!"

"Do you like him?" P-21 asked.

"I... it's... you..." Glory stammered. "He's... nice! I thought he would be stuck up and insincere, but he's not. He's a genuinely nice stallion. And he wants me to marry him! He says he loves me. And with Blackjack... she says the same thing and I know she means it but..." She sniffed and beat at her head. "I feel like I'm going crazy!"

"You're not going crazy, Glory. You're in a relationship with Blackjack. It's not unpleasant, but it is a little surreal. It would be easy to simply dismiss her, but you can't. It'd be better to leave her, but you won't. And even though it hurts to be around her, you can't help but want to be there just in case she needs you." He patted her shoulder gently. "I'm sure your condition isn't helping."

"Ugh... don't start that. Just because I'm a mare doesn't mean this is due to hormones," she snapped. "Mares aren't weak just because we get this way."

"Glory, I'm an expert on mares when you get that way," he said, closing his eyes. "Yes, I didn't have any choice in the service I provided, but I know mares, and always it was more than just sex. Duct Tape liked to pretend we were married. Marmalade wanted a friend. Sometimes we didn't even have sex. Palette wanted body paint. Misty Hooves wanted everyone to hear us so people would stop thinking she was a filly. Gin Rummy would tell me her worries about her daughter. Rivets would rut, then complain about the Overmare to me, because I'd listen and not report her. Mares need things in this time. So what is it you need?"

"I... I... I... don't know," she stammered. "On one hoof... I'm... horny..." she said the word with mortification. "And on another I feel ashamed... and I want to be bold and free like Blackjack and on another I... need to apologize." She hung her head and shook it. "That's what I need."

"Then do it. Blackjack will understand. You could have an orgy with half the Society and Blackjack would want to know the juicy details. Don't worry about that." He then gave a little smile. "Just make sure you can accept the consequences if you do. Pregnancy is the last thing you want right now."

"Splendid has a contraception spell... said it was a requirement in his position..." She shook her head and groaned. "Why does everything have to be so complicated?"

I coughed and knocked on the doorjamb before stepping outside. Glory immediately looked away. P-21 sighed and smiled at me before walking past. I trotted up to her side and took a seat. "Well. Interesting night. Things are definitely... nightish."

"I'm sorry," Glory said as she looked away.

"For what?" I asked.

"Oh, Blackjack, you know what!" she snapped as she turned to face me. But I cocked my head and knit my brows. "Sex!" she erupted. "With Splendid. Ugh... I can't believe I did it at all."

"Do you want to do it again?" I asked politely. She grit her teeth, eyes popping a little, before she turned away. I sighed and looked away. "Glory... we can't keep doing this. Not if it's tearing you up this much."

She looked a little terrified as I gazed out into the rain. "Blackjack..." she whispered.

"Sex and monogamy are big deals to you. They're not to me. In fact, the entire monogamy idea is stupid to me," I said bluntly as I looked at her. "I don't care with who, how often, or what toys you use to get off with, so long as at the end of the day you're in my embrace. As long as we're first, I don't care about seconds, thirds, fourths, and fifths. Do you understand? I don't care." I stressed those three words

as hard as I could before I stroked her mane. "But you do."

"Blackjack," she repeated softly.

"I care that you're upset. I care that you're feeling guilt. I care that you're going through these changes and I can't help you. I care about what you're feeling. But I don't care that you played 'hide the carrot' with Splendid." I closed my eyes. "Maybe it's time we stopped this relationship. All I ever do is hurt you."

She didn't answer, and that was the worst response of all. Okay, she could have laughed and called me a loser, but still. I glanced at her and saw her looking at me funny. Then she stared out at the night as well. "Was Stygius nice?"

"Nice?" I blinked. That's one way of putting it. "He was a bit of a goofball, but nice... sure. Maybe it was a part of the whole 'prince' deal." I rubbed my chin. "I needed someone nice and safe, and, above all, somepony I didn't have a relationship with. I used him," I admitted with a shrug as I looked out into the night. "Not the noblest thing I've ever done, but he was pleasant enough about it and even helped me when he could have just taken off. I guess that's what made it okay for me." I looked for the expression of outrage on her face but was surprised to see her smiling.

She walked to the rail and folded her hooves on it as she looked out into the night. "I was just trying to do it without dying of embarrassment. Definitely different... feeling him move. Not at all like with you. And a lot stickier than I expected," she said as she made a face, then giggled. "You know what's funny? The whole time, I was comparing him to you. Blackjack does this and Blackjack does that. More than anything... I wanted you to be there with me. I wanted to compare and contrast and enjoy things. And of course I immediately thought I was being perverted."

"Why? What's wrong with a threeway?" I nickered and nuzzled her ear.

She laughed and shook her head. "The fact that you can ask that so easily is what astonishes me."

"Glory, if *that's* what's bothering you, I don't mind including others." She groaned and hid her face in her wings. "We could go get Splendid and really see how he treats a pair of ladies." She groaned even louder, and I grinned. "Or Grace? I think Grace would really appreciate it." Glory let out an even louder groan and waved her hoof, trying to hit me.

Finally she sighed and looked at me, then leaned over and pressed her head to my shoulder. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I should start imagining less and experimenting more, Blackjack. Trying things with other mares. See what kind of experiences I can have." Then she looked at me. "You'll always be there for me if I need you, right?"

"Always," I replied.

She stretched up and kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you, Blackjack," she said quietly as she walked away.

I watched her go, then closed my eyes, sighed, and shook my head. Then P-21 stepped out and looked at me. Just... looked at me with a small smile and a warm look in his eyes. "So... is this part of the plan?"

"Plan?" I gave a little half smile. "I'm so far off a plan that I'm just totally winging it here. I'm personally waiting for everything to explode. That seems to be how most of my 'plans' end."

"Well, if that's what you need," he said calmly as he offered his foreleg. I took it, but turned my

head and pressed it to his neck. He felt... nice.

"P-21?" I asked quietly.

"Hmmm?"

"Do you still hate me?"

"Blackjack, when it comes to you, I haven't a clue," he replied with a chuckle. "But no. No, I don't think so."

"Oh," I said as I gave him a tighter hug. "That's... nice."

He led me out to the ballroom. "Shall we dance?" he asked me with a little smile. At the question, it seemed more eyes than just his were turning towards me. Murmurs were spreading about the queen taking the floor. Lacunae and Stronghoof looked over to us. Grace smiled beatifically and nodded her encouragement. Splendid smiled regally.

I looked from him to them and back again. "You... dance?"

"Don't sound so surprised," he replied, arching a brow with a playful haughtiness. "I'm well-trained in a variety of skills. It'll be nice to use them because I want to rather than because I'm being threatened with a needle."

Oh. Right. I looked over, spotted the bartender beside the buffet, and levitated over the first bottle I could. My trusty horn did not let me down; I gazed upon the amber mana of Wild Pegasus and polished the whole damned bottle off. With liquid courage at war with an artificial liver, I set the empty bottle aside and then smiled at him. "Okay. Let's do this."

I don't know if it was the drink or the company or the music, but he led me to the middle of the dance floor and the music began to play. One two three, one two three, one two three... I began the foalish motions that Grace had drilled into me earlier. I stared into his eyes and the numbers just melted away. He moved, and I moved with him. I was sure that I looked idiotic, but I was Blackjack. What did I have to lose?

And when one song ended, we moved to another. I did what he did, moved as he moved, and laughed. We twirled around, and I spotted Lacunae and Stronghoof twirling magnificently. And then Grace and a pink stallion were dancing beside us. Glory and Crumpets. And before I knew it, P-21 had been replaced by Glory. Then Glory replaced by Splendid. And I had a few more drinks as the world became a wonderful blur of blue and white.

I recalled seeing Brutus and Stronghoof locked in a flex-off that seemed to envelop the two in a nimbus of masculine power. Shirts and harnesses were destroyed in the eruption of pectoral might, and it ended with a hoofbump. Scotch Tape hopping up between the two robotic DJs and playing music that was less twirl and more bouncing bass. And everypony danced to it because I did. Rampage beating Stronghoof and Brutus in a hoof wrestle without mussing up her dress. On and on the night continued till finally I laughed and laughed and couldn't stop.

And I was escorted to a bed, my own or somepony else's... and there was blue and white... and dresses being removed and then nuzzling and stroking and kissing... such wonderful kissing. And there was licking in places that were wonderful to be licked and filling and finally the evening really did end in explosion after explosion after explosion...

Not a bad night at all...

* * *

When I woke, the music had ended. It was just past midnight. My liver had broken down the alcohol, but the hangover would linger for a while longer. I was tangled up with another pony, awash in the scent of sweat and sweeter smells. I nuzzled soft and wonderful pony before cracking open my eyes. Mmmm, blue. Glory had come back after all. And from the feel of it behind me... a him. Splendid? Slowly, carefully, I rose. There were empty champagne bottles on the nightstand and nearly drained glasses. I wondered if she'd ever drunk before.

Then I looked behind me and froze. No. Not Splendid at all. Flushing far more than I ever had after coitus, I pulled myself free from them. P-21's eyes opened a little, his lips curling in a slightly inebriated smile. "Time to go?" he muttered sluggishly. "Don't call medical. They'll think I did a bad job."

"Shhh..." I muttered gently, leaning down and kissing his brow. "Don't worry about that. I just need to use the little filly's room." He relaxed and closed his eyes, and I stroked his brushy mane before I carefully climbed out of bed. When I was free, I looked down at the pair and felt a twist inside me, but I had no choice now. "Get her home, please," I whispered in his ear. He gave a little smile and nodded in his sleep. I walked past the detritus of priceless dresses and strewn party paraphernalia, slipped into the bathroom, and closed the door.

I walked to the sink; oh Luna, I'd sure been taken care of. Too bad I couldn't remember specifics. I filled the basin and started to wash my face. Then I set the washcloth down, took a deep breath, and looked into the mirror.

A blue unicorn mare with a silver mane looked back. With a flash, Lacunae appeared in the bathroom beside me. "It's time," the Goddess said simply in my mind.

Yes, it was time. The Goddess was linked back with me, and it would take more than a hangover to keep her out. Worse, she wasn't threatening my friends or giving me anything I could work with. No righteous anger to shake her control. We were in Unity. She willed, whether I liked it or not. Once more or less clean, I dressed in my gear and lifted my sword. Carefully, I cut out my PipBuck. No way my friends could track me without it, and no last minute radio pleas to try and break the Goddess's control. The Goddess would provide a lesser PipBuck for S.A.T.S. soon. She had PipBuck technicians in Unity to give me the knowledge to install it.

"So. Now what?" I asked the mare in the mirror.

She firmly locked down on my body and told me. There would be no verbalizing this scream. No fights that could wake my friends. Nothing. Lacunae's horn glowed, and together we disappeared in a flash.

We were on our way to Maripony to kill LittlePip.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: And here is the conclusion to the Society arc. I know a lot of people wanted to see the fall of the Goddess, but really it would have clashed with the tone of the chapter and I really think the Goddess deserves an entire chapter to herself. This is a chapter I wanted to do forever. One good night for Blackjack. I hope that everyone enjoyed it.

I'm hoping to get the Goddess chapter out before I move. There's no answer on the job front, so I might have to move to Vegas to sub. Therefore, the tip jar is always open for anypony with bits to spare. Also, feedback and critiques are more than welcome at the Cloudsville forum. I want to thank everyone

who's read thus far, Kkat for creating FoE, Bronode and Hinds for editing, and Squeak for being kind enough to stop by and take a peek. I hope it was an enjoyable chapter. Take care.)