

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By: Sombra

Chapter 58: Departures

"You and I have some unfinished business. My magic's gotten better since I was here last. And I'm going to prove it! Me and you. A magic duel. Winner stays, loser leaves Ponyville forever!"

I've never liked gravity. It's not heights that're my problem. It's falling. It's the idea of gravity pulling you downward. The sense that there was some force constantly clutching at you simply because it could. It didn't matter how hard you tried or what you wanted, gravity was always there; inescapable, inexhaustible, and unforgiving.

Lacunae looked on, the purple alicorn having replaced her formal wear with the black mourner's gown. She had a minigun from the Harbinger attack squad and an anti-machine rifle floating beside her as she waited patiently. Idly, I wondered where she kept her ammo. I supposed it really didn't matter at this point. Despite her wings, she too was trapped in gravity's inexhaustible pull. So much energy being expended to keep herself from being crushed by its force.

I was falling now as I scribbled out a note in Awesome's study. Every letter was a struggle to put to the page. 'wanted to give you this. Take Fleur and go home. Stop Lighthoves. Hope I see you again. Sorrie if I don't. Talk to' And I tumbled a little bit more as gravity compelled me to scribble out the last two words. 'Love you. Blackjack.' I'd just have to hope that they'd finish what I couldn't. Gravity told me to move. Gravity wanted me somewhere else. I told gravity to fuck off as I looked to the page and scrawled in a trembling pen, 'PS: don't freak out. Last nite was awesem. Giv 21 a hug frm' but that was all I was allowed. I wanted to add a PPS and a PPPS, but if I did, gravity would make me fall on my friends and kill them.

Gravity was a bitch...

I left the note on the gift I'd found in Meatlocker. I'd forgotten to give it to her... being thrown against a wall by an irate marefriend can have that effect... I struggled to stay there a few seconds more. My PipBuck lay beside it; no calling for help in a moment of lucidity, no navigation tags to lead my friends to me. All very neat. I wanted to linger... Just a few seconds. But gravity tore me away, and I turned to Lacunae. "You can port me all the way to Maripony?"

"No. It will take several teleports, and I will need assistance," she said in solemn tones. "You will have to help me till we meet up with the others."

"I don't want to do this," I whimpered as we stood together. I looked at the pathetic note I'd scribbled and ached to stay just another instant, but I couldn't fight it anymore. Neither of us could.

"I know, Blackjack." I looked into her sad eyes and touched my horn to hers. Together, we triggered the spell, her magic supported by my own meager offering. Together, we disappeared.

* * *

Our arrival at Miramare felt like I'd slammed through a solid wall. And I could make that comparison; I'd had more than a bit of experience in the slamming-through-solid-walls department. Every cell of my body ached and my horn had some char on it, but it was beyond relevance now. The spell would be cast again. And again. And again, for as long as it was necessary. Indeed, with Lacunae's guidance, teleportation almost seemed easy. "Go get it," Lacunae told me as she trotted out to the crater to soak up her rads for the next leg of our trip. I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. The Goddess pulled at my every thought, dragging me down into the mass that was Unity. Oh, she wasn't going to

consume me fully just yet. She wanted a trump card. Already, I had to think of ways to kill LittlePip and her friends.

If it was just LittlePip, I'd have to take her out from outside the range of her E.F.S. I did not want to fight her up close where she could drop a boxcar on me! How such a little mare had such terrifying telekinesis was beyond me. If I did have to fight up close, I'd need the shotgun with flechettes. She wore light armor; if I was lucky, I could take her out quickly. Maybe blind her... she wouldn't be very good with her super telekinesis if she couldn't see, and E.F.S. and S.A.T.S. don't do you any good if you don't have eyes to sparkle at... oh dear Luna, did I just think that?

If her friends got involved... I absorbed everything the Goddess knew of LittlePip and her friends. Calamity would die first. Headshot, long range. I couldn't worry about him and LittlePip at the same time. Velvet Remedy would die next; she'd likely linger over his body. That'd eliminate healing and really distract LittlePip. No matter how she denied it, there were still warm and sexy feelings associated with Velvet in her subconscious. Kill her friends and hurt her too badly to come at me thinking straight. Steelhooves would be risky. Oh, not killing him; Steel Ranger armor was tough, but all I had to do was teleport onto his back and cut his head off with the starmetal sword. No, the problem was that that would put me in range of LittlePip and Xenith. Ultimately, magic bullets to the head would be my best bet for LittlePip. Xenith would probably kill me, but the Goddess would be saved from whatever plot LittlePip hatched.

I just needed one little thing.

I walked into Miramare's admin building; I didn't need E.F.S. to spot the squatters who'd moved in. A dozen or so emaciated ponies and three tough, scarred, and all around battle-hardened griffins immediately roused themselves as I entered. From their leather gear and service rifles, I doubted they would be any kind of trouble to me. "Hey! This is our place! Get--" one griffin female shouted as she rose. Then she took in just what she was talking to as my eyes locked onto hers. "By the First Egg... who the fuck are you?"

"Nopony you want to fuck with tonight," I answered. The force of the Goddess was pushing me to end the three; there was no future for the griffins, zebras, or dragons. Their extinction was unfortunate but inevitable. I thought back that they might be protecting the ponies, some Contract arranged. The pressure eased.

"She's with Red Eye. She's a cyberpony, just like him!" one of the earth pony mares shouted in a panic. "She's come to take us back to the pits! Kill her, Lyonesse! Please!"

"I'm not here for any of you. I'm not with Red Eye. In fact, I'll probably be killing him soon." I could feel a whole hit list of people the Goddess wanted dead. I'd be more than her Lacunae; I'd be her personal hitpony. Her executioner. The thought made me clench my teeth and try to think of a way to escape her pull. All I accomplished was a headache as my legs resumed movement through the admin building.

"If you're not after us, we got no argument with you," Lyonesse replied, the young tawny griffin looking at the other two. From the looks they all exchanged, it was clear that this wasn't a fight any of them wanted. That might save their lives. "If you're here for salvage, we picked it all clean and stashed it, so there's nothing for you here."

"Funny. I thought I picked it clean when I swept through here," I replied as I walked past towards the barracks. The three followed. I had to obey that force, but that didn't mean I couldn't chat in the meantime. "You all new to the Hoof?"

"The ponies came from Fillydelphia. Met up with them near Ponyville a couple weeks back.

Heard Hoofington wasn't controlled by Red Eye anymore, so we agreed to escort them in exchange for any ammo or weapons we came across," she said, keeping her voice calm as we trotted into the locker room. "So... are there a lot of you around here?"

"Some free advice. Go northeast. Look for a place called Megamart. Premiere traders. They'll buy anything you folks find. Don't go southeast. You'll run into a place called Flank. Used to be a community, now just a lot of killers. Be very careful who you fuck with," I said as I trotted to the terminal and selected Psalm's locker.

I typed in the password. 'Unforgiven'. The locker popped open with a heavy clunk, and I lifted out the large matte black metal case and the black riot armor she'd worn before. I felt the wave of shame from my friend, along with the memory of her placing these objects within when she first returned to Hoofington in exile. Testaments of the bloody legacy she'd carved through ponykind. Popping its catches, I opened the case and looked at the disassembled Penance in its padding. Dozens of tiny scratches on the polymer butt hinted at its bloody legacy. "Forgive me, Luna," I murmured, despite myself. It still smelled of gun oil. It was a gun of beauty, awesome in its design and terrible in its purpose.

The three griffins looked at me, and one of them suddenly grinned covetously. "Scramble me, that fucking shit is mi--" Her hand reached for her holster.

I obliterated her head in a spray of blood, bone, and brains with a magic bullet. "Oh shi--" screamed the second, trying to bring her guns to bear behind me. One applebuck with two metal hooves, and she made a sound like plywood snapping as she was embedded in the flimsy lockers behind me. Lyonesse I fixed with two glowing pinpricks right in her eyes. The tawny griffin shook as she stared back, filling the room with a salty smell as she wet herself.

Only the fact that she might keep the ponies safe till they could be transformed saved her. I closed the gun case and took the riot armor. Grace's alteration spell was fresh in my mind; I couldn't have cast it myself, but I was connected to the analytic genius of Mosaic and Gestalt. In a trice, the alterations had been made, and I pulled the black armor over my body. When the coat was in place, few ponies would guess I was augmented, but everypony would know I was bad news. No dragonkiller rounds in the locker, unfortunately. I'd have to use normal antipersonnel and armor piercing against LittlePip.

Closing the locker, I made my way to the door, leaving the bodies of the two griffins untouched. I think that unnerved Lyonesse even more. "If you really want my advice, though, get the fuck out of the Hoof as fast as you can," I said calmly. "This place will fucking kill you." And I turned my back on her, walking out the way I came. The dozen ponies shrank back into the offices and barracks as I strode past. Who could blame them?

The Operative walked the Wasteland once more.

When I approached the balefire crater, Lacunae looked at me with profound regret. "No. No. Please. Don't do this to her. Don't make her into her antithesis."

"You are in no position to tell us to do anything. You are the trash bin, and you are starting to stink. Now make the next jump," the Goddess replied contemptuously.

"No!" Lacunae shouted, her eyes flaring bright purple. "I won't!" Dreadful silence filled Unity at those words.

"You what?" the Goddess replied, as if not understanding those two little words.

"I refuse! I will not obey!" Lacunae shouted, sitting in the crater as she pressed her hooves to the

sides of her head. "I... I am not your garbage bin! I am... more!" she yelled aloud and across Unity.

"You dare? You think yourself more than us?!" the Goddess retorted haughtily. "You are nothing! You are merely the collection of our weaknesses, flaws, doubts, and pains! You were never born. That vessel isn't even yours. You are nothing! Now obey!" And gravity strong enough to crush her, the focus of not just the Goddess but hundreds of wills, pressed in upon her.

"I... will... not!" Lacunae roared in response to the dark skies overhead. "I have friends! I am... I am lo... I am cared for! I matter to others! I will not fail them now and deliver them to you."

"You have friends..." the Goddess murmured, and a ripple spread through Unity at the word. "How... how could a... a nothing... a nopony... a neverpony... have friends?" she demanded scornfully. Then she growled, "Of all the times you could do this, you choose now? Now that LittlePip is coming! She means to destroy us! Blackjack's own thoughts confirm it. And you dare to do this now? Now?!"

"I will not..." she whimpered. "Think about what you are doing." She fell to her knees in the crater, eyes clenched shut as her whole body shook.

"What we are doing? We? We are saving the pony race! We are becoming a viable species! We are eliminating three of our greatest threats all in one go. We are also going to make sure a zebra artifact will never corrupt another after we've extracted the knowledge we need. We are doing what must be done! What *will* be done! And nopony, not you, not Red Eye, not Blackjack, and certainly not that undersized pain in our ass is going to stop us!" Unity roared into her like an avalanche. "But what about you! What are you doing? You are putting our entire race at risk of extinction because you're worried about your friend. You are fighting our efforts to protect ourselves from Red Eye, for your friend. You are blind to threats to us out of concern for your friend! How can you be so shortsighted? How can you be so selfish?" It was not rage that poured through the link, but disgust and contempt. "If only we could execute you safely..."

Lacunae pressed her face to the glowing earth as she struggled against the gravity tearing her apart. "Please!" I begged into that raging collection of thoughts and voices. "You had friendship once! You had to! Twilight had friends! She had friends!"

"Echoes and shadows of immaterial things long since passed," the Goddess replied coldly. "Hurtful, wretched, terrible things... do you know what friendship, love, is? It's pain. Pain of loss. Every one of us had friends, family, and loved ones. Do you know what the grief of a thousand ponies feels like? I do. That is why we created the Lacunae. That is why we need her. We couldn't stay sane if we had to feel that."

"But I do feel it!" Lacunae wailed as she rose slowly to her hooves. "Every second of every day. Friendship. Family. Love. And Blackjack feels it. You might have stripped away the feeling and the memories but they're still there. And if you felt them for one minute, then I know you'd realize what you've beco--"

"What we are is what we must be! Radiation and taint will only spread. We must adapt to survive. That was Mosaic and Gestalt's grand conclusion, and Twilight agrees," the Goddess growled back. "Do you think all of this was made despite Twilight's wishes? No. Her will and intellect have made us possible!"

"She wouldn't! If you returned to her all that you've put into me, she wouldn't! And neither would you. Any of you!" Lacunae wept as she turned about, as if appealing to a massive invisible audience. "Take it back. Before you do this. Take all of what you've put in me back. Then see what conclusions you reach."

"There is neither time nor a point to such an exercise," the Goddess said gravely. "We stripped away those thoughts and feelings decades ago. Only our children matter now, and you will stop behaving so immaturely and do as you are told!"

Lacunae swayed to and fro, staggering in circles. Finally, her eyes came to rest on mine. Tears poured down her cheeks as she whimpered, "I'm sorry, Blackjack. I... I wanted to do better too..."

"You did," I murmured as I bent my head, as the Goddess wanted. Gravity always won in the end. I could see our destination clearly; there were fundamentals of teleportation being dumped into my head to aid in the trip. I tried to project back my own memories and the feelings I'd gotten from Twilight, but they went no further than Lacunae. The Goddess didn't want to feel, didn't want to remember the past.

Our weeping eyes met as we touched our horns. Together, we channeled the spell and disappeared for our next destination, outside the Hoof entirely. We reappeared on the tracks southwest of the city; this time I didn't land on my face, since Lacunae's own radiation-empowered body provided most of the energy.

This was the first time I'd been out of the Hoof while connected to Unity, and the difference was startling. Before, I'd only been aware of Lacunae and the omnipresent screaming note. Now, that scream was just a barely perceptible wail on the horizon, and in the clarity I could hear the individual whispers of dozens, even hundreds of minds. I knew them, and they knew me, and yet... something was wrong. Okay, maybe I didn't have much of a right to judge the state of telepathic mass minds, but as I felt all those different intellects, there were so many and so... little.

Like the two greens flying towards us. I knew that one had been an opportunistic scavenger who'd stumbled upon Maripony a century and a half ago... yet, he didn't even know his own name. He didn't want to know. He didn't even care. And his companion had grown up in a settlement... but that was all she knew; there were no faces of a mother and father. No games played, or friends. The memories she did retain were banal and functional things: how to fix leaky water pumps with scrap metal, and twenty-five different uses for duct tape. But when I pressed on who had taught her, there was only an empty gap.

Hundreds of souls all humming in harmony, but it was a spiritless tune... all the more heartbreaking for what it could have been. Had they been bound in friendship, tapping into that elusive and powerful magic that transcended definition, the Goddess would have been a Goddess in reality. But now that I could see Unity directly, I saw how pitiful they were. Even if they were monstrous, they were still so very sad and small compared to their potential.

And as soon as I was dipped, I would be just like them. Oh, there'd be an alicorn called Oubliette or some other oddly fitting name that had once been Blackjack's body... maybe she'd still have her augmentations... but the real me would be another of those masses of voices around the Goddess. I wouldn't remember my friends, but I wouldn't miss them, either. And I wouldn't remember the bad things. Everything distressing or disruptive would be shoved into the new dumpster. Because despite her threats, the Goddess needed me.

Others besides the greens were coming. In the meantime, I had to find out what LittlePip was up to and how to go about killing her. Because while the Goddess had dozens of technicians, scientists, scavengers, and even raiders, she had precious few heroes connected to her. The idea was alien, stupid, and even insane. The Goddess literally could not put herself in LittlePip's horseshoes and anticipate what she might do. In a rush, I was learning more about the Stabl...

Oh dear sweet Luna. They were the same pony? They hadn't been joking about that?! How... she... I... I couldn't believe that a tiny, sweet, smart mare like her could be the strapping goddess of

Wasteland death! I... I'd just not think about it.

Thank goodness, the Goddess seemed to reply as I refocused on my job and on LittlePip's biography. How she'd gone after Velvet Remedy half out of lust and half out of a desperate need for a friend. How she'd met Calamity. How she'd dealt with the crushing realization that she and Velvet would never be, and how she'd met Homage... and *oh* the things she'd *done* with Homage!

Really. It made me wish I remembered the events of a few hours ago a lot more clearly...

The Goddess had my meager memories, as well. The thing we did together at Red Eye's camp. Of course, I'd been half drunk the whole time and had no clue what LittlePip had actually gone there for, just that she'd done it. She'd needed... what? Information? It was no secret that Red Eye was trying to duplicate the events that created the Goddess, but hadn't succeeded. Maybe he'd discovered a weakness and LittlePip had asked him about it. Or maybe she'd needed something from him. His balefire bomb? Could LittlePip actually talk him into surrendering it? Doubtful. Red Eye wasn't a hero. He'd never trust LittlePip. If he did give her something, it'd likely be a fake. How about help? An army? He had the soldiers to spare, but would they matter? Something from his Stable? Some kind of tech that could be used against the Goddess?

"What is she going to do?" came the constant pressing question from Unity.

"I don't know. I'm not a smart pony. You should have taken P-21 and Glory," I countered, but I was already imagining it. LittlePip was smart. She'd try and hit the Goddess in some way the Goddess wouldn't see coming. Maybe she was going to dump those thousands and thousands of memory orbs that had been hidden under Shattered Hoof into the Goddess. No clue what would happen. The Goddess made sure she'd telekinetically repel anything small and round. The Black Book? Maybe she had some spell to affect the souls in Unity? That was pondered gravely. What if LittlePip could extract the Goddess's soul from Unity and bind it in a soul jar? Or an even more powerful spell. Twilight recalled the zebra lore of a star falling on Equestria. Perhaps that?

It was a huge unknown, but it was all the more frustrating because every memory of Twilight studying the Black Book with Rarity had been removed from Unity. All Twilight knew was that she *had* done it. And that she couldn't recall a spell like that... but what if she was wrong? What if there was a clue in one of those missing moments that had been thrown away because the thought of her friend hurt so very much? Unity couldn't bear those emotions, so said the Goddess...

But I wasn't just in Unity, was I? I was connected to Lacunae. I could dig through the 'trash' and try and see for myself. I met her eyes, said "I'm sorry," and invaded her as surely as I'd been invited. I had no choice. Gravity compelled me, no matter how much I hated it. The Goddess knew what I knew, and the Goddess wanted me to look.

But inside Lacunae's mind, past the surface of her consciousness, the contents were a solid mass of compressed thought. There was no organization or cataloguing, simply presence. Like geological strata, the newest memories inside her were all of me and my friends and her experiences with us. Worse, the merest digging shifted psychological structures that even the Goddess didn't fully understand. She'd overfilled Lacunae, pressurized her with so much that even this minor disturbance threatened a chaotic reaction.

The act, though, was like digging through colored stones tagged with cutie marks; the memories had condensed until they crystallized like amber. Many had no identification at all, lost to Unity's members for all time. But I could find interesting stones of purple with Twilight's cutie mark upon them. And with Gestalt's help, I could look inside.

Odd; I had the feeling that half of Unity was trying to peek over my shoulder and see that which

had been stripped from them. But which to look in... which to look in... I touched one of Twilight's memories and heard two names at once. 'Rarity' and 'Goldenblood'.

Oh, this I had to see. I took the memory into myself -- don't ask me how, that was being handled at a higher level -- and Lacunae's mindscape swirled away.

oooOOOooo

I found myself in a sumptuous hallway approaching a door emblazoned with three rhomboid, blue gems. No further title was needed. I shifted the scrolls in my bags; only an hour, and all of it would probably be spent working on new M.A.S. recruitment slogans. Then it would be time to go back to Manehattan and finish a report for the Princess. Time... there just wasn't enough of it. Not enough time with Spike. Not enough time with my friends. Not even enough time with my magic. When was the last time I did an all-night book trawl of Starswirl's spells? Or even just read a book because I wanted to read it?

I walked up and was about to knock when I heard the familiar, rusty voice. "You must have something, Rarity. You always have something." I froze, my hoof an inch from the door. Eavesdropping was horribly rude, but this was Goldenblood. He was up to something. He should have had an oil slick for a cutie mark. Why would he be meeting with Rarity? I turned and pressed my ear to the door.

"Goldenblood, *darling*, you make it sound as if I'm collecting books on zebra lore," Rarity's voice barely penetrated, but I could hear the poisoned sarcasm of the word.

"I know you haven't turned over all the writing on zebra magic to Twilight," Goldenblood countered. "Especially critical tomes you keep on your person," he added archly.

"We have a deal, Goldenblood. I keep your dirty laundry out of the press and history books and you don't harass me," Rarity countered. "The confiscation of tomes and texts that are hazardous to the war effort falls under my jurisdiction, and I take my ministry responsibilities seriously."

"If you could just give me an hour or two with it, then I'd be satisfied!" Goldenblood said forcefully, before collapsing into a fit of coughing.

"Perhaps you should have thought about asking before sending your little black assassin to steal it," Rarity replied coldly. "You're lucky I didn't turn her over to Pinkie Pie. Most of what you seek isn't here, anyway. All copies are erased, and the originals are archived outside Canterlot. I keep all those unpleasant things in Hoofington."

"Please," Goldenblood rasped. "Please. I need to know. There are things happening! Things that only the zebras know. I need to read about the disaster that befell their people long ago. How did they call down the star? Was it one or several? What were the effects afterwards? I must know!"

Calling down stars? That sounded serious. Megaspell serious.

Rarity didn't answer immediately. "Is this professional or personal?" Rarity asked pointedly.

Now it was Goldenblood's turn to pause before he answered, "It's personal. This is something outside the O.I.A. This is something I have to know."

Rarity didn't answer immediately. "Very well. I won't lend you my primary source. I didn't even give it to Twilight. But I will give you a few hours of access in return for a favor. Pinkie Pie has been sniffing around my projects. I'd appreciate it if you could do something nefarious to distract her. Perhaps skulk about Manehattan in a black cape and top hat. Oooh! And you simply must add a mustache to twirl. She'll be following you in seconds."

"I'll consider it, but I think a word to Quartz might be more effective." Then he paused and added, "Thank you, Rarity." Another pause. "I'm sorry."

"I beg pardon?"

"Sorry. Sorry for everything. For... you... your friends... everything..." he muttered something I couldn't hear and then let out something that sounded almost like a sob. "It's one thing to plan... it's quite another to execute..."

"Goldenblood? What's going on?" Rarity asked, now with real concern. "Is this about Horse taking your position at the O.I.A.?"

"No, Rarity," Goldenblood choked. "I think I made a mistake... and then I made mistakes to deal with my mistake... and now... Rarity... I think something's gone horribly wrong and I don't know how to fix it."

"What is it? Tell me. Perhaps I can help," Rarity said generously. "I know something about mistakes. Sometimes I just want to trot up to Luna and tell her to take this ministry and... do something unladylike and anatomically uncomfortable with it. If it weren't for my friends loving every minute of it..."

There was a long pause in response. "Thank you, Rarity, but this was my mistake. I'm the one who has to clean it up. Please, excuse me." There was an implosion of air and a faint flash under the door. I backed up and chewed my lip. What to say? Admit that I was spying on my friend? Accuse her of holding secrets? Admit that working at the M.A.S. wasn't the dream come true I'd imagined years ago, now that most of the research was being done by other ponies?

I turned away from the door and walked back down the hall to Rarity's secretaries. "Um... excuse me. I just remembered something that completely slipped my mind. I was hoping we could resche--"

"Twilight?" came Rarity's voice from behind me, and I froze, then turned slowly and frowned. She looked... terrible. There were shadows around her eyes and a gauntness that made her look as if she hadn't eaten in days. Even her magnificent mane had more gray tips than I'd ever seen before. And how she moved... as if she were in pain... still, she smiled. "Twilight, Darling, it's so wonderful to see you again!"

"Rarity? Are you all right?" I asked as I trotted quickly to her side. "You look--"

"Glamorous? Stunning? Beautific?" Rarity suggested at once, bringing a smile to my face.

"Old, actually," I answered honestly.

She slumped a little and gave a small indulgent smile. "Twilight, I really do need to loan you a copy of *Principles of Proper Pony Speech*." Her smile faded, replaced by a look of clear fatigue. "Actually, I'm just a little tired after my latest creation," she said as she started back towards the office.

"You're still making dresses? Even while running your ministry?" I said, both impressed and a touch envious as I followed her inside. I caught her sliding a drawer closed as she walked behind the desk.

"No. I wanted to... well... branch out a little, as it were," she said as she lifted a purple and pink box wrapped in star-printed ribbon and set it on the desk before me. "These are for you, Twilight."

I cocked my head, feeling something was off about this gift, but not in a bad way. Carefully, I tugged the ribbon, undid the bow, and then started to pull up the tape very... Oh, Rarity was giving me the look that meant that now wasn't the time to save wrapping paper... I ripped it right off at once and

opened the box inside. I tugged the paper free and...

There we were... all six of us together like when we were young, before this horrible mess had occurred. And there was Pinkie Pie, and she looked happy and free. And Rainbow Dash grinning confidently and Applejack mid-buck. And... was that me? Was that really how I used to look? I pulled out the tiny figurine. It felt... warm. "Rarity..."

"I put my heart and soul into them. One set for each of us, and a seventh for Princess Luna." Her smile faded a touch. "Do you like them?"

"Rarity... they're amazing! I... I don't deserve them," I said as I lifted the rest out and assembled them on Rarity's desk. "They're so lifelike..."

"While I originally planned on keeping them together... I really couldn't. I gave one of mine to Sweetie Belle, along with an apology. I've given her so many, but I hope she realizes that this one's sincere. And I know Rainbow Dash is giving one of hers to Scootaloo. I expect that Applejack is giving one to Apple Bloom. And I believe Fluttershy has given one to Angel Bunny, can you imagine?" She smiled and lifted a tiny Applejack with her magic. "Well, at least she doesn't have to worry about them breaking." And she thumped it solidly against the table. For an instant I moved to stop her, but she was right. The figurine was unharmed.

I lifted the tiny replica of myself. "I... it's... I could give it to Spike... or Princess Celestia... or..." Mom. I swallowed as I sniffed and smiled. "It's like the Gala tickets all over again."

"Yes. There's never quite enough to go around," Rarity replied, her smile fading. "If I'd known how the Princess would take it, I would have given a whole set to Spike."

"How did she take it?" I asked with a touch of concern.

Rarity seemed to consider her words for a moment, then sighed and rolled her eyes a little. "Oh, I don't know. I suppose she's used to lavish presents. But when I gave it to her she seemed... disturbed by it. I've never seen her so discomposed before. She thanked me, of course, but I'm not quite sure she knew what to do with them. I suppose it'll end up on a shelf somewhere. I rather hoped she'd give a figurine of you to Celestia, but..." she sighed and shook her head, then lifted the tiny copy of herself and gazed into its eyes with profound sadness. "I suppose this is as close as I will ever come..."

"Rarity?" I asked, wanting to put a hoof on her shoulder.

She laughed mirthlessly and casually wiped her eyes with her fetlock. "Oh my. Becoming so maudlin over such a... a silly little thing." She glanced at me, then gave a little smile. "You know... I still have the Twilight Sparkle from my set... I could give it to Spikey Wikey so he'll always have you with him."

I caught on and returned her smile. "And I could give him my Rarity. So he'll always have the love of his life." I looked at the six, feeling a little tight in the chest and throat as my gaze lingered on the friend whose problems I couldn't help, no matter how smart I was. "It might have been simpler just to give each of us seven of ourselves. Then we could just give them those people we cared about."

"I... considered that..." Rarity murmured, but so softly that I looked over and saw her face shielded by her mane. Then she gave a sniff. "I did. But... I wanted each of us to remember our friends as we used to be, not as we are today." She tried to wipe away her tears behind the veil of her mane but couldn't hide the thickness in her throat as well. "He was right. It all seems to have gone horribly wrong, doesn't it?"

"Rarity?" I asked gently, putting a hoof on her shoulder. Should I bring up what I'd overheard? But then it was too late as she broke down, sobbing, pushing her face into my shoulder as she clung to

me, trembling. Great hot tears spilled down my neck as she clung to me.

"I was supposed to be a fashionista! I wanted to design things for other ponies. Not... not micromanage and direct others and pretend like... like all *this* is important to me." She flailed a hoof at the sumptuously decorated office. "Managing Luna's image? Confiscating books? Authorizing press releases? I was supposed to have a handsome husband and a foal that I could spoil absolutely rotten and a boutique for Canterlot's finest. That was what my life was supposed to be! But you and Fluttershy and Pinkie Pie... oh Pinkie Pie!" she wailed and shook her head. "How did it come to this? Where did it all go so... so wrong?!" she asked as she pulled back and looked at me with a devastated gaze.

"I... don't know," I whispered as I stared straight ahead. Tears of my own ran down my cheeks. "I don't know anymore. I look back these ten years and it just feels... empty. Like everything we've been through... anything good... has been sifted away. I... go to bed and I feel like somepony should be there with me! But he's not there... and I don't even know who he is. And that I'm supposed to have... more! But it's not there either. Like everything that I'm supposed to cherish is just smoke and the things that should matter aren't there anymore!"

"But we have to do it," Rarity whispered, guilty and ashamed. "It was like Rainbow Dash said. There're so many ponies fighting and dying for us that we have to give back to them. We owe Equestria. And Applejack... it's not just other ponies fighting. It's family."

I thought of Big Macintosh, and that huge gulf threatened to consume me. I had a precious few memories of the red stallion before the war... but that was it. "Maybe," I answered, drying my tears in her mane. "But that was ten years ago. It might be time to think about changing things... soon." Once the I.M.P. was finished, I could step aside. Let Mosaic and Gestalt run the Ministry. Or Luna could pick somepony else. I was tired... tired of the stress and the pressure and the meaningless sacrifice. There were just a few loose ends to wrap up.

Like meeting the candidate for the I.M.P. test tomorrow...

oooOOOooo

"Enough," the Goddess snapped, breaking me out of my reverie. Three more alicorns, a blue and two greens, had joined us. There'd be more at the next destination, I knew. "You're wasting time. All these... these... emotions. They're pointless! You need to focus on eliminating LittlePip." I shared Twilight's tears. She hadn't known, the life that could have been. That should have been. What would Twilight have ended up as if she hadn't accepted Luna's offer? Wizard? Princess? Wife? What about Applejack or Rainbow Dash? Or poor Pinkie Pie? Would Fluttershy have committed high treason if she'd never been put in a position where she could do so?

It was wrong. All of it. Every last bit felt contrived and pointless and... stupid! What was all that for? "What's the Goddess-damned point!?" I screamed aloud and through Unity. A war over resources that destroyed the countries that wanted them. Ministries that consumed the mares that directed them. Princesses who seemed absent just when everypony needed them. A Goddess who was planning to kill a mare whose greatest driving goal was to help others.

Then the Goddess showed me.

An irradiated world, one in which even the Enclave had been driven to extinction. No ghouls; those would be stamped out eventually. Zebras, griffins, and dragons were no more. Just a world of alicorns. Mostly female; it would depend on how the Black Book would make the changes, but the Goddess had no interest in creating an equal distribution of sexes. She knew the effectiveness of Stable 99. New alicorn types, perhaps red ones that specialized in fire or white ones that specialized in ice, would be developed and evolved. Perhaps alicorns who travelled in time? Super telekinetic alicorns?

The Elements of Harmony and the Gardens of Equestria would be reclaimed and repurposed; Twilight might only have generalities and scraps, but they'd be a foundation for a new Gardens. One that spread balefire and magical radiation to every land till the very oceans glowed with power. There would be only alicorns and their Goddess, a mother and her children. One mind. One will. One note united forever. They'd use their magic to defeat Horizons, whatever it was, and cast down Hoofington once and for all.

And that was the point of the world. By Alicorns. For Alicorns. Only Alicorns. A monorace with a singular will and a Goddess with the power to exceed any Princess.

And I was going to be a part of it, whether I wanted to or not. So would all my friends. Everypony. And if you weren't a pony or resisted, the alternative was simple and permanent death. And most terrible of all was who in Unity had come up with this plan. Not Trixie, the showmare. Not even Mosaic and Gestalt. This was Twilight Sparkle's plan... a Twilight stripped of compassion and concern and ethics. A Twilight more machine than mare, fulfilling Trixie's ego. It felt like there was more Twilight inside Lacunae than inside the Goddess. Almost.

Twilight was a part of that monster. As was Trixie. As were Mosaic and Gestalt. Fused. Stripped of those parts that allowed compassion for others. Trixie had suffered, knew shame and humility, but that was gone now. Mosaic and Gestalt had felt a love and a desire to understand others... but that was gone as well. Weakness shoved into Lacunae... like soul jars of memory. The Goddess had become like a void sucking in everything good and transforming it into more of itself. Would it stay on this world, when every last living thing was altered to suit it? Or would thousands of purples and millions of greens teleport them to distant stars and innocent worlds?

And I was going to kill the mare best-suited to end her now.

The greens touched horns, their magical fields boosting Lacunae's. With another flash, we disappeared.

* * *

There were a half-dozen more alicorns at our destination. An old train switchyard; in the distance was some large structure with hundreds of mirrors. Aside from some gutted concrete storage buildings and some rusted train cars, there was nothing of interest here. LittlePip had entered the crater; I had to hurry. There was no more time for delays. There were no signs of her friends; both they and Red Eye had pulled back. Did Red Eye know what was going on? Her spies hadn't learned it. If so, it meant only Red Eye himself knew. LittlePip and Red Eye in collusion... the possibilities made gravity crush in on me as a green brought a PipBuck from Fillydelphia and began to wire it into the hole in my leg. She'd once been a father and a stable technician; beyond that, she didn't matter. Anything that made her matter had been shoved into Lacunae.

"Think! What is she going to do? What might she do?" the Goddess demanded.

"I don't know! She's smarter than me!" I shouted back as my head felt like it was being pressed between two crushing hooves.

"You have endured and faced ridiculous odds! How would you kill me?" the Goddess pressed.

"Me?!" I laughed madly aloud and into the link. "Oh, let me count the ways! Hijack a Raptor and crash it into Maripony with all guns blazing? Work out a deal with the Enclave to give them Shadowbolt Tower in return for killing you? Fill your head with horribly catchy pre-war pop songs that would drive anypony crazy? Oh! There's an overcharged megaspell in Hoofington! I'd totally use that! Oh! Better than that. I'd warn the hellhounds and tell them to clear out in return for planting it right under your goopy blue ass!

"And don't get me started on all the ways she *might* kill you! Maybe she's gotten Gardens to work and she plans on neutralizing Maripony's taint. Or maybe Velvet Remedy has that spell; seems like it'd be right up her alley. Or the Black Book! Maybe it's given her some kind of superpowered soul spell. Or Spike might make an appearance just to kick your ass! An army of Steel Rangers! Zebra death commandos! The possibilities are endless!" I laughed wildly, madness being the only escape I could see open for me.

"Enough! She has none of those things!" the Goddess countered.

"Oh, but you don't know, do you?" I retorted at once as the green finished connecting the PipBuck to my systems. I was forced to chow down on some gems, but that didn't silence my mind. "You know she planned to remove those memories of me. But you don't know. You can't even imagine what she might have up her PipBuck sleeve." New possibilities of deicide bloomed in my mind as the Goddess imparted all she knew about LittlePip. "Maybe she found some severed greens in Canterlot, and they're going to help her lift the whole Maripony building and shove it into the sinkhole! You don't know!" I swallowed and laughed even louder. "And what's so pathetic is that you brought me, the stupidest damn pony in the Wasteland, to help! How dumb does that make y--!"

"ENOUGH!" the Goddess yelled as I collapsed and started to convulse. "You are quite right! I don't need your intellect or morals. I just need you to kill one mare. You don't need anything besides that!" And I screamed as I felt gravity tear a piece of me away. A... place. Where had I come from? I was Blackjack, and my mom... who...

"No! Please!" Lacunae screamed as she turned from one stoic alicorn to the next. "Stop it!" Things seemed to be falling away from me. A place with a filly who filled me with dread... what was her name? A boat where I felt horrible pain... but why? A stallion I wanted to kill... but I couldn't recall the reason. "Don't do this to her!" the strange purple alicorn shouted.

I... I should be doing something. Following something with my friends. Scotch Tape... and... and who was she? And there'd been another... I could see them for an instant: a blue stallion and a gray pegasus. They were frustrated with me... amused by me... I loved them... I...

I loved who?

An echo whispered in my mind. "It fucking sucks not to remember."

Yes. Yes it did. Then that went away too.

"Stop it!" the aberrant alicorn screamed as she lifted the two guns. Crude weapons; inelegant. "I won't let you do this to her!" She dared to turn against us? To fight us? To betray her own? The motors began to whirl on the minigun as the anti-machine rifle loaded a round into the chamber.

"Madness," I said, calmly.

Gravity directed; universal and inescapable. Do not kill. Disable. I brought up S.A.T.S. and queued four magical bullets, boosted by four greens. Limbs and wings; she would survive that. Eighty-one percent probability. I activated the spell, the bullets blasting with the ferocity of our unity at the aberrant. Why was I... why didn't matter. Do.

Unfortunately, the aberrant disappeared in a purple flash. We were working to bring the aberration into line. The recent additions had caused her to slip free. Where... I knew, but we could not react in the half second of time we had. The anti-machine round blasted right through the skull of the purple beside me from directly above. Shields raised around all of us, except myself and the blues, as we looked up at the aberrant above us. Rage and grief filled her face. Madness. She would not target me, but the aberrant's powerful rifle would be problematic. The two blues disappeared into invisibility as two

of the greens boosted each other's shields. The minigun would be far less effective as it needed several seconds to chew through shields.

The battle should have been finished in seventeen point nine seconds. I teleported directly above the aberrant. I expected some... something... as gravity dropped me upon her back, my mass penetrating her shield with only moderate discomfort. Silver sword emerged from its sheath. Severing her horn and wings would simplify things greatly. If horn amputation severed the aberrant from us, we might even be able to kill her cleanly and rid ourselves of her toxic emotions for good.

Only she flipped upside down completely the instant I made contact. I tried to flap my wings, but I was aberrant as well. Heavy. I passed through the bottom of her shield with an electric crackle and slammed into the muddy ground. One of the free greens shot powerful silver arrows into the aberrant's body. The blues would move to ambush her. Already they were flanking, and with their shields down there was nothing to betray them while I recovered from the impact.

The aberrant swore impotently as she sprayed wildly about her. Futile. Madness. The madness of everypony outside Unity. The minigun rounds zinged through the air as the blues moved in. One remained silent when the line of bullets was interrupted by her body. The aberrant continued to fire wildly with the minigun... but not with the rifle. That weapon swung around to where the minigun's bullets had disappeared in midair and blasted the blue vessel with an antipersonnel round. The pain was significant as the round fragmented, expanded, and exploded out the far side in a significant spray of organic fluid and protein.

The non-shielding greens were working through the aberrant's shields, and seeing the death of its twin, the blue evaded that revealing stream of bullets. Without that, there was nothing to betray its approach. Gunsmoke wreathed the black form. Another sign of aberration; clothing was irreverent social symbolism. I rose up and drew the dual dueling revolvers, waiting for the PipBuck's spell matrix to recharge so I could maximize my accuracy. The aberrant seemed to be avoiding targeting me. I could use that to our advantage.

Seventeen point nine seconds elapsed... frustrating. Silent wings carried the blue behind the aberrant, swirling the smoke... swirling...

The blue raised her shield, the greens pumping the anti-kinetic shield to maximum; even the rifle's bullets shouldn't penetrate! But the aberrant didn't fire either gun. No. Instead she bit hard on the barrel, the metal burning her mouth as she swung with both muscle and telekinesis, slamming the heavy butt with incredible force. The slow, heavy mass (relative to a bullet) pierced a shield anticipating far higher velocities, and the butt crashed hard upside the blue's head. She screamed instinctively, but that just allowed the second return swing to crash right against her temple. Her shield flickered as focus was lost, and it broke completely when the final blow smashed her skull and sent the other blue crashing down.

The aberrant had taken severe damage, though. Her shield had fallen and that black garment was spotted with a dozen bleeding wounds. A few more and she should be exhausted enough to disable. The greens prepared another barrage as two focused on shields and two on the magic arrows that streaked after her. The aberrant was saying the word 'blackjack' over and over again, but what relevance a gambling card game played I couldn't imagine. With her shield down, she was taking shelter behind one of the rusted boxcars. Reinforcements were minutes away, but we didn't have minutes to waste with the aberrant.

I had her on my E.F.S. The red bar stood out; she hadn't teleported away. Knowing she wouldn't attack me directly, I darted around behind the boxcar. Nothing! I turned to face the car, frowning. Where did the aberrant...

Two booms erupted through the metal of the boxcar. The shots were wide; I was correct. The aberrant had a critical weakness to this shell. I jumped inside and rolled, but the aberrant seemed to anticipate me as she jumped back atop me. "Stop it, Blackjack! Fight her! Fight!"

I didn't understand what she meant and I didn't care. I brought the sword around; not towards her but towards the anti-machine rifle that had been so devastating. The starmetal edge cut through the weapon's barrel, rendering it useless. The greens moved to either side of the boxcar as I swung the weapon at her horn, but she parried with the ruined butt, twisting the weapon to prevent the edge from simply slicing through it as well. The black dress ripped off her purple body; perhaps a sign she was returning to the guidance of Unity?

No. The garment was thrown in my face, and even when the sword sliced it neatly in two, her magic grabbed the tatters. With magical swiftness, she tied them tightly in place.

Then she threw me into the face of two greens in the doorway. It was only for a moment, but the impact of my heavy metal body disrupted the focus of the pair. And I heard the spinning up of the minigun in that second. At point blank range, the five millimeter rounds ripped into all three of us, but I was far more resilient than the other two in the heap. Still, the few seconds it took for the aberrant to dispatch the pair allowed the other two to grievously injure her. And using the sight of the greens, I rammed the blade into the spinning barrels. The metal sheared off and flew away in a dazzling circle of sparks and steel.

Just a few more seconds. Just a few...

She disappeared in another purple flash and reappeared atop a boxcar twenty feet away. Blood dribbled from her wounds as she slumped. The aberrant was almost finished. She would submit, and if she would not, then this one would perform the task personally. She was clearly straining with another spell, her horn crackling as she gritted her teeth. Perhaps an attempt to teleport away? Annoying, but manageable. The two greens approached the injured aberrant.

Then she disappeared, and the source of her strain was evident.

The boxcar had disappeared too.

I suddenly felt a sensation of déjà vu...

The car crashed down upon the remaining pair of greens with a squeal of broken metal. I sliced the cloth tied to my head carefully and caught sight of the aberrant falling limply from the top of the crushed car. The pair had gotten their shields up in time, but it'd take them a while to disentangle themselves from the wreckage. The aberrant's horn was blackened along its entire length to her face and it still gave wild sparks from being overtaxed. Slowly I approached, pistols and swords ready. She opened one pain-filled eye and said, "You idiot. Don't you get it? She's worthless like this."

That was true. Resilience aside, this body lacked... something. It would have to... be... "Oh Goddess..." I breathed as I stared down at Lacunae's broken body. "Oh no... no!" I collapsed at her side, and held her close, shaking as I wept. The pieces that had been removed from me were back, and more. I now knew what Unity was like. Perhaps my tenure in the group mind might be a little different, but not by much. I'd be hollow. Cold. Dead in the ways that mattered.

I bowed over her, cradling her as more alicorns teleported in around us. "Why didn't you just kill me? I'd rather you'd done that," I whimpered like a filly as I held her. I felt like I was being dragged back to the *Seahorse*... only worse. At least then I could have died.

"You don't kill your friends, Blackjack," she replied with a pained smile. And I looked into my friend's eyes, and I knew why. I could see it glowing in the middle of that jumbled mess of memories...

the one true thing that was Lacunae's and only hers. Hope. Hope that she could delay long enough for LittlePip to defeat the Goddess. Hope that, somehow, I'd be free. It was small and pitiful and so beautiful.

"Give me a healing spell," I demanded of Unity as I held Lacunae's bloody body.

"Already makin--" the Goddess began, but I pressed Sacrifice against my head and Duty against Lacunae's. I wouldn't leave her with the Goddess. I felt like I was in Flash Industries once more, fighting with all my will against gravity. "Really?" the Goddess asked, sounding skeptical and disappointed.

"Heals. Now. Or I'll blow my brains out and laugh at you from the afterlife as LittlePip kills you. I'll even get a special spot in hell ready just for you," I hissed, my muscles shaking as I kept all my focus on the trigger. I think, like this, Glory would forgive me for breaking my promise to her.

The dropped boxcar rocked as the two greens telekinetically heaved it off themselves. They approached slowly with the others, forming a ring around us. I could feel the Goddess calculating. Did she need me? Would it be better just to let us die? Some part of the Goddess decided a sliver in my favor. Their horns glowed in unison; the Goddess wasn't going to trust me with the spell. Carefully, they healed most of her injuries as I watched. Only when she stood did my resolve crack, and I yielded to gravity once more.

"You are a pain in our ass," the Goddess muttered softly, but there was something else in her tone. Frustration? Admiration? Resignation? I couldn't tell for certain.

The greens touched their horns, and the purple alicorns' horns began to glow. Two more teleports. What could we do? How could we stop the Goddess? I looked at Lacunae and that tiny glowing emotion inside her that I lacked. Hope. Just a little bit in the Wasteland...

* * *

Lacunae's delay had bought LittlePip a few minutes. She'd arrived already and was inside and approaching the Goddess with the Black Book. There was no time left. The Goddess was hesitant to probe LittlePip too deeply, and yet at the same time she was eager to strip away and discover all she could. Like a foal with a Hearth's Warming Eve present, parts of her wanted to wait till the book was taken care of, but others wanted to devour every thought from her perilous enemy. LittlePip believed she was dooming all of the Wasteland with this action; she was right.

We'd teleported to the lip of the crater. I'd take care of her from here.

Under cover, I immediately unpacked Penance and began the exacting assembly of the weapon. Even if I wanted to foul it somehow, I couldn't. Gravity wouldn't let me. Even after two centuries, the rifle fit together perfectly, one piece into another. It was a work of art, terrible and awesome all at once. I carefully slid the scope into position, then tightened the screws to exactly the right tension.

And the icing on the cake? The small black container marked 'M.A.S. / M.W.T. / O.I.A. EBP#12.' which had also lain in Maripony's research facilities for two centuries. Within was a .50 caliber round of black diamond carefully etched with magic glyphs. A wonderful application of bypass magic. A bullet, magically precise, that would ignore stone and steel and impact flesh. According to classified notes discovered in the facility, #8 and #9 had performed marvelously. The Goddess felt a smug glow at withholding this treasure from Red Eye. I slid the round home and I lay out on my stomach. I had Psalm in me, her training and her habits, and I had my own precise control of my telekinesis. As the chamber closed and locked, a cold shiver ran through me.

Time to kill LittlePip.

I raised the rifle and stared. The magical scope made the stone, wires, piping, and rebar disappear in a cylinder along the path. It took me almost a minute to find LittlePip; it was like peering down a straw, a magic straw that could see through walls. My horn turned a little dial back and forth, moving in and out of the structure as I swept the weapon back and forth. Then she appeared, the tiny, brave mare approaching the vats. Saddlebag floating beside her. The black book was in there; the Goddess had skimmed that fact... but what if her friends had tricked her? What if there was a megaspell targeting talisman inside?

LittlePip was talking... stalling. For what? The Goddess couldn't tell. I couldn't. LittlePip was talking about weather control and how it mattered to somepony else. I settled the crosshairs on LittlePip's pretty little temple. The Goddess could kill her without warning; with but a thought. LittlePip didn't have any Pinkie Sense to warn her. Smugness rose up in Unity.

The insecurity of it made me gag. Supreme telepathic and telekinetic powers and an army of minions, and she still wanted an ace in the hole. Because she knew that LittlePip would try something, and she knew I might guess what it was. The Goddess was wracking her memories for everything she knew about weather control and how it could endanger her. Flash floods, lightning, even tornadoes wouldn't be able to do much to the massive structure, even damaged as it was. Still, there were giant gaps on the topic of weather control spells. Had Twilight ever worked with Rainbow Dash on them?

The Goddess didn't know. She would, though. Now that she had everypony under control and LittlePip hopeless and defeated, she luxuriated over her enemy. The power! The ability to do as she wished! She was the Goddess! No pony had this power. She wanted the sensation to last a little longer. LittlePip was stalling... waiting for her friends, no doubt. But I could see... and through me the Goddess could see... that her friends had abandoned her. Calamity wasn't sneaking through the ducts. Steelhooves wasn't charging to the rescue.

LittlePip thought something... I didn't hear it specifically so much and feel it. Names. But not just names. There was something more attached to it. Something... personal. Like a familiar, nagging tune long forgotten. "Yes! Your silly little plan against the Goddess is hopeless! The Goddess is not impressed! You... wait... who?"

A moment later, LittlePip thought them again. This wasn't a part of the plan. This was... different. Unexpected. I was all set to turn the small unicorn's brains into red paint, but those four simple words. Trixie. Twilight. Mosaic. Gestalt. Of course the Goddess knew who they were, but to the Goddess they were four flat entries akin to what one might feel reading a dictionary. The names from LittlePip rang with memory and thought and emotion. Music playing in a simple mental harmony.

As LittlePip remembered what she'd viewed in the star orb, the melody began to grow. Feelings that hadn't been scraped off into Lacunae began to resonate as we watched Trixie getting a second chance from Twilight. And the other memories! The fall of Canterlot and Rarity touching the holed window tore through Unity like a fresh wound, aching with the image of the unicorn skeleton with her hoof melted to the glass. My aim wavered as tears obscured my vision a touch. Applejack losing the love of her life. Pinkie Pie... quitting her ministry? Pinkie Pie... the true Pinkie... talking to herself?

It was like an earthquake rolling through Unity. Yet the Goddess, perhaps not having felt so much pathos in so long, hesitated to shove it all away. No... not hesitating! She was trying to do exactly that... but Lacunae was full, and unlike myself, LittlePip wasn't in Unity. The memories and emotions kept rolling out.

I don't know how long I was there. An hour. Two? Three? Even my horn gave out, and I just lay there, hoping this was the plan. Maybe LittlePip would get through to the Goddess! Maybe... just maybe... this was the plan! But as I lay there the clouds high above parted, and... no. It wasn't the

clouds parting. It was the clouds *descending*. A colossal, swirling, gray machine of death. It hovered far above, tornadoes seeming to curl around the powerful engines propelling the machine. Before it, dropping down towards the valley, were four immense Raptors. Their engines filled the air with a ghostly whisper that made my mane stick up.

So... that's a real Thunderhead. As impressive a machine of war as it was, it seemed to be keeping its distance high and away from the facility. *Triumphant*, a pegasus within Unity identified. The Enclave leadership were here to mark this momentous event. More than just dangerous, the machine appeared... gaudy. Its metal spire tips and whirling propeller blades gleamed with gold, and the massive curve of its body was decorated in swooping, curling designs. From its position miles away, I wondered if it was staying high out of aloofness or caution. Then again, it could probably annihilate me from there anyway.

From the Raptors dropped small teams of power-armored pegasi, then whole wings flying in glorious and impressive formation. It certainly looked intimidating.

They were greeted with a grand sight of hundreds of alicorns arranged in a band of green, blue, and purple. Perhaps all of them. Beneath the wings of power armor, small pegasus camera teams flew about, capturing the glorious sight. A new age for the Enclave, I supposed. A team flew by me, no doubt intrigued by the odd unicorn and her gun. "Who is that?" they asked, half accusingly and half questioningly. An illusion hid my rifle from view immediately.

"Blackjack," Lacunae said, before gravity crushed down upon her to be silent. "She's the Security Mare of Hoofington," she gasped through the pain.

"No pony for you to concern yourself with," a pair of greens replied to the camera teams in unison. "She serves the Goddess."

They looked at each other, then touched the sides of their helmets, no doubt receiving orders. Together, they flew away. LittlePip had succeeded in stalling the Goddess; now what?

The Goddess had hoped to have the Black Book and LittlePip dealt with before Harbinger's arrival. "Enough of that memory! It... It is not important!" the Goddess thought as she tried to actually deal with real feelings rather than shove them away. Lacunae could barely stand as the Goddess tried to force them into a vessel that would not hold more.

She was so overwhelmed and off balance that she missed LittlePip's stunned thoughts initially. Harbinger was approaching; no doubt his escorts would film every second of this exchange. She should be getting ready! She'd had a whole speech prepared about a glorious new beginning for Enclave and Alicorn alike! Finally, though, the Goddess latched onto two words in LittlePip's mind... 'balefire bomb'.

Like dominos, the missing pieces fell into place. The meeting with Red Eye had been for the one thing the Goddess been sure he'd never part with: the balefire bomb. How had LittlePip talked... but it didn't matter. She had. The bomb had been small and portable... but how had she gotten it inside? Stealth cloaks! But that was impossible. Anypony foolish enough to enter would be...

Anypony...

"The zebra!" the Goddess gasped as she put two and two together along with LittlePip. Xenith, in the cloak, could evade even the hellhounds beneath Maripony! LittlePip was running... Harbinger was here and beginning to blather on about something the Goddess could care nothing about. I returned the rifle's sight to LittlePip as she backed into Harbinger. I could kill her now, and good riddance... the Goddess had to find that bomb!

In a rainbow cloud, the ring of alicorns began to fly towards the building. No doubt dozens,

perhaps hundreds would die to the hellhounds. How could LittlePip have endangered them as well? She was more ruthless than I, clearly. I rested the crosshairs right between LittlePip's eyes. The rifle's magic would make sure she died. Then I would join the search.

But something was amiss. Something wrong. I was playing my role, as were we all. Only one part of the Goddess wasn't: the garbage dump. The lingering, teasing melody of those four names and the emotions associated with them played in the back of the Goddess's mind. A splinter in the hive mind.

"Perhaps you know something," the Goddess said after a moment's hesitation. "Some... schematic... some spell... some... something about balefire. I suppose it wouldn't hurt to look," she said, and Lacunae groaned as the Goddess's will picked through the countless memories deposited within her, no time for the Goddess to use me as a filter.

Distantly, I could hear Twilight Sparkle's voice as the Goddess retrieved the memory. It wasn't quite like a memory orb. Instead, I saw a ghostly shadow of Twilight and Rainbow Dash inside the Goddess. "It isn't a natural explosion."

"What do you mean? It goes boom, right?" Glory -- no, Rainbow Dash answered.

"Balefire isn't normal combustion. It's not even megaspell combustion, like we thought. It's more like a megaspell teleportation field. It brings a phenomenal amount of fire from... somewhere else. Don't ask me where. It could be the sun, or even another world! It has a chaotic element that defies our normal laws of physics. If one of these goes off, spell effects could be disrupted. Worse, just as it teleports fire here, it teleports other material there. It's almost perfectly destructive."

"Almost? You have something that'll work?" Rainbow Dash asked eagerly in my mind.

"Work is relative. I think I can modify Shining Armor's shield spell, though. With some fiddling, we might be able to protect critical ministry buildings from harm. Power is going to be an issue..."

The ghost images faded, but with that memory, the simple tune LittlePip began deepened. Shining Armor and Rainbow Dash's notes joined as those emotions were renewed. "Perhaps some more. Something that will help us."

I heard Princess Celestia's voice. "No. I think that Mosaic and Gestalt are incredibly gifted ponies, and I'd be honored to accept them at my school." I saw Celestia addressing two shabby-looking green earth ponies. The couple looked like they could have been Wastelanders. A pair of identical green fillies hid behind them.

The father said in a worried voice, "Are you sure? They don't have much magical talent. We... well... we never could afford them schooling or magic books. Being earth ponies, the missus and I couldn't teach 'em magic at all."

"I assure you, Mr. Pebble, my school is not simply for the children of unicorns. I think that, with their talent, your children will excel at my school for gifted unicorns," Celestia said, and the twin notes of Mosaic and Gestalt thrummed with new life.

The Goddess scoffed as the images faded away. "What... what was that!? I said to find some useful memory! Not sentimental nostal...gia..." The greens were replaced by an elderly gray unicorn in a pointed hat. The little blue filly shot fireworks into the air from her horn; impressive. At her age, I couldn't even do magic.

The unicorn stallion spoke warmly, "Bravo, Trixie! Très bien!"

"Did you really think so?" a filly replied. "I never be as good as The Mighty and Majestic Mystere."

"Bah. I left that name with the stage, *ma chère*. But trust me. Your raw talent is beyond compare. You really should apply to Celestia's school. Those fireworks were très magnifique!" the stallion said grandly with a wave of his hoof.

"But all I can do are silly little tricks, Mystere," the filly said softly. "Nothing I do is useful at all."

"Trixie!" the stallion gasped. "Useful! What is useful? Useful c'est commun. Boring. There are a million practical unicorns. Equestria does not need another."

The tiny ghostly Trixie brightened a little. Then a mare's voice snapped, "Trixie Lulamoon! What have I told you about talking to that old coot? You should be doing your homework!"

For a moment she crumpled, and then she glanced back at the old stallion. The filly frowned away, then raised her nose as she declared in a quavering voice, "T... the great and powerful Trixie doesn't need to do homework."

The old stallion clapped his hooves together, laughing uproariously. "Bravo!" He levitated his pointed, star-covered cap and set it atop the beaming filly's head.

"I... Mystere... I'd... I'd forgotten..." the Goddess murmured. Then it was like a breaching flood as memories began to flow back into the Goddess. The balefire bomb was almost forgotten as memory after memory was returned to the Goddess. Sterile, clinical facts were thrown into beautiful context, and emotions long suppressed were renewed.

LittlePip had started the melody with four names and a few memories. With these four, an orchestra began to play. It carried whimsical piccolos of Twilight's memories of Spike. Guitars played for Applejack. Accordions for Pinkie Pie. Violins accompanied Trixie standing alone in the rain. The delicate ringing notes of a hammered dulcimer for Gestalt and Mosaic finishing each other's sentences in magic kindergarten. The beat of Twilight's rage at Littlehorn. The violas and cellos of her last terrible fight with Pinkie Pie. The slow contrabass of Big Macintosh and the pain of his death. Trumpets of pride for Trixie's second chance. Woodwinds sharing Gestalt and Mosaic actually working under Twilight Sparkle when so many others didn't understand or value their gift. For the first time ever, the Goddess was torn.

"Children! Flee!" she blurted, instinctively, and that wave halted and undulated as Unity became Uncertainty.

Harbinger was confused. This was not going as he'd anticipated. "There is no need to flee. We mean you no harm. In fact, we've come to offer you an Alliance between the Enclave and the Goddess."

Doubt, after all the seductive thoughts of putting Thunderhead and the surface in their places, was starting to creep into his thinking as he launched into a monologue about how they would team up against the bad surfer Red Eye. Of course he had plans for treachery down the road, eventually. Just as he expected treachery in turn... but perhaps not THIS soon. Clearly this was going quite far from what he'd anticipated.

But within Unity, I could see two Goddesses; one a horrible amalgamation of mares and the other a union of four ponies, each fuzzy and indistinct. They were opposites and yet the same, one cold and hard and monstrous and the other compassionate and empathetic. "We must survive!" the Goddess roared. "We must find the bomb at any cost!"

"Any cost?" Trixie replied contemptuously. "Can you even imagine the cost? This is more than smashed wagons and hurt feelings."

"There is more at stake than us," Mosaic began calmly.

"This is a question of Legacy," Gestalt finished.

"Legacy?" the Goddess scoffed. "We are the beginning and the end. Without us, we are nothing!"

"We are more than the sum of our minds, bodies, and memories," Twilight Sparkle said quietly.

"Together," Gestalt began.

"We are greater," Mosaic finished.

Trixie looked herself in the eye. "Think of all the things I really wanted. Like respect?"

"We are better off feared!" the Goddess countered.

"Happiness?" Trixie suggested.

"Power makes us happy!" the Goddess sneered.

"Friendship?" Trixie said quietly. A ghostly Twilight rested her hoof on Trixie's shoulder, and the blue mare looked back at Twilight with a small smile.

"We are closer than any friends! Any family! We are one. And when we have ripped the souls from that book and tossed them to oblivion, we will have power like we could never imagined!" the Goddess roared. Even now, I could feel those hundreds of alicorns returning. LittlePip had tossed the book into the mass of blue IMP, and it was slowly sinking into the depths. Then she'd sealed herself into a saferoom. It didn't matter; already the gravity was pulling my aim back to the small mare. The shielding and spells in the saferoom's walls made even the truesight scope's image dance and waver, but I was still able to make out the ponies inside. I had to be patient. Perfect. I might not even have to kill her. She was furiously talking to the Enclave soldier she'd trapped with her. Still, better to be safe than sorry.

Harbinger, meanwhile, had stopped his grand speech. He scowled as he pressed an earbud with his wing. "Ambrosia! Come in. Ambrosia!"

"You won't be able to contact her inside that room now that the seal has activated," the Goddess said as her image flickered erratically. She seemed to be struggling to maintain the illusion. "Nor can the Goddess's own children teleport in and extract that little wretch to rip all her thoughts out of her skull. Do not fear. The Goddess will deal with her."

He looked at her, wariness pricking through his thoughts like icewater. "You're speaking differently now. What's going on? This isn't following the script."

The Goddess twitched again, and I could feel her straining. "Unfortunately, that miserable little nag has interfered yet again. She has smuggled a bomb into this facility somewhere." The coldness of her words, so free of her grandiose showmanship, made me shiver.

He feigned confidence. "A bomb? Really? Is that all?"

"Excuse me. A balefire bomb." Her image twitched once more, and I saw the blue amalgamation of four for an instant before it disappeared again.

He laughed. Then he looked at her, and his mirth turned to ashes as his schemes rotted on the vine. "You're serious! A balefire bomb? Here!"

"Yes. There is a balefire bomb in this facility. It will detonate in thirty-one minutes," the Goddess replied coolly as she turned both eyes on him. Another flicker, and he saw what I did for an instant. A thing that should not be bartered with. "It is likely in the tunnels beneath the building. You will use your

formidable Enclave assets to assist us.”

“What?!” Harbinger blurted, then added, “Why, certainly! Just allow me to return to the *Triumphant* and we will... assist.” His thoughts didn’t turn to assistance. They turned to getting the heck out of here and salvaging this fiasco. Already he was spinning how to tie this in with Red Eye and give credit to himself for destroying Red Eye’s ally.

“You don’t have to do this,” Twilight said in tired resignation.

“This isn’t going to change anything,” Trixie added. “You’re still going to be a monster.”

“We are NOT a monster!” the Goddess countered as she ordered her children back.

“I’m not getting through to the *Triumphant*,” the second pegasus soldier said. “The signal’s not penetrating the walls.”

“You will assist the Goddess!”

“What should we do, General?” wailed the third as she backed away.

“Get out of here! Now!” Harbinger shouted, lifting into the air and flying for the exit. “Let this freak burn!” he said in a sublime example of diplomacy.

A telekinetic tendril reached out and wrapped around Harbinger. Two more snared the second pony. The third got as far as the door before the tendrils grabbed her wings and dragged her back. Her hooves scraped at the catwalk. “You are not going anywhere!” Then the Goddess looked at the other soldier. “You! Take all your soldiers into the tunnels! Find that bomb!”

“The hell I will! I don’t take orders from big blue goop monsters!” the soldier shouted.

“Just let me contact my forces, and I’ll be happy to...” Harbinger demanded desperately... but it was all a lie. If he got free, he’d laugh as she burned. It’d save him the trouble of leveling Maripony after he finished using the Goddess. She could see it in his mind. ‘Freak. Creature. Monster.’

The Goddess dissolved into one inarticulate roar of rage and frustration. Her telekinetics crushed the three like sparrows in the claws of a hellhound... but that wasn’t enough. No. With an almost bestial fury, she smashed the bodies into the catwalks and vat walls, ripping them to pieces. I kept trying to line up a shot of the entrapped mare. If LittlePip would just remain still for a minute I could do as the Goddess wished. No matter how wrong it was...

The four ghostly mares put their hooves on the Goddess’s shoulders, and she froze, looking at the meaty gobbits floating before her. Gravity halted, and I felt my mind floating. And for the first time, I saw tears in the Goddess’s eyes. “I... I just wanted them to help...”

“I know,” Trixie said, gently.

“I... I just wanted to be loved. I wanted to save everypony...” she whimpered as she let the bloody metal clumps fall to the floor. “I wanted to be the hero for once.”

“Yes,” Twilight replied. “I wanted to save everypony I could, too.”

“I... I... What have I done?” the Goddess pled, and I saw her harsh and horrid lines blur a little as she seemed to blend in where the others touched her. “I don’t want to be alone.”

“You aren’t alone,” Gestalt said with a smile.

"You have us," Mosaic finished.

The image of the Goddess and the four transformed into one glowing form that grew brighter and brighter. For the first time, I could see the ghostly outlines of other ponies in that vastness. Small and foallike compared to the Goddess, yet ponies all the same. "I don't want to die," the Goddess said, fearful and small.

"No pony does," Twilight answered. "But we can leave something behind. We have our children."

"Our children," the Goddess murmured. "Perhaps we can survive in them?"

"Unlikely," Gestalt said solemnly.

"Without the I.M.P. biomatrix, our ability to remain cohesive will be severely compromised and will last only hours at best," Mosaic explained.

"I'm scared," the Goddess confessed. "I'm so tired of being scared."

"I am too," Trixie answered. "Remember how scared we got going out on stage? How worried we were that each show would be our last and we'd never find another? Well, now we don't have to worry about another show. Now... all that matters is how we go out, together."

"Together," the Goddess replied, her voice aching with the need for relief.

I pushed Penance away as I slowly rose to my hooves. Lacunae lay beside me, breathing weakly. Blood ran out her nostrils and ears. I wanted to tend to her, but the sight of what was happening in the valley astonished me. The horns of the blue alicorns were glowing as greens paired up beside them. Blue stars began to fill the air, swirling and finally coalescing into the front half of a blue mare with a silver mane a mile tall! The blue, ghostly form looked at the Enclave ponies that fluttered like gnats around her.

"Enclave," she said in a voice from a thousand throats magically magnified. "I wish to thank you for your generous offer. However, I cannot accept. There is a balefire bomb about to detonate underneath this facility. Please evacuate as quickly as you can. High General Harbinger will not be able to join you. You have fifteen minutes until detonation."

Then she turned and looked off to the south. Her eyes were hard as she scowled. "And Red Eye. I know you're watching this... you, or your minions. I have only one thing to say to you: it's not worth it." Then her violet eyes glanced down towards Lacunae and myself. "Goodbye, my children," she finished, "I love you all." Then the blue motes flickered out and scattered.

I didn't know how the Enclave would take it, but all at once, gravity reversed, now pushing me away from Maripony. In purple flashes, the alicorns were disappearing and escaping any retribution the Enclave might have attempted. Two green alicorns swooped in to myself and Lacunae. "We shall help you on your way," they thought as they landed beside us.

"Thank you," I said to Unity as I hastily took the gun apart and stowed it in my saddlebags.

"I'm sorry," the Goddess replied as the pair levitated the staggered and semi-conscious Lacunae between them. "I know you cannot forgive me for what I have done to you."

All that she'd done... I suppose it'd been quite a bit, at that. Still. "Hey. No problem," I answered, sincerely. Sure, the Goddess had been a real monster, but she was going to die in a few minutes. I could give my forgiveness. I could feel her children teleporting further and further away. Now for me to do the same... though teleportation was hard enough for me to pull off on my own, even with the Goddess still connected, the greens feeling like two wings lifting me up and pushing my magic forward.

"Come on..." I grunted as I tried to pull off the spell.

"For the High General!" screamed a voice from above us. I barely had time to get my guns up as I saw a wing of five Enclave divebombing us. The greens hadn't even had their shields up, as we'd been on the verge of leaving. A barrage of crimson struck the left alicorn, and she transformed into a glowing alicorn shape before collapsing in a pile of ash.

"You stupid sons of mules!" I shouted as I pulled out the dueling pistols and targeted the lead pony. A step into S.A.T.S. and I had five shots targeted. Executing, the pistols seemed to roar in slow motion as one, then the other, blasted the helmet of the leader. I'd only needed four before the visor exploded inward. The fifth painted the back of his helmet with his brains.

The remaining green threw a shield around both of us, leaving a tiny window for me to shoot through, as rage exploded inside me. "You pull this shit now?" I yelled as I fired at the headless formation, which split into two pairs, their gatling beam guns blasting me and the green. The pairs started to pull up, but one of mine was just a little too low. The starmetal sword arched up and caught his chest, the impossibly sharp blade slicing from sternum to stifle in one bloody arc. While his armor tried to lift back to the skies, his viscera were pulled into the dirt. The three banked and dove again, two blasting the green with a focused barrage while the third still aimed for me. The green used some kind of spell... a green ray I'd never seen before. The beam sliced through the air, but the two twirled away from it and, with a flash, the alicorn's shield dropped under another burst of fire. I ignored the beams cutting me, the operative barding withstanding them well enough, as I blasted at the pair, but when they lifted away again, the green had fallen.

"Leave me," Lacunae murmured weakly aloud. "Teleport yourself to safety."

"As if. I'd be lucky to get fifty feet." The three began to dive once more. Their mistake. The crimson gatling beams ripped into me; individually they didn't do much, but I wasn't going to last long at this rate, even with the armor. And I had spoken truthfully; I doubted I'd be able to teleport any real distance without the boost from greens.

But that didn't mean I couldn't teleport a short way straight up.

In a flash, I'd left the ground. Equally fast, I realized as I was rammed by the central flyer that this was a very bad idea. I wrapped my hooves around his neck and chest. He struggled to stay aloft, which suited me just fine as one of the two came around to grab my back. Big mistake. The sword flashed as it eagerly sliced the helmet off, along with the head in it. After that, the remaining Enclave began to blast both of us, and my ride started to tumble out of control.

"Oh brown rain!" he wailed we flipped over and over together and then landed with a heavy crunch, sending my armaments flying across the rocks. His gatling beam guns broke, scattering fragile components over the rocks as we rolled. As we finally came to a stop, he collapsed on his side with a grunt. I rose.

The other flyer landed, her hoof stomping down on my sword as her guns began to hum. My pistols had landed behind her, and it would take me a moment to retrieve them. "Now what are you going to do?" she jeered.

Five magic bullets blasted her faceplate, and she collapsed in a heap. "That," I replied to her corpse, then turned to the survivor. The wrecked guns had entangled his wings. I levitated the sword as I approached.

"Oh... oh... please! Don't kill me!" he wailed as his wingcovers flapped and failed to give him lift. "Mommah! Daddy! Somepony! Halp!" he screamed.

I sliced the wreckage of his guns away and then grabbed his helmet between my hooves. "Security doesn't kill ponies if she can help it. That balefire bomb will. Now get the hell out of here and tell whoever your radio will reach to join you!" I shoved him away, but he just stood there. "Fly, you idiot!" He crouched and launched himself into the air.

Unfortunately, that attack had eaten up precious time and taken out my own escape route. Lacunae, her horn still blackened, struggled to stand. "I'm sorry," the Goddess said, and I knew what she meant. In the time it would take for purples to jump back to me, the bomb would have gone off. She could have sent some immediately to me, but that would leave dozens of blues and greens who could otherwise be evacuated trapped in the blast zone. Neither of us wanted that. The Goddess had cast an enormous shield around Maripony to try and buy more time, but that would only last as long as she herself did.

"Don't worry about it," I replied as I moved underneath Lacunae and hefted her up. "I'll just run out."

"Blackjack," Lacunae began.

"I'm not going to leave you. Don't even think of arguing," I said tersely as I pointed myself in the direction of away and ran as fast as my hooves could carry us. Unity was a buzz of questions. Would LittlePip survive a point blank blast? Would the Goddess's children? Would I? Could alicorns even survive in the Wasteland without the Goddess? How could they, when so many memories had been taken? When so many thought them monsters.

I just ran. It was all I could do. I checked above me and saw the Raptors and the *Triumphant* laboriously pulling away. The swarms of Enclave in the air were trying to return to their ships as quickly as possible. I couldn't pay any further attention to that, though. Nor was I the only creature running for their life on the ground; I spotted packs of hellhounds who had overheard the warning. Could they get away?

Could I?

Doubtful.

Minutes were down to seconds. All the Goddess's children were away. All but two. To the side, I saw a pair of large rocks about three feet high and five or six feet long, arranged in a wedge pointing towards the crater. It was the only thing in that blasted landscape that might count as cover. The Goddess was saying something, but I focused on getting Lacunae and myself behind those stones. Pressing my back against them, lying flat, I counted. Thirty seconds. Fifteen. Ten. Five...

One...

I blinked as nothing happened, frowning and looking around the dead woods and rocks. "Don't tell me it was a dud," I muttered as I looked back towards the crater.

If my eyes hadn't been mechanical, I'd have never seen again. From the valley came a flash brighter than anything I'd ever seen before, and time seemed to freeze in its terrible brilliance. The myths of Celestia raising the sun came to mind, but this was more a wrathful Celestia ripping the sun from the earth. The telepathic scream of the Goddess could have been the wailing of the earth itself. The rim of the valley deflected the flash just a little bit, just enough that my face and mane didn't instantly burst into flame. Time began to trickle, and I fell backwards as that horrid illumination washed across everything. Every dead tree and bush bloomed with fire almost instantly. The Goddess's scream matched the horrible, billowing green-and-rainbow fire rising higher and higher into the skies, her shield already blown apart like a paper bag with a grenade in it.

Then, in advance of the flame, a strange, shimmery bubble of air blew out from the crater. It expanded in every direction, beautiful and terrible. And as it passed over the lip of the valley and through the burning woods, every blaze was snuffed out in a terrible expanding crescent. Every trunk bent as one as it passed by. I felt as though I was trapped in S.A.T.S., save for that terrible shimmering bubble.

Then it struck me, and I was nearly blasted away. The rocks kept me from being swept away immediately, but they didn't stop every medical signal on my PipBuck from flashing red as I was hit with more force than I'd ever imagined. Even having a boat dropped on me was nothing compared to this. I couldn't breathe. Couldn't move. Could barely even think. And oddly, I imagined I could hear the Goddess still talking in my mind. Not even a balefire bomb had shut her up, at least in my imagination.

The dead trees had been snapped and tossed on the wind like so many matchsticks. I lay on my back, watching with almost abstract interest as the mighty Raptors were caught in the rising fireball like tiny models in a whirlpool. One was coming apart before my eyes, cloud and steel just scattering as the machine of war was transformed into so much rubble. A second was on fire, plummeting towards the earth like a dying phoenix, only this time never to rise again.

Really, if I hadn't felt myself internally bleeding as my talismans raced to restore me, it'd actually be kinda cool. I was so injured, I couldn't even feel pain. Then I became aware of the ground shaking. My eyes slowly returned down to the lip of the valley. A luminous green baleful light was sweeping across the landscape. It covered the earth as the fireball had filled the skies. Even if I survived the shockwave, I wasn't going to survive this. It was oddly a relief.

"No," Lacunae said as she rose to her feet. Even battered and bloody, she climbed to her hooves in the face of the catastrophic wall of green balefire. By the second, her injuries disappeared and her body swelled. The char fell from her horn as she faced the rending storm of fire. Her eyes blazed with violet light. "No. You will not die here, Blackjack! You will not!"

And around us both appeared a shimmering shield, not a bubble but a wedge. And like water on a magical ship's prow, the fire rammed into it and split to either side. Were I not synthetic, I would have been deafened by the roar, but the fire simply scraped against her field instead of racing through us.

Through gaps in the green flame, I could see one of the Raptors turning end over end in the sky, as if hurled by an immense irate foal. Then it snapped in two, the ends flying away out of sight. I watched in awe as Lacunae swelled, larger and larger, absorbing the energy pouring in around her. Of course, I was absorbing it too, but for me it meant something a lot less pleasant than more power and a growth spurt...

"Hold on, Blackjack!" wailed Lacunae as my radiation meter passed from yellow to red. 100+ rads a second. I didn't know it could go that high. "Hold on!" she screamed, her field flickering as it battled with the immense stream. She wasn't the only one. Above, I could see the *Triumphant* flying away. Its proud gold spires were melted and its fancy designs burned away, but its immense bulk and armor, not to mention distance, had spared the Enclave siege platform from destruction.

"Funny. Never thought it'd be radiation that got me," I muttered. Even with her shield, the heat was utterly stifling. Lacunae struggled to keep her grip, but she was still growing. Her alicorn magic was the only thing keeping her alive. Me, I might be resistant to radiation, but there was a world of difference between resistance and immunity.

"Don't you die, Blackjack!" Lacunae warned, but it was so hot and I was so tired and hadn't I earned it? "Blackjack?" the giant alicorn said above me as my vision faded. I quite blissfully passed out as the world disappeared in an emerald hell. "Blackjack!" Lacunae screamed, her wail following me into that oblivion.

* * *

I really hated almost dying. First getting my legs cut off, then having my soul sucked out... now I was coming back from a balefire bomb. It said something pathetic that I was becoming familiar with near death experiences. Of course, my body felt as though it had been stepped on. Correction... danced on. By a whole dance troupe of minotaurs. With steel hooves.

"Lacunae?" I groaned, opening my eyes. I was astonished to see my rads at zero. We were on the smoking lip of the valley. A haze surrounded us in all directions. A few hundred feet away lay a Raptor, smashed prow-first into the earth like a foal's bath toy. Down below, a brand new crater gave forth a chaotic glow. Maripony had collapsed completely into the sinkhole, nothing now but a jumbled pile of rubble.

Bodies lay everywhere. Smoking pegasi, like steel sparrows, littered the ground around the fallen Raptor. Dozens of hellhounds also lay in charred, clawed lumps where they'd cooked. Smoke billowed from their holes like great volcanic vents. I wondered just how long the fires underground would burn.

Forget Stable 99; that was nothing. Between Enclave and hellhounds, LittlePip had killed *thousands* with this bomb! Granted that hellhounds and Enclave weren't automatically good and blameless, especially not after those five had attacked me, but the immensity of the deaths was staggering. Somehow, I'd imaged that LittlePip's plan, whatever it could have been, would be more discriminating. The Stable Dweller should have done... something. Something better. Warned the hellhounds! Evacuated the Enclave! Something!

From out of the haze approached a blue alicorn. I tensed... but then realized that there was silence in my head. I could make out the faintest of whispers from my friend, but what remained of Unity was denied me. A second alicorn walked forward: a green. Then a half dozen. A dozen. Twenty. Fifty. They stared silently at me. "H... hello? Lacunae?"

In unison, all of them turned and looked to the left along the ridge. That was when I saw her; a colossal purple alicorn with a hide so dark that I imagined she was black. She was speaking to a glowing ghoulish form pulling a wooden skywagon. I started to approach, but before I'd gotten twenty feet, my rads spiked and I backed away again.

"Lacunae?" I asked. "Ditzy?" I said as I looked at the luminescent ghoul. How many undead pegasus mares wrote in chalk? The ghoul smiled worriedly at me and scribbled something on the board, showing it to the alicorn.

"We will try," Lacunae said in a deep voice, and my whole body shivered. She looked worried, then turned to me. Her face was clearly torn. Had the Goddess survived? Somehow possessed my friend? Was that why she was so huge? Her eyes glowed a solid purple as she looked down at me. Then my fears abated as she gave a small smile. "Blackjack. You survived."

"Yeah. I always seem to," I said warily as I looked at the charred ground around me. "Unless I have wings now or I'm a ghoul too, I'm guessing you did something?"

"You forget: Twilight created a spell to purge radiation. As soon as the fire abated, I used it to nullify the radiation dose you'd taken," Lacunae rumbled. She turned to look out at Maripony's shattered remains, and I saw on her flank something that made my... well, made me wish my heart could stop. Five small white stars surrounding a purple sixth. It wasn't clear as a normal cutie mark, though... like a ghost.

"What... what happened?" I breathed. "Are you... you?"

"Both very good questions," Lacunae replied. "I suspect that so many memories of Twilight's

were put into me that, when the Goddess died, Twilight's soul was attracted to me rather than the everafter, turning me into a temporary soul jar. I do not know how long it will last. Minutes? Hours?"

"And you being an alicorn of unusual size?" I gestured to her immense bulk.

"A side effect of the prodigious amount of radiation I absorbed," Lacunae said as she looked down at me. "You have been unconscious for several hours," she said quietly. "Did you dream?"

The question was so unusual that I actually thought a moment. "No. I didn't. Why?"

"I took back the mental contamination of Psalm. Anything that remains are your memories of her, not hers. She'll not trouble you again, Blackjack." She closed her eyes. "A parting gift."

Oh, I didn't like where this was going. "What are you talking about, Lacunae? You're scaring me. What is Ditzzy here for? What's going on?" Panic was nibbling at my spine; the need to act, no matter how danced on I felt, pushed at me.

"LittlePip was supposed to have escaped while we searched for the bomb. The arrival of the Enclave ruined that plan. Xenith escaped on the Griffinchaser, but with the radiation levels so high all across the valley, it was impossible for LittlePip's friends to return. So they sent Ditzzy to find her," Lacunae said solemnly, in the tones of somepony who was trying to break bad news.

"It doesn't seem possible," I said quietly. How could anypony survive, and if they did, how could help reach them? "Can I do anything?" I asked weakly, unable to voice my fears that LittlePip was likely so much irradiated jelly. Even with the scope, it would take hours... days... to scan the devastation for the saferoom, if it survived at all.

Ditzzy stomped her hoof and tapped her board. Lacunae looked over and shook her head once. I wondered what the ghoul had written... I couldn't tell; I was no longer able to see into her mind. Ditzzy chewed her bottom lip and lifted into the air, flying over the crater.

"She wants to know if all the alicorns can search, but there is another, more pressing, concern," Lacunae said as she looked at the crowd of alicorns around me. "What happens to them?"

"Well... they try and survive as best they can, right?" I gave a little, weak smile. There was no way that LittlePip survived that. I was an augmented cyberpony with regeneration talismans. How could she have pulled through? That the Wasteland had lost a pony it needed... I didn't want to think of it.

"You don't understand. Without the Goddess, their souls returned to their bodies, but their minds are hollow and damaged. The Goddess removed countless memories from them. Who they were, where they lived, what they loved... and so they will be easy prey in the Wasteland. A few fortunate individuals will be able to recover enough to survive on their own, but..."

"So... can't you give them their memories back?" I asked with a hopeful smile.

"With Twilight's soul maintaining a faint Unity to them all, I can," Lacunae murmured, head bowed.

My smile wavered. "So... so what's the catch?"

"I am not a pony," Lacunae replied quietly. "I was never born. I never had parents. I was not transformed into an alicorn. In fact, I was never supposed to exist at all. I am a collection of memories and feelings placed within my body, and that gave rise to my consciousness. If I give those memories back..."

"No," I murmured. "No. No!" I shouted up at her. "There has to be another way! There has to.

Just give back half! A third! Keep enough to survive!" I implored the immense alicorn.

"Even if I could divide all the memories within me, I would have no right to a third of a pony's happiness or sorrow. If I return them, I must return them all, and even then many alicorns will be lost and confused. But it might give more a chance to survive. Enough to have some future in the Wasteland."

"I don't care!" I yelled up at her. "You're not dying like this!"

Lacunae gave the saddest of smiles. "I can't die. I was never born."

I looked on in desperation. "Maybe... maybe you can hold on to a few. Some? The memories of alicorns that don't have bodies to go back to? There has to be enough for you to stay... you..."

But Lacunae just smiled like she always had, in pain and love and sadness. "The connections in Unity are failing without the Goddess to maintain them. In a few minutes, parts of it will sever completely. I don't have the time or ability to sift through each memory and determine if it should go or stay. Such a thing would take a lifetime for me to do on my own. If I am to return them, I have to return them all. I'm sorry," she said as she looked down at me. And I knew she was, not just for me, but for all that would be lost when she finally went.

"Horseapples!" I hobbled to her, ignoring the radiation and my battered body. "I won't! I won't let you!" I said as I tried to wrap my hooves around her fetlock. "I won't!" It was childish and immature, but I didn't care. I wept as I held her, looking up at her. "Please..." I begged.

"Shh..." she stroked my mane gently with the very tip of her wing. "Shhh... I have to do this. And you know why. If you were me, what would you do?"

I wanted to lie. I wasn't connected to Unity anymore. I could just lie! "I'd... I..." but it stuck in my mouth because we both knew the truth. "I'd give them up too."

"And I would weep, and beg you not to go," Lacunae answered me. I hated the truth, but it was like gravity. There was no fighting it. "Because I love you."

I closed my eyes, ignoring the rads coming off her as I nuzzled her warm, dark fur. "I'll miss you."

"I know. And I am glad that somepony will." She closed her eyes a moment, smiling broadly. "I was never supposed to exist. But you offered me your friendship. You made it so that I mattered. You gave me a life and made me feel like an actual person, and that was more than I ever deserved. You forgave my betrayal, and you stood by me when I could not stand by myself. And you made me dance," she sniffed, great tears rolling down her cheeks as she raised her head. "Stronghoof..." she murmured, but shook her head. "I love you, Blackjack."

"I'm sorry," I said, pointlessly. Needlessly. Sorry for what, I couldn't be sure. Sorry for something I'd done. Something I hadn't done. Something that I wish I'd done. Right now, all I wished was that I had done something more for her. Been somepony better to her. "I love you," I managed to choke out as I backed away.

"Farewell," she said. She lifted her head, and a golden light issued from her horn. It reminded me of glowing motes of thought freed from their confinement in memory orbs. The light formed gleaming streams that poured out of her and into the brows of the collected alicorns. More rivers of luminance passed away into the distance, fading from view. As the memories left her, the starburst on her flank became clearer and more distinct.

The alicorns started and jerked, for once breaking from uniform movements. They flew away, or teleported, running to find a place to process what had just happened to them. My eyes remained locked

on my friend, hoping that when the transfer was complete that somehow... some way... something would remain of Lacunae. But when the glow ended, the behemoth alicorn remained dark and still as the scorched earth.

"Lacunae?" I asked, backing away. For an instant, she turned and looked at me. A tiny smile formed on my lips as tears ran down my face. That somehow... but then she turned away back to the desolate valley. "Lacunae?" I whimpered, reached towards her with a hoof and touching her fetlock again gently. I grit my teeth, bowing my head, doing my best to keep myself together. "Twilight?" I asked.

Slowly, she looked at me again. But she didn't answer. Not verbally, at least. What I heard was the faintest whisper over the evaporating Unity connection. "You have my friends," came the whisper. For a moment, I didn't understand. Then I saw her eyes on my saddlebags. I opened them up and lifted the first figurine I found. Rarity smiled glamorously at both of us. I levitated it before her, and she stared at it with her immense eyes. Then she blinked and turned away, back to the crater.

"She has my friends too," Twilight whispered.

"She?" I frowned in confusion. "You mean Ditzzy?" No response. I looked at the devastation. "You mean LittlePip?"

Slowly, she gave the tiniest of nods. "She needs help."

"How do you know?" I asked, feeling the connection fray.

"My friends told me," was all she said before the link broke completely. Slowly, she spread her enormous wings and gave a great flap that knocked me back. Slowly she began to circle over the tangled heap of concrete, steel, and rock. Many of the pieces were even bigger than the behemoth.

Her horn glowed like a violet star. I hugged Rarity's figurine to my chest. "Come on," I breathed as I watched some of the massive boulders shift. "You can do it..." *Be enduring, darling*, a little white mare cheered along with me. It was impossible. Inconceivable. No pony could move such weight!

Then one immense boulder lifted up and was tossed aside. Then a piece of wall. A chunk of foundation. A heap of stone. Each was cast aside as if it was nothing. And then there was a rumble and screech that I heard from miles off as something dark and battered was hauled from the rockslide. It looked like a giant brick of steel and tangled reinforcement. Hunks of foundation dangled beneath it, falling away with crashes that I heard from here. Greenish water cascaded from the base of the huge block.

For a moment, I was utterly sure that the block would tumble back to the ground, but with strength I couldn't imagine, the metal top was peeled open. I scrambled in my bags for Penance's scope and got it out just as the behemoth extracted something from within the block. I looked through the scope, zooming in. LittlePip was alive! She was talking!

I collapsed, dropping the scope as Twilight dropped the shelter. It crashed like an avalanche into the earth. I pulled out Twilight's figurine. "Thank you," I muttered before kissing her brow. "Thank you."

I carefully packed everything up as Ditzzy flew over to meet LittlePip. I knew she'd get her home safely.

Now it was my turn. The behemoth disappeared into the clouds, and Ditzzy raced off, likely to get LittlePip to medical aid. I didn't begrudge her not coming to pick me up. No doubt LittlePip was in a bad way. I could endure. Ash tinged a faint green began to fall like snow across the charred woods. The silence, within and without, was deafening. "Goodbye," I whispered into that void, in a vain attempt to fill

it. I would have lingered, but the ash was making my PipBuck tick. I started the long walk back home...

Alone.

* * *

I didn't know where I was or how to get to Hoofington from here. The PipBuck installed in my hoof had none of my old navigation tags in it. Worse, the radio was busted, so I couldn't even try to hear what was happening in the wider world. Ahead of me, fires flickered and crawled about like sullen molten worms through the brush and dead trees. Every hour, I'd take a dose of RadAway and Rad-X. If I didn't get out of the fallout before my supplies ran out, then I'd really be putting my endurance to the test.

I found a nice little ridge of stone that took me southeast and downhill. Not as good as a road, but it was better than nothing. The silence wrapped around me, and I found myself starting at flakes of ash drifting down in the corners of my vision. I'd turn, expecting somepony behind me. I looked above for Enclave. Below for hellhounds. Something. Anything! "Something attack me, damn it!" I yelled into the falling green ash. My own voice made me jump.

Alone. Sweet Celestia, I fucking hated being alone. Walking was better than thinking. Thinking led to pitying, and if I started that, then the rock would turn into a mattress I'd never get off. Follow the rock. Look for hostiles. Watch the radiation meter.

Don't think about it. Don't think about what happened. Don't think about what would happen. Don't think about -- and I was so busy not thinking that I misstepped and discovered a whole new way of travelling: falling down a hillside. I flipped end over end, crashing through the underbrush and cannonballing through smaller trees. I finally came to a stop at the base next to a large rusty refrigerator on the banks of a muddy creek. I saw, as I struggled to sit up, a pony skeleton lying curled up on its side within the metal container. I looked at it a moment, wondering how the bones, the refrigerator, and an old gambler's hat came to be on the banks of this muddy little trickle in the middle of nowhere. Slowly, I collapsed back.

Gravity of a different sort pressed down on me as ash began to cover my visor. My friend was gone. I wasn't upset. I wasn't anything. Since we'd met, she'd always been there for me, quietly supporting me. She'd been my only confidante to what the Goddess had done to me. Somepony who could sympathize with me. She hadn't been perfect... she'd used me, put Psalm inside me to ease her own burden... but I could live with that. Her companionship had more than made up for it. 99. Hightower. I would have died so many times over, if it hadn't been for her.

I should be like that pony in the fridge. What would it take?

And I could be. All I had to do was lie there and let the ticking continue. I'd survived a boat falling on me, a building falling out from under me, poison gas, radiation, smooze, and Enervation. I'd sucked up Pink Cloud, had my legs chopped off and my body violated, and lived through a fucking balefire blast. To think that this was what would kill me. Behind the visor, I sniffed and smiled all at once. Was I really this weak? Was I doing this to myself again? *Be enduring*, a stoic white unicorn mare in me urged. *Be strong*, her orange earth pony friend agreed.

Slowly, I rolled over and onto my hooves. Lacunae wouldn't want this. None of my friends would, no matter how much I wanted to be selfish and give in and give up. Do better than this, Blackjack. Step by step, I proceeded on in the general direction of east. Eventually I'd find a road or... something.

I don't know how long I wandered. A few things -- scorched radhogs, weird floating plants, and agitated radroaches -- made suicide attacks on me. The red-barred hellhounds I avoided; when they spotted me, I ran. They'd lost so much that I couldn't bring myself to fight back when I could just flee. My

meandering course was getting me nowhere; more often than not I found myself backtracking towards Splendid Valley.

And the hellhounds weren't giving up. Not that I blamed them. Not after how many of theirs had died with the destruction of the alicorn Goddess. There were more and more red bars in my vision, and I suspected they weren't irritated bloatsprites. They were moving around me, trying to drive me around and finish me off. Twice, they'd attempted to spring from the ground and rip me to pieces, only to learn that my sword wouldn't just block their swipes but go right through their entire limb. Two missing arms later, they'd fallen back to trying to blast me with their energy weapons. The overpowered, chaotic beams crackled through the air. Eventually they'd combine the two and make for a serious threat. Then I'd have to start killing them.

"Please. Hasn't there been enough pain and suffering today?" I begged them as I made my way up a rocky hill. The hellhounds were popping up right and left and began moving up after me. "I don't want to kill you!" I yelled down at them.

The roar of a dozen beam weapons tearing at the stones around me voiced their sentiment on the reverse matter. I ducked behind the cover of boulders as I set myself to doing what I had to. A thirty foot drop behind me should keep them off my back. Popping up, I sighted carefully, hopped into S.A.T.S., and... a tiny yellow pegasus in my mind gave me huge pleading eyes, begging me to spare the poor upset hellhound. Fluttershy was going to get me killed... I fired at his limbs and body. The hellhound howled as it fell back a moment, but there were others coming. I sighed. Sorry, Fluttershy; I tried. I took out Penance and fitted the parts together, swapped out the bypass round for fifty caliber explosive bullets, and took my position.

I wasn't a sniper, but I'd had one's memories for a while and knew my guns. Penance worked like the machine of death she'd been designed to be. The dozens of hatchmarks on the butt would need a few more added to it as the rounds blasted into the resilient armored hide of the hellhounds coming up the hill. I didn't try for headshots; at this range, the scope was a hindrance rather than a help. The detonation of each orange-banded round echoed through the woods, the shrapnel and flames keeping them scattered. "Go away. I'm not worth it. It won't bring them back!" I shouted down at them between blasts, not even knowing if they could understand me.

Maybe I should let them kill me. Give them a little bit of satis--

"No!" I shouted as one got too close, his claws scraping on the gray rock. The bullet caught its shoulder, blowing off the limb at the joint. "No, I'm not going to give up!" Not after what Lacunae had done. Not after what I'd promised Glory. I reached for another magazine of explosive rounds...

Nothing.

I switched to armor piercing rounds, trying to put the bullets where I guessed hearts would be. But without the blasts forcing them to take cover... I was only one pony with a gun that could point only one direction at a time. They were being smart, using the boulders and rocks to shield them. It was almost as if they were waiting for som--

"Pony die!" roared a hellhound behind me, raising his arm to strike. Apparently those hands were also good for climbing! I dropped into S.A.T.S. and bombarded his face with magic bullets, but the hellhound's hide was tough enough to remain intact. I swung the massive sniper rifle around in futility as the hounds gave a howl of victory.

Then the air was split by the crack of four hooves impacting against the side of a hellhound's skull, and I stared at the sight of a blue pegasus with a rainbow mane slamming into the hellhound above me. The beast reeled, swiping a clawed hand against her torso as its teeth sprayed from its maw in bony

shrapnel. The claws, which could tear through earth, failed to rip through the brown dragonhide leather. With a scream, it tumbled off the cliff just as a second poked its head over the lip. The pegasus pulled out a boxy beam gun as she landed in front of the rising hound. With the precision of S.A.T.S., she blasted away at its face with a dazzling barrage of kaleidoscopic light I'd never seen before; the beam, rather than being the standard red or green, was a startling spectral rainbow. The overcharged blasts turned the hellhound into a cloud of glittery dust, but a second poked its head up immediately and started to climb over the edge. Undauntedly ejecting the spent gem cartridge, she pulled a brilliantly glowing fresh one from her bags, slapped it into place, tossed the gun into the air, bit down on the grip, and blasted away again, with the same result.

I could have made love to Glory right then and there. But there were plenty more hellhounds coming up the hillside now behind me. Rather, there were before the hillside was washed with a series of explosions. Hellhounds reeled, blasting at random for their attackers. One seemed to sniff out the source of those blasts and pointed to a blue pony hidden in the rocks a dozen yards away to my right. He started to charge P-21, but then there sounded a wild scream of delight. "Death from above!" cried Rampage as she dropped from the sky and onto his head. Power hooves discharged in unison, blowing away most of the hellhound's cranium and chest cavity.

P-21, suddenly a dripping red stallion, wiped the gore from his face. "You meant to do that!" he yelled.

"Well, duh!" Rampage drawled.

Then a claw burst through the chest of the mare as a hellhound pushed itself out of the ground beneath her. With one sweep, Rampage's head was sent bouncing away over the rocks. "Stupid pony talks too much!" the hellhound hissed. Then paused as Rampage's decapitated body reached out with her power hooves and touched its face, patted its cheek, and then smashed a power hoof upside its head. The hellhound hissed in shock and outrage as the headless mare battered at the very confused beast.

"Shouldn't you be shooting?" a stallion growled beside me, and I jumped as I saw the shimmer of a zebra stealth cloak. Lancer lifted his rifle and silently blew out the eyes of a hellhound with a wicked beam rifle who had been taking aim at us.

"What are you doing here?" I blurted in amazement at Lancer.

"The Proditor said it was the 'Blackjack defeat effect'." Lancer calmly blinded another shooter spraying red death at us. "Apparently I now have to follow you around until I find a new purpose in life or something," he muttered sullenly as he fired again. "I don't care how much the Proditor says you need a brooding hot male on your team. I am out of here first chance I get."

P-21 hauled Rampage's squirming body up to us and gave a smirk at Lancer. "Oh, how many times I've said that." And he actually chuckled before looking to me. "But Blackjack has this certain gravity that keeps us all coming back to her." I was so stunned, I couldn't even keep Penance levitated.

The hellhounds had had enough. With howls and snarls, they were pulling back. Apparently this wasn't a good day for anypony. Glory pressed Rampage's severed head to the stump, and it slowly sealed back on. She blinked and looked around. "Oh? We won? Yay!" she slurred.

"But... how... who...I..." I muttered weakly. P-21 and Glory looked away from everything, especially each other, as the former wiped his face and the latter checked Pew-Pew. "How did you know where I was?"

"I told them," Lancer replied grimly, not taking his eyes off the hillside. "They questioned me

about your disappearance. Eventually, I informed them that you had seemed... not yourself. You spoke of a Goddess and this place called Maripony. And so we came here when we could not find you."

But what... how... My shock was increased when Scotch Tape screamed from overhead, "Glory! I don't know how to fly this thing!" Directly above me hovered a boat. I nearly teleported away then and there, but this boat was suspended beneath an enormous purple bag and had fins sticking out the sides with propellers out the rear. "Without Rampage I can't steer anywhere! Help!"

"I'll be right there," Glory shouted, launching herself up to the floundering airship.

Rampage blinked and worked her mouth, rubbing the vanishing seam in her neck as Lancer watched in shock. "Whew. Lost my head there for a second," she said as she trotted up to me. "Hey Blackjack. If you are Blackjack, but really, how many other ponies would be dumb enough to fight hellhounds alone? Nice armor. Very badass. How are you doing? Where's Lacunae?"

It was the simple, causal question that hit me the hardest. There was only one response to all the feelings churning inside me. I bowed my head and sobbed like a heartbroken foal. Rampage sighed and shook her head. "Definitely Blackjack..."

* * *

Aboard the *Fleur* and away from the ground, I told them everything. We sat in a circle on the deck, with Boo at the helm, seeming fascinated by the wheel. Somepony had put an old captain's hat on her head, and the sight was so ridiculous and precious that I couldn't keep from smiling a little when I looked over at her. Scotch Tape returned my Delta PipBuck to where it belonged as P-21 held her. On my other side, Glory snuggled up against me. Rampage and Lancer looked on from across the circle. The zebra stallion hadn't taken his eyes off the red-striped mare, and leaned away from her slightly with wide, skittish eyes. Funny how he reminded me of Xanthe...

I started with how I'd connected to the Goddess in Hightower. How she'd slowly gained more and more control over me. How she'd wired my mind to make me unable to speak of her. Even saying the word 'Goddess' made me stammer and my head ache, despite the fact that she was dead. As I went on, Glory hugged me repeatedly and Rampage and P-21 looked ill. Even Lancer seemed to be reassessing me with a disturbed look. I generalized a bit when it came to what had happened inside the Goddess and skipped right to the balefire bomb.

"I knew it," Rampage said to Lancer. "Second we saw that flash, I knew Blackjack had to be involved. She's always around when the best shit blows up."

"Get away from me, you freak. He cut your head off!" Lancer replied, leaning further away from her.

"Eh. You make it sound like such a big deal," she said with a negligent wave of her hoof.

I quickly moved on to tell them what happened afterward, and Rampage's laughs stopped. When I got to Lacunae, they all looked seriously at me. "Lacunae's gone? Just... gone?" Scotch Tape asked plaintively from P-21's hooves. When I nodded, she looked away. "Oh... just like Momma." She pressed her face into P-21's chest. "I didn't even get to say goodbye to her," Scotch murmured through her tears.

"It was a very noble thing she did," Glory said as she hugged me with her wing.

"There is no greater honor than to give oneself for one's tribe," Lancer agreed with a small nod.

"Oh, come off it!" Rampage snapped as she rose to her hooves. "She died! She's gone! It doesn't matter how she died. Her shit is over. She's fucking lucky!" The outburst surprised me as

Rampage turned away. "She was a great... a great big... freak. With her freaky dress and guns and magic and not talking and... just... damn it!" she yelled. "Couldn't you have taken me with you, you big purple bitch?! Fuck! You were awesome! You used a minigun in a black dress! Who the fuck else could pull that off but you!" she roared, as if, if she yelled hard enough, she might be heard in the hereafter.

"Rampage," I said in concern.

"Fuck you, Blackjack. Leave me alone," she said as she walked to the rail of the *Fleur* and hugged it, looking down. "Fuck..." she finished lamely as she sulked.

I knew why she was so upset. I'd hoped that the time we'd spent together had curbed her desire to die. Now the loss of a friend had brought it back in force. I looked at Glory. "What happened when you... ah... woke up?"

She immediately went bright red. "You mean alone?"

"Completely alone!" P-21 butted in immediately, turning scarlet as well as he suddenly looked away.

"Oh yes. I was so shocked to find myself by myself. Alone. With nopony else in bed with me," Glory said as her mane frizzled a little. "Especially not a stallion. Because I would never, ever have a stallion in bed with me." She gave a tense little laugh. "Stallions! Ew!"

"Oh I know. I feel the exact same way about mares! Can't stand 'em! Nope!" P-21 laughed as well.

Scotch Tape cocked her head. "You're acting weird again, Daddy. I told you you drank too much last night."

I smiled, glad for the poor humor. "So. After you woke up alone," I said to Glory, "you found my note?"

"Yes. At first I was upset, but when we found out Lacunae was gone too and your PipBuck had been torn out, we were really worried. We went to question Steel Rain, but that was when Lancer said he'd heard 'the Goddess' talking to herself. That was when we grabbed everything and came as quickly as we could."

"I held on to your PipBuck, Blackjack," Scotch Tape said. "That dealer pony is freaky, but he was really worried about something happening to you."

"When the bomb went off, I was sure... I thought..." Glory began, then shook her head, sniffed, and hugged me again. "I am so sorry! I knew something was bothering you, but I thought it was the zebras, or Mother, or Cognitum or something!"

"Hey! It's not your fault!" I said with a little smile. "The G...G...she wasn't stupid. She knew that all of you would help if I told you and made sure I couldn't. No matter how much I wanted to," I said as I nuzzled her teary cheek. "Believe me, I almost gave myself a seizure trying to tell you, and I still couldn't do it."

"It's sad when you've been through so much that we didn't notice you in trouble," P-21 said quietly.

"Yeah," I muttered softly, looking in the direction of Maripony. The dead are gone. I had to focus on the living. "Well, I guess we should be dealing with Lighthooves before he fills half the skies with pony-eating psychopaths."

Rampage sighed. "Okay. Okay. I'll get pedaling."

I frowned after her and looked at Glory. "Pedaling?" Rampage trudged slowly downstairs and into the hold.

"Ah! Yes." Glory flushed. "Well, I thought that the engines might be a little too high-energy, so we disabled them and hooked up the main drive shaft to some pedals."

"Now we're flying on rage," Rampage said from below. "You're welcome," she added dryly as the propeller behind the airship started to turn and the wings began to flap.

"I meant what I said. Soon as we're close to the Hoof, let me off," Lancer said as our circle started splitting up, Scotch Tape returning to Boo and P-21 going to the bags of supplies brought from the Society. "I mean it! I am not joining your little group."

"You don't have to," Glory said coolly. "And honestly, I don't want you to. We took you with us in case this was a trick of some sort, and to help Blackjack. She's helped. You've paid back your debt. You can get off whenever you want. Because, quite simply, you're not good enough to make up for the mare we lost." Lancer scowled at her and moved away, head bowed as he muttered to himself.

"Ouch," I muttered.

"Sorry. I... didn't have a good morning," Glory replied as she rested her head on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She smiled as she sighed. "I'm removing that word from my vocabulary. I'm not sure how it should be applied to me."

"I can relate," I said quietly. "So, are you?"

"I want my old body back. I want to be me." I watched as she reddened. "Last night felt good. Really good, to be honest. And part of that bothers me. And it bothers me that it bothers me. I know I drank a little... but I never realized what it feels like to be so... heterosexual."

"Bisexuality for the win," I answered and shook my head. "Sweet Celestia. I just lost a friend, and I'm teasing you about sex. What the fuck is wrong with me?"

"I think it's your coping mechanism. One of them. It's something you enjoy. Straight. Gay. Kinky or normal. I think it's a safe place you can come back to to feel good about life," she said quietly. "Bad stuff happens, and you want to get laid so you don't feel so bad. Could be worse. Could be your other coping mechanisms." When I looked at her blankly, she elaborated. "Wild Pegasus?" I flushed. She did have a point.

She curled her tail around my neck. "Come on. There're some rooms below. I think we both need a little coping time."

"Yes, ma'am."

* * *

It'd been a much tamer coping than usual, with far more cuddling and tears and talking about what had happened than sweat and orgasms. When we finally emerged, I did feel better. We were high in the clouds. Maripony, and the pain of losing Lacunae, now lay behind us. Ahead was an entirely new mess for me to deal with. Glory had gone below with P-21 to check on the life support rig for me, and so I was in the prow with Captain Boo.

The *Fleur* was remarkably quiet, save for the woosh of prop and wing. We moved through the cool mist of the clouds, the field of gray broken by intermittent gaps that allowed blue sky to wink through. In places, I was almost sure I could see the sun. Boo lay curled up beside me, lightly snoozing with her crazy cap slightly askew as the music played.

Wait? [Music](#)? I opened the panel and glanced down at my PipBuck, frowned, and tapped it a few times, but it continued playing one old audio file or another. I sighed and leaned against the railing, looking out as we passed through the wispy clouds. The violin and piano notes carrying back.

I remembered when I first saw her, that shadowy image in the dark outside the Hoofington Museum and within Blueblood manor, like a ghost of Princess Luna. How we met within Star House, and how I'd quickly realized that she was much different from anypony else I'd ever known, and not just for being an alicorn. How she'd behaved as if she were just a tool of the Goddess. The pony who wasn't.

I remember the despair I'd felt when she'd pulled me out of 99 and how I'd hated her for denying me my deserved death. And I remembered her shielding Glory and myself from the rain. How I'd gone into her mind after she'd lost herself under Hoofington, and how she'd put memories of herself into me. Except Lacunae wasn't Psalm, no more than I was my metallic legs. Psalm had been her foundation, but the mare herself had been someone completely different. She was closer to me than my own mother had been. She'd known my faults and accepted me for them. Her kindness and humility were all the more emphasized by what she'd been connected to.

She'd come to save me when I needed help on my lonely trip after Happyhorn. She'd travelled through hell with me in Hightower. She'd been an object of both mirth and adoration. And she'd grown, too. From a seemingly emotionless cypher to a mare who knew and loved. She'd danced. Something I'd never seen Psalm do. What could she have been if she'd had another few months? What might she have become if the Goddess had lived and realized her mistakes without dying?

I stared ahead, seeing the clouds stream around us, and reached down, stroking Boo's mane gently. And I looked at Boo's blank flank as the music swelled and the enormity of what Lacunae had done finally hit me. I began to shake, tears running down my cheeks.

Lacunae had no soul. She'd been that collection of memories. Any soul connected to that body had been Psalm's, not Lacunae's. There was no everafter for Lacunae. There never had been a chance of one. And she'd still gone through with it and returned the memories to the alicorns, in the hope that there'd be a future for her race.

Hope... that had been Lacunae's virtue. Hope that I would survive. Hope that I would succeed. Hope that... somehow... things would be better. Boo looked up at me as I put my hooves around her neck and pressed my face into her mane. "She's gone. She's... she's really gone! She was dancing with Stronghoof and... and..." I imagined her life, marrying that great overdramatic goof of the Wasteland. They'd have been an epic couple, with a romance that would have been the stuff of legend! That somehow she'd have children, or adopt them, and teach them in her kindly way. That she'd be there to help me when I screwed up with Glory or P-21... or just in general. "I'm never going to hear her laugh or her calm voice telling me things will be alright or... or anything!"

And as the music played, I remembered all the beauty she'd brought. The violin music she'd created with her horn alongside Priest and Medley. Or the sight of her fluttering her wings as she bathed in magical waste! Or how the ghouls in Meatlocker had been taken back to a time two centuries ago when they'd been alive just by seeing her dressed up. She'd improved the Wasteland just by being who she was. All I could do was blow holes in it.

Lacunae was lost, like tears lost in rain... but was hope? Would she want me to sit here and weep for her? Yes. For a time. She knew the value of grief. And so I didn't try to keep it in. Tears were

how the heart purged itself of grief. They were not a weakness. But then she'd want me to keep going. To keep up hope in bringing all this to a close. So after I'd had a good cry, I wiped the snot off Boo's neck. "Sorry, Boo." The white mare just looked at me a moment, then smiled. I blinked at her, and she blinked back, then smiled again. Slowly, I smiled a little too, and the odd blank leaned forward and nuzzled my wet cheek before beaming at me.

"You really are an odd one, you know that?" I said as I finally composed myself. Together, we sat by the rail as we flew into tomorrow.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Wow. This was one of the most challenging chapters I've ever had to write. It wouldn't have been possible without extreme assistance from Lucid, Fuzzy, and Hidden Fortune. The latter of which was willing to donate two days of her time to making sure this chapter was close to canon. I understand this was a pivotal moment for many readers of FoE, and I wanted to present it well and respectfully. I also want to thank Hinds and Bronode for, as always, putting their meticulousness and their wordsmithing talents to good use.

This month I'm moving down to vegas, so I can't put an honest ETA on when 59 will be out. School is starting too, so things are going to get interesting soon. I hope things work out for me both professionally and financially so I can keep plugging away at Horizons. Just the Enclave left to go.

I'd like to also thank Kkat for creating Fallout:Equestria, even if some of her finer details drove me to tears this chapter. I'd like to thank everyone who has read this far, and I'd like to thank people who leave feedback at cloudsville. I'm always trying to get better. Donations can be given through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com and are greatly appreciated at this time. Thank you.)