

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 19: EC-1101

“Does my crown no longer count, now that I have been imprisoned for a thousand years?”

I leaned against the metal railing of the Celestia Bridge, just a few yards away from ‘Celestia’s Mercy’, listening to the gurgle of the gray water passing beneath me. My eyes looked at the enormous relief of Luna on the floodlit dam. I knew it was Luna, now, after feeling her feathers on my lips. She gazed down at me despite the holes zebras had attempted to blast in the concrete.

“How are you feeling?” Priest asked as the black pony quietly walked up beside me. “Still have a fever?” He raised his hoof to touch the side of my head. I grimaced, pulling away. He kept looking at me with that annoying gaze that wasn’t trying to get me in bed.

I coughed a few times, proud to resist the urge to spit in the river. “Oh, me? I’m fine. I’ve faced the Wasteland’s worst. A little cold isn’t going to nail me.” I tried to keep up the act for a moment longer, then slumped a little. “Honestly, my nose is running worse than this river and my throat’s been scrubbed with a rusty wire brush... but I do feel better. Thanks.” He smiled a little more at that. I didn’t even want to mention the injury to my gut.

“You’re welcome,” he said, hooking his forehooves over the rail next to me and looking at the water flowing underneath on its journey to... wherever rivers go. There was a moment of silence. “You’ve changed.”

I closed my eyes with a little smile. “I picked up this nasty habit called thinking. Pretty bad stuff. Caused me all kinds of misery.” I sighed and shook my head, still smiling. “I’m still not very good at it.”

Since I’d gotten up and about, I’d bumped into Sekashi and her foal. Priest. Harpica. Chapel was starting to look more like an actual village, even if three quarters of its population were still colts and fillies. Of course, one thing hadn’t changed at all: the capmonger had greeted me with a look promising that, when I left, I would be capless. I just hoped she didn’t clear me out before I paid for EC-1101’s decryption.

Provided the file even remained in my PipBuck after being struck by lightning, of course.

“There were ponies who were very good at it and still didn’t realize that what they were doing was wrong,” he sighed. “Anyway, I wanted to thank you for all your help.”

“Me? What did I do?”

“You cleared out Blueblood Manor enough for us to be able to scavenge it safely. The Society will pay nicely for statues, cutlery, and things that aren’t rotted. We can use that money to buy some decent building materials and try to expand Chapel. I don’t know if you saw, but we’re getting a little crowded.”

Trade is going to save the Wasteland? Maybe it will, Bottlecap. A village expanding. Growing. I’d tried to do just that two days ago. I smiled softly. “Well, let me know if you need any help.”

I looked at him again. “Could you not touch one room? Please?” I told him about the memory orb and Vanity and showed him the letter. “He apparently did something bad, but for all that, I still think he was a good pony.”

He looked at me and then gave me a little nod. "So, now what's your plan?"

"Oooh, I'm a bad pony to ask for a plan," I muttered. "Something always seems to explode when I plan something. So for now, nothing." I couldn't tell him that Watcher had made the arrangements to meet with my data analyst. I'd best stay put until Bottlecap contacted me... however she would. "Got a place we can lay up for a little bit? At least till the funeral?" We'd be burying Roses in the cemetery; she might not have always been a very good pony, but I still felt that she deserved to be buried with respect.

"Funny you should ask that. Care for a walk?" he said as he gave me his easy smile. I had to admit, I was a little intrigued. We walked back to the shore, but instead of heading southeast towards the town, he turned sharply south towards the hills and the dam. I could hear the sounds of water roaring through the spillways as we made our way up. Then I spotted the house sheltered from the sight of Hoofington by a low ridge of rock. It looked out across the graveyard's swath of yellow grass and Chapel beyond.

"I haven't been inside in years, so be careful," he said as we walked towards the front door. There were little miracles growing beside the door: small flowers that looked like yellow and gold balls of color. Flowers. Actual flowers! Walking to the door, I reached out to the latch with my hoof and found it locked. Automatically, I reached for a bobby pin and focused, trying to remember exactly how to open it. The pin stuck and snapped. "Shoot."

He tapped my shoulder and coughed with a hint of amusement. "Ahem."

I looked up and saw the key floating beside me. "Oh, sure. Do it the easy way." Still, I took it and opened the door. As I stepped in, I checked my E.F.S. for intruders. Nothing on it, so whether the place was empty or there was a cloaked zebra hit squad in there... or the damn PipBuck had been struck by lightning and I'd forgotten. Ugh, why couldn't I be a smart pony?

The cottage hadn't been occupied in quite some time, but it looked like it'd been inhabited in the last few years instead of just the last few centuries. A layer of dust covered every inch of the place, and there were water stains on the ceilings and floors from old leaks. Still, it didn't reek that badly of mildew, and what furniture I could see was in pretty good shape. Metal dinnerware was stacked neatly in a corner kitchen, and some old pillows sat before a stone fireplace. There were also stars everywhere. Painted on the ceiling, carved into the stones, made of polished copper, silver, and brass and nailed to the wall around a crescent moon... It had a feeling of great age to it, and I couldn't help but touch one of the six-pointed shapes carved next to me.

"What is this place?" I asked in awe.

"We called it the Star House when Arlost and I lived here," he said with a wistful smile. I glanced at him, wondering if he knew that Arlost had returned in Reaper armor. I wasn't sure; she hadn't come into Chapel with us, saying something about fixing her gear.

"What was your relationship?" *'Knew him? I fucked him, or I wanted to.'* I couldn't help myself as I smiled. What was it about good bucks...

He looked surprised, and maybe a little concerned, but answered, "I was an orphan. My parents came here and made the pilgrimage, though of course nopony called it that yet." He sighed, his eyes looking at something more distant than the walls he faced. "I couldn't go with them. I stayed behind and eventually wandered into the church. It was a mess, vandalized and defaced, but I felt a purpose in restoring it. I met Arlost shortly afterwards. She wandered down the road... I think looking to make the pilgrimage herself. Scared. Confused. Maybe even a little mad. We talked for hours, and I earned her trust, and she decided to stay a while." He coughed quietly. "I thought she was my first success."

I smiled. It'd be okay to tell him...

His wistful smile hardened. "Then she killed a foal."

What. The. Fuck? I blinked and cocked my head, forcing a smile... or a grimace. "Come again...?"

He looked at me, both angry and sad in equal measure. "We'd started collecting the Crusaders. For a time, she was... happy. Wonderfully happy. She said she'd never gotten to be a Crusader, but she couldn't tell me what she meant by that. Only as time went on, she became... odder than usual. The fact she didn't get older was strange enough, but she'd talk to herself or mutter in strange languages. One morning, a foal was found strangled. The hoof marks on her throat were too large to be made by anyone here except Arlosté."

Old anger and sadness lingered on his face. "She denied it, but I couldn't trust her alone with the foals anymore. And worst of all, I'm not sure she believed it either. We couldn't kill her... she had a strange ability to heal injuries, like she had a built-in healing talisman, but she couldn't stay. A lot of the oldest Crusaders still miss her." And from the tone in Priest's voice, he did too. "So I moved into a house by the road proper and locked this place up."

I thought about Arlosté lying with Thorn between her hooves in the garage. If we hadn't been there, what would have happened? I swallowed hard, definitely feeling some hard questions coming for Rampage.

I hoped she didn't kill me for asking them.

"It's a wonderful house. Thanks for showing it to me," I said as I looked at it with a sigh. It was like a house in the stories I got to read as a filly. Well, when I was interested enough in reading, which wasn't often.

Priest chuckled softly. "You misunderstand. I'm not just showing it to you." He floated the key to me and put it in my mouth. "I'm giving it to you."

My butt and the key hit the floor. "You're giving me a house? This house?"

"I don't want it. I don't even count it as mine. I was just holding onto the key," he said as he looked at the stairs. "It needs some fixing, but your friends can help set that up. There's some furniture upstairs... old belongings... We never used it, and it felt rude to just throw it out."

"But why?" I asked, feeling a little lightheaded. "I didn't build you turrets or make walls or kill anypony for you... why would you give me this?"

"So you'll stop by Chapel more often, of course," he said with a simple, pleasant smile.

I kissed him. If my legs had been cuffed and hobbled, I still would have found some way to kiss him.

He didn't kiss back. And when our lips parted, I looked him in the eye. His smile was polite, tolerant, and forgiving... and that was all. I smiled sheepishly at him in embarrassment, then growing confusion. I felt a little ashamed, even if he didn't look angry. "Well, I'm glad you like it," he said, covering up the resounding awkwardness as I blushed and rubbed my mouth sheepishly, kicking myself again and again. I'd acted just like I was back in Stable 99. Had I learned nothing?

"Yeah..." I muttered, fighting for a smile. "I like it. A lot."

"Well, I'll let you look around," he said as he walked towards the door. Then he paused. "Also. Could you please tell Arlose that I'm glad she's okay, but that she shouldn't come into Chapel?"

My gut dropped once more, like I'd just been cut... "Yeah... I'll tell her."

He closed the door, and I walked to the nearest wall with an elegant six-pointed star, closed my eyes, and beat my head against it. "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

* * *

A while later, after my head stopped feeling as if somepony had hit it with a wall repeatedly, I poked it into each of the small rooms. The two other rooms on the first floor had clearly been lived in by Rampage... Arlose... and Priest. Thankfully, it looked like they hadn't been sharing them. The first room I checked probably wasn't Priest's, since it still had so much stuff in it, though I wondered if he'd cleaned up; it seemed remarkably neat for what I expected of Rampage. I found a quite dented brass star-shaped badge that said 'Hoofington Guard'. There were also a lot of books: police procedurals, murder mysteries, and books of forensic science, mostly. She'd also collected wooden carvings of ponies. No, of zebras. I frowned as I looked from one group to the other.

Munching on some peppermint sticks I'd found in a desk drawer -- only a little bit dusty -- I peeked into what I assumed was Priest's room. It was mostly cleared out, but there were sketches and drawings of the church. A picture of Celestia's window was pinned to a wall over the bed. Beyond that, there wasn't much left. I peeked at the full wastepaper basket and lifted out the wads.

"Why throw these out?" I muttered softly as I smoothed them out.

Arlose looked back at me. The look was posed, and done with more detail than even the drawing of Celestia's window. I stared into her eyes. Priest should have had a pencil for a cutie mark.

No wonder he hadn't wanted to kiss me. He'd loved her. Then she'd done... something. Had she really killed a foal? How can you love a murderer?

I picked out the intact drawings from the trash, took the ones on the walls down, and collected them in a small stack in the middle of the room. I'd return them later. I thought that maybe... could there be some way... perhaps if I...

I sighed. *Always trying to save ponies.*

I wondered just how long it would take for me to be contacted. Would Bottlecrap send me directions? Should I be listening for a clue from DJ Pon3? Maybe I should try and find out how to repair my PipBuck? Virgo Zodiac said she studied them, but I had no idea how to find her or if it would be safe to contact her.

I walked upstairs. Clearly, this was where most of the belongings of the previous tenants had been stored away. Priest's hornwork was visible here, too; all throughout the upstairs were nice neat boxes that only showed a little bit of rusting. I walked in on a room with a full moon painted right above the bed. Curious, I opened the closest metal box and saw a number of slightly warped photos and other knickknacks.

A young light blue unicorn in thick glasses and braces grinned beside a far younger looking Twilight Sparkle and Cheerilee. She was levitating a little model of the globe with the sun and moon orbiting it. An award rested around her neck. I reached down and pulled out the little medal still hanging

on the blue ribbon that had once hung around her neck. 'Ponyville junior astronomer award'.

Then a picture of her older, still wearing glasses but without the braces. She stood in a blue uniform beside a dozen other mares. 'Spacemares', read a caption under it.

Another photo, and she smiled at me through her thick glasses as she stood before some massive pieces of machinery. Another had her with a small cluster of ponies looking up at a model of the stars and planets. And another with her meeting with Twilight Sparkle and Applejack. The blue unicorn clearly possessed an eager hoofshake, as it looked like she was trying to shake off the purple unicorn's leg.

As I looked at the streaks in their manes, I frowned. It was amazing how similar they looked. Had Twilight Sparkle had a sister? Then I looked at the next picture, and my frown deepened. Was it a... missile? No. It looked much too big for that. Like a minaret mounted atop a delicate jewel-encrusted alabaster spire supported by four tapering buttresses. Some kind of... rocket?

A picture from the moon.

My entire body went numb as I stared at the image of a world hovering above a gray horizon of faintly luminous white dust and rocks. The sun silhouetted the world above me, but I could see the tiny winking lights of cities, the darkening blues of what I could only imagine were seas. The greens of plains and forests. It looked so small and fragile, surrounded by all that darkness. Yet there was light, too. Motes of light more beautiful for all that harsh darkness around them. The stars seemed to almost be welcoming, teasing, taunting... maybe even flirting a little.

We went to the moon. Not in some kind of fairy tale of an alicorn banishing her sister to the moon, but actually travelling there. We did that, I realized, as I looked at the next picture, showing the rocket sitting upright on the open and empty plain. It possessed a terrible loneliness, stark but beautiful. Pensive. Like Princess Luna, I found myself imagining.

There was only one picture of the blue unicorn on the moon, and I gawked at the strange bubble helmet and silvery, gem-studded suit she wore. From the way she hovered in the air, upside down as if in the middle of a somersault, I wondered if it was the suit or the moon that was allowing her to float effortlessly like a pegasus.

Another picture showed white, cloudy gems embedded in the stones and glowing with a strange light. The moonstones seemed similar to the talismans that Glory had collected, only lacking any kind of spell glyph within. Maybe they were the source of the moon's gentle glow?

I lifted the box from the stack and set it on the floor before me, looking deeper into it. I perused the newspapers behind the photos. 'Back from the moon!' proclaimed one headline, the picture of the rocket sitting back on Equestria with dozens of ponies gathered around it and cheering. The next had a front page article, 'Our future on the moon'. But it was crowded out by a report of a terrible zebra battle south of Hoofington. The next paper, dated a month later, read 'Scandal strikes the moon program'.

And then 'Astromare Marigold a moon momma? What tricks did she pull to land in the cockpit?'

The last: 'Space program suspended indefinitely pending investigation'. I looked at the picture of the mare smiling radiantly on the moon, then at the picture in the paper of a tiny-looking mare sitting before dozens of frowning, scowling ponies. A tiny little side article read 'Ministry of Arcane Sciences preserves space explorer Marigold's ministry stipend'. There was a little quote: "Never has a mare sacrificed so much to go so much farther than most ponies could ever dream." –Twilight Sparkle.'

Finally, perhaps most heartbreaking of all, was a small picture. It wasn't of the moon or on the

front page of the Hoofington Post. It was of a tired and sad Marigold digging in her garden with an old brown buck looking on with his own sad eyes and passing her some of the colorful poofy flowers I'd seen outside. Beside her rested a basket holding a purple unicorn foal batting at a little star tied to the handle.

A wrinkled note lay folded beside that picture. 'Thank you for the flowers from your garden, Hoss. I just know that Tarot will love them... if she'll stop eating them!'

There wasn't anything past that. I wondered what had happened to her. I wondered if she'd died in the bombing. I wondered if there was anything past that sad photograph.

* * *

Back downstairs, I looked at the blackened casing of my PipBuck and sighed. I hated waiting. I didn't want to confront Rampage just yet. Glory was avoiding me too, since her own injury. P-21 had said something about haggling with Charity over selling some gear. I thought of visiting Sekashi, but honestly I was simply drained by my disastrous attempt at romance and thinking about that poor mare who'd been to the moon and been ruined for it.

And as for trying to rebuild some sort of relationship with Priest... really, I probably wouldn't have less of a chance than I did now even if I decided to shoot him.

It was probably a bad idea, but I levitated out Vanity's orbs. I glanced at the bloody smear on the fourth. I didn't want to deal with his death now. Goddesses, I was so sick of death. From Roses to Vanity, why did everypony have to die? Want to die? Weren't there ponies who liked life? Who wanted something new in the Wasteland?

Well, there was P-21. Too bad I'd killed his lover.

Ugh, I needed a drink. Why didn't I ever have some Wild Pegasus around when I really needed it?

I picked up the first orb from the set, then stopped and trotted over to make sure the door was locked. Then I frowned and shoved the entire couch against the door. Blackjack was not available!

I lifted the first orb to my horn and closed my eyes. I tried to make the connection... but it was hard. Not like the orb was locked, but like my horn was scared to make the contact. I supposed that that was understandable. I had to breathe several times before I finally felt the connection take shape and the world swirl away.

oooOOOooo

Ooooooh! A party. As in a full five stars, red alert, don't let the Overmare catch us, wow party! Lights flashed, the music was bright, and I wanted to dance! Not that I knew how to dance, but right now I'd have tried figuring it out if my host would let me! A banner bedecked with balloons and streamers proclaimed that this was 'Ministry of Morale Hub Inauguration Party Time!' Now this was what the Ministry of Morale was all about!

And in the middle of it all, both physically and socially, was a middle-aged earth pony mare with a poofy pink mane just starting to develop gray stripes. "Come on, everypony. I know what'll make you shake your hoove things!" Pinkie Pie cheered as she immediately danced right up against bucks and mares half her age. Her infectious mood spread like a fever.

I was in Vanity; at least my host was a unicorn buck instead of just a buck. Stonewing and Jetstream flanked me. Twist, Big Macintosh, and a yellow earth pony who looked like a geeky egghead

brought up the rear. The large gray Doof seemed to be arguing with the ponies at the door. The young mare snickered as she adjusted her glasses, "That was mean, Macintosh." From the rest of her squadmates came highly amused chuckles.

"I just told 'em I wasn't sure he was on the list," Big Macintosh said with a languid chuckle. "Didn't think a buck that keeps on hitting on fillies what aren't interested would be." Twist's smile turned more genuinely grateful as Macintosh's gaze darkened a touch. "If that boy can't figure out how to manage his gun around ladies, then he shouldn't be allowed to have one."

"Hey, hear that, Jetstream? We're ladies now," Twist laughed gleefully.

"Us? Psalm, maybe," the blue pegasus said with a quirky sort of grin. "I can't believe that she passed up a chance at a Ministry of Morale party to go *pray*."

"Well, could be worse. Applesnack just doesn't have *time* for parties. Ugh, did that pony get his stick installed before he enlisted, or was it special issue?" Twist asked with a snort, giggling with a little bounce. So, with everyone else except Psalm here, that had to be Flak Jacket's name, the one that had been scratched off on the lockers. She pulled out a peppermint stick and munched on the end. "Ooooh, I love these," she said around the stick poking out between her lips.

"That one of those 'special' sticks?" Jetstream asked skeptically. "You know any zebra crap's illegal."

"Oh come on. They're peppermint leaves. Peppermint! You can't tell me leaves are contraband now! Besides, the Proditor eat them all the time," Twist said with an easy laugh as the Marauders started to split up and go their separate ways. Big Macintosh went to speak to Pinkie Pie, the egghead following like his ghost. Stonewing and Jetstream flew up to the second floor balcony, leaving Vanity watching with a wistful sigh. Twist spoke around the candy cane sticking out of the corner of her mouth like a cigar. "I keep telling you, your royalness, munch one of these and you might actually be able to ask her out."

"What? Who? Me?" Vanity sputtered. "I... she's an enlisted mare and I'm a morale officer. It could never work."

"Sure. But that doesn't stop you from wanting to make it work," Twist said as she bumped her hip against his before bouncing away.

This was clearly not Vanity's sort of party, and he migrated slowly towards the edges with the other lookers-on, sipping his drink, listening to the music, and keeping his eyes open for Jetstream.

"You look pensive, Uncle," a voice rasped softly in my ear, and both of us jumped. The sound was like the voice of a rusty can, and we turned to look at the fair hide and golden mane of Goldenblood. His brilliant golden eyes looked searchingly at Vanity. As he talked, his breath rattled so harshly in his chest I could hear it over the blaring music. "Hardly the Grand Galloping Gala, is it?"

"Golden!" Vanity smiled and gave his shoulders a friendly squeeze. "I didn't know you were out of the hospital. You sound... better." To be truthful, he looked... probably as bad as me. Dark hollows hung around his eyes, and his hide had unhealthy blemishes on it. He wheezed softly with every breath.

"Thank you, Uncle. I'm sorry I didn't get to attend your commencement," he said in that soft, horrid voice. "It's exceptional that you signed up at all. I don't know any other aristocrats who volunteered for a front line position."

Vanity gave a disgusted little snort. "After so many inspirational speeches, I thought somepony would have to sign up. At least a token noble." He tried to smile dismissively. Goldenblood's smile was

more... aloof.

"So you signed up out of pride then?" Even I caught the note of disapproval. "Not out of loyalty to the Princesses?" The question seemed to catch Vanity by surprise as he focused on his nephew's earnest expression.

"Well, I suppose for Luna as well. She needs all of our help."

"Indeed. But I wonder if she has it." Goldenblood spoke calmly, but even I could hear the tension in his voice. "Do you really think my father is loyal to Princess Luna? Do you believe that any titled pony is?" He swept his hoof to the side. "They hold their balls and galas, wasting their money on their own indulgences as war threatens the kingdom. They use their lineage to leverage safe postings around Canterlot and Manehattan rather than place themselves where they might actually have to fight. Is there any value to the aristocracy at all, Uncle?"

His question struck me as unusually direct, but I also had to admit that Goldenblood had a point. I hadn't seen anything of Blueblood or the other aristocrats that seemed worth a damn. Vanity was the first and last aristocrat who seemed to care about the actual fighting of the war. Still, his gaze hardened as he looked at the sickly stallion. "Tradition. The noble houses have always existed to serve and support Equestria and the Princess. It is our duty and our sacred honor."

Goldenblood's hard look softened slightly. "Undoubtedly, Uncle. But I have to wonder, do they serve her still?"

Suddenly, a leg went around my shoulders, a flash of pink to my left as Pinkie Pie pulled Vanity's head into a crushing hug. "Hey! Why are you ponies over here looking like such sourpusses? Don't you know it's supposed to be a party, smarty?" Somehow, despite her grin, I detected a note of annoyance in her voice.

Suddenly her eye twitched and she went stiff. "Ahh! Left eye blink. Ear waggle. Rump itch? Oooh!" She suddenly headbutted the two aside just as a sick Doof was violently ill over the rail. "Ewww... somepony partied too hard?" she said with some sympathy as the club's staff hurried to clean up the mess as the huge gray pony groaned. "Good thing my Pinkie Sense saw that coming!"

"Pinkie Sense?" Vanity asked with a skeptical smile. Goldenblood looked intrigued, however.

"Oh you won't believe me either," Pinkie Pie said as she rolled her eyes with a slightly sad smile. "Twilight Sparkle's been trying to study it for years, and she still can't figure it out. I just get little feelings that things are going to happen, and then they do!"

"It sounds... convenient," Vanity said as he hid his smile behind a feigned muzzle rub. I had to agree. It wasn't like you could tell when bad things were going to happen just from an achy knee or itchy mane.

Pinkie Pie rolled her eyes with a sigh. But then Golden said softly, "It sounds... lonely. Knowing things that others can't understand or accept. You bear it well." Pinkie Pie's manic grin disappeared as she looked at Goldenblood with a look of uncertainty, then a growing smile.

"You believe me?"

"I think there are many things in this world that can't be explained rationally, so therefore irrational explanations should be considered." He glanced up at where Doof hung over the rail. "If it prevents us from getting vomited upon, I'd freely consider it."

The pink pony grinned and swept him up in a hug. "I knew you were a good pony, Goldie Oldie Boldy!"

Goldenblood suddenly hunched over and started to cough and retch. Pinkie Pie immediately released him, patting him on the back. "Oh, are you okay?"

He just gave her a tense little smile and then returned to coughing, stepping away a little. "Just... adjusting," he said as he levitated a cloth from his vest and coughed into it before drawing a slow breath. Vanity looked at the spots of pink and red left behind on the cloth.

Twist bounced her way across the club, smiling like nothing in the world could bother her. She nudged flanks with Pinkie Pie and grinned. "Hey Pinkie, this is a great party, but I've got something that will make it even better!" she said as she pulled out one of her candy canes and tossed it to Pinkie Pie, who caught it balanced on her nose and looked at it cross-eyed. "You've got to try these. Just take one. They'll blow your mind!" she said with a grin.

Pinkie Pie smiled and tossed the candy cane in the air, caught it in her mouth, and chewed. "Mmmm... pretty sweet, Twist."

"Yeah. They're really super, aren't they? I made them myself!" she said proudly, fluttering her eyes behind her thick glasses.

But Pinkie Pie wasn't paying attention anymore. The pupils of her bright blue eyes expanded and her smile grew from ear to ear like mine had my first time playing the contrabass. "Oh wow! This really is super duper trooper good!" the mare said as she bounced gleefully on her hooves. "Wooo! Wooo! Wooo!"

She pointed a hoof at Twist as she started to giggle. "You're still sad about Apple Bloom, aren't ya? I can feel it!" She looked right into Vanity's eyes. "And you keep thinking you're a murderer and scared you're going to turn into a monster. And you are!" And then she looked at Goldenblood. "And you..." Her smile slowly faded away. "You..." And like in ruins of Sugarcube Corner I watched as her face turned from glee into an expression of fear. "You're going to hurt a lot of ponies. Lots and lots and lots..."

Goldenblood didn't say a word as he simply looked back with his golden gaze.

"Pinkie Pie. Relax. It's a party," Twist said in worry as she gave Pinkie's flanks a nudge, but now the pink mare wasn't paying any attention to us. Her eyes were sweeping from one to the next. "And he's a rapist... and she's... she's stealing! And... and... no!" She sat down hard, muttering. "Twitchy mane... hot hoof... tingly knee... dry tongue... what does it mean?"

"We should call a doctor," Vanity said as he looked around. Twist knelt, apologizing repeatedly for the candy as she hugged the trembling Pinkie Pie. The crowd was starting to notice, but that was when a huge cake made in the shape of the pink ministry hub was wheeled in.

Pinkie Pie looked right at it and pointed her trembling hoof. "It's a bomb... it's a bomb... there's a bomb... a really big bomb..." she whimpered over and over again as she shook. Then she looked around at the crowd. "You have... you have... there's so many pony... you have to do something!" Twist looked skeptical. Vanity just shook his head. Goldenblood's face was a stoic mask. Pinkie Pie stared at him. "Please, Goldie... please don't let them get hurt..." she begged as tears ran down her face.

Goldenblood closed his eyes, and then said in a tone of command that made Vanity's ears rise up, "Vanity, get a message to the Hoofington Guard; there's a terminal you can use in the club's office. Tell them somepony planted a bomb at Prance. Twist, yes? Find Big Macintosh. Tell him the cake is a

bomb.” He began hacking and coughing again but struggled to keep his breath. “Pinkie Pie. Listen to me.” The shaking mare looked up at him. “You need to smile. You need to calm down. Where you go, the party goes. And the party needs to go outside.”

Pinkie Pie stared at him, then swallowed and nodded. And like that she was okay again. Her smile returned, her hair seemed to curl... only her eyes remained terrified. “Oh... sure, Goldie. Great idea.”

Goldenblood just gave Vanity a look, and my host ran for the office as Pinkie suddenly cried out, “Come on, everypony! You know what’d be a great idea? A block party! Outside!” Then she bounced towards the door while singing something about ‘raising the roof’ and ‘a party for Hoofington!’ The cake looked quite forlorn as the club emptied calmly. Prince Vanity’s name seemed to help the city guard take the threat seriously. Big Macintosh and Doof encouraged the rest of the staff to leave.

When the club was almost empty, Vanity carefully scraped away the pink frosting and cake. It peeled away enough for us to see the gray blocks of explosives within. She hadn’t been crazy after all.

When Vanity found Pinkie Pie, she was tackling one of the cooks. “You did it! You made that bomb. You’re a bad pony! I can tell! A mad bomber pony!”

“You’re crazy, lady! I just picked up the cake from the bakery!” he protested as she glared down at him.

She grabbed his head in her hooves and pulled his face within an inch of her own. “Don’t call me crazy, you wicked, bad, no good pony. You’ll tell me what you were doing! I’ve made dragons talk; you’ll be easy.” She looked at the guards. “Can you take him to my hub? I think we’re gonna need a special private party-warty.”

The crowd cheered as the buck was dragged towards the ministry hub, still shouting his innocence. Oddly, Pinkie Pie didn’t look happy with their cheers. In fact, standing this close to her, she looked... angry. *Scared* and angry, and her smile was almost vengeful as she trotted out of sight. Vanity and Goldenblood followed. She was pacing. Fuming.

“It’s all secrets and lies. All of it. All those ponies,” she said, more to herself than the two unicorns. “I saw what they were doing. I just... the pieces all came together and... and...” Her bright eyes darkened. She suddenly slumped. “I... I dunno how I can stop it. I couldn’t stop it when I knew it was a bomb.” She sniffed as tears went down her cheeks. “I’m so stupid. All I can do is throw parties. I don’t know how to stop bad ponies and keep the good ponies happy and safe!”

Vanity just sighed and rubbed Pinkie Pie’s shoulder. “Don’t feel bad about this, Miss Pie. Leave it up to the city guard; it’s their duty to keep peace and security. They’ll find the bad ponies.” And for a moment, it looked as if that was going to be that.

But Goldenblood was just looking at Pinkie Pie. Then he said slowly, “I don’t know, Pinkie Pie. I think you can do more than you know. The Ministry of Morale’s more widespread than any ministry. You’ve got contacts and roots in the community. And you have the Pinkie Pie Sense; that’s something nopony else has. If there is anypony in Equestria who can keep us safe, it’s you.”

Pinkie Pie looked at him, her face a mask of desolation. Then she sniffed and rubbed her nose. “I... maybe. I’d need more of Twisty’s candy. And... there’s so much to keep track of. I don’t even know where to begin.”

Goldenblood glanced at Vanity, his lips curling slightly. “Oh, I can think of a few places. After all, I know there’s lots of aristocrats who you should use your Pinkie Sense on. Especially if they’re not

helping Princess Luna as much as they could.”

Pinkie Pie closed her eyes and then murmured, to herself or to the unicorns, I wasn't sure. “Oh Goldie, I asked you not to let them get hurt...”

oooOOOooo

I jerked out of the memory and at once took stock. I was still on the couch pressed against the front door. I wasn't disemboweled. Deus and Blueblood hadn't resurrected themselves and come out of the darkness to gang rape me. No spritebots. I had to admit that, for coming out of an orb, this was pretty smooth.

So for once, I could actually think about what I'd seen. It'd been pretty clear that Goldenblood had a grudge against his father and the other aristocrats. Maybe it was his father's treatment, maybe it was his loyalty to Luna. Whatever it was, he'd clearly set Pinkie Pie on the road to putting monitoring equipment into bakeries and sending her surrogate parents to spy on her behalf. Paranoia, or had Pinkie Pie really sensed something?

Still, I'd heard the argument. The doubt. Goldenblood seemed determined to bring down his father and the aristocracy, and he'd used Pinkie Pie and his uncle. I just wondered...

...why I heard hoofsteps upstairs?

“I could really use an E.F.S. right now,” I muttered as I rolled off the couch and readied the dragon claw and Cupcake's revolver. “Actually, I could really use a drink right now.” Too bad neither Priest nor Arlose had kept a liquor cabinet. Slowly, I made my way upstairs. I'd only checked the one room, the one with Marigold's belongings. I'd never checked the other... Images of more ghost ponies peeked into my mind. I cracked the door open.

The unicorn mare in black lace who'd been praying in the chapel when I first visited it was in the house, her back to me. Up close, I could suddenly appreciate how big she was. Her horn glowed as she lifted away her dress. A dusky purple hide appeared... and wings... and...

Oh sweet Princesses, it was Luna.

No. No, *not* Luna, I realized. I'd seen Luna. What stood in the room was like a copy, a pale imitation. The light was dull upon her horn, and no magical moonlight seemed to glow on her matte hide. And to seal the appearance, there was no cutie mark on this mare's flank.

Still... what the hay?

I considered my options: a tiny P-21 told me that I had the element of surprise and shouldn't waste it. A tiny Glory warned me that she might not be hostile. A tiny Blackjack lay in a bathtub and whined about how she wanted a drink. A tiny Rampage just gave a shrug.

Fuck it. I closed the door softly, then knocked on it. “Hi. If you'd like to talk, Miss Alicorn, come on downstairs,” I said loudly, turning around. I'd probably just invited another monster to kill me. Maybe she was another Zodiac? Or a monsterpony like Gorgon? I really didn't care at this point. If she tried to attack me, then I'd kill her... or something. The plan was still a little fuzzy. I hopped back onto the couch, propping my head up on one of the arms as I dug through my saddlebags for a Fancy Buck Cake and two Sparkle-Colas. I hummed to myself, trying to avoid the urge to go back upstairs.

Then there was a hoofstep on the stairs. Then another and another. Purple eyes peeked around the corner. “Hey. If you're going to kill me, mind waiting till I'm done eating?” I muttered around a

mouthful of gooey cherry filling. She just stared at me a moment before slowly walking the rest of the way down into the living room. "Want a soda?" I asked, lifting one. I'm fairly sure that, of all the things she thought I might have asked, that wasn't even on the list.

The purple alicorn seemed at a bit of a loss. "The Goddess... does not require a soda," she finally said in a low, quiet voice. I really was amazed I could hear it at all. There was something... unnatural about it, something... off. Something about it sounded familiar, too, Luna only knew how.

"Didn't ask if you required one. Just wanted to know if you wanted one."

The alicorn's horn glowed softly, and she lifted the drink to her lips. She looked suspicious and wary as she took a very small drink from the bottle. "You are... unusual. You are not afraid of us?" She'd somehow managed to say that *while* drinking, without moving her lips. Putting that aside for the moment, I focused on what she'd said rather than how she'd said it. I suspected that this was not the reaction she expected. Good. And was it my imagination, or did I now detect a hint of a smile?

"Sorry. Call me jaded," I replied after swallowing, "but after you have a cybermonster pony screaming 'cunt' at you while hunting you clear across the Wasteland, it's sort of hard to raise the bar on that." I popped the last bit of the cake into my mouth, chewing briskly. I gulped it down and wiped the crumbs away. "Not that you're not interesting, of course."

"We are... the Goddess," she said, again without moving her lips. There was some confusion and hesitation in her statement, as though even the purple alicorn wasn't exactly sure. Personally, I would have thought that a goddess would be much more... assertive?

"Well, when I start seeing double, I'll start calling you plural." I sat up and coughed, hacked, and spat a glob of phlegm into the cake wrapper. The alicorn went from looking suspicious to looking disgusted. I wiped my mouth with a hoof as I looked up at her. "Do you have a name, or will 'Goddess' suffice?"

Now, I know some ponies might have fallen over themselves at the sight of somepony that looked like the Princesses and called themselves a goddess, but I'd seen the real thing. I'd even been touched by Luna's feathers... well, secondhand. I could still remember the feeling of them on my lips, and so, looking at this alicorn, I felt curiosity but certainly not reverence. I should have been more suspicious, I suppose.

She just looked so... sad.

Again, that long silence. It was almost as if she were considering options. "Lacunae."

"Lacunae. Let me guess, it's a name that's absolutely rife with meaning and mystery that's completely over my head?" I said with a grin, and Lacunae looked a bit more wary. "Well, my name is Blackjack, but you know that already. You've been watching me for some time." I looked at her from over the tops of my mirrored glasses. "In the chapel. And in the mansion."

"We were considering you for Unity and joining the Goddess," she replied softly. As with all of her speech, her lips did not move, and it looked like she hadn't altered her breathing, either. That was one of the less strange things going on, though, and I could wonder about it later.

Joining the Goddess? Was there a part of that which didn't sound creepy? I waved my hoof before me. "Pass. I've got way too much trouble on my hoof. I'm damaged goods."

"We agree." She hesitated, head cocked as if she were listening and not quite sure how to express it. "We have observed some positive traits. You are... unusually tenacious. However, you are

also unpredictable. Unstable. Irrational and self-destructive. And whiny. Definitely whiny.” There was a long pause. “We no longer wish for you to share in Unity.”

“Huh,” I grunted softly, not entirely surprised but still slightly hurt. Was I *that* whiny? “Well shucks,” I said with a chuckle. “So if you’re not interested in me for this Unawhatsit, what are you doing here?”

“We... I... we... live here,” she said. She took another hesitant sip, almost as if this wasn’t something a goddess was supposed to do. I supposed that, with the cottage being abandoned, this was a natural place for a big alicorn goddess thing to live. Either that, or Priest had omitted a really big part of his time here. “Am I dreaming?”

Okay, the questions were becoming more interesting. “I don’t know. Are you?”

“I... we... I am always dreaming. We are dreaming each other’s dreams. But my dreams are missing.” She looked at the stars painted on the ceiling. “This city is full of nightmares. They scream in me. I do not want to be here, but we need me here.”

“Nightmares?” I muttered, thinking back over the last four days. Ya think?

“They are hateful dreams. Spiteful. Full of malice. They make it hard to hear the Goddess. I wish I could hear us more clearly. I need her forgiveness. I need her confidence.” She looked in the direction of the chapel. “I can hear us most clearly in the house of faith. That is why I remain here, where there is less to fear.” She looked at me. “Are you afraid?”

I sighed, looking at the strange creature. “Hun, I recently escaped from a rape factory. An emotionally scarred buck who half-wants to kill me is my best friend. We’ve got a pegasus with us who was booted from the Enclave but still thinks of herself as one of them, and we’ve got a Reaper who survived getting her head cut off and who may or may not be a psychopath. I’ve faced monsters, been really annoyed by two-hundred-year-old mysteries, and shot at. A lot. You’re going to have to be a little more specific.”

“Are you afraid for your soul?”

I blinked and groaned, burying my face in my hooves. Philosophy. Why did she have to ask me about philosophy? Still, I thought about it. “I’m afraid that I’ll turn into something I hate. I’m afraid that I’ll hurt ponies who don’t deserve it. I’m afraid that one day I won’t want to stop killing. So yeah. I guess I am.” I sighed and then smiled. “Guess we’ve got that in common. But, I’ve got mysteries to solve, questions to answer, and bastards to kill.”

“I...” Then she paused. “May I tell her?” Then she fell silent and I frowned as I watched her closely. She drooped a little. “I... am looking for something as well, but it is difficult searching alone. We do not like the nightmares of the city. One can be ignored, but dozens spread the nightmare through us all. I do not want to search alone. May I accompany you?”

“You... what? Why? Lacunae, I get shot at almost daily. There’s not a day seems go by when something isn’t trying to kill me. I’m not exactly sure it would be safe.” For either of us. For all I knew, this whole ‘Goddess’ bit was just a ploy by Sanguine to do... something. “I have no idea who, or what, you are or what your agenda is.” She definitely seemed psychologically unstable and was clearly withholding secrets.

“Please?” I blinked hard. Had an alicorn... just used the ‘magic word’ to try and convince me? Did she... or they... really think that I was that trusting of a complete stranger who was somewhat nuts?

I just looked at her for a moment, then raised my hooves into the air and snorted. "Welcome aboard! You get the dishes Tuesdays and Thursdays. Just make sure you try to schedule your emotional breakdowns when they don't conflict with ours. One of us is bad enough, but when we all get going... whew." I rolled off the couch and then struggled to pull it away from the door.

Then a brighter glow enveloped the couch and easily pulled it away. Great, and she was stronger than me. It was probably because of her great big... ugh! I didn't need a case of horn envy right now! "Okay. I need to fill in my friends. I need to make sure Glory is okay. She almost got eaten last night, and she's been acting weird. I need to tell Rampage not to try and gut you. I should probably also ask about that whole foal murdering thing. And I need to let P-21 know that we've got another mare with us. He'll be thrilled."

As I slipped out that door, I heard her mumble softly, "Are you sure we want to do this?"

* * *

I know... I know... there wasn't much of this that wasn't branded 'really bad idea', but despite that, I had to admit that there was something about her that made me want to help. Okay, she wasn't a normal pony, but it felt so much like she was... lost. And I simply couldn't believe this 'Goddess' gave a twig about a bounty.

I'm damaged goods travelling with broken wares and trying to save the Wasteland. "Where does it say that everypony I associate with closely has to be scarred, betrayed, crazy, or something else?" I wondered aloud.

While I might have wanted to talk to Glory first, Rampage was the first I came across. She was lying on a stone with her forehooves crossed, resting her chin on top of her hoofclaws and looking down at the town. "Hey," she said sullenly. "So, he showed you the clubhouse, huh? Do I still have my old room, or did he turn it into a den?"

"Actually, he gave me the clubhouse, so yeah. You get your old room back, Rampage," I said as I joined her on the rock. "So," I said as evenly as I could.

She didn't look back as she said in just as even a voice, "So."

"Did you fucking kill a foal, Rampage?" I asked softly as I looked at the town.

"Probably. That's what everypony tells me. My hoofmarks on the body," she replied, her pink eyes downcast.

"Then what was what you were doing with Thorn?" I asked, my magic pulling the heavy revolver from my bags. If I shot her in the eye fast enough and managed to get some rounds lodged in her brain...

"Being happy. Is that so hard to understand?" she said as she sat up. "I love kids. I mean, love 'em. I look at all this shit, and the one thing that gives me the slightest hope is that some foal might grow up and be able to do something about it. I come across some fucker who hurts a kid, and I eviscerate him or her. No regret. No hesitation. Because as fucked up as the Wasteland is, nothing makes it worse than what we do to each other."

"So what happened then?"

"I don't remember. It was a boring day. We didn't have any pilgrims. Just the usual ponies in town. I went to bed and woke up with the foal beside me, body beaten and neck crushed. I was so mad... so hurt... so... everything. A lot of the kids stuck up for me, but Priest couldn't. I couldn't either."

She hung her head. "I know what I remember, but I also remember the sight of her lying there. I still see her, even with my eyes closed. Even with my eyes gouged out. Every second is frozen in my mind."

I could relate. I really could. "Till we figure this out... if I see you alone with a foal... I'm going to take you out." Then I frowned, rolling my eyes as I looked up at that great vasty badness above. Ooooh, mistake! Falling up now! I clenched my eyes shut for a moment.

"Oh? And how are you going to going to do that?" she asked with a little smirk.

"Well, you were found in a balefire crater..." I said as I grinned at her.

"Yeah, but you don't have a balefire megaspell," she said with a snort, and then looked at me with a touch of uncertainty. "Do you?"

"Give me time." I grinned, and she smiled back, maybe with a touch of unease. Hey, it wasn't completely impossible! "So... on a totally unrelated note, have you ever heard of alicorns in the Wasteland?"

"Alicorns? Here?" She sat up. "I've heard they're around other parts of Equestria, but Hoofington's never had them before." She looked at me suspiciously, then gasped. "Wait... there's one here, isn't there?" She suddenly grinned. "Did you make friends with it?" I blinked, flushing as her grin grew and she cackled. "Oh sweet Celestia, Blackjack. Do you have a pet hellhound or something? Maybe keep a radscorpion in a shoe box? Only you could make friends with something that practically everypony in the Wasteland thinks is a monster."

"I made friends with you, didn't I?" Rampage looked at me with a slightly less snarky smile as I went on with all the smugness I could muster. "You know, it could be that I'm just using her. This could all be an elaborate ruse! I can do ruses you--" I started with a snort, then sneezed hard, blasting my hoof with streamers of snot. "Eugh..."

Rampage smiled sardonically. "Right. You are clearly the puppet master. We are all your puppets." She rose to her hooves, looking back at the cottage as she squinted up the hillside. "Well. I guess I should go meet this monster."

"Don't fight her, Rampage," I warned as sternly as I could manage, scraping the snot off my hoof on the rock. "She's... strange."

"She's an alicorn. Isn't that required?" Rampage asked. "It's kinda like becoming a Reaper or Steel Ranger: you just have to be off just to make the cut."

"I know her," I said sharply. Then I sighed as I sat. "I just don't know where I know her from. Something about her is familiar. It doesn't make any sense; I just look at her and feel... something."

"You're hopeless," Rampage said with a shake of her head. "Fine. I'll play nice." She swayed her glittery razor-wire-wrapped tail. "Oh... and chessmaster Blackjack? You have snot on your butt."

I glanced back behind me, ears flattening as I glared at her. "It's only because I'm plotting! Plotting the plots of... plotness!" I said as she walked towards the cottage. "Just you wait! No pony's gonna see this plot coming!"

* * *

Once I'd dealt with the boogers on my butt -- honestly, I had a cold! Couldn't they cut me a break? -- I headed into town, where I heard the delightful sound of Charity getting murdered. Okay,

technically it wasn't delight, but could anyone blame me if I did feel just a bit pleased?

"You... you're trying to take advantage of me!" Charity cried as she stood on a stack of crates. "I work... and I slave... and I try so hard to get caps for town... and you want thirty caps for a landmine?" She sat hard, bawling as twenty assorted foals and fillies watched on. "Why are you being so mean to me?"

"I'm not trying to take advantage of you!" P-21 sputtered, red in the face. "Twenty caps is too low! Even thirty is too low!" he protested as he raised his hooves. "Stop crying! I'm just trying for what's fair! Twenty five caps. Twenty three?"

"You... you... you're trying to rob me... you rob little ponies! How can you be so mean?" the unicorn bawled as she rubbed her eyes.

P-21 wavered and then slumped. "Fine. Twenty caps."

And just like that, the tears stopped and she said happily, "Deal." Hopping off the crates, she trotted towards her bag, muttering, "Stable ponies is so easy."

"She's not a pony," P-21 muttered. "She's some kind of bottle cap collecting monstrosity."

"She'll own the Wasteland someday," I agreed solemnly as I sat beside him. "So... what'd you buy?"

"Believe it or not, these fillies have dug up some decent stuff. I was just hoping to hang on to some more mines rather than sell them all," he said as she returned with a huge stack of caps and set them on the crates. "Is that all my caps? All two thousand?"

"You don't trust me?" she asked, her eyes going wide with hurt.

He smirked and narrowed his eyes. "Oh no. You're not getting me with the waterworks this time."

And then Charity sighed, a soft little heartbroken catch in her voice. "I knew I'd never get away with it. I mean, we try so hard to get ahead here... but I know all too well how tough things are." She turned and started to walk slowly back towards her store. "I'll get the rest of them..." It sounded like he'd demanded her prized teddy bear or something! Even I looked at him with disdain, and these were our caps!

He lowered his head and gave a grunt of defeat. "Nevermind," he muttered, putting the caps in his saddlebags.

"Come again!" she replied brightly as she and four other Crusaders pushed the cart loaded with landmines into the post office.

"You should have seen me the first time. She charged me for a bottle of water that she gave as a gift to Priest," I replied, looking at the boxes. "So what'd you buy?"

"Some ammunition, a magazine extender for your twelve gauge, some more dynamite for me, and some barding for you and Glory."

"What about you?" I asked as I nudged open the box and pulled out some light black leather armor. A little closer to 'raider' fashion than I liked. A pony could get shot wearing this if she wasn't careful.

"If I get hit at all, it's 'cause I got noticed. I'll just stay nice and quiet in the background while you three get shot up. That way it's my own damn fault if something happens to me."

I looked at the black leather barding. "Well, I suppose it'll do till we get to Megamart. I wonder if we can spray-paint 'good guys, don't shoot us' on it?"

He looked at me with a smirk. "Blackjack. That's *Glory's* barding."

"This?" I looked at it in shock. "P-21, she can't wear this!" It was... ugly. I could only hope it was some sort of disguise or something.

"It's what she asked for," he replied with a shrug. "She wanted something that looked like she could kick tail. Personally, I think it's going to take more than clothes for her to be able to do that. No, your barding is in the other box."

I put the black leather aside. Honestly, it looked more like it was for sex work in Stable 69 than something Glory should be wearing to stay alive. I levitated that box aside and opened up the metal crate beneath it.

Black and blue beauty greeted my eyes. This armor wasn't just reinforced security barding, it was actual combat police armor, like I'd seen on the back pages of the Ironshod Firearms catalogues. Magically treated black ceramic plates on a matte blue kevlar jacket. This was armor for my whole body and wouldn't leave my belly exposed. Blueblood couldn't... okay. Not thinking about it. Not thinking about guts spilling out all...

I smacked myself hard, much to the alarm of P-21. I took a deep breath, trying to will my heart to slow. "Sorry, just making sure this wasn't a dream." He looked skeptical as I pulled out the pieces of blue armor and saw that, to make the icing perfect, 'Aegis Security' had already been printed upon the plates. "Oh, I could kiss you!" I said as I hefted the armor.

"Yeah. Please don't," he said, raising his hoof to ward me away as I wiggled into the combat armor. "Does it fit?"

I blinked and then looked back at him. "You know what's weird... barding always fits. I have to wonder if there's some kind of 'one size fits all' spell made into these things." Cinching it up under my belly, I had to admit that it was a little heavy, but not as much as the reinforced security barding had been. It had a sling for a shotgun on the left side, and a loop for a baton that would hold my dragon claw on the right. It even had saddlebags with pockets for holding healing and restoration potions as well as chems.

As I redistributed my stuff, I told him about the Star House. He smiled. Then I told him about why Rampage hadn't been seen around town. He stopped smiling. And then I told him about Lacunae. He seemed more upset about her than about what Rampage had told me. "How do you know this Goddess thing isn't some kind of trick?"

"I gave her a chance to attack me and she didn't take it," I replied as I snapped the combat helmet into place. Thankfully, my glasses still covered my faintly glowing eyes. "I don't know. She's strange. I want to figure her out."

He sighed. "Does she seem like she has some psychological or emotional problem that you think you can help her with?"

I sat, tapping my hooves in front of me as I flushed. "Maybe..."

"Of course she does. And is she sad?"

I rubbed my nose as I awkwardly said, "A little. Maybe. Just a bit?"

"Blackjack, are you trying to turn us into the deadliest band of angsty whiny ponies to wander the Wasteland?"

"Maybe," I replied, and he sighed as he facehoofed. "What? It could work. Bad ponies could see us coming and go, 'Oh Goddesses, no way I want to mess with them because then she'll start crying, she'll be suicidal, and then he'll blow us all to the moon!' I know I wouldn't want to tangle with that."

He tried to suppress his laugh, shaking his head, and then sighed. "Alright. Just... please keep on your hooves, and make sure this isn't another Lancer or Caprice." That certainly helped sober me up a bit, and he passed me the twelve gauge ammo he'd picked up. Trust was good. Trust that gets eleven zebras executed, not good.

* * *

Speaking of zebras...

I really didn't expect to see Sekashi kick Glory in the face when I encountered the pair. My eyes widened as I went for my dragon claw before a pink pony in my saddlebags bucked me upside my head and I noticed Sekashi wasn't pressing her attack.

"You are rushing, Fallen Bird. Do not be in such a hurry to hit me that you fail to connect," the zebra said as Glory picked herself up out of the yellow grass. Sekashi glanced at me, her smile widening before looking back at Glory. The gray pegasus hadn't noticed me approaching while she was picking herself out of the grass. "Why do you wish for this, Fallen Bird? You are not a fighter like your friends."

Glory shook herself hard. "I told you! I'm sick of being useless all the time."

Glory? Useless?

"Back in the mansion, I survived only so long as Rampage was around. The second she wasn't I got stuck in a stove!" she said as she started to shake. "I couldn't even help Blackjack against Blueblood. He cut me without even looking back, and I just sat there as he gutted her! I nearly got her killed!" Glory shouted back.

"It is a poor fighter who forsakes their strength for a weakness, though I know very funny stories of fighters who do just so," the zebra said with a wistful smile. "Perhaps I should write a tale of the Fallen Bird, who wished to fight like the dogs because she thought her wings too weak." Her green eyes looked back at Glory. "Ah, but how would the story end?"

Glory panted and hung her head. "I don't want to hear stories! I... I saw what that... that... wh... wh... that slut was trying to pull. I knew it was Caprice and I didn't tell her! She does everything for me. She saved my life and I just stood there as she was dying in front of me on the road. Rampage got her to Scalpel, not me. P-21 killed Blueblood. Not me." She sat down hard, hanging her head as she started to cry. "I can't do anything."

"You caught me," I said softly as I walked up beside her, taking off the helmet. Damn thing was uncomfortable.

"Oh my! Look at the sun! I believe I owe the Crusaders a story about two friends helping one and other. Excellent story. Very funny. Remind me to tell you some time!" the zebra said as she turned

and trotted away. "Such a pity I cannot hear what two friends say to one another!"

I walked to her and lifted the black, spiked barding from the bag. "So, I'm guessing this isn't some sort of disguise thing," I said as I sat down beside her. She turned her head away from me. "And I'm guessing that 'Fallen Glory' isn't so much about keeping your identity secret as trying to be all tough?"

"I have to be tougher, Blackjack. For you. I..." She flushed as she stood. "You do everything. You get shot, blown up, cut up, hunted and betrayed... and all I do is... nothing. I feel... I feel like I'm still trapped in that oven and just waiting for the monster to eat me. Like I can't live if somepony doesn't come by and save me!" she said as she started to shake. She lifted her hooves, watching them tremble. "I... I can't... I can't even... stop..."

I did what worked for me. I hugged her. I held her as she quaked in my limbs. She wanted to be stronger. She wanted to be better. "You help me, Glory. Whether it's with your beam guns or with just being good and loyal, you help me." I stroked her mane, and then looked into her eyes. Despite Priest's healing magic, a thin scar remained, running from her brow to her cheek. She'd nearly lost an eye to the strike.

She kissed me. It was probably the most awkward kiss in the history of pony kisses.

I was so shocked that I barely moved, and she pulled away, her budding hope crumbling in the face of my stupor.

"I'm sorry... I guess... I guess I can't even control myself," she muttered as she looked away.

"No! I'm... I... just... didn't know you felt that way." I was certainly stunned by it; as awkward as the kiss had been, there was no mistaking the emotion that had been behind it.

"And... do you feel the same?" she asked in a tiny, hopeful voice. And if I was honest, I'd crush her.

"I... don't know how I feel, Glory."

"I know you like mares. You were with her after all," she said with a flush. "I could... do that..."

Oh Goddesses, Glory was actually trying to proposition me? "Caprice was sex. Mutual masturbation. She made me feel good, but nothing my own hoof couldn't do for me. We were just using each other," I said as I struggled to somehow defuse this emotional dynamite factory before it all blew up and she was crying... or worse. "I don't want to use you like that, Glory."

And crush. She didn't have to say a word. She lowered her head, dropped her gaze, her shoulders hunched and her front legs rubbed against each other. "I see... sorry."

Urrgh. Was that as annoying for everypony else when I did it? "No, Glory. You don't have to apologize. For anything," I said as I hugged her as platonically as I could. "It's just... yeah. I have sex with mares. And bucks. It's all fun. But... you're different. You're special, Glory. And every single pony I've... been with... was just sex. That's all it's ever been. If I were with you... if we were together... I'm afraid it'd be the same. Then you'd stop being my friend and then you'd leave. And I don't want you to leave..."

"So..." She fidgeted. "What now?"

I sighed and chuckled. "I don't have a clue. I'm not the smart pony, remember." *Be kind.* "Right now, it's something to think about. But what I'm more worried about is you feeling like you're useless.

You're not useless, Glory. You're the only pony in the Wasteland that has a clue how to deal with the raider disease. You keep me going when I'm doing everything short of falling on my face. Heck, even when I *am* falling on my face."

"I guess so. Though I don't know what good I am with the disease. I'd need a lab and months of work to come up with a treatment." She looked at the black barding. "I'm just sick of seeing you get hurt protecting others when I can't do anything to protect you."

"Don't worry about it. I'm Security. It's part of the job," I said, giving her the easiest-going grin I could.

She sighed and shook her head sadly. "Oh, Blackjack..." She was smiling, so why did I feel like I'd said the wrong thing?

I told her about Rampage and Lacunae, and we were both grateful for the change in topic. Her caution mirrored P-21's, but she seemed far more interested in the Star House. "You say there are pictures there from the moon? From the actual moon?" In her excitement, she seemed to forget all about the awkward patch we'd stumbled upon.

"Well, it looked like they were from the moon, and from the newspapers she'd kept it seemed like it. Why? Does it matter?"

"Well, we thought that the Equestrian Space Program was a hoax, just a way to stir up public support during the war that got axed when it failed to produce weapons or a boost to morale like it was designed to. We didn't even know if Marigold existed or if the scandal was just a way for the program leaders to wash their hands of a wasted experiment. I mean, the launch center is real enough. I think there's a ghoulish village there called Rocket Town. You can see it from the Skyport. But I never thought in a million years that those rockets could actually fly."

"Apparently they did, once," I said, glad to see that she hadn't put on the dreadful barding and happy that she'd cheered up a bit. "What do a bunch of ghouls want with rockets?"

"Oh, they're some sort of cult or something. Plan to fly to the 'great beyond' or to some far off promised land. Since most of the space center is radioactive, we never went there. But Orion's Herd is decent enough if you don't mind ghouls." From her shiver, it was clear there were some ghouls worth minding.

"Well, let's get you some barding that's actually protective and not something that makes you look like a raider," I said as we headed towards the post office. Harpica strolled along with the ghoulish foals in two rows behind her, and she gave us a very soft and polite greeting. Since arriving, the little ghouls had been quite well behaved and seemed too scared to wander off. A world that was more than four walls was an intimidating concept; I knew that firsthand.

Still, at least the Crusaders were friendly enough and interested both in them and me. A blue colt with a cutie mark of a pitcher of pouring water even played with my black and red streaked tail curiously.

Inside the post office, my eyes met Charity's and we narrowed our gazes in unison. I licked my lips. She chewed slowly on a candy cane sticking out the side of her mouth. I walked to the counter and set the barding on it. "I want to make an exchange."

She neither said a word nor took her eyes from mine nor blinked. She just swung the candy cane around to point the tip at a sign on the counter that read 'all sales are final.'

"Look. I don't like you. You don't like me. I get that," I said quietly as I pulled down my glasses a

little to look her in the eye. “But see that pegasus back there? That really nice pegasus? I like her, and I want to keep her safe. That means dressing her in some barding that doesn’t make her look like a raider. So I want an exchange.”

She just chewed slowly on the end of her peppermint stick. “Your friend... she mute?”

“Huh...?”

“Mute. Can she talk?” Charity demanded.

“Yeah...”

“Feeble-minded then?” the little filly queried.

“No, but...”

“Fillyphobic?”

“Look...”

Charity chewed up the rest of the peppermint stick. “I’m just trying to figure out... if this is for her, why are *you* the one doing the talking?”

Glory blinked and then stepped up past me. “Hello. Um... I need better armor than this,” she said as she pointed at the black barding.

“Welcome to Charity’s, where we ain’t,” she said with a polite smile. “You need better barding than this?”

“Well, yes please,” Glory said in surprise. “Something light.”

Charity walked to a shelf behind the counter and pulled out something light blue. It had been patched up more than a few times, but it seemed tailored for pegasus. “How’s that?” A faded patch on the shoulder read ‘Equestrian Skyguard’.

“I...” She took it and looked it over, then back at me, then at Charity. “It’s good. How much?” I braced myself.

“Eh, we’ll call it a swap. You need beam guns too, I hear?” My butt hit the ground about the same time as my jaw. “Beam pistols all right? Saddle-rigged?” Glory smiled gratefully at the filly and nodded. The filly put two of the boxy weapons, minus mouth grips, on top of the barding. “Four hundred caps and I’ll even throw in some gem cartridges.” Glory dug into her saddlebags for the caps as I just gaped.

“Thank you! And thank you, Blackjack. Again... for everything.” She gave a little squeal. “Oh I can’t wait to rig these on my battle saddle.”

I just stared at the filly behind the counter. “Why?” It was all I could say just now.

The filly looked at me coolly. “She needed the deal. You and your friend didn’t. You were just after caps. So I was just after caps. That’s what Bottlecap taught me,” she said before thumping her hoof on the counter. “Now are you going to buy something, or am I going to charge you for loitering? Ten caps a minute, starting now!” I ran for my wealth!

* * *

I felt a little bit... itchy. Not in a mane sort of itchy so much as an it's-been-a-good-day-and-no-pony's-shot-at-me kinda itchy. I was starting to feel a little bit overdue for something bad to happen to me, but the skies were dry and most of the Crusaders and the few adults were getting ready for Roses's funeral in the afternoon. So why was I feeling so jumpy at everything being... ordinary? Had I been so stressed for so long that I was starting to anticipate threats that weren't there?

Then the skywagon swooped over the town once, and before I knew it my revolver was out. It was the Enclave! They'd finally...

...sent a delivery wagon pulled by a ghoul pegasus? 'Absolutely Everything. Yes, I do deliveries!' was painted on its side. I looked at my gun and at the sight of a lavender filly climbing out of the back of the wagon and found myself starting to shake. Deus was dead. Blueblood was dead. The Zodiacs hadn't jumped at me in a while, and I had yet to find out what monster of the day Sanguine had waiting in the wings. Just breathe.

"I'll go get Charity, Ditzzy!" the small lavender pony with the blond mane called out as three or four Crusaders rushed to the wagon to help unload boxes.

Slowly, I walked closer, looking at the ghoul. Her mane might be almost gone and her wings so much bone, but that googly-eyed expression fit the poster in the post office almost perfectly. Noticing me, she pulled out a piece of chalk from her bags and lifted a slate that hung from a string around her neck.

She wrote on the slate and lifted it. 'Blackjack?'

Slowly, I trotted closer. "That's me."

Rubbing it clean, she dug into her bags for a folded piece of paper and passed it to me. I looked at her and then floated the note in front of me.

Blackjack, I've made the arrangements with the person who can assist you with your decryption. She's very secretive, but has always been trustworthy in our dealings. However, she operates under some paranoid rules. Ditzzy will take you to her and then back to Chapel. You have to go alone and unarmed. When you reach the building, you'll have to go into a memory orb. Then you'll be taken to her. -Bottlecap.

I looked at the note and then at Ditzzy. She blinked her offset eyes at me, then gave me what I assumed was supposed to be a reassuring smile. I sighed and then coughed. "Okay. So I'm with you, then?" I had to admit, even for a trusting fool like me, there were a lot of things that could be going on. But the fact was that if I was going to find out what EC-1101 was, and what Sanguine wanted it for, I'd have to trust them.

I gave the ghoul pegasus a smile that she happily returned. "Okay. I'm going to tell my friends and drop off my stuff." I pointed up the hillside to the southeast. "There's a house up there where you can pick me up in a little bit." Ditzzy looked where I'd pointed and then nodded. I quickly trotted away to look for my friends.

I was pleasantly surprised to find all of them at the Star House. I was more surprised to find that no-pony had killed each other. Lacunae sat by the stairs while Rampage cleaned out her old room and P-21 took Priest's. Glory was working on attaching her new beam pistols to her battle saddle. I had to admit, she looked a lot better in the Skyguard barding than that black monstrosity P-21 had bought for her. Five ponies and only four bedrooms. Oh dear.

I stamped my hooves loudly on the floor. "Well. Good news, everypony..."

Rampage peeked out at me. "You're pregnant."

I blinked and then scowled at the smirking Reaper. "No."

"You're drunk?" P-21 asked as he walked out with a box of Priest's drawings balanced carefully on his back. "You seem pretty happy, but more coherent than I anticipated."

"No! I'm not drunk. I'm..."

"Oh, please tell me you're not taking Buck again. I don't know if Priest can heal the damage like Scalpel," Glory fretted.

I sat with a little scream of annoyance. "I am not pregnant, drunk, or high!" I took a deep breath. "I'm going on a little trip to get EC-1101 decoded. Alone."

The three of them took it about as I expected.

"Trusting the alicorn is bad enough, but now you're going someplace alone, unarmed, and unconscious? What if you're being sent to Paradise? Deus might be dead, but Usury still has the caps to inspire all sorts of trouble," P-21 said sharply as he pointed to the door.

"I trust Ditzzy Doo to get me safely there and back again. And if I show up armed and with all of you, then she won't even show." Still, the more I thought about it the more I didn't like it. "But... maybe there's something we can do."

* * *

One minute.

That's how long it took before my brain started screaming at me. The skywagon lifted, and in one minute I was certain I was going to die. Every thought was crushed away by that one impulse that grew and swelled within me. And while I knew that I wasn't going to be sucked into the clouds while being smashed into paint on the ground, all I could do was scramble for an orb and clutch it to my horn as my heart beat faster and faster. I fought to try and make the connection, even if it was just to unconscious oblivion if the orb was trapped.

I wanted to be with Maripony and Big Macintosh. I wanted to be with the Marauders. I wanted to be with Twist and Vanity and Jetstream and Stonewing and even Doof if I had to. I wanted to jump, insane as it was. I'd be happy taking a spin inside Deus, Blueblood or Gorgon or even Sanguine--

oooOOOooo

I was lying in a bed. A hospital bed, from the beeping machinery and the feeling of tubes going in and out of my body. Blissful lethargy filled me. I could barely move my head as the sensation of floating filled every limb. Everything felt so... distant. I couldn't tell who or what I was inside right now, just that I was sprawled on my side on the bed. I had the feeling that there were a lot of ponies standing outside my field of vision, but I couldn't move to see them.

Then a maroon unicorn buck in a white lab coat stepped into view. "A pony truly is a thing of wonder. The arrangement of limbs. The paths of nerves. The circulation of our blood. Magic is in our very bodies and souls. It courses through us. It gave me the ability to alter the universe. Gave you

flight.” His magic reached out to dab a cloth at my host’s drooling lips.

“Sadly, for all our wonder, our flesh is limited and our souls finite. But this war... this darling war... has offered us an opportunity to expand and explore the very possibilities of life itself. And you are going to play a role in that. You should be honored, Lance Corporal Stonewing,” he said as he adjusted his glasses. “You see, not only are we going to mend your flesh, we are going to enhance it. Empower it.” He patted his cheek softly. “We are going to make you... better.”

And with that he moved out of my field of sight, his hooves echoing across a tiled floor. The murmuring increased.

“I don’t like this at all,” a familiar mare’s voice said with an edge of tension as she approached the bed I lay upon. “I want to speak to him.”

“The subject is under heavy sedation for the procedure, Fluttershy. He shouldn’t be conscious. He shouldn’t even be alive, with his spine severed,” another mare said as the pink-haired pegasus stepped in front of my host and lowered her soft blue eyes to meet mine.

Her lips curled slowly, and I felt his curl to match. “Don’t worry, soldier. We’re going to fix you right up. We’re going to make sure you never ever get hurt again.” I felt a rasp in my throat that might have been a question. I didn’t feel... good. What little of my body I could sense felt like it was crawling inside.

“We’ve got his consent in writing and recording,” the mare with the familiar voice said softly. And then a bright red unicorn mare with a short white trimmed mane stepped into my vision. She wore magenta glasses with glittery plastic frames and a sure smile I didn’t like at all. “Dr. Trueblood’s got the other subject prepared for the megaspell.” A glittery red hoof came to rest on Fluttershy’s shoulder. “We really can’t wait any longer. We’re already committed.”

Fluttershy just looked tense. Her eyes were surrounded by wrinkles. Stonewing made another noise of confusion. Something about this was all wrong, and we both knew it.

The red mare continued softly, “They won’t use your megaspell on the battlefield, Fluttershy. But we can still put it to use to keep ponies safe. That’s what all this is about after all. Keeping ponies safe. And he will be safe, and he’ll be able to keep other ponies safe as well. He won’t even have to kill zebras any more. He’ll stop them with one look. Turn them back with another.”

Fluttershy looked at me a moment longer, her eyes full of both sadness and a terrible kind of need. A need for... something. She wanted this, I realized, but she didn’t want to admit it. Couldn’t admit it. I think that my host realized it too as he breathed harder and faster, trying to say something... anything to stop this. But Fluttershy just backed away and let the nurses and doctors come and gently pull back his sheet and levitate him into the air. I saw jars full of a familiar and disgusting rainbow concoction dripping into a tube that disappeared into my limp hoof. Slowly, I was levitated over into the middle of a circle of unicorns.

I wasn’t alone. Something else floated there as well; something I first thought was some kind of chicken. Then I noticed the wings. The claws. The serpentine body. But before my eyes, it was changing. Bubbling. Melting as if it were made of wax. “Careful,” the medical buck called out. “You don’t want to liquefy them too much. Remember the last four subjects.”

And so was my host. I caught a glimpse of his hoof stretching like wax before my eyes.

I wanted to cry out, but all he could do was rasp as I felt his body return. They’d said they’d sedated him. They’d lied, or it wasn’t nearly enough. And when sensation returned I felt the violation of

the creature being pressed into his body. Flesh twisted as I felt it struggle and thrash for freedom inside him. And it was slow... so horribly slow. The creature felt like it was swimming inside him, as if his flesh were a net it tried to escape from. And worse, I had the distinct feeling of something happening inside my skull. My eyes crawled as I felt the sockets change.

"Excellent. He's blended nicely," I heard the medical buck say sharply. "Right. Purge the contaminants and let's see what comes out of the oven." The glow dimmed, and I felt something horrid being expelled from my orifices. "Good. Superfluous biological material removed. Everything going exactly as it should." The buck stomped his hooves eagerly. "Wonderful. The fusion megaspell is a success!"

I dropped to the floor in a pile of colorful ichor and fleshy goo and slowly turned my head towards the sound of the stomping. The maroon unicorn in the lab coat seemed quite enthused. Meanwhile, Garnet was escorting Fluttershy to the door. I rose to my shaky hooves... feeling a body that was no longer my own. I tried to talk around a serpentine tongue, tried to call out to Fluttershy. I imagined him begging her to turn him back.

Then, with one parting glance over her shoulder, Fluttershy left the room with Miss Redhooves.

A nurse stepped in front of him. "He seems aware, Doctor Trueblood," she said as she stared into my host's eyes. Then she jerked and gasped, crying out in pain as her limbs solidified before me.

"Excellent! Magical traits of the addition transferred intact!" the maroon pony in the lab coat said, actually dancing in glee.

Then my host reared up and smashed the petrified pony into rubble. Screams started as he began to charge through the megaspell chamber. I noticed that he was trying to struggle to the doctor, his bat-like wings fighting for purchase. But then spells filled his body with a lethargy. He collapsed as the numbness robbed his strength once more. A sack went over his head. Conjured ropes bound his limbs.

"You said he'd maintain his sapience, doctor!" the mare with the glittery hooves shouted as she returned. "Fluttershy almost saw that!"

The unicorn buck chuckled in delight. "Oh, he did. I'm sure of it. He came right towards me, after all."

"You're sure?"

"Oh yes. Project Chimera is a complete success. We simply need more subjects to make the process more efficient. Explore combinations. Trace possibilities." The doctor chuckled from nearby. "I think we should classify this strain as 'Gorgon'."

The glittery-hooved mare spoke from right above me. "I hope you're right, Doctor. We're trying to procure more combat personnel for the prototypes. Luna wants war resources, and we're going to give them to her, though we'll have to keep billing this as a Ministry of Peace project to keep the others distracted."

"Ugh. Cloak and dagger intrigues I leave to you, Garnet. Are you going to forward our results to Emerald?"

"Of course, Doctor Trueblood. The M.A.S. should be briefed about the possibilities of Flux-accelerated megaspells, and we're already exploring possibilities with the other ministries."

“Are you sure that’s wise? Shouldn’t the Ministry of Peace maintain exclusivity?”

Garnet laughed brightly. “Oh, Doctor, then we wouldn’t be able to get away with nearly as much!” I felt magic lift Stonewing’s body as the red pony said softly, “Let’s make sure his memory is nice and clean and then put him in storage till we’re ready to duplicate the process.”

I felt a horn touch his forehead through the bag, and everything swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Coming to, I felt myself shaking as the memory left me. Gorgon. Project Chimera was Equestria’s monster making program. And Fluttershy had known, had been involved. She had said to do better. That wasn’t better. That was insane. I swallowed hard as I twitched there on the ground. After Deus’s orb, and now Gorgon’s, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to go into any more orbs for a while. I felt sick at the thought of it. It was like sticking my hoof in a fire.

So, where the heck was I now? I slowly opened my eyes and looked around. This was some kind of office, and a fancy one if you looked past the fallen ceiling tiles and rotting floor. Streamers of water trickled constantly from broken and cracked pipes overhead and washed over the moldy carpeting in miniature rivers. The emergency lighting still flickered and twitched on and off. The big desk in the room... looked just like the Overmare’s. And the open door leading from the office was a stable door... or at least a flimsy, half-sized replica of one. This couldn’t be a stable, though; no stable had armored windows looking out at the Wasteland, as this office did.

I walked to the door. It looked like a stable, if you’d built one with rooms twice as large as normal. No stable I’d seen had hallways this roomy. I watched the rusty river trickling along the hall and cascading down some stairs. Judging by the cracks and holes in the wall, clearly this place wasn’t built as tough as a stable, either.

A ping sounded, and one of the replica stable doors down the hall slid open. Okay, once again, have I mentioned how much I really wish I had my E.F.S.? And my gun? And my barding? And my friends? I really hate being alone, especially in any place that looked remotely like a stable. Stables were not places for lone ponies.

The door opened into an elevator, its walls lined with posters. ‘Stable-Tec, Voyage to the Future!’ proclaimed one. ‘Save yourself and your family. Sign up today!’ read another. Looking at the pictures of ten-story stables with swimming pools and internal gardens, I wondered why I’d never heard of a stable like that. 99 must have opted out of those features. And who knew, maybe it had. How many stables had been built? Perhaps Stables One, Two, and Three had been paradises, but towards the end, they had to replace underground greenhouses with recycling equipment out of a simple need for expediency?

I stepped into the elevator, the doors slid closed behind me, and the car started descending. As long as I kept my eyes on the walls, I didn’t feel the panic building... too much. Ten seconds later, the elevator slowed and the car doors opened. I stepped into a hall almost completely sealed with rubble. One door remained clear; written on it in chipped white paint were the words ‘Stable-Tec R&D’. The few other doors I could see were open and led to rooms that looked so damaged that they might collapse on me if I so much as sneezed in the general area. I really hoped that I wouldn’t have to try them.

The door slid open in front of me, and I stepped onto a catwalk over a floor covered in worktables. I picked my way slowly around the edge to stairs down to the work floor. An entire wall was almost covered with glowing monitor screens. Looking up at the upper left, I saw a flickering label over a slowly rotating design. ‘Stable One: completed.’ Next to it was an even larger design. ‘Stable Two: completed.’ And the next. And the next. Some of the monitors were dead. A few were marked as ‘delayed’ or ‘redesigned’, but the majority of them were complete.

I saw the sprawling layout of Stable 89 with all its many storage areas and labs. It looked similar to 90 and 91. Then I frowned as I looked at Stable 90. 'Complete?' *This stable's not finished*, Buttercup had written. A mistake, or had something else happened?

I smiled at the sight of 99, despite everything. I'd never realized how big 99 actually was. The four stories of habitation blocks around a central stair linking atrium to living quarters to utility storage to maintenance to reactor. It looked a bit like a tree, curiously enough. And it was 'complete', if 'completely fucked up'.

Over the workstations were more stable designs flickering and rotating silently on their screens. 'Rapture Hydrostable' resembled dozens of bubbles. Was it supposed to go underwater? 'Sea Star Hydrostable' looked more like some sort of floating island. 'Celestia Astrostable' had rotating wheels like a wagon and long sweeping wings while 'Luna Astrostable' actually looked a lot like 99 but built inside a big aboveground pyramid for some reason; I couldn't see how ponies were supposed to reach the door all the way up at the top. 'Big Macintosh Megastable' was positively huge, looking as if it'd been designed to hold thousands instead of hundreds. 'Scootaloo Aerostable' seemed more designed for cloud dwellers, while the 'Pinkie Pie Aerostable' hung from huge balloons! There were other designs that seemed even less concrete.

Along the opposite wall were monitors showing the evolution of maneframes, terminals, and PipBucks. The first machines were room-sized monsters, progressing through smaller and smaller boxes until they reached desk-sized maneframes like many we'd run across. The first terminals were already small enough to fit on a desk, but they looked bulkier than the ones I was used to, with smaller screens and more awkward-looking keyboards. Then the 'Personal Information Processor: Alpha' appeared in the form of a PipBuck so large that it covered an entire pony, boxes, straps, and wires everywhere like some odd form of armor. Beta PipBucks covered most of a limb and still had a backpack. After that, terminals became more simplified and refined, though I couldn't see any differences between a standard, a hardened, and a reinforced terminal. The differences in the PipBucks were far more obvious. The Gamma models were what I had on my hoof, from the slightly bulkier 2000 to the more compact 3000. There was a Delta model, too, that seemed even simpler and more flimsy than the rest. Terminals shrank to hoof-sized 'contact nodes'. I wondered if eventually the two would merge. Well, would have merged, if things hadn't blown up.

There weren't any exits on the first floor, so I climbed back up to the catwalk. Most of the offices off the catwalk were locked and dark, but one was lit by the green glow of a terminal. I made my way to that door.

The office within was cluttered in an absentminded way. There were wadded-up designs piled high in the wastebasket, drawings taped to every available surface, and scale models dangling from the ceiling on fishing line. A foal-sized robotic pony stood silently in one corner, looking forlorn and abandoned.

There were pictures of things other than technology, too. Three fillies wearing blue and gold capes piled one atop the other, laughing at the camera. The trio, a bit older, proudly displaying their cutie marks. I was struck by how similar they looked. The three again, this time mature mares apparently enjoying a night out together. There were pictures of Applejack, and one of Big Macintosh, and a third of an elderly green pony.

The terminal had only one thing on its screen. 'Area of Inquiry?' I looked at it and the keys, then typed slowly. >EC-1101

The screen flickered once.

>Hello, Blackjack.

I was looking at the blinking cursor when a flicker and flash from behind me caused me to spin around, reflexively trying to ready a weapon that wasn't there. The light was coming from the robot, and as I watched it grew more and more concrete until a flickery image of a young Apple Bloom stood in front of me, identical to the filly in the picture save for the luminance that glowed around her. Looking at the strange, glowy earth pony I relaxed a bit, though not much.

"Um... hello?"

"Heard you got yerself a puzzle on yer hoof," the filly said as she trotted towards me. "Well, I never got a puzzle solving cutie mark, but most folk figured I was a clever pony."

"If you don't mind... what the heck are you?" I asked in shock. "Who are you?"

She gave a smile. "Well, that's the million bit question, ain't it? Maybe I'm a pony running things from a terminal somewhere, helping you out. Maybe I'm just a machine doing what I'm programmed to. Or maybe I'm Apple Bloom. You can call me Applebot." Then she looked at my blackened PipBuck. Her eyes widened in shock. "Landsakes! How'd you fry a 3000? They're supposed to last forever!"

"Um... lightning?"

"Lightning?" The robot sounded skeptical. "You got it struck by lightning?" I nodded weakly. She rubbed her mouth as she looked at the blackened electronics, then shrugged. "Well, that'd do it. I guess you'll be needing a new one."

"So... the data's not lost?" I asked warily as two mechanical... hands, if you could call the clusters of tools that, rose from the robot's shoulders. The tools on the end of each finger began to deftly remove my PipBuck.

The little pony smirked. "Oh, it'd take a lot more than that to kill your data. Ta do that, somethin'd have to destroy your PipBuck outright. And probably you, too. Nah, you just fried the interface, which I gotta admit is still pretty impressive." She set the device on the table, then trotted over to a metal cabinet. "Now... 3000... 3000... nope. Fresh out of 3000. Looks like you're going to have to make do with a Delta model."

"A Delta?" I asked as I watched her remove a sleek, polished silver PipBuck. I looked at it and then at my more bulky model. "Um... do you have anything a little bit heavier?" The little Apple Bloom cocked her brow at me. "Well, it's just that I hit ponies with my PipBuck."

"You hit 'em?" She clicked her tongue, and said with a touch of playful sarcasm, "That ain't no way to treat sensitive electronics." She replaced the flimsy silver one and dug around a bit. "Aha! Here we go." She pulled out a matte black PipBuck that seemed marginally more bulky... but only barely. "Was designing this for the Shadowbolts, but it never made it into mass production."

Setting it next to my old 3000, the robotic hands removed the covering as I watched. "So... how's Stable 99 holding up?" Applebot asked curiously.

"Huh?" I blinked.

"Stable 99. I put a whole lot of new stuff in there. Was wondering if it worked out or not."

"Ah... well... it's still working. I mean, I hear Rivets complain all the time about leaking pipes, but the recyclers still work like a charm."

“Well that’s good to hear. I was a little worried about the reprocessors. I mean, I know they purify and remix the waste. I ate the sample chips myself. Still, there’s still something just... off... about that.”

“Yeah, especially when you have to reprocess a buck after being removed from the breeding population.”

The robot froze as she finished removing the casing. She looked back at me. “What did you say? You do what now?”

“Put dead ponies in the reprocessors...” I blinked at her shocked and disgusted expression. “What? That’s what we’re supposed to do, right?”

“Uh, maybe if you like a high protein diet,” she said, still looking a little shaken. “Reprocessors weren’t made for that, though. That’s why I installed an incinerator.” She gave a disgusted little shiver. “And breeding what now?”

“Well... in Stable 99...” and I explained the whole breeding process as the little Apple Bloom’s mechanical armatures carefully removed a flat, glowing gem plate. It looked like a wafer of pure diamond with a magical glyph in the center. She placed it in the new PipBuck and deftly screwed it into place.

“You what?!” was Applebot’s response to my explanation.

“Well, that’s what we’re supposed to do! I mean, didn’t Stable-Tec set it up that way?” I said defensively.

The robot shook her head slowly, the magical hologram flickering slightly as it turned back to the PipBucks. Then there was a hiss and a click and a mare’s voice sounded from my new PipBuck.

“Hi. This is Scootaloo... and you know what? I’m sick of these recordings. I am just fucking sick of ‘em! I can’t... I don’t... Fuck!” the mare yelled. *“How’d things get so messed up I had to do over a hundred of these?! Damn it... I’m just so sick of it all.”* There was a teary sniff. *“To hell with it...”*

“Okay! Again. This is Scootaloo, VP of Stable-Tec. You’ve got yourself one heck of a stable. We made it as good as we could. You’ve probably noticed you don’t have any orchards or food warehouses, right? Well that’s because the machines in 99 recycle all your waste, purify it, mix it... ugh... you know what? Don’t think about it. Okay, just don’t. It’s gross no matter how you slice it. It just means that you won’t run out of food anytime soon...”

“So long,” she continued sharply, *“as you keep the population stable. You should have enough contraceptives to last at least two centuries. You also need to keep a one offspring per pony policy. Keep things stable, Overmare. There’s other stuff here too, but you know what... I don’t care anymore. I don’t care. Do what you have to do, but keep things stable. Survive... and do better than we did.”*

“Apple Bloom! You two are doing the next ones! Got it? I need a fucking drink. 99... fuck... 99...”

The voice cut off. “Those’re all the instructions given,” Applebot said. “There were some additional plans, but the fact is that by 99 we left it largely up to the ponies to decide what they would do. I mean, the only restriction 101 had was that it was earth ponies only. Who knows what they cooked up?” She gave a soft sigh. “Poor Scootaloo... it wasn’t fair to her, but she was the only one who could record those messages. I got tongue tied, and Sweetie Belle just bawled.”

“But... how’d we go from that... to...” I just stared at the enormity of it. It hadn’t been some

messed up Stable-Tec rule or bylaw. It was us. We'd created the nightmare P-21 and I'd escaped from. I swallowed hard and looked at the hologram-wrapped robot. "Are you really... Apple Bloom?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm just a copy of her," she said as she finished and powered up the new black PipBuck. "Hard to say, really. But there's some truth to saying that you shouldn't use yourself as a test subject. Just ain't healthy," she said as the robot's hands slipped the device around my hoof. "There you go. Complete with a fully functional broadcaster and terminal interface." At my blank look, she rolled her eyes and then explained, "Basically lets you contact terminals through your PipBuck... if you have a signal source recorded."

She then looked down at my PipBuck. "So... EC-1101. It still exists."

I felt a shiver go down my spine. "EC-1101. What the hell is it?"

Applebot smiled sadly up at me. "The keys to the magical kingdom of Equestria, Blackjack."

* * *

Once upon a time, Equestria had been ruled by two Princesses. The older ruled because, quite honestly, she was immortal and magical. There wasn't a civil war or a crisis of succession because the Princesses couldn't die of old age. Celestia had a thousand years of experience, and the kingdom was familiar with her leadership. She wasn't a tyrant. She didn't have to be a tyrant. The status quo was so comfortable and predictable that Equestria simply accepted her rule. Beneath her was a hierarchy of lesser nobles tasked with administrating the smaller day to day local concerns and maintaining the order of things. Equestria had a thousand years of near social stasis.

Of course, the return of Nightmare Moon and Princess Luna disturbed all that. It wasn't big at first, but the presence of two Princesses prompted a change in attitude across the kingdom. There were many reasons for Celestia to continue, but what if other possibilities were considered? New avenues of thought opened up simply because the societal fabric had altered its paradigm. Magic became arcane science. Nobles found their station questioned and challenged. Businesses arose. Trade with outsiders, both of goods and ideas, exploded. Life was new and good.

But then the war came, a war such as Equestria could not have known. And like so many things, ponies were not prepared for its novelty. The violence tore at Equestria, and fear and desperation ripped at its underpinnings. Some stresses pushed science and magic further than ever dreamed. Others tore ponies down. But through it all went the ironclad belief that, whether under Celestia or Luna, a Princess would rule.

Shattered Hoof Ridge changed all that. Only Big Macintosh's sacrifice prevented Equestria from discovering the hard way just how integral the Princesses were to the country's collective psyche. The death of a soldier was tragic, but the idea of losing one of the fundamental parts of the kingdom proved unbearable. It introduced an insidious question: what would Equestria do if the Princesses were killed?

EC-1101.

"Equestrian Command 1101 isn't a computer file," Applebot explained softly as her mechanical hands withdrew into her shoulders. "It's a delayed-trigger megaspell designed to transfer control of the country's crucial systems from the Princesses to another individual in the event of both of the Princesses' deaths. It was supposed to use the terminal network; it would travel from terminal to terminal, node to node, seeking out the next designated target."

"So who were the targets?" I asked, just before the realization hit me. "The Ministry Mares, of course."

“Yes. First Twilight Sparkle, then Applejack, Rainbow Dash, Fluttershy, Rarity, and finally Pinkie Pie. The spell would locate them all and bestow upon them the authority to run the country and give them full control over the countless information, magic, and technological systems that ran Equestria. If it failed to do that, it would seek out the heads of the armed services, the courts, the Office of Interministry Affairs, or the descendants of any of its targets. Unfortunately, it seems, the spell could not make contact with anypony.”

“So how did it end up in Stable 99?”

“Sheer size, unfortunately, and the fact that it wasn’t triggered till the fall of Canterlot, which took far longer to die than the rest of Equestria. Most nodes handle small packets of magical information. EC-1101 was not small. It was a highly complex behemoth of a spell, and unlike normal files, it had only a few networks it could move through swiftly. The balefire bombs shattered those networks. The last jump it made, I suspect, was from the Ministry of Morale’s hub in Manehattan just prior to, or during, the city’s destruction. Then the Stable-Tec link between Stable 99 and the rest of Equestria severed, and the spell remained trapped in Stable 99’s systems.”

“So... why is Sanguine after it now? The Ministry Mares are all dead; everypony’s dead.” Gee, what a rosy thought that was, Blackjack.

“Correct, none of the Ministry Mares had offspring, and the likelihood of locating the descendants of the military or judicial branches is minuscule. The spell might recognize a ghoul, but I’m skeptical. Still, it is a key, and I think somepony with the right skills might be able to use it to force an override of something, maybe turn off a security system or break into a database. The fit would be rough, though, and it would prob’ly work only two or three times before the spell got completely wrecked.”

An idea struck me. “Have you ever heard of something called Project Chimera?”

She looked thoughtful, rolling her eyes as she stared at the ceiling. “There! Found an index.” She nodded once. “Project Chimera. O.I.A. Project sealed by Royal Command.” Her flickering eyes widened. “Holy smokes... sealed by Royal Command?”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means that Luna, personally, put her hoof down and killed that project. A lot of the ponies involved probably went to jail, too.”

“Could EC-1101... well... open it up again?”

My mane crept on my neck as the little robot blinked, thought, and then nodded. “Prob’ly. If a Princess locked it, somepony with a Princess’s access privileges would have to unlock it.”

“How about Project Eternity?”

“Project Eternity. O.I.A. Project sealed by Royal Command.”

“Project Redoubt?”

“Project Redoubt. O.I.A. Project. Sealed by Royal Command.” Then she blinked in shock. “Well now. Looks like Luna was cleaning house at the O.I.A. I wonder why.”

“Me too...” I frowned and rubbed my nose with my hoof. “Are there any other O.I.A. programs that were shut down by Royal Command?”

"I don't... wait... I've got... Project Steelpony... Project Partypooper... Project Starfall. Project Horizons." Applebot paused, then the flickering robopony frowned in consideration. "You want something else that's weird? They were all shut down on the same day, a month before the bombs fell."

I heard the soft rustle of cards as I thought about those names. "O.I.A. Office of Interministry Affairs, right? Who were they?"

"Oh, them. Not much. They acted as liaisons between Stable-Tec and ministries other than the M.W.T.," she said with a dismissive little shrug. "A bunch of overworked ponies who were really busy managing the gaps between the ministries."

"What do you mean by 'the gaps between the ministries'?" I asked with a little frown.

"Because that's what the O.I.A. did. Say there was somepony in the M.A.S. that had an idea they wanted to work out with the M.o.P. The O.I.A. would pass that idea to someone in the M.o.P. They'd set things up for the two ministries to work them out. Make bridges between the ministries and fill the gaps.

"Or say some inventor came up with a new talisman, but both the M.W.T. and the M.A.S. wanted dibs on it. The O.I.A. would work things out so that everypony had access without wasting time fighting and arguing. Some ponies liked to call it 'Spike's Ministry', but I'm not sure if he was involved."

"Hmmm..." I sighed, feeling the nasty thought. "Why would they make monsters, then?"

That seemed to surprise her, and I explained Gorgon's memory orb. "That's... very disturbing. But while I've no doubt the O.I.A. might set up something like that, it was probably originated at the Ministry of Peace. While most were diligent about helping Equestria, and even the enemy, there were some ponies there that were decidedly... creepy."

I sighed, looking at the PipBuck with a little grunt. "Well, damn. As interesting as all this was, I have to admit, now that I know what it is, I still don't know what to do with it." I tapped the screen showing the file name with a hoof. "I mean, it doesn't tell me who Sanguine is working for or how to stop him." I frowned at her. "Would he be able to use EC-1101 to make more monsterponies?"

"If that's what Chimera was for, I suppose," Applebot said thoughtfully.

"So much for just giving the damned thing up. Could I just destroy it?"

That made her pause. "I suppose. Sure. Not even your PipBuck spell matrix will survive something like a balefire blast," Applebot replied, and I felt staggered. That's what it would take? "But are you sure you want to? You don't know what those other projects are or who you might be able to help."

Great. Guilt trip me with that. "I just wish I could find some offspring of Applejack or Pinkie Pie and shove it in their lap." And then what? I started fiddling with the new PipBuck, checking some of its features. Huh. The E.F.S. was blue instead of amber. That was at least twenty percent cooler.

"Yeah. Unless you're some long lost descendant of Twilight Sparkle, it's not much good to you," she said, looking sympathetic. "If you want my advice, EC-1101 was en route somewhere when it got stuck in Stable 99. If you can get it to where it was going, you might fight some answers about what's going on and who's really after it."

"So how do I do that?"

“Oh, that’s easy. Go back to whatever terminal you got EC-1101 from and see which terminal it was going to next. Go to that terminal and repeat the process till the routing is finished.”

“Go back...?” I muttered weakly, my eyes widening. My mane was suddenly feeling very scratchy indeed.

Back to Stable 99.

I had to go back. I wasn’t exactly sure about Applebot’s suggestion of following the routing, but it was all I had at the moment. Above all that, though, was the fact that Stable 99 was a chapter I needed to close. I knew now that what they were doing was wrong, and I had the guns and friends to make sure it stopped for good.

“Well, it’s a plan, at least,” I said, smiling.

“Good. I think that, whatever you do, you should track that--” And then there was a ping and a crackle as the illusion wrapping around Applebot flickered and the small robot slowly keeled over. With a clatter, it sparked and the illusion disappeared. Then automatic fire ripped through the windows of Apple Bloom’s office and I fell onto my side. The robot gave a buzz and the light in its eyes went out.

“Gonna try and take me alive?” I shouted at the tops of my lungs as broken glass settled over me.

A rock flew through the shattered windows and bounced off the top of my head, making me curl up as it landed in front of me. An apple-shaped ‘rock’ with a bright red band around the middle. Reflexively, I threw it back through the window as I dove for cover under Apple Bloom’s desk. The grenade erupted into a sheet of flame that splashed over the desk and the ponies immediately outside. I grabbed Apple Bloom’s terminal and yanked it hard, snapping its cords.

Floating the terminal in front of me, I raced out of the burning office and onto the catwalks. One earth pony was scrambling, trying to extinguish her armor and bring her automatic pistol to bear on me at the same time. Another started taking shots that sparked and pinged off the terminal housing. I looked down and toggled S.A.T.S. with a thought. In that moment of accelerated time, my horn flashed thrice and her head transformed into gray, red, and white pulp. Sweet Goddesses, how I loved S.A.T.S.!

Now I had a gun and a terminal. I lifted the former and heaved the latter at the mare with a similar ten millimeter automatic. She dodged away as I raised the pistol, took aim, and carefully planted a quartet of bullets in her face and throat. There were still a lot more red bars on my cool blue E.F.S., though, as I swept up her gun. I wished I had time to collect bullets.

“Aries! She’s up there!” shouted a colt from the far side of the lab. The catwalk was clear, and I raced for the door. Suddenly, a plume of flame sprayed up through the grate and swept towards me! Burning office behind me and plume of flame to the front, the only way to go was down. I leapt over the catwalk railing. My tail, a little too late to avoid the spray of flame, trailed smoke. I landed, my legs giving a resounding pop as something gave way. I rolled and slid across the grimy floor, ending up underneath a worktable. I heard the ping of a grenade bouncing off the top before rattling further away and then detonating with a fiery ‘whooph’.

Something walked with ominously slow and heavy steps. The rest were moving fast. One slid across the floor with a victorious look in her eyes. Our gazes met, and her jaws worked the trigger. My horn was faster and with a pop ejected the clip.

That didn’t stop the ten millimeter round still in the chamber from thumping meatily into my front leg, but nothing she could do prevented me from filling her with a half dozen rounds from both guns. Struggling to my feet, I snatched up her clip in my teeth and kept my head low as I limped as fast as I

could, hoping that the smoke filling the room would screen my movements.

A wall of flame sprayed across my path, cutting off the stair back to the catwalk. I backpedaled from the heat so quickly that I fell over. I looked at the source of the flame. The Steel Ranger power armor had been spray-painted a brilliant cherry red with a fireball on the flank. A heavy incinerator was mounted on one side of the armor and a grenade launcher protruded from the other. Shit! I was dealing with a flaming Deus!

And worse, I doubted these bullets were going to cut it. I hobbled my way forward as two other ponies ran around to cut me off and finish me. I screamed around the clip in my jaws as I strafed the pair. Then I body slammed into one, collapsing into a tangle of limbs. The other mare was so eager to finish me off that she sprayed bullets into her teammate. I hauled the corpse over my body as a meat shield, hissing in pain as two more holes opened in me. My head started to spin...

'*Be strong*', a little orange pony told me. I ejected the spent clip and slammed the one in my mouth home, narrowing my eyes as I clutched the body over me like a macabre blanket. She had no such cover, and my bullets raked across her until she finally fell. I swallowed, fighting the urge to vomit. I could hear Aries walking closer and saw the remaining two red bars. Still, I needed healing desperately. Digging through their bodies, I found two cloudy gray potions and grimaced. They tasted like sour milk, and they didn't do much for my injuries. The Med-X helped far more, letting me haul myself to my hooves.

"She's getting up. Moving to your left," the colt called out, and I reversed as grenades clattered in that direction, filling the air with more patches of crackling magenta fire. There was a hiss, and from a few feebly-glowing talismans sprayed cones of water. I doubted it would be enough to fight the kind of blaze that Aries was creating, but it washed out some of the smoke and made it easier for me to think. The colt was tracking me somehow. Not with an E.F.S.; I was pretty sure the power armor had something like that. This was something giving him the distance he needed.

I ran--okay, limped horribly with my leg threatening to make me fall flat on my face with one wrong step--in the direction of the door again. As I approached the stairs and the catwalk, I saw the blue unicorn colt with the pitcher cutie mark from Chapel looking down at a strange little device between his hooves. Then he calmly levitated a revolver and started blasting away at me. Falling on my face in the slippery pool of cold water was the only way I could keep from eating some more rounds of lead. I rolled over and pointed the pistol at his face, but he just smirked with certainty and fired again.

Damn it! Sure, he was a colt, but he was shooting at me! Why couldn't I blow him away for that?!

I scrambled through the water as his bullet took off the tip of my ear. The Med-X wasn't enough to fully keep the edge off the pain as I staggered ahead of Aries and out of the blue colt's field of fire. I just needed a healing potion... and to stop bleeding... and for the world to stop spinning.

I limped along in a circuit. Aries had swapped to fragmentation grenades now, lobbing them with infuriating accuracy. My tail was both ragged and scorched now, and my butt was laced with superficial holes from chunks of shrapnel. The second I slowed down even just a little, I was toast! I wondered if they were toying with me for Gemini and Taurus...

Wait... my tail... I took cover behind an overturned workbench and ran my hooves and magic through my singed tail. Then I felt it: a small ball the size of a corn puff and almost as light was clipped to my tail. It had a small blinking light. A tracking device?

Good. I was so glad I wasn't going to have to yell at Ditzzy or Bottlecap.

Still, what good did it do me against that power armor? Eventually, I'd bleed out or burn up, even

if I crushed the thing. What I needed was some way to disable Aries, like with one of P-21's spark grenades. Some way...

I looked at the rows and rows of stable monitors and the cables hanging behind them.

"Left! Forty feet! Now!" the colt yelled as Aries turned and fired another shot with the grenade launcher. To the right, I scrambled on top of the closest workbench and prayed. The grenade exploded, the monitors flickering wildly as the power cables were severed and the wires dropped into the churning water. There was a resounding pop and a smell of ozone. The power armor's weapons drooped as the crackle went on, and then everything went dark.

Slowly, I walked towards the stairs and looked up at the colt. Now his smile wasn't nearly so cocky. "Aries? Aries! She's... she coming!" In my mutant gaze, I could see him clearly as I walked through the darkness towards him and tossed the gun aside.

He gave a desperate giggle and hiccup as he levitated his revolver and pointed it at me. My horn shoved the barrel aside as he fired. He reaimed, and again I shoved the barrel in the other direction. The bullet passed so close beside me I could feel it. I stared him right in the eyes as he pressed the hot tip of the gun to my forehead. "You won't kill me! I'm a kid... I'm just a colt! You won't! Please don't!" As he scrambled back, I saw his strange cutie mark was peeling away; a cutie mark decal. His flank was blank beneath it.

He pulled the trigger, but there was no recoil as my magic gripped the hammer before it could release and fire the round. Now he shook in terror as his levitated weapon jerked ineffectually. "You're right. You are just a colt..." I said low and soft, my grin spreading. "And I'm not an executioner."

Then I grabbed him in my bloody hooves and twisted, sitting atop the stairs and pulling him across my lap as my magic flung the weapon from his startled grasp. He wailed as I pinned his head with one hoof and then spanked his ass as hard as I could, grunting with each smack, "Do! Not! Shoot! The! Nice! Security! Pony!"

Then I shoved him away from me and limped towards the elevator, leaving him sniffing behind me. From the depths of the power armor came a mare's tentative, "Uh... hello?" as I limped into the door.

* * *

I made my way back up to the office I'd awoken in and found my way up to the roof. Ditzzy Doo waited nervously with Silver Bell as each of my friends, who *technically* hadn't come with me to the meeting, each stood watch at a different corner of the building. Well, three were watching. Rampage spat loogies over the edge. As the doors slammed shut behind me, Rampage looked up and noted the new holes in me. Her face split into a grin. "So, run into any trouble?"

My smoldering look gave them their answer. Really, it was my own damn fault. I'd said 'Wait on the roof and keep an eye open for trouble,' not 'Stay ten feet behind me and keep quiet.' The Zodiacs had gotten in some other way, and my friends had been up here the whole time. I flopped onto my side, dug out an orb, and got ready for the flight back.

oooOOOooo

Jetstream. The memories that flowed from the orb weren't the same as I was used to. Somehow, they were concentrated and accelerated, coming in flashes and little insights.

Jetstream meeting Stonewing in summer flight camp. The pair learning to fly together, she with ease and he with difficulty. There is a race between them and some rivals, but a thunderstorm brews. A

gust of wind blows all of them into a mountainside, with the exception of Jetstream. She flies faster than ever before. Stonewing, slowest flyer in all of Equestria, proves himself also the strongest as he carries three pegasi across the finish line on his back. She's gotten her windy cutie mark. He's gotten his granite wings.

The pair, older, seeing the Wonderbolts perform for the Summer Sun Celebration. A cyan pegasus with a rainbow mane talks about wanting to join the team. He can't take his eyes off her. Jetstream can't take her eyes off him.

They're sitting together in his home in a city of clouds, reading about the rescue attempt and the deaths of so many Wonderbolts together. He wonders about the mare. She just sighs and looks away.

They meet behind the weather factories. He tells her he's going to enlist. She tries to talk him out of it. They show up in basic training together. Stonewing lifts Big Macintosh on his back. He gets applause for the first time in his life. She smiles, so happy for him.

They fly in their first battle together. Griffin mercs can't resist the slower flyer, but their rifles can't drop him. She picks them off one by one with lightning passes. After the battle, she receives commendations from their captain, Cupcake. She tries to give credit to Stonewing. He just shakes his head with a smile and limps away to the medic.

Dinner on a boardwalk with the Marauders. Doof challenges Stonewing to a garlic eating contest. They eat bulb after bulb. Doof goes red. Then green. Then he loses. Stonewing eats three more bulbs. Jetstream gives him a victory kiss anyway. They watch the fireworks over the bay, her head resting on his firm shoulder.

Another mission. She's hit and spirals down. Zebra ninja warriors swarm in. Stonewing lands among them like an avalanche. A bayonet catches him in the throat, ripping it open. His wonderful bass voice goes silent forever. He doesn't fall, standing over her till the rest of the Marauders extract them.

A dinner alone on a mountaintop. She's going to do it. She's ready. She's going to tell him. She's going to let him. But there's an explosion in the village below, and he's away, flying to help. She watches, realizing how alone she'd been before flying after him.

The bombing at Prance. She tries to get him alone. She tries to tell him how she feels. He listens. He smiles. He shakes his head and kisses her forehead. He breaks her heart as gently as possible. She's grateful for the bomb.

An argument. She wants to leave. He wants to reenlist. She can't see the reason. He just shakes his head. She's had enough fighting. He's not done yet. She signs the papers to stay another year.

They watch the rocket rise on a pillar of fire. Stonewing grins like an eager colt. She smiles and can't help herself. She rests her head on his shoulder again, hoping he can't feel her tears.

Brimstone's Fall. She sees the sniper. She starts to open her mouth. The bullet strikes him in the neck and he falls like a brick wrapped in a dirty sheet. She flies to save him, to repay him, but the medics load him on to an evacuation wagon with a tag around his hoof.

An argument. Big Macintosh tells her to be strong. Tells her that it's alright. Tells her the war can't last forever. Tells her to remember Stonewing and all they'd done together. She cries out and strikes him. She hits him again and again as the rest of the squad looks on.

She sits alone on a cloud. Vanity teleports to her. She tells him what she needs. He tells her it's

a mistake. She asks once more. He kisses her cheek softly, tells her he understands. Her eyes widen as he touches his horn to her brow and takes the tears away.

oooOOOooo

I awoke on the floor of the wagon, my gut and inner ears telling me that we were still flying. Fortunately, my brain had been through enough that, instead of screaming incoherently, I just lay there and groaned.

“Try to relax, Blackjack. We’re almost back to Chapel,” P-21 said quietly as he stroked my striped mane. “Guess we weren’t much help after all.”

“Eh... it was my plan. Not your fault,” I replied with a groan.

“What’s wrong with her?” the young filly asked as she looked down at me.

“Just... not good with wide open places,” I groaned softly. “Too many memories, too. Pinkie Pie. Stonewing. Jetstream.”

The little filly suddenly looked curious. “A memory of Pinkie Pie? What was it about?”

“Somepony tried to bomb a party she was at.” Talking helped a little. Took my mind off of... falling... hurk!

“Spew...” muttered the disgusted filly. “I’m not cleaning that up!”

“Don’t worry about it, Silver Bell,” Rampage said as she tossed a dirty rag over the puddle. I tried to go back into Jetstream’s rapid-fire memories but it was useless now. My horn refused to make the connection.

Then I looked over at Rampage and saw she’d removed her steel barding once more. Lacunae had to carry it so the cart wouldn’t be overloaded. The striped pony had no problem looking out, but I supposed that was because if she fell she’d... ugh... My eyes drifted further down to her flank, and then I froze.

A cutie mark was a pony’s most innate self, an ultimate expression of who and what we were. That’d been as far as I’d gotten in the lecture before passing out from boredom, but I had the gist of it. Cutie marks mattered.

So what was the meaning of a cutie mark of a teddy bear having its rotting guts torn out by barbs of rusting metal sprouting from candy while the bear itself ripped at a distorted a zebra glyph of a skull while fleshy tendrils pulled and shredded at the normally smooth lines and black lightning struck and shattered wineglasses while in the background swirled a spiral like a whirlpool? Yes, it actually moved. As I watched, the barbs of rust melted into chains while the teddy bear pulled its guts back in and screaming pony faces bubbled to the surface.

Our eyes met, red on pink, and she gave a little smile and shrug. “Ha. Beat that for a cutie mark. Mine moves.”

I didn’t want to beat that. I’d rather die than beat that. “You win,” I replied softly.

I shut up for the rest of the flight. I wasn’t going to say one single word of complaint right now. There were worse things than flying.

* * *

Roses's funeral was something of an aberration. Few ponies actually left bodies to be buried when they came to Chapel. The sentry beams turned all pilgrims into ash. Still, she'd left Thorn behind, and I'd asked Priest if he would allow it. I hadn't expected anypony else to be here. To my surprise, the entire town attended. The Crusaders marched out en masse to support Thorn, and I suspected that for them this was a service for their lost parents as well. The hoofful of adults remained in the back. Lacunae looked right at home in her black lace. After my fight in the Stable-Tec R&D building, I limped as badly as P-21 as we walked out to the field.

Rampage was not in attendance. I could have asked his permission. She might have come.

Of course, this was the moment the clouds started to threaten rain. Well, my cold couldn't get much worse, could it?

Priest stepped next to the sheet wrapping Roses's body, bowing his head respectfully for a moment before speaking in his soft, clear voice. "We all have a journey in our lives. A path to walk, a road to take. Each of us walks that road in our own way and at our own pace. Sometimes alone, if we must; sometimes with others, if we are lucky."

The fillies and colts around Thorn nudged her gently, reminding her that she wasn't alone. She was a Crusader now.

"The road may be dark. It may be hard and painful. And all too frequently, it is cut short by another. We walk these roads as we are able, whether with vigor and excitement or a heavy load. But we all walk.

"Roses's road has come to an end like so many do in the Hoof. It was not a noble road, but while there was the blood of others upon it, there was also virtue. A love for a daughter and a wish to keep her protected and safe. So if some would speak ill of the dead, let them do so when the passed are not present."

I'll bring cake to your funeral. You mean I get one? Sweet. How many lives had I ended that had never gotten this opportunity? Had Air Duct and Vent received one? Where was the funeral for Scoodle? For those forty nameless foals? For Tumbleweed and eleven zebras? Where were the kind words for U-21? For Vanity? For Gorgon? For Deus?

I did not want to die alone and forgotten.

"Your road is at an end, Roses. Rest in the embrace of Celestia and Luna. Let the Goddesses receive you with their peace and mercy." We bowed our heads, and then six unicorns, myself included, reached out our magic as one and lowered her down into the earth. The assembled ponies shuffled by. Medley dropped in a poem or note. Priest set a drawing of Thorn upon the stained linen. Charity laid two bottlecaps beside her. Glory a feather. Me? Two of the little golden flowers.

The young earth ponies then took whatever spades they had and started to fill in the dirt. Harpica lay beside Thorn, holding her close under her dried and desiccated wing with an air of having done this many a times for a foal. Ditzzy Doo's leg held Silver bell closely, the overcooked ghoul nuzzling the jagged scar on the filly's brow. As the dirt piled up, Thorn began to sob, "Momma! Momma!" Then a second later she wailed, "Wampage! Wampage!"

I felt myself start to shake. I was already crying, but I had to hold it together. There was one last part. Glory had suggested it; P-21 had agreed. How could I not?

Slowly, I lifted the contrabass from its case and stood on my hind legs. *You hold it like an earth pony.* I rubbed my cheek on the cool wood and whispered softly, "Please don't let me mess up." Priest's sheet music floated before me. I levitated the bow to my hoof, pinched it behind my fetlock, and dragged it slowly across the strings.

As the contrabass's slow, sad notes rose over the sound of spades, it was joined by a violin. I looked at Charity in amazement, the filly giving me a grudging little nod as music rose from her glowing horn. I still didn't like her, but for this there were more important things than what I liked or disliked. Priest calmly added the notes of a deeper stringed instrument. I don't know what 'Adagio for Strings' meant, but as the music rose and fell, rising and falling, I could only feel my own disgusting and diseased heart trying to lift with it. And it hurt. Oh how it hurt. It didn't matter if I cried; the rain was falling now. Higher. Higher. *Just a little further*, the instrument seemed to say. Higher!

Silence.

I hung my head as we played the last few chords, my heart starting to beat once more in my chest; I didn't know what magic let me get through all that, but when the last note died, we were left with only with the hissing rain, a muddy pile of dirt, and a piece of wood marked simply 'Roses'.

* * *

Most ponies, being smarter than me, know to get out of the rain, and this time I was at least clever enough to follow them. In the post office was a mournful celebration as the Crusaders talked about fallen friends and lost family. There were tears, but there were just as many smiles. This was a funeral for far more than just Roses. It was a funeral for Scoodle, and for everypony who had died yet was remembered. It was for that nameless Dashite, for those infected farmers, for Hoss and Granny Smith and Macintosh and Maripony and all the fallen Marauders.

I limped over to the lace-veiled Lacunae. "So... Goddess..."

"The Goddess isn't here right now," Lacunae replied in a low tone of near... scorn. I was astonished I could hear it over the din. "She could not bear to be here right now. She is ignoring me and distracting herself with inconsequential thoughts of the others."

Looking at the alicorn, I frowned, not sure if I was upset at her or her Goddess. "I thought goddesses were supposed to care."

"They are. They're not supposed to die, either, but they do. Excuse me," she said as she rose and walked into the bathroom. There was a purple flash under the door, and when I peeked in she was gone.

Stepping out, I saw P-21 and Glory standing apart. The pair didn't seem to associate with the Crusaders as well as I did. I looked at Charity, and she looked back at me. The truce would last a little longer. "Lacunae's gone... somewhere."

P-21 frowned at me and shook his head. "I don't trust it. We don't know what it can do!" Glory scowled at him, probably for his choice in pronouns.

"Well... um... you can add disappearing to the list. And wings. And unicorn magic."

"Telepathy," Glory added absently. At my uncomprehending stare she rolled her eyes. "She talks inside our heads, Blackjack. Ever notice how you can hear her no matter how noisy it is?" Um... yes. Yes, but it hadn't occurred to me that that was because her words could skip straight past my ears

and into my brain! But that was definitely good to know. So she could talk in my head. Though that did make me wonder what else she could do...

I drifted through the crowd a bit more, then bumped into Harpica. The dusty ghoul looked at me in worry. "Oh, Blackjack? Have you seen Thorn anywhere? I brought her inside but she's disappeared, and the rain is getting worse. Oh, the Master will be so upset if I lose track of one," she fretted, forgetting that her master was the one who had killed Thorn's mother.

I sighed. "I'll see if I can find her," I said softly, fearing that I'd have to tear her from her mother's muddy grave. Oh please... please don't make me do that. I sighed, my mane itching from all the damp. I needed a bath. A hot bath.

I stepped outside, coughing and spitting up more phlegm. I needed a few days' recovery, and I wasn't getting it. Even with the bullet holes healed, I could only hobble along. Pretty soon, I'd be as bad as P-21.

I slowly scanned the town, but my E.F.S. was bare. She might have been in one of the houses, but I'd have to go into each one. The cool blue colors of the Delta PipBuck seemed to conspire with the rain to make this day as gloomy as possible. I looked towards Roses's grave and felt relieved and saddened that nopony was there. I sighed and coughed again, wanting to go inside. If Thorn was like me, she probably wanted to be alone.

Then a tiny pink pony inside my head smacked my brain hard and pointed out something on the road. A tiny rain soaked rag.

A horn puppet.

No. No no no. Thorn wasn't like me. She still had somepony to go to.

I ran to the puppet and saw the lavender filly running towards the bridge. I forgot about my cold and shivery body and ignored my aching legs as I started to run. I yelled out into the rain for her to stop. Had one of the Crusaders told her about the bridge, that she'd be with her mother on the other side?

There was another pony on the bridge. A pony that caught her in her limbs and held her as I ran to catch up. Rampage, missing her armor, just held her in her hooves as Thorn sobbed horribly into her shoulder. I stopped, lungs burning, legs feeling as if they were about to break. Her cutie mark seemed to still, the rest blending away into the image of the teddy bear. "Shh... shh... it's all right."

"Wampage..." Thorn sobbed as she hugged her close.

"Shh... Shh... It's okay..." she said as she held her. I struggled to tell Thorn to step away. For all three of us to return together. Don't make me shoot her in front of you.

My eyes met Rampage's. I jumped into S.A.T.S., toggling three magic bullets. My useless, exhausted little horn let out an anemic flicker and went dark.

Her teddy bear melted away. "You'll never hurt again."

The rain hissed as a crunchy pop filled the air.

"It's okay," Rampage said softly to the bloody mass, a bony equine skull grinning at me from her flank. "It's okay. You'll never hurt again..."

Footnote: Level Up.

New Perk added: Dealer's Ante -- Every time you kill an opponent in S.A.T.S., the spell immediately regenerates 20% AP.

(Thanks to Kkat for creating FoE, to Hinds and Bronode for making it spectacular, and to all readers who leave feedback. You keep this mattering. You keep this going.)