

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 65: Knowledge

"Hello everypony! Did I miss anything?"

Once upon a time, I'd been a security mare in a diseased stable teetering on the edge of systemic collapse, bloody revolution, or both. My work concerns had been limited to dealing with the occasional incident of indecent exposure, tracking down fillies raiding the supply stores for parties during their sleep shifts, and tracking down males who'd either been misappropriated or needed to be retired. My personal problems were just dealing with an overzealous and a simpleminded coworker, feeling my manifest inadequacies compared to my mother, and trying to talk another mare into coitus.

Today, I was a cybernetic mare, pregnant, in the middle of the deadliest place imaginable, and facing an enemy who had beaten me like a drum. Oh, and a friend that I'd thought was an innocent pony also happened to be one of Equestria's most dangerous enemies from before the war. We faced each other in a repository of zebra relics beneath a swarm of floating souls on our way to destroy a mechanical monstrosity and keep a superweapon from annihilating the world. Times like this really highlighted for me how surreal my life really was at this point.

For a moment, the Legate and... Boo? Discord? I wanted a time out for some notes or something... faced each other in the ruined village. The Legate stared coldly, then launched himself at Boo. She raised a hoof, twitched it, twitched it again, and then stared at it a moment. "Oh snap..."

In a flash, Boo ducked behind me, shoving me towards the cloth-wrapped zebra who'd landed where she'd been standing a second before. "On second thought, this really is your thing, Blackjack! I definitely don't want to intrude on your whole thematic aspect of 'badassness'! Come on! Give him a taste of fisticuffs... or hoofsicuffs... or whatever you pony folk call it!" She hopped on her hind legs, jabbing her forehooves at him.

I gaped at her, stunned. "What are you doing in Boo, Discord?" I snapped. "Get out of my friend!"

"Hello! Fight going on here. Priorities," Boo said as she kept me between herself and the Legate. I turned and regarded him, frowning. He could have punted me out of the way if he'd really wanted to, though I had moved up a weight class since we'd last faced off.

"You've interfered for the last time," the Legate growled. Something about his voice was so... familiar. I'd heard it before. Maybe it was the skull he wore distorting things, but there was something definitely familiar.

"Really? The last time?" Boo taunted from behind me, weaving back and forth to peek at the zebra from around my flanks. "I may not be as spry as I used to be – two centuries with a starmetal tomb slowly sucking the life from you can do that to a being of chaos such as myself – but I think I have just a *pinch* more interference in me. Some meddling, too. Maybe even a whole shenanigan!"

"Enough," he bellowed, leaping at him... her... ugh, Discord was in a *mare's* body... but male... Whatever! At *her* over my back. I snapped my wings up, but he simply pushed off them with still more agility than I'd imagined he had. I reached out with a hoof, popping my fingers and grabbing at the end of his hindleg. As before, he yanked the limb out of reach and landed with an agile spin. Rampage, her helmet now battered into shape enough to let her peer out of one eyehole, charged him. He pivoted in a circle, sidestepping her and letting her plough into the stone wall behind him with a colossal crash,

bringing it down in a plume of dust.

"Olé!" Boo cheered, and I glared back at her. "Ah. Yes. Wrong side and all that. Boooo! Hisssss!"

If I was going to get any answers, I had to deal with the Legate first. He'd come out of his spin charging at Boo and me again. Twice he whirled, and four times his forehooves smashed into my head. The impacts clanked loudly, but it wasn't nearly as dizzying as the first time we fought. I fired a trio of magic bullets that sent him dodging away. Of course, none of them hit, but at least I was giving a better show than before. "Why do you protect him? He's Discord, the greatest enemy in Equestrian history!"

"What? You mean that whole Chaos Capital thing? That was ages ago, old boy. Really, I think I've served my time," Boo said indignantly.

"What have you done with Boo?" I demanded, jumping to the side to block the Legate as he attempted to dart around me again. He attempted another jump over me instead, and, as before, my wings snapped up again to block him. Really, I was fairly certain that he could have done much more damage to me if he really wanted to. Why was he taking it easy on me?

"You've been deceived, obviously. That creature was never your friend. It simply used you for protection," the Legate snapped. He tried to dive under me and heave me out of the way, but I'd put on a few hundred pounds since we last danced. He still managed to raise me onto my hindlegs, but I forced him back down with powerful upstrokes, trying to pin him. As slick as greased lightning, he pulled back, grabbed one of my forelegs, and, as I plunged off balance to the side, used it to swing me away from Boo and himself towards her. As I crashed to the floor, he twisted in the air and wrapped his forehooves around her neck, one of his hindlegs kicking thrice hard into my side. The rapid-fire blows knocked me back, but I snapped out a hand and grabbed his tail, yanking him off Boo before he could break her neck. "End him!" the Legate snarled, glaring at me from over his shoulder.

"I don't think so," I said, pulling him away from Boo. "I don't know what's going on, but I'm not going to let you kill her!" ...Actually, that was pretty much the story of my life, come to think of it.

"Thank you, Blackjack. Truly you are a wonderful paragon of friendship and kindness. Far more of one than your ancestor," Boo said, her words dripping with unctuous, sarcastic sincerity.

I pointed a hoof at her. "Shut it. I want you out of Boo, now. How did you even get inside her?"

"Well, when two ponies love each other very much..." she began. I must have somehow managed a shooty look without eyes, because she immediately coughed. "Mmm... yes, perhaps I should save that for later." She huffed and rolled her red eyes. "Well, if you recall, when we last parted, I'd gotten out of that tomb with only a tiiiiny remnant of my colossal power. And most of *that* was used keeping that robot busy so you and your friends could escape. So when I took a peek in here—" Boo tapped a hoof to her head, making a noise like an empty oil drum. "I couldn't help but notice how roomy it was! How homely! After all, it *was* built from my blood. My *stolen* blood, I remind you," he explained, his voice taking on an increasingly dark and dangerous tone before he fizzed back to enthusiasm. "Where better to lay low and stay out of trouble but in here?"

Could she be a little less verbose? I wrestled with the zebra, who despite my weight, was still putting up a hell of a struggle. Stay out of trouble? I doubted that. "And why is he trying to kill you?" I asked, pointing a hoof at the Legate.

"Well, I suspect it's because I have this nasty itty bitty little habit of..." Boo began, tapping her hooves together sheepishly.

"Being an insufferable, conniving, degenerate wretch!" roared the zebra. The Legate made his

move, and he stopped being gentle. When he lunged at Boo in the same old way, I moved to block him as before. Instead of being pushed back the same old way, however, he grabbed me and lifted me right off my hooves; I powered up my wings, but they only made him strain a bit more. With Rampage-like strength, he arched his back and slammed me upside down into the base of the wall behind him. I hit the deck and nearly bounced, the wall cascading down upon me, as he straightened and lunged at Boo once again. The blank turned and began to run down the boulevard between the broken walls.

I lay curled up beneath the rocks, fighting both panic and anger. I heaved once, then twice, and then a pair of hoofclaws flipped the largest block off me. "He is not Achu, but he is very good," Rampage said in Shujaa's accent.

"I've got to save Boo," I said as I hauled myself to my hooves. I channeled Blackjack of Stable 99 as hard as I could and doggedly ignored all concerns for my baby or anything else. I'd be paralyzed beyond all use if I stopped to think about it for even a second.

Don't think about it...

"And Coyotl as well, for the time being," Rampage said as she scowled down the street. "If he wishes to kill him, it must be for a reason."

I froze and stared at her. "What did you say?"

"Coyotl?" Rampage asked in confusion. I nodded tersely and she continued, "It is my people's name for the one you call Discord. Coyote. The Trickster." She blinked at me, her eyes narrowing skeptically. "Did you believe ponies were the only ones that suffered his cruel games?"

Discord... Coyotl... Flux... Boo... "Brood of *Coyotl*... they're blanks! Just like Boo! Made with Flux from Project Chimera," I said, my mind running a mile a minute. "But how could he control them? Blanks didn't have any minds or souls to guide them. On their own, they'd be instinctive. You couldn't control them like robots..." I froze again, staring at my own legs. "Or cyberponies..." If you took Project Steelpony and Project Chimera, you could have a mass-produced army of utterly loyal automatons. And there had been a zony in charge of that project...

"I need to find Discord. You have to keep the Legate off us long enough for me to talk to him, and then we need get out of here and deal with Cognitum. Can you do that, Shujaa?" I asked, hoping she could stay in charge long enough for us to get clear. If Rampage asserted herself, she might not remember.

"It would be my pleasure," she replied. "He claims to be Achu. I will show him a true Achu."

From the left came a colossal crash, and I gave the striped mare a nod. She returned it, and together we raced towards the red bar on my E.F.S.

Boo was running full out, with the Legate racing after her with murder in his eyes. If Discord hadn't been some avatar of mischief, I had no doubt that Boo would have been a thin red smear by now. The skull-helmed zebra moved like a cyclone after the mare, but she endlessly retreated with uncanny dodges and weaves. However, while Discord might have been a magical being, Boo's body was flesh and blood; from the sweat pouring off her hide, I wondered how long it could go before it gave out, or just slowed down too much.

Not that she wasn't getting some licks in. As we raced towards them, he struck out with a double hooved stomp that would have crushed Boo if he'd landed it. Instead, after rolling aside, it found the end of a flat tipped shovel. The handle flashed up, smashing the stout wooden handle across the Legate's skull helmet. He whirled, kicking out at Boo with his back legs. Again, she dodged aside. His hooves

smashed into the wall behind her, and the wobbly stones at the top fell and thudded down on him.

I'd anticipated a concussion, some broken bones... a little bruising, at least! The Legate, however, shrugged the stones off, whirled, and kicked out at them with his hind legs. A little orange pony in my head couldn't fault his technique as the rocks were sent rocketing right into Boo! The operative barding absorbed some of the force, but she was still sent sprawling to the floor. "Now, to silence you for all time!" he declared, and he pounced with a flying kick at Boo's head.

And impacted with six hundred pounds of cyberpony as I swooped from above and slammed into him, knocking him completely off target and giving Boo a chance to scramble out of the fray. "Next time, don't talk," I chided, shoving him away. He rolled across the ground, pushed himself upright with one shove of a hoof, and got his legs under him. He came to a stop, facing me.

Either taking my advice to heart or simply pissed off beyond words, he charged me without a word. I set myself for the attack, ready to grab whatever limb I could and break it. He was pulling his— With a speed and force I barely registered, he struck me right where my heart should have been. The blow was so sharp that, for an instant, it felt as though I'd been impaled. A small part of me noted how sad it was that I knew that sensation. I staggered back, feeling a throbbing pain in my head, as though all the blood I had left had been squeezed into my skull. He pointed a hoof at me. "You are needed intact, not *untouched*, Blackjack." Okay, just really pissed.

Rampage, or Shujaa at least, demonstrated the value of silence as she leapt upon his back. I heard the snap of bone and saw the eyes in the skull widen in pain as he crumpled under her strike. *Please be out of the fight*, I mentally begged as I struggled for breath. That one blow had done something to my support systems. I fought for air and grimaced against the pain in my skull. The Legate, though, gave a heave and tossed her off his back. I saw blood on the jaws of the skull he wore; he was injured, but he wasn't down yet.

Shujaa backflipped, landed, crouched, and launched herself at the Legate once more. The injured zebra, however, had hardly slowed as he evaded her powerful strikes. Over and over again, he deflected attacks strong enough to shatter stone, a quality demonstrated by the holes her blows blasted out of the floor and ruined walls. I trotted over to Boo, my systems slowly returning to normal as my repair and healing talismans restored me. "Don't worry. Shujaa will beat him." Then I could talk about him freeing my friend.

Boo... Discord... Boocord? She frowned at the battle. "While your faith is admirable, I'm afraid that your friend is about to lose."

She was right; the Legate had returned to his rapid fluidity. Shujaa showed ever-increasing frustration and pain. The Legate was striking her body with those sharp, lightning-quick jabs that seemed to create ever more pain. Shujaa had said he wasn't Achu, and watching them fight, I could see the difference. Shujaa's blows were all power. One of them could kill a pony; I questioned how long even I could last against the force she wielded. The Legate had speed and power too, but his blows seemed to cause her far more pain than simple impact warranted.

Suddenly they stopped, Rampage's face frozen in a mask of agony. "How..." she gasped.

The Legate stood smugly. "A simple disruption of your body's biorhythms and connection to your soul. The imbalances build and resonate until—" He reached out and poked the stricken mare's chest. Suddenly her whole body spasmed and seemed to compress all at once. Her mouth opened in a silent scream, and blood erupted from her maw. She finally slumped but didn't quite fall, looking as if a massive hand had squeezed her. "That." He turned towards Boo and me. "I learned the weaknesses and gaps in the Achu fighting style long ago," he said smugly as he approached us.

Then two blood-smeared, red-striped hooves appeared around his neck from behind as Rampage sprang on his back. "How about some good old fashioned Equestrian Commando fighting techniques, then?!" she hissed, bloody froth pouring from her mouth as her hindlegs gripped his back. Her hooves twisted his neck around, and only the lubrication of the blood smearing them kept her from popping his head completely around. Nevertheless, she did manage to get him to turn in pain, then finally flop onto his side. I started to approach to finish him off, but a spasm of pain lanced through me. Ugh, what had that hoofstrike *done* to me? I was a cyberpony; I shouldn't have had enough 'bio' to my rhythm for him to disrupt!

"Get off of me!" he roared. "You should be dead! Why aren't you dead, you red-striped freak?!" He rammed the skull helmet back, one of its horns gouging her eye socket. She cried out, but held on, though her grip slipped somewhat. He struck her temple with one hoof strike, and she hissed in pain but didn't let go.

Instead, her hooves swapped and grabbed the leg in a hooflock that was familiar to me. "You have the right to shut the fuck up or die, you sick son of a mule!" Rampage replied, levering the limb till it let out a resounding pop. Freaky zebra powers or not, a dislocated limb would slow him down some, right? Right?

It didn't. I watched in horror as the bulging, twisted limb forced itself back into place. "You think... you dare... to believe... you can defeat me?!" he roared as he inexplicably started to pull his leg around. "I have been patient too long to let myself be beaten by the likes of either of you!"

"Blackjack! Headshot!" Rampage cried out as he pulled his leg free and tried to heave her off. She sank her hoofclaws into his side, digging deep furrows as she struggled to remain on top. "Oh no you don't, you motherfucking Pink!" she swore, biting his mane and struggling to keep on top of him. Her barbed tail lashed between his hindlegs, but though his eyes bulged in fury, he did not try to break away. Instead he reared, standing upright, and smashed his back into the wall behind him over and over again. "Hah!," came Rampage's muffled and slightly slurred voice. "I faced worse than that in lockdown!"

"Can you magic that skull off him, B... D... Biscord?" I asked the white mare, desperately, as I assembled Penance.

"Blackjack, I'm using every last bit of power I have left keeping him from popping her like a zit," Boo replied, waving her hooves. "Things would be so much easier if I just had my normal fingers to snap! These hooves are impossible!"

"Fingers are nice," I replied as I popped in the bypass round. The Legate roared as he hammered against Rampage.

"I'm sensing a lot of aggravation from you. Perhaps you can calm down and tell me about your mother?" Rampage grunted into his ear. He heaved forward suddenly, tossing Rampage over him. In a flash, his hooves lashed out, beating at her in a furious flurry of blows. She'd heal. She'd always heal. But if she was knocked out... I took aim with the gun. I had to get this just perfect. I only had one shot.

I wasn't sure who was in charge now. Every second Rampage swapped from the thundering Achu blows to the sharp commando throat and joint strikes to the boxing body blows. The random mix kept the Legate's back to the wall, but he didn't stop moving his head long enough for a clear shot. "Rampage! Give him a noogie!"

Rampage abandoned her defense and wrapped her forelegs around his neck. His forehooves closed like a nutcracker, and I heard her spine crack like a bullet shot, legs dangling limply. But she had his neck...

Penance rang out once. The bullet moved faster than any of us could possibly see, but instantly, the Legate's head exploded out the eye sockets and mouth. His corpse dropped Rampage, then collapsed on his side. I rushed to her.

"I really wish I could die now. More than usual," Rampage rasped, then clenched her teeth in pain. "This really hurts."

I broke down Penance and stowed it, then helped her on to my back. "Well, don't worry. He's done." Not even I could survive having my head blown off.

"Guess again, my dear," Boo quipped tiredly. I followed her gaze to the Legate's twitching body... moving body.

"Oh come on!" I shouted, running over and stomping the corpse over and over again. "Die already!"

"If only you said such sweet things to me," Rampage groaned, her rear legs twitching.

"Don't you start!" I warned her, then resumed stomping. The head was starting to regrow, a pink mist slowly spreading up and forming into tissue. Just like... "Rampage, he's got a phoenix talisman too."

"That's impossible," she muttered weakly. "It was a prototype."

"With all we've run into here, that word no longer has any meaning," I snapped. The only mostly-dead zebra's hooves were starting to block my blows, inaccurately, of course, but eventually he'd have a head back. At that point... "We've got to run. Now."

I trotted over to a wall and slammed it with all my weight, knocking it over atop him. "That will slow him down," I said, hoping I was right. A zebra phoenix talisman... the zebras had stolen Project Chimera and Project Steelpony. Why not Eternity, too? With Rampage on my back, I trotted to Boo. "Now, you helped us out at Hippocratic Research, so I'm asking this nicely. Please leave my friend."

"Your adorable little Boo is perfectly fine. And," she said with a gesture at the heap of rocks, "not to put too fine a point on it, but perhaps we should be moving along? One thrilling chase was quite enough for me for the moment."

"Right." Rampage slipped off me and grimaced as she pranced on her hooves. "Oooh! Pins and needles!" We started walking quickly towards the exit. "We need to get out of here and get to Robronco and end this."

"Au contraire," Boo contradicted. "We need to go down."

"Down? No we don't," Rampage said flatly. "There is absolutely nothing good about that direction in Hoofington. Ask Blackjack. Down is where bad things are."

I agreed, but I regarded my pale friend with her new eyes. "Why do you say down?"

"Why, it's the last thing your enemies will expect. Cognitum knows you're coming. I suspect she wants to meet you on her terms rather than yours. Plus, it's Tuesday, and everyone knows Tuesdays are ideal for spelunking." She waved a hoof in the air, scowled at it a moment, and then tapped it against the floor. "Ugh, why won't this thing work? It's infuriating to go from 'embodiment of pure chaos' to 'lucky sidekick'."

Rampage stared at me as we walked. "You're thinking about it, aren't you?" she asked wearily,

clearly concerned.

I didn't want to admit that I was. All my experiences with going underground tended to end badly. "Discord makes a good point. They'll be expecting us to come from the surface. Echo thinks Cognitum is in an underground lab. The element of surprise might be the only advantage we have."

"No, Blackjack. Just... no. You remember that thing in the elevator? There are things like that down there. Things worse than that. Just go to Robronco." She hesitated. "Think about your kid. Just, don't go down there!"

I paused and stared at her for a moment. I didn't want to ask. Didn't want to go there with one of my friends. "What did you talk to Steel Rain about?"

A moment of bafflement on her face. "Steel? How..." she began, the confusion growing. "Why... I mean..." We slowed down and she faced me. "He... he wanted me to give you a message. Cognitum can fix you."

"There's nothing wrong with my repair talisman," I replied dryly.

"I mean new body," Rampage replied. "New new. Brand new. No augmentations or anything. Take it, leave EC-1101, and go home. She's determined to fix up the Core." She tapped my chest. "Dawn was the one that wanted you dead. Cognitum is prepared to wipe the slate clean and let bygones be bygones." She gave a weak smile. "Just imagine it, Blackjack. No more shit in your life. The Harbingers will leave you alone. You can go to Star House with Glory and turn my old bedroom into a nursery, and boink each other's brains out all day. Be head of Security for Chapel or Stable 99, or wherever. All this shit could be over. Just... over."

"Oh yes, and I'm sure Cognitum Pinkie Promised that she'd keep her word," Discord said snidely. "The insane are immensely reliable. Believe me, I should know."

I didn't look away from Rampage. "There was something else, wasn't there?"

Rampage didn't answer me for a second. "Well, there were promises of Dawn's head on a platter, an IF-88 Ironpony, and bars of gold... whatever you could desire. I figured all that was secondary to a new body." She kept her eyes down. "You know... stuff..." she finished, almost muttering.

I didn't reply for a moment. "She said she'd kill you, didn't she?" Rampage didn't answer. "Didn't she?" I pressed, and when she still remained silent, I turned away with a hiss. "Where's the basement?" I asked Boo. She pointed at the door marked 'stairs' next to me.

"Blackjack," Rampage started to say, and I turned and stared at her. Her head hung down as she stared at her hooves. "I'm sorry. I just... don't want to see you get hurt."

I couldn't trust her now; ending her life was the most precious thing to her. "Well, thank you for your intentions." I turned my back on her. "Goodbye," I said softly. I wished I hadn't asked. Wished that I was still that clueless mare back in a stable worried about getting laid. Ever since I'd gotten EC-1101, I'd been learning things. Learning my Overmare was selling us out. Learning about the dark side of Equestria's government. All my learning had gotten me was misery. Right now... I wished that I could have been just as ignorant now of my friend as I had been about everything else so many weeks ago.

It would have hurt so much less...

* * *

The stairs led to a basement, just as preserved as the rest of the building. I wondered if all the souls had somehow preserved it as an ad hoc soul jar. The generators still hummed, even after two

centuries. I hoped, after seeing what had happened to the other hubs, that this building would somehow survive. Some spell, some defense, or some magic of the souls protecting it from falling into that pit. At the bottom of the basement was a hatch. 'Access door: Hoofington utilities tunnel. Alarm will sound if door is opened.'

The exit was one-way, but at this point, I only had one way to go. I was now trusting to the luck of one of Equestria's greatest villains. I pressed the bar hard, and the door swung wide into the access tunnel beyond. If there was an alarm still functioning, I wasn't hearing it. The tunnel ran off out of sight to either side. Walls, ceiling, and floor were covered in tubes of conduit, some of which had broken open and spilled wires across the ground. A grate covered larger plastic water pipes. A green light from one direction cast a pallid glow. We went the other way.

We walked along in silence, Boo leading the way, occasionally glancing back at me. "Well?"

"Well what?" I replied.

"Don't you want to question me about something?" Discord asked, her voice teasing and high, obnoxiously probing for a reaction I was in no mood to give.

"Not particularly," I said, my voice quiet, flat, and lifeless. Okay, that wasn't really true, but I was pissed. I could understand what Rampage had done. What she'd wanted to do. Soon as I calmed down, I'd forgive her. But right now, I was going into a bad place, and I needed my anger. "I'm not in a mood for taunting and teasing."

"Well, you certainly can pick the perfect travelling company." She chuckled and hopped into my path, walking backwards. "You're travelling with one of Equestria's oldest nemeses, and you don't have any questions?" Discord said with a sickly grin.

"I don't care," I said. "My friend sold me out to my enemy." If she'd told me... maybe I could have excused it then. Given her another chance. "Just go away and bring back Boo."

She blinked. "Imma here Bwackjack," she said, her eyes suddenly pale, before giving me a nuzzle. "Imma sowwie I didn't tell. He say it was a secret." Her ears flopped in worry.

"That's okay, Boo. You didn't know better," I said, and gave her a hug. She blinked hard, and Discord's eyes appeared; I quickly stepped back. I sighed, gazing down the tunnel. "Fine. Why?"

Discord blinked in confusion, his smile fading. "Why... what? Why is the sky blue? Why should one make it rain Wild Pegasus? Why do coconuts taste like rutabagas but no one really notices?" She smirked at me. "Would you like to know a Wild Pegasus rain spell?"

"No," I replied flatly.

"My!" she said in surprise. "That doesn't sound like the Blackjack I know. Where's the fire? The winging your way home on a flock of alicorns?"

"I matured," I replied. "I had to sooner or later." When had I gotten so serious? In Thunderhead? Maripony? When Dawn betrayed me? Where was that mare who'd laughed as she sang through a ghoulish infested mansion, or who'd laughed as she rode a ship through rapids, or soared on an airship through the clouds? Discord looked at me with an expression of pity. I wondered what he'd be like without the experience of two hundred years of isolation and torment. Finally, I asked, almost at random, "Why did the world go to shit? What went wrong?"

His smile disappeared. I was glad for that, grouchy pony that I was. "Ah, yes. Why indeed? It's something I never understood either." He stared down the hall, then glanced back at me. "You know, I

was never supposed to stay a villain. My role was very clear. Open antagonist to challenge Twilight Sparkle's presuppositions of friendship and make her face having her friends turn on her at the outset, and then I was supposed to grow into a grudging ally of sorts. I had the scripts, and I was quite looking forward to my time with Fluttershy. Rehabilitation. Yay," Discord said sarcastically, pressing her hooves together and fluttering her eyes, then slumping. "Only it never happened. I stayed a statue, and things went... wrong." I arched a brow at her, and she rolled her eyes. "Oh, don't give me that. I'm a spirit of chaos. I'm a connoisseur of wrongness. A bit of mischief... a bit of peril... hardly anything *serious*. But ponies slaying? Ponies warring? Ponies committing global thaumaturgical balefire war with zebras? Oh, it was chaos, alright, enough to give me quite a nice bit of power, but that doesn't mean that I *wanted* it to. I mean, even besides what happened to me, there was so much waste of potential and material for amusement; as I said back in Hippocratic, there are few things more boring than a corpse, and that goes double for the corpse of a world. Besides, it's not like any of that was supposed to happen, anyway..."

I bl— wished I could blink at her. "What do you mean *supposed* to happen?" I pressed. Behind the conduit, green light shone through a breach in the wall. I hugged the opposite side of the tunnel as we passed. Through the gap, I could see an immense crevasse shining wetly, beams and blocks of concrete poking out amidst outcroppings of the jagged gray rock. Things seemed to be moving on the far side, skittering, oozing, crawling things. I spun around, looking back the way we'd come, expecting something foul to be stalking up on us. Nothing.

Discord seemed oddly subdued as well, keeping her voice low. "It's not something I can easily explain, and I'm rapping against the fourth wall hard enough as is," she said with a roll of her eyes. "Suffice it to say that Twilight was never supposed to become a Ministry Mare. She was supposed to become an alicorn... and not a goopy super mutant Goddess sort of alicorn, either, but a real pony Princess." She rolled her eyes again, snorting.

"A Princess. Like an actual Princess Luna Princess?" I asked in shock.

"Ugh, I'd forgotten how gushy you ponies can get when it comes to your winged unicorns." Discord made a gagging noise. "Yes, a Princess the same as Moonbutt and Sunnyflanks. Ironic, considering how she poured herself into creating her alicorn potion. But somewhere along the way, something went wrong. It never happened. And bit by bit, the Equestria that was supposed to happen... didn't. Some lesson... some letter... some something happened, and Celestia never sent me to Fluttershy for rehabilitation. Never trusted Twilight with Starswirl's greatest spell. Never did a lot of things. Regardless, everything went from how it was supposed to be to where we are now."

"But why? What went wrong?" I asked as we started walking along the halls. I kept my voice down. It felt like we were being watched. Cracks in the walls let through beams of greenish light; more concerning were the things breaking those beams ever so briefly. I could hear the softest of tapping on the far side of the stone.

"Who knows? Maybe Twilight said the wrong thing in one of her letters. Perhaps Princess Grumpy pants woke up on the wrong side of the bed. Maybe they didn't sing one of their annoyingly cute pony songs on key. Whatever it was, instead of Twilight becoming an alicorn, she remained an ordinary mare. Instead of Equestria being a folksy land with a few cities and lovely pastoral countryside, there was a consumer culture with a rampant hunger for coal. Instead of love and tolerance, you had hate and suspicion." Discord suddenly whirled, tensing, eyes turning this way and that. Then the tunnel shook. Not a major quake, but somehow much more disconcerting. "Of course, I was stuck as a statue. There wasn't much I could do about it, regardless."

"So something made them into the ponies that became the ministry mares?" I asked quietly, gorging myself on refreshingly direct exposition. If only I'd met Discord right after getting out of the stable,

I could have spared myself quite a bit of heartache. "Some sort of mind control spell?"

"Now wouldn't *that* have been interesting?" she said with a grin, tapping her chin wistfully before slumping again. "But sadly... no. No, I think, deep down, the potential was always there in Twilight and her friends. A little bit too much control from Twilight. A smidge too much trust in her family for Applejack. A teensy bit too much desperation from Pinkie Pie. All they needed were the right conditions to fester in," Discord said with a smirk. "No one is ever quite as good as they think they are. Except me, of course, but then, I am the exception that makes the rule." She touched her chest with a hoof in a sham of modesty. "There might have been a few players pushing pieces around the board from behind the scenes, but that's always happening, no matter what world you're in. Even Princess Sunnybuns could be wonderfully manipulative at times."

I sighed, listening to the hiss in the pipes, the gurgle flowing underhoof, and the momentary buzzing crackle of sparks. The tapping behind the wall had stopped. Had it moved on, or was it lurking right outside the pipe? "So... if there's a way the world is supposed to be... what, am I supposed to go back in time and fix it?" Was that even possible? The thought began to make my head spin.

Discord laughed, her voice high and echoing. She realized her mistake and covered her mouth with a hoof, eyes snapping left and right before focusing on me again. "Time travel? Please. Entertaining as that may be, when has that ever worked? Besides, I'm sure somewhere there's a world with a bossy purple alicorn Princess up to no good." She sighed and patted my shoulder. "No. I'm afraid you're simply going to have to pony up and face incalculable odds for the survival of the world and the pony race. That's all." She wilted a little at my grimace. "Ah, no pressure?"

"Thanks," I replied flatly, then sighed. "So, what do you know about Horizons? Wait. Let me guess. You can't tell me?" I braced myself for disappointment and frustration.

"Well, one occupational hazard of omniscience is knowing when *not* to say things," she answered, a touch defensive. I slumped, wondering if Rainbow Dash felt the same way with Pinkie Pie's predictions. Why did I even bother asking? "All I can say is that Goldenblood requisitioned a lot of my blood for it. Oodles and oodles." She smiled and wiggled a hoof at me. "I'm sure you've noticed all the really interesting things you can make out of applied chaos. Perhaps Goldie wanted an army of blanks?"

"Not his style," I replied immediately. Still... an army of blanks. That niggled at me as we passed by a small hole in the wall, the sound of breathing on the far side. Or maybe it was just the draft in these deep spaces. "But what about the Brood? Are they really all blanks like Boo?"

He grimaced. "Oh yes indeed. That I can comment on without too many spoilers. I'm sure you've noticed they're all a touch unusual."

"Identical, you mean?" I said with a frown. "I noticed."

"Yes. An utterly insulting application of my chaos," she said with a scowl. "Boo is unique. Precious. An individual. Why, she's growing her own soul and everything. And she's as immortal as I am. Plus she sees things as they really are, which is probably why she loves you no matter how scary you become," he said, regarding herself in a puddle on the floor for a moment before going on, "But the Brood... mindless, soulless, immortal automations of magical flesh and steel. I look forward to seeing you take them all apart."

"Boo's immortal?" I asked, hoping I didn't sound too surprised.

"As immortal as me. Maybe someday she'll become the next avatar of chaos. That is, unless you take the role yourself. You've demonstrated yourself to be an *exceptional* agent of chaos, Blackjack," she said with a broad smile, getting another frown from me. She hurried on, "After all, while I may be

immortal, eternal is quite another question. Nothing good lasts forever. You might notice I've been quite reduced of late?" She gave a smirk. "Still, while I'm down, I'm not out *quite* yet."

"So why does he want to kill you? Can you... I don't know... control the Brood of Coyotl, since they're made of Flux too?" I asked, imagining the entire army turning on the Legate. That would be interesting... of course, whatever Discord did next with them would be even more interesting.

"Now THERE'S an idea!" She beamed. "Emperor Boo! Ruling the Wasteland with my army of..." Her face twisted up, and Boo's pale eyes returned as she scowled. "Stopit Discowd! Imma not gonna be bad! Imma gonna be like Bwackjack!" She grinned at me, and I smiled back at her. Celestia save me, I was a role model. A few blinks later, Discord's eyes reappeared, and she pouted. "Ugh. Fine. I'd forgotten how saccharine you ponies can be. Anyway, to answer your question, I don't know. The last time we were around those Brood, they didn't seem to recognize me."

"Do you think the Legate knew you were outside Grimhoof?" I asked.

"I'm rather sure of it. In fact, I'm rather certain that I'm the reason he was there in the first place. He and I operate on a similar frequency," he said. "We've been going around and around for ages."

"Ages?" I asked with a frown. If he had a talisman like Rampage's, I could believe it. He'd been regenerating his head when I'd last seen him.

"Oh yes," she said with a blissful smile. "He's worn his own share of identities over the centuries. He was almost as good as Celestia for a laugh. She was prettier, of course, and had a slightly better sense of humor, but he's been around nearly as long. Manipulating. Hiding. Organizing. And I've been around too, interfering, annoying, and disorganizing. It's all great fun."

"Except when you got yourself turned to stone for tormenting ponies too much."

"I'm hurt, Blackjack!" she said with a simpering pout. "Didn't I say I was *forced* to be a villain? Cast in such a role by powers beyond your comprehension?" She sat and pushed a hoof to her brow, then smiled and rolled her eyes. "I'll admit that I may have caused a teeny, tiny bit of anguish to various people across the world from time to time, but it was for their own good. I'm not an agent of evil, Blackjack. I'm an agent of chaos!" She frowned in annoyance. "You really haven't figured out what that means yet?"

"This is the first time I've been able to talk with you when something wasn't trying to kill me," I answered. "And chaos has been pretty evil in my experience."

"Well, you've been experiencing quite the wrong sort of chaos, then!" She gave an insulted snort. "If I were evil, I would have snapped my claws and made Twilight's head explode. It was certainly within my power, but utterly outside my nature." She smiled. "Chaos is change. It's a break from the status quo. Chaos is invention. It's art! It's uncertainty. It's a gamble. It's in a butterfly's wing, the motions of an electron, and the chemical reactions in your brain. Without chaos, life becomes a set of comfortable routines from birth to death, never changing. I manipulated and tormented ponykind... and zebrakind... and griffinkind... and plenty of others... to shake them out of conformity."

"Well, the war certainly did spur innovation, but I wouldn't call it good. And as for the chaos of the Wasteland..."

"Yes..." she said with a frown. "I'll admit, when the war started, I was quite happy. Sure, things weren't going to plan, but with all the little-d discord the ponies and zebras were making, soon they'd have had big-d Discord back to set things right! Even after Sunnyflanks buried me. Only, like you said, the war was spurring innovation... and towards bad ends. Before I knew it, sweet little Luna was having me ground up to fuel her war machine, and a decidedly non-winged Twilight, her friends, and an old geology

teacher were doing their best to help Moonbutt turn Equestria into the most ordered catastrophe this planet's ever seen. I would have been quite impressed if it weren't so perverse."

That was putting it mildly. I wondered if he knew, specifically, what Luna had done. Before I could ask, he was continuing in a nattering rush.

"Anyway, the war was growing more and more brutal and less and less funny! War is the worst kind of chaos to begin with, regardless! War, the real, brutal, no-holds-barred sort of war that they were fighting, only results in death. Death only results in decomposition. I, at worst, made ponies miserable. Misery may not be good, but at least you're alive at the end of the day." She closed his eyes. "When the bombs fell, I felt the silence from one side of the world to the other. I wept, Blackjack. I know you probably don't believe me, but I wept."

If it was an act, it was a damned good one. Still... thinking that the war was wrong didn't mean that you were a good person; it was just one way you weren't a bad one. "If your chaos is so much better," I probed, "why did Celestia and Luna turn you to stone for a thousand years, and Twilight and her friends put you back when you broke out?"

"Oh, well," she said dismissively. "It's because chaos is Eeeeeeevil, isn't it?" She frowned at the hooves she was waving in front of her face. "It's just not the same without fingers to wiggle. Anyway, Celestia and her posse are, or at least *were*, all 'Lawful Good' when you got right down to it. Even dear Pinkie was disappointingly predictable. What, they didn't have enough order already? Order for order's sake isn't beneficial. It's stagnation. Consider your home, Blackjack. Stable 99, and Equestria. Both were founded under good, orderly premises, but over time, good order rots. The order becomes more important than the good, and the only changes that happen are the perversion and decay of the original ideals. I *do* hope that you understand that, Blackjack." For a moment, he was oddly serious. "Back in Hippocratic, you told me that the Wasteland had enough chaos, and told me to do better. I had no idea what you were talking about at the time, since it never occurred to me that you might seriously set me free... but you were hoping that I'd become a bit more orderly. Like that's likely!"

He suddenly leaned over, grinned, and rubbed a hoof in my mane. I glared at him, and he pulled back and coughed.

"Well, however adorable it might have been, you freeing the *God of Chaos* and telling him to start obeying traffic laws or whatever, you were doing it because you thought that that was good. And looking around at the *shameful* sort of chaos you've been having to deal with, I suppose that I can't blame you too much. You've done good and sown disorder, but you haven't gotten the *spark* that links them in your head yet. Look around a bit harder." She swung her forehoof in a wide arc. "This whole city is a testament to unchanging corruption and stagnation, to what happens when *order* goes too far. And that's not even mentioning what's *under* it..."

"Cognitum wants to bring the city back," I said. "To return it to how things were."

"Cognitum wants stasis. She wishes to freeze the world into the state she thinks it should be, optimally with her on top. Funny how that's usually the case," Discord said with a grim smile. "Oh, I've no doubt it would be comfortable, for most. Discomfort is the antidote to conformity. And I'm sure *you'd* find it quite *uncomfortable*." She shivered. "The whole world would be a starmetal tomb or a Stable 99."

I could certainly share that feeling. "And the Eater?" A rumble slowly ran through the earth, and cracks spread along the concrete walls. I really wished I could close my eyes right now. "I hate this place."

"You show promise for an equine," Discord chuckled. She then paused. "Hold that thought..."

Boo blinked, "Wazzit, Discowd?"

Another blink back to Discord's mismatched eyes. "If my sense of dramatic timing is still accurate..." She lifted a hoof, staring at it as if checking a PipBuck. "We should be attacked right about... Now!" I tensed and checked behind me. Nothing but empty tunnel. I stared ahead. More tunnel. I glanced at a baffled white mare. "Or maybe... now!" Again I tensed. Again, nothing. I really wished I could give a flat-eyed glare. "Huh." She shook her hoof like she had a cramp, then lifted it to her ear. "I guess my drama needs new batteries."

The wall exploded inwards in a shower of pipes, conduits, and stone chips as an immense curved spur ripped a hole right through the concrete and everything else. Cables snapped and popped, and steam flooded through the tunnel as my hands snapped up, caught the serrated tip of the hook, and barely got out of the way as it gouged deep into the wall behind me. The entire tunnel seemed to be coming apart around me, and I only hoped that Discord kept Boo from being crushed or cooked as the tube fell to pieces. The immense stinger, easily the size of my body, yanked back out the hole it'd torn.

As it withdrew, my hand was caught between two chitinous serrations, and with the ease of withdrawing a can of Cram, I was yanked through the new breach and into another deep crevasse a dozen feet across, more than a hundred long, and several hundred deep. Broken pipes jutted out into the air, spraying cold water in a fine mist around enormous blocks of reinforcement. Here and there, the crevasse was bridged by crumbling sewer pipes, tangles of corroded wiring, and even a subway or two. The rock had split and left the concrete train tubes sticking out into space. Small white soul motes drifted from one wall to another, passing through the solid matter like ghosts. A bend in the shaft below me protected me from being directly bathed in the green glare of Enervation, but the entire crevice was lit with the reflected light. I activated my wings and yanked myself away from the stinger.

The barb was attached to a creature resembling a scorpion, if someone who had never seen a scorpion before had been given a vague description of one and had been so taken with the general idea of it that they'd hastily rushed to build the biggest scorpion of all time... and had neglected such trivial things as proportion, symmetry, and checking their work for errors. Nine legs on the left, six on the right, a dozen eyes of varied shape and size scattered around what might be a head, mandibles and fangs that had no business being as long as my body, a pincer on one limb vaguely resembling a hand, and another limb ending in the scorpion tail-like protrusion completed the monstrosity before me. As I hovered there, taking it all in, the behemoth let out an earsplitting screech as it turned, clinging sideways to the fissure wall, and faced me.

Okay. I could do this. I starting assembling Penance as I backed away... then balked. "What do I shoot?" Then my back hit the wall behind me, and I realized that several dozen feet wasn't nearly far enough away from this thing! Its body surged as it rammed that tail spur across the gap and at me. I fell, and it rammed the wall a few feet above my horn. "Okay! Plan B. Shoot *anything!*"

I decided for eyes and weaved my way around as I targeted the thing's various globules. Once it was blind, I could get back to the tunnel and Boo, right? Then we could hustle along. Each one exploded like a pustule... only to be replaced by even more black eyes. "Oh come on! You regenerate, too?" I brought out the moonstone pendant and darted in closer, and wasn't that a mistake! The handlike pincer snapped out at me and seized me by my wings, drawing me towards the immense fanged, chomping orifice that was the creature's mouth.

Funny how panic could make teleporting my quarter-ton body out of its grasp easy. Why, I was so scared that I barely even registered the sledgehammer blow to my gray matter. I couldn't hurt it. Didn't want to risk getting closer to it. My power supplies were dropping by the second; I only had three minutes of power left. It was pretty big; maybe it couldn't climb very fast? I could only hope so as I flew

up towards the roof of the shaft, the abomination in pursuit.

For a few seconds, it looked like I'd been right. Even with all its legs, it couldn't move anywhere near as fast as me. I could lead it away, circle around, and get down the tunnel where it couldn't fit. I could do this. I... the massive creature seemed to swell with a great wet retching noise. A geyser of chunky red flesh and steaming fluid erupted from its maw, spewing straight at me. I darted behind the cover of a swaying length of train track strung like entrails across the gap. Hanging on them was the rusted-out corpse of a train, its chain of flatbed cars scattered with unstable heaps of crates. I watched as the meaty barrage spewed up to either side and began to rain back down. I crouched on the bed of one train and grabbed the lid off one of the crates on the train, lifting it above me to block any of the gore that had spread far enough to hit me.

"Well, that was close," I said after the wet plops and splats had subsided. I lowered the lid and regarded the visceral mass that had accumulated on it.

The red mound twitched rhythmically, and then a half dozen eyes bubbled open. Two fleshy tendrils sprouted, wrapping around my neck and horn, and as it pulled itself closer, a large mouth filled with toothy protrusions snapped at what little face I had left. "You have got to be kidding me!" I shouted, reaching up with my hands and tearing it away. The meaty mass quivered under my metal fingers before I ripped it into two halves, then smashed them to paste against the case. "There... done!" I said, staring at the red goo in my hands.

The goo quivered and formed tiny mouths that snapped at me. I stared for three seconds, then flung it off the side of the train! "I quit! I quit I quit I quit! Undying flesh is where I draw the line!" Unfortunately, that wasn't the only glob. From both directions along the train, a veritable swarm of these things were crawling towards me, some scuttling on chitinous legs like their parent, others flopping on tentacle limbs, and others flying through the air on fleshy, membranous wings. Above me was solid rock, some of it now *a/so* crawling with these abominations.

And while Penance was an exquisite firearm, it wasn't the ideal weapon for use against a swarm of opponents. I was missing my Boo luck charm, too. "Damn it!" I shouted, slamming my hooves against an intact, tipped-over container as I wondered if I could fly back to the hole without getting puked on.

The lid broke open, and dozens of twelve-millimeter semiautomatic weapons tumbled out around my hooves, each still in its translucent plastic wrap. I grabbed one, tore the wrapping off, stared at the gun, and then looked around at what was, I realized, a munitions transport.

I could kiss Discord so hard her hooves would... wait... no. That'd be weird. A hug would suffice. I tore through the crates around me, searching for ammunition. Grenades. A flamer would be ideal. I doubted the flesh would reform if it were flame-broiled. One of the creatures, with legs like a spider, leapt onto my back and started to ram a silvery proboscis into my neck. I levitated the pendant towards it, and it screamed and skittered back long enough for me to grab a leg and smash it. Some of the smaller ones were glomming on to each other, fusing together into more and more massive creatures.

"Come on! Where are the damned bullets?" I asked as I ran along the crates. There were enough guns here to arm every pony in the Wasteland and have some to spare. Unfortunately, there wasn't a universal bullet. I found .22, .357, 5.56, .308, and anti-machine rounds, but not any 12.7mm, grenades, or flamer fuel tanks. I scooped up as much as I could from every ammo crate I passed as I ran along. At this point, I'd take it all and let my PipBuck sort it out.

Two more blobs dropped onto me, one tangling in my wings with ropy masses and hooked limbs, the other ripping into my rump and legs with scythelike blades, tearing rents in my armor. Okay, that sent my 'oh fuck no' level through the roof. I kicked back wildly at the misshapen thing, knocking it away, then rolled, squishing the webbed mass like a bloody tick. It continued to writhe on my back, but with my

magic I pulled it off and flung it over the edge. The strain on my magic made me a little more aware of the thudding pain in my head, but I shoved it aside. I'd deal with the brain damage later. The scythe-limbed creature lunged once again, and I hit it with a trio of hoofslams to knock it back. Physical blows wouldn't take it out, though.

Then I spotted it. It lay within the shelter of a M.W.T. crate lying on its side. Maybe it was a trick of the light or the stress, but I imagined a beam of golden radiance illuminating it. Without hesitation, I launched myself at the crate, snatching it up with a cackle of glee. An IF-84 Stampede riot shotgun. In a flash, I tore the translucent wrapping paper off, took in the sharp scent of lubricant, and popped out the drum. I selected the ammo with my PipBuck organizer and loaded the gun with red-banded shells. With a distinctly manic grin on my face, I murmured, "I shall name you Boomstick."

The scythe-limbed horror charged me once more. I rose up, reached out, and grabbed its limbs as they descended. Then a trio of blazing incendiary rounds burned through its hide and malformed, toothy maw. The incendiary reaction took hold, and in seconds the abomination was first a toasty inferno and then a charred heap. All along the train, the monsters paused, and I grinned as wide as I could. I could kill them after all!

I fell into a frenzy of shots, grappling them with my hands before setting them ablaze with the incendiary shells. This was close combat, my forte. It didn't matter that they had teeth sharp enough to rip steel or claws or were universally horrid; I could kill them. If I could kill them, I could win. And if I could, I would.

Not that my combat style didn't have some problems. There was more than enough live ammo on the train to make firing blindly as much a hazard to me as it would be to them. My constant jumping and shooting wasn't doing the impromptu bridge much good, either. In addition to that, I was up here, and Boo was down below with most of my gems. I popped a mouthful of stale garnets, the last of my stores, into my mouth as I reloaded the gun with flechettes to tear the monsters up a bit more before incinerating, swapping back and forth between magazines with my PipBuck's inventory function.

More than once, I had to dart away from a container of cooking ammo, the rounds going off like a hive of blazing bees. At least a few grenades were in the mix as well, blowing flaming pieces of crate and critter into the air and making the train shake and sway alarmingly. Still, I fell into a moment of peace. Shoot. Jump. Kick. Blast. Run. Dive. Reload. Grab. Smash. Shoot. Toss. Smile. Retreat. Lunge. Cast. Shoot. Block. Twist. Stomp. Twist. Reload. Shoot. Laugh.

Enemies I could fight with no moral complications. Opponents who were clear threats to me and my baby, which I could dispatch guilt-free. It didn't matter where I was. This was the moment where, for several manic, magical seconds, I was alive from horn to hoof, metal or not. This was joy. This was sex. This was life!

Then I whirled to blast another and froze. Before me stood a pony... but not a pony. Four legs. Two eyes, if one was a black button and the other a milky boil. No mouth, just a blunted bump of a muzzle and two knobby, melted-looking ears. The maroon hide reminded me of a ghoul, but less rotted and more diseased. The creature's mane and tail were tendrils rather than hair. Most disturbing of all was a scar-like cutie mark on its flank. I hesitated a moment as another of the pony things stepped into view. Then a third. Shifting my gaze from one to the next, I waited for their mouths to open wide with countless jagged fangs... any second now... any second...

But they didn't. They just crouched there, heads tilted, regarding me cluelessly. Where had they even come from? I glanced around, but aside from the motes and the grinding from below, everything was still.

"Okay. Well... then... just stay back..." I finished lamely, backing away from them. They weren't

hostile, for the moment, so why blast them? I needed to find some gems and get back to Boo before...

The train shuddered under my hooves, and I looked behind me at the far wall. The scorpion-crab thingy had finally reached my level. Suddenly my super awesome shotgun seemed woefully inadequate. The tail spike reached up to where the tracks sprang across the gap, curled around the track and flatbeds, and gave a firm yank downward. The pincer hand reached up, grabbed a flatbed, and flung it at me like a giant throwing knife, pummeling me with a rain of metal containers. Suddenly, the wheels on the flatbed car I was on squealed, and the entire train began to roll backwards towards the beast. "Oh, you have got to be kidding!" I shouted as it grabbed another flatbed car and sent it whirling at me.

With all this garbage raining down, I'd be hard pressed not to be smacked out of the sky by a spinning slab of steel. I was no Rainbow Dash in the air. More like an Air Macintosh. I ran away from the abomination as it continued its barrage. I glanced behind me at the pony creatures, watching some plummet helplessly into the depths while others were devoured by the creature. I had bigger things to worry about as I was smashed again and again by the debris. I needed something substantial to use against it. Something like an anti-machine rifle. Or a minigun loaded with armor piercing rounds. Or a grenade machine gun. Or—

A long gray case smacked me right on the noggin with such force that I flipped forward, rolled, and ended up flat on my rump, hugging the offending case between my hooves. "Owww!" I hissed, gritting my teeth. Of all the times, why did I have to get hit by a... I paused and stared at the label right in front of my face. 'Mark Four reusable missile launcher'.

If I ever saw that snaggle-toothed son of chaos again out of Boo's body, I'd give him a kiss that'd make his antler... horn... — whatever! — pop *right* off. The case was heavy enough that I could barely lift it with my magic, so I hefted it with my hands and used my magic to pop open the latches while running/flying/falling in the direction of 'away from that monster'. Inside the foam rubber lining was a far larger thing of beauty than my Boomstick: a four-foot-long firing tube and a trio of meter-long missiles. I hooked two under my wings as I watched my power drop below five percent.

I loaded the missile with my mouth, bit down on the trigger, braced the launcher against my shoulder and neck, and whirled, looking through the sight at the multi-eyed face of the monster. The missile gave a soft putt, followed by a deadly hiss as it streaked through the air and detonated... well, more towards the rear of the creature rather than on its face, but close counted in horseshoes, grenades, and missile launchers! The blast made it stagger, and the next flatbed rammed it before the claw could catch it and throw it at me. That gave me time to load the second missile. I braced myself and fired; this time, it exploded more solidly on the body and blew out a pony-sized chunk of gore. The ejected hunks of flesh morphed midair into horrid flapping bird-bat things that darted away. It was regenerating as I watched, but even this monster would take time to close that hole.

I could do this. I could. I raced away along the flatbeds, sliding the third missile into the launcher. Time to end this! I spun around and fired the third missile straight at the creature's mouth!

It lifted one flatbed and the missile detonated harmlessly on it, sending a massive fireball and countless flaming crates flying into the air. Okay, I might do this. I ran along the tumbling and shifting crates, getting slowed by the battering I received. "Missiles! Missiles! Where are the missiles?" I shouted as I was drawn slowly back. Flaming crates rained down on me from my own missile. "Discord! If you can hear me, hit me in the head with a missile please! Or three! My head can take it!"

My head went unabashed by a chaotically delivered crate of missiles, but I was able to pick up a couple rolling past my hooves. The problem was that the monster was now aware I could hurt it. Every missile I fired, it blocked with either that heavy pincer hand or flung debris, deflecting most of the energy. The monster was more than capable of regenerating before I reloaded, and soon, even I couldn't keep

ahead of it and reload the launcher and dodge crates at the same time.

Most of the rolling flatbeds were on fire now, and the abomination didn't seem to care too much about the smaller detonations. Countless masses of materiel were being lost down the hole. To try and buy myself time, I magically flung back grenades as quickly as they rolled by, but the few that did hit didn't do any more damage than deflected missiles. I had to blow it apart, not bash it about. The monster let out a roar, and a moment later it was answered by multiple roars further below that chilled what blood I had left. If there were more of these things on the way...

No. I couldn't wait. I was at three percent power as it was. I had maybe fifteen seconds of flight time, if I activated it. Couldn't fly. Couldn't teleport more than a few feet. Couldn't hit it hard enough to finish it off. I was... no! I could beat this. I could! I just needed to hit it hard... like with a boat. I needed a boat to drop on this damned thing. Or maybe... I grinned as I slung the launcher across my back, tossed an empty crate between my wings, and started collecting grenades, flares, and anything else that might explode. The cars continued to fly at me, but I didn't fight back. That just made it throw cars faster, which made the whole thing move with increasing velocity. Good.

Eventually the weight on my back started to slow me down, and I was drawn closer and closer to the monster. It began to smash down with its barb, and I had to dart to the left and right to avoid getting crushed like the cargo crates. Come on. It had to be soon. Soon. Any second... there! I glanced over my shoulder, telekinetically pulled a half dozen pins from the top layer, and then flung the box off my back with a buck and a kick. A second later, the grenades detonated, covering the creature in a thick cloud of smoke and fire. From the flailing claw knocking flatbeds down the crevasse and the barb sweeping and flailing wildly, I knew it hadn't been killed by the blast. As its flailing limbs dispersed more and more of the smoke, I hoped to see at least—

Then the train's engine came shooting out of the tunnel; half rolling and half falling, it streaked towards the monster. I activated my wings, launching myself off the last flatcar and into the air. Like a chisel struck by a hammer, the flatcar sheared right through the outstretched claw hand and then clean through the monster's body. A millisecond later, the engine rammed right into it with an enormous crash, splattering it against the wall. For good measure, I sent a missile flying, not at the monster, but the rock wall beneath it. Then the whole messy, bloody, flaming mess fell into the crevasse, tearing down the bridging tracks with it. I watched it fall...

Then joined it.

I had barely enough power to tumble towards the wall, slow my drop with a few kicks of power to my talismans, and then reach out with my hands and cling on for all I was worth, scoring jagged runnels in the rock with my fingers as I plummeted further into the abyss. I was only hopeful that I would land somewhere in the vicinity of Boo, Discord, and their precious, delicious gems as I tumbled, fell, and tumbled some more. I finally came to a rest at the mouth of some sewer, much farther down than Boo. And there was no way for her to reach me...

My power flashed, flickered, and went dark, leaving me in the depths where no one... not Boo, not Cognitum, not even Rampage or the Legate... could find me.

* * *

I didn't know how long I lay there, the bare flickers of my power reserves keeping one ear working, listening to things drip and gurgle. More than once, I heard echoing hoofsteps, roars, clicks, and cracking. The ground trembled more than once under my body, and I heard rocks falling in the deeps. I heard voices too. Soft, almost fearful, singing within me. Occasionally I felt the warmth of a mote as it moved through me. And I felt the occasional flutter of my baby moving, little reminders that I couldn't lie here on this ledge forever. But there was nothing I could do. My only hope was that Discord, with his

crazy chaotic powers, could find me before another monster did.

And lying there, blind, helpless, minutes turning to hours... silence taking me as the last of my power was expended... I couldn't be faulted for dreaming, could I?

~ ~ ~

Mom and I sat together at the kitchen table, my filly drinking from a bottle and my colt snoozing in her embrace as she rocked him slowly. It was early morning, but she always sat up with me when the twins were fussy like this. Even if it gave her a harder day, she always took the time and sleep deprivation. "She's such a glutton," I murmured softly as my dark blue daughter drank her fill yet again.

"Babies always are," Mom replied, just as soft, then gave me a wry smile. "You were no different. If anything, you were worse." I gave a skeptical sniff, and she grinned at me. "It's true. And you didn't limit yourself to milk. How you got your hooves on your father's apple cider, I'll never know."

"Least it didn't damage me too much," I said as I gazed into my daughter's face and brushed her blue mane from her tiny horn. "I'm glad you're here, Mother. Even if you're really not here..."

"No. I'm not," she said as she regarded the colt in his blanket. "That doesn't mean I can't enjoy being a grandmother a little, does it?"

"I suppose not," I said as I turned my head and stared out the window at Equestria that wasn't anymore. "This isn't a normal dream, is it? Normally, I don't know I'm dreaming."

She looked up at me with teal eyes and smiled a little before glancing back down. "Most ponies don't have as much experience with mind games as you, Blackjack." Tears began to run down her cheeks. "You have such beautiful babies."

"Who are you?" I asked as my filly stopped drinking and started to whine. I draped a towel down my back and started to gently pat to work out the burp. She didn't meet my gaze as she gently rocked my son. I really needed to think of some names. I wasn't sure how many more card game names there were, though.

"Just another ghost. You pick them up, don't you, Blackjack?" she asked with a wry smile. "Echo. Lacunae. You draw the past to you. Dig up the old secrets. Pull everything into the future, whether you like it or not." She brushed the red earth pony's mane from his face with an anguished expression. "Whether we like it or not."

From outside the window came a colossal flash of energy, turning Mother into a black silhouette. I wasn't too worried. At this point, I was an expert at nightmares and horrors. "You're one of those mote souls, aren't you?" She hesitated a moment, then nodded. Outside the window, the world was on fire. It didn't touch our bubble. Not yet. That expanding wave of annihilation hadn't quite reached us. "Why are there so many of you in the Core?"

The house exploded in a silent wave, the wood splintering, the pipes twisting like drinking straws. Still, we were untouched. This was a dream, after all. I watched the corpse of my neighbor Midnight lying on her lawn. A small mote of light rose up from her, rising towards the sky. Then it was suddenly pulled back. I watched it approach the ruins of the house and a small box that read 'Roseluck Pest Solutions'. With a tiny cry, it was pulled away. "It drew us. From all over Equestria. All over the world." She sniffed. "Can you imagine what it was like? We died... but we can't pass on. We were drawn through those silver rings to this place. We're trapped here. Like you."

"But why?" I asked as my daughter gave a little burp, and didn't vomit down my back for a change. Mom's suggestion to add a little rice to the milk had worked after all. "Why does it draw you

here?" I knew *how*: the silver rings. But what was the ultimate purpose behind them?

"I don't know. Because it can, I suppose. It doesn't eat us. Doesn't need us. And yet it craves us and keeps us trapped within this place," she said quietly. "Perhaps it delights in tormenting us. Or maybe it thinks it's protecting us from the hereafter. It can't get all of us. I'm still waiting for my sister to join me... and horrified she will..." She hung her head mournfully.

Sister? But... She reached out a hoof and covered my mouth so I couldn't ask the question. "I'm sending help to you, Blackjack. Please, do what you have to. Get out of here. See to your babies."

"Who are you?" I murmured as tears ran down my eyes.

"Someone who knows what it's like to deserve to hurt," she replied in a whisper, the light fading out around us. She scooped up my filly in her other hoof. "I'll look after your babies till you return."

~ ~ ~

Somepony was putting something hard into my mouth. I pulled it in with my tongue, tasted the fiery flavor of a ruby, masticated, and swallowed. Instantly, my systems started booting up again. "Oh, thank you Boo..." I said as my eyes flickered to life.

The mottled, horrifying visage of an abomination pony met my eyes. It only had one eye, a maroon orb on the left side of its face. Only the fact that my E.F.S. was blue kept my magic bullets in check. Another one behind it, with vestigial membranous wings, held a second gem in a mustache made of a brush of tendrils. There were more behind those, each holding a small gemstone. I levitated them to me one after the next, eating them and refilling my batteries, waiting for them to try and eat me. But they didn't. They simply stared at me with their mismatched eyes.

"Um... thanks..." I murmured awkwardly. "Can you understand me?" They stared in response. "Can... you lead me to Boo and Discord?" The silent herd turned to regard each other, then began wandering up the sewer pipe. One stopped and turned its unblinking eye back at me. "Okay. I'm coming." I scrambled after them, barely able to fit with my wings.

I had to trust that they knew where we were going. The pipe led to a crevasse which led to a partially collapsed subway which led to a rockslide. All the while, I passed by more and more abominable... weird things. Plenty were ponies, but I spotted others that appeared to be griffins, or zebras, or even hellhounds. They stood around, or wandered aimlessly. Every now and then, one would misstep and tumble, coming apart like wet roadapples. A mote of light escaped and wandered away. The bloody goop would form spiders, or scorpions, or other skittering things that I occasionally had to splatter with Boomstick. Once, I watched as a mote slipped into a puddle of bloody goo which then coalesced into a tiny weird griffin.

Flesh and soul, but no mind, and without a soul, they became monsters. "But why?" I asked, baffled. Even a little purple pony in my head was fresh out of ideas.

Then I heard a wonderfully familiar voice from down a passage. "Is ya sure Bwackjack's gonna come this way?" Boo asked, her voice distant and coming from somewhere above. I opened my mouth to call out but then closed it and scanned the tunnel. There might be critters nearby. I needed to find a way up to them.

"Oh, I daresay she'll be around soon enough. When it's dramatically appropriate," Discord replied, her voice echoing softly in the tunnels. "She has the knack for that sort of thing. It really is a useful perk for arriving just in the nick of time and save the day. Quite aggravating."

"Yous so weird, Discowd," Boo huffed. "Nothin' you say makes sense."

"Ah, what fun is there in making sense, my dear filly?" Discord replied fondly, her dry chuckle reaching my ears as it echoed through the tunnels. "I am a being of chaos. I delight in mischief, upsetting order, thwarting the plans of others... and occasionally mixing weather patterns with snack foods."

"Was you really bad?"

Discord didn't answer for several seconds, and when he did it was soft and reflective, "I suppose I was, dear Boo."

I spotted an elevator shaft; the mare's voice seemed to come down it. There wasn't anything for it. I looked around at the mangled herd, turned on my levitation talismans, and started up, leaving them behind.

"Why were you bad, Discowd?"

"Oh, you too? Honestly, does no one actually listen to me? The Satellite-Stamped Sisters have been dead two centuries, and they *still* have more pull? And I've made sure to be on my best behavior and everything while in you." No doubt Boo would have heard my hooves and wingtips scraping the walls if she wasn't in a conversation. "Still, at the time... I don't think I realized how terrible it is to hurt. Harm, to me, was boredom. If ponies didn't like my pranks, it was because they lacked the humor and wit to appreciate the gift I offered. Fear. Suffering. Misery. I didn't understand the harm they caused others. I was only interested in the fun of the new." He let out a long sigh. "Dear me. Two centuries locked in a starmetal tomb, and I've gotten all mopey. But then, the mope is in high style around this horrible place."

"Is yous gonna be bad again?" Boo asked innocently.

I paused atop a twisted lift platform and listened for his reply. I was curious about that too. "My dear. At the moment, I am a fragment of a wisp of a particle of my former power. Were I not safely within you, I'd be blown out, like a candle," Discord said fondly, but also in tired tones. "I'm far too old and worn out for those shenanigans. One more prank, I think. One more. But if I had my choice..." she hummed speculatively. "Perhaps... perhaps... but it is in my nature to be contrary. If the status quo is wickedness... I am valiant. And there is so much wickedness in the world today, order and chaos alike. I couldn't let that stand. But then, well, if the norm is civility and order, I dissent. Usually. But I can't help but think that, even if her mane's a little short and she can be so terribly depressing at times, Blackjack does remind me of what a certain yellow pony would have been. I mean, seriously, freeing me, no questions asked or deals demanded? Telling me to do better? She needs someone around to tell her to stop apologizing to the dragon trying to eat her. And take her out drinking! I like Drunkjack."

I rose to the open elevator door and stepped out. "Well, I'm glad we're friends, Discord. Or at least on the same side," I said as I deactivated the talismans and immediately popped a ruby.

Boo rose to her hooves and launched herself at me. "Bwackjack!" I'm sure, a few months ago, I would have been adorably bowled over. Instead, she clanged loudly against my armor plate and sank into a heap. "Owww..." she whined, rubbing her head.

"Sorry," I said as I kissed Boo's boo-boo. "You two okay?"

"Oh, absolutely delightful. Wonderful place to sit around and linger," Discord replied, rolling her mismatched eyes. "I'm thinking of setting up a summer cottage. The view of the horrific abyss is quite lovely this time of year." She stood and tapped a door with her hoof, scraping away some of the oxidation. 'Robronco Access Hatch 11-D. Trespassers will be Pinkied!'. "I knew you'd arrive here,

Blackjack. There's no way you'd fall to a common spawn of these depths, no matter how delightful."

Delightful? I supposed to something like him... "Do you know what that monster was?" I asked, then pointed down. "There were these... these things." My specificity earned me a wry arch of her brow and a sardonic smirk. "They were mismatched, mangled... things! Pony things and griffin things and... just... things!" Discord sighed, shaking her head. "Does this have anything to do with the Eater... Tokomare... thing?"

"An alien device of immense complexity that may also be an eldritch abomination of mind-shocking power projecting a field that liquefies flesh causing that flesh to transform and alter into monsters of grotesque magnificence?" Discord gushed, her red and yellow eyes growing by the second as she leaned towards me. Then she gave a dismissive wave of her hoof. "Nah. Couldn't be. Personally, I think there's something in the water. Fluoridation. Look it up."

"Fluoridation?" I muttered weakly, then shook my head hard. Focus. "Why would the Eater create monsters?"

"Why, Blackjack, that's what stars do! It's what they live for," Discord said with a shrug. "That and shine and sing all day long. Personally, I prefer a little interaction. Some give and take. Tit for tat."

"So stars create life," I murmured.

"Or shine. They're very proud of the shining. And the singing. Stars... ech," she snorted, waving her hoof dismissively. "Prima donnas, every one of them. Always needing the spotlight. Never standing to be upstaged for even a moment." Then she blinked, and touched her chest at my smirk. "What?"

I couldn't take time to enjoy Discord's blatant hypocrisy though. The words the Eater had blared struck me. Discord was inherently dishonest, and there was an honesty in that. "And if Cognitum is right?"

Discord shrugged once more. "Then it's a machine of irreducible complexity, like yours truly, incapable of being understood. The fine line where magic and technology meet, and beyond that another where they mesh with life. Maybe it's trying to rebuild the organisms of whatever place it came from, far, far away. Or maybe it's just in need of a good debugging. After all, you've run into other intelligent machines."

That was true. Cognitum. Applebot, so many months ago. Happyhorn's healing machines. "I guess there's no real difference."

Discord gaped at me. "No real difference? Why, Blackjack, there's all the difference in the world! It's like saying there's no difference between 'Blackjack' and 'messiah archetype' or 'Twilight Sparkle' and 'Fussypants protagonist'. The difference is as profound as 'dearest friend' and 'pony you've a certain fondness for' or 'deadliest foe' and 'recurring antagonist'." She pointed a hoof at me. "When you think of something in such a way, you define it. Contextualize it. You make it matter. If the Eater is just a piece of technological equipment run amok, then really everything you've gone through is a technical glitch. But if the Eater is a fallen star, a god maimed and dead, seeking to be reborn, then everything you are, everything you've done, is a struggle for the very survival of the world! What stakes could be higher?" Discord declared grandly, hooves raised to the roof. Then she sat and gave a little wave of her hoof. "But, eh... no real difference. Like, whatever."

I stared at her. Cognitum and Dawn believed the former. That the Tokomare and the Core were simply malfunctioning and damaged. The solution to the Wasteland was simply controlling, repairing, and utilizing infrastructure to restore society. All very neat and tidy. Red Eye would approve. So would LittlePip, I suspected. But what if this truly was more than simply fixing X to do Y? Was there a deeper

meaning to anything I was doing? Saving my friends? Saving strangers? Saving the Wasteland? I stared at the rusty door before me, beyond which was my enemy.

Why, ultimately, was I here?

"You do better," I murmured. "You try harder. You do everything you can to make up for your mistake, hoping that when everything is done, you've come even a tenth towards making up for the harm you caused." The war. Twilight Sparkle. Pinkie Pie. Rarity. Fluttershy. Rainbow Dash. Applejack. Goldenblood. Celestia. Luna. Me. So many ponies I'd met since I'd left my home. "You try, knowing that it can never be enough. But you do it anyway, to make tomorrow a better place for everypony."

Discord rolled her eyes. "Oh, you have got to be kidding—" Then she blinked at my frown and quickly amended, "I mean, yay. Go team horribly idealistic. Hoofbump!" She stuck her hoof out at me with a sheepish grin. Still, it'd done the trick of snapping me out of my navel-gazing, and I looked at the door.

There was a small terminal set in the wall next to it, the screen of which still flickered with life, and a PipBuck access plug. "First things first," I said as I drew the cable out of my hoof.

"Yes yes. Get this thing open so we can have the big, climactic showdown," Discord said, tapping on the door.

Part of me thought about using the Perceptitron to find out what Steel Rain was doing, but Cognitum had tracked me that way once before. Surprise might be the only advantage I had. I sighed, then used EC-1101 to open the door and expose the intact conduit-lined hall within. The tunnel led to a basement that had been heavily damaged and repaired. Cracks ran along walls, and gaps spidered out in the floor and ceiling. These were repaired with bolted plates, struts, and jacks. Clearly, somepony had been busy preventing this place from falling apart completely.

There were also dozens, perhaps hundreds, of crates of weapons, ammo, chems, and body armor. Enough for a small army. Shaky foundations and lots of explosives? Even I could see the potential...

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Discord asked softly with a grin.

"Yeah, but I need to talk to Cognitum first. Find out what she knows about Horizons. Then we can blow this place up," I replied as I loaded up on magazines of twelve-millimeter rounds.

"Well, that's hardly what I was thinking," Discord replied, indignantly. "I was thinking that marmalade would go wonderfully on pizza."

I laughed quietly. "That does sound good, actually. We should have that when we get done down here."

Discord stared at me, skeptically, but then nudged my shoulder with a hoof. "Deal."

The far side of the basement seemed to have all the working generators. A strong blue glow shone through the cracks and supports. If I were an insane supercomputer, that's where I Would be. "I'll make my way over there. What are you going to do?" I asked Discord.

"Why, what I always do. I'm shocked you even asked," Discord said, reproachfully, then grinned and rubbed her hooves together with a purely diabolic expression on her face. "Make mischief!" She caught my raised brow and added, "All in the name of goodness, of course!"

"Uh huh," I said skeptically. "Just don't do anything I would do, Discord. I don't want to lose any

more friends.”

“Of course,” she said, a little bit dejectedly. “I know how much you ponies hate to lose your friends...” She waved a hoof dismissively. “Well, fear not, Boo will come to no harm with me.”

“I mean you too, you know,” I added, tapping her chest. “You stay safe as well.”

She stared at me a moment. “You really mean that, Blackjack?”

“Of course. You’re definitely a ten on my weirdness scale, but... well... You’ve got a hell of a bad reputation if even half of those old stories are to be believed. You’ve suffered more than enough for everything you’re supposed to have done. Everything I’ve *seen* you do has been good, if odd, and what you’ve told me, even if I don’t agree with all of it, makes it seem like you want to keep that up. I hope that that’s one thing that won’t change, at least. So, yeah... you’re my friend,” I said with a little shrug and smile.

Suddenly, I found myself hugged by the yellow-and-red-eyed, snaggletoothed mare. “You’re a bit less cushy than Fluttershy, but you’ll do,” she said with a smile. “Just don’t forget to write when this is all over. I simply won’t stand for a Sparkle not writing me. It’s terribly rude.”

“Uh... yeah. Sure,” I said with a baffled look. What was all that about? “Take care, Discord. Boo.”

“You be careful, Bwackjack,” Boo replied, and the white mare disappeared into the darkness of the Robronco basement. I stared at the blue glow shining ahead of me, took a deep breath, and advanced.

I made my way through the basement as silently as I could manage. I knew Cognitum wasn’t alone, but she didn’t know about me or Discord. I’d have to neutralize any protectors she had... and speaking of which! The ground began to rumble as a rainbow Ultra-Sentinel rolled around the corner. I barely had time to duck behind some crates as the massive war machine rolled past. Further ahead was a second one. Over there to the left, a third. Okay. Those might be a problem. Still, the basement was tight and cluttered. The machine had passed me without stopping. I just had to keep on my hooves.

Their presence definitely complicated matters, though. I couldn’t just trot up to her with huge killer robots rolling around. And blowing them up would definitely get this party started prematurely. I wished Scotch Tape was here. Maybe Ultra-Sentinels were a bit much, but she could just shut them down, no sweat. I paused, then frowned and glanced at my PipBuck. EC-1101 had been made to access Equestrian systems... did robots count?

“Dealer?” I whispered as loudly as I dared. I glanced around, making sure the Ultra-Sentinels were out of earshot. “Echo, are you there?”

A flicker in my vision and he appeared. Once, he’d looked like death. Now, he appeared like a ghost, translucent, pale, and suffering. The pained expression he wore made me want to hug him. “Yes, Blackjack?” he whispered.

My reason for calling him fell back, and I was barely able to resist the urge to ask him if he was okay. Of course he wasn’t. He was a mind and soul trapped in a PipBuck, slowly dying. “Can I help you?”

For a moment he appeared confused, and then, if anything, his sickly features turned even worse. “No, Blackjack. I’m sorry. You can’t.” He turned away from me, then asked softly, “What do you need, Blackjack?”

I wanted to press him a moment, but couldn't. Not as he was now. "These Ultra-Sentinels. Can you use EC-1101 to keep them from blasting me?"

He didn't answer for a moment, then said, so quietly that I almost missed it, "Don't worry about the robots. Just do what you have to do."

I stared extra hard at the E.F.S. bar of the nearest robot. Blue. Huh. "That was easy," I murmured, glancing back. Then I froze as I saw the translucent tears on his cheeks as he stared at me in desolation, then faded away completely.

"Sorry," he breathed in my ear. "I'm so sorry, Blackjack."

"You did your best. Big Macintosh would be proud. Thank you, Echo," I said, but to no response. "Echo?" Nothing. "Echo?" I said a little louder. Still nothing. I sighed and rose slowly. "You did so much for me. If there was some way I could help, I would. I'm sorry," I murmured, then stepped slowly towards the blue-barred Ultra-Sentinel, wary of it turning red and vaporizing me in one shot. It ignored my presence, so I trotted past and approached the blue glow at the far side of the basement.

Pipes and supports gave way to a large antechamber I'd seen weeks ago in a memory. There, atop a large steel platform framed by two pairs of parallel bars descending diagonally away along either side was the massive heap of computer circuitry of Horse's knockoff Crusader Maneframe. Heavy structural reinforcement beams had been attached to the side, and for some reason a crane arm had been mounted on top. Either the change in perspective or maybe my nerves made the machine look even larger than I remembered. From above dangled an umbilical of pipes, hoses, and wires. Transparent glass tubes full of blueish fluids gurgled, and a palpable aura of chill air surrounded the immense machine. Five glass jars were arranged on the left side, each one shrouded in shadow cast by the machine, and a sixth sat next to a small wrought iron table. The wall behind the computer was missing, the two rails plunging diagonally down into the depths of a ravine below.

I pulled out the missile launcher, loaded a projectile, and then balked. If Cognitum did know about Horizons, I needed to know too. Besides, perhaps Steel Rain was right and there was a diplomatic solution... not giving up EC-1101, but if she was sane and wanted to help the Wasteland, didn't I owe her a chance? "Softest damn heart in the Wasteland..." I muttered. But if it so much as farted a spark at me, I'd whack it with a missile till it behaved. "Cognitum," I said as I slowly ascended the metal stairs leading up to the top of the heavy steel plate. From the center of the hulking machine, a whirr began. It sounded almost like a purr.

"At last," a mare said from the shadows.

"Keep your distance," I said quietly, keeping the missile launcher pointed at the shadowy shape approaching me from the back of the enormous machine. "I'm pretty sure it's bad manners to talk with a missile launcher pointed at someone, but I've had a real long day."

"Quite understandable." She slowly strode forward, from the darkness emerging a mare with beautiful lilac and pink tresses, a glimmering white horn, and soft, understanding green eyes. Sweetie Belle smiled beatifically down at me as she waited at the top of the stairs. "I've waited a long time for this moment," she said with a pleased smile. "It's good to finally meet you. Face to face."

"How could I resist? You've made my life complicated, Cognitum. All for this," I said, lifting my forehoof.

Her eyes locked onto it for several seconds. "Yes. All for that," she said as she gazed at where my PipBuck lay. Then she looked at me. "Do forgive me my poor choice in servants. As the cliché goes: good help is hard to find."

"I don't believe that. I've found that when you're good, you'll find help that's just as good," I said as I watched her. "Deus. Sanguine. Dawn. Steel Rain. You've made my life hard."

Cognitum smiled, but it was more arch now. "You could have given up EC-1101 at any time. Returned it to ponies more deserving. Who could use it to resurrect Equestria properly. Your suffering was every bit a product of your own stubbornness and pride, Blackjack. Even you coming here, now, like this... it's all about you." The mare gave a sigh and shook her head. "Ah well. I knew from the moment we first met that you were special. You passed all my tests, albeit with a little help every now and then."

"I want to know things. You. EC-1101. Project Horizons," I said as I kept the missile steady on her.

Cognitum smiled casually, and in amusement. "Well, knowledge has its price, Blackjack. What do I get in return?"

"No missile to the face?" I suggested.

She laughed and shook her head. "Costing you any and all information I possess. If you really didn't care about finding answers, you would have fired without a word." She trotted over to the table next to the jar. Upon it sat a delicate tea set, a bottle of Wild Pegasus, and a box of Sugar Apple Bombs. Within the jar, to my horror, was a familiar form gripped in the glow of a levitation talisman set in the jar's bottom: the mottled maroon body of Sanguine. His undead body twitched and jerked spasmodically as he levitated in the middle. His limbs had been hammered to steel braces, and cables snaked into his temples.

"What the fuck... he's supposed to be dead!" I said, pointing a hoof at the body as he twitched and jerked.

"Technically, he is dead, but I understand your confusion," she said as she poured herself a cup of tea, putting in two sugar cubes and a twist of fresh lemon. "I took Sanguine from the remains of Hippocratic before it exploded. He might have lost most of his sanity with his family, but I've been able to extract a rather sizeable amount of information on Project Chimera from him." She let out a soft sigh and shook her head. "Such a pity. Had he been a little less ruthless and a little more loyal, he'd have his family now."

Sanguine's mouth opened and closed in silent screams as his body strained against the metal plates that held him immobile. "That's sick," I whispered, feeling nauseous.

"My apologies. I could kill him if you like. Or give you the honors. Setting him free would just unleash another feral ghoul on the Wasteland." Cognitum smiled sweetly, folding her hooves amicably on the table before her. "Which would you prefer?" I didn't answer, averting my eyes but still seeing him silently writhe. "I see," Cognitum said a moment later, lifting her teacup between her hooves. "Well, all things being equal, then, I'll hold on to him a bit longer. You never know when you'll need a blank."

There was a heavy boom of machinery that almost sent a missile flying as the crane moved over us and lowered a massive claw as big as my body. It gripped the top of the jar by the table and swung it over to the others. I struggled to regain my equilibrium, as Cognitum took a sip of her tea. I guessed that if that Sweetie Bot was made for sex, it had to be able to swallow fluids. "I want to know about Project Horizons," I said.

"I bet you do," Cognitum purred, her eyes narrowing in satisfaction. "Aren't you more curious about me?"

"I'm curious about why you're not talking in all booming words," I replied.

"The Royal Canterlot Voice is for addressing subjects. You are no mere subject, Blackjack. I knew it the moment I first learned about you. A mare capable of accessing EC-1101? A mare refusing to take the easy way out? A mare defying and challenging the Wasteland on its own terms? Oh no. You were a knight. Erratic and unconventional on the board. Perhaps even a queen, streaking across and destroying any in your path. Far more valuable than any pawn."

"Like Dawn?" I asked, with a scowl. I had no way to force the answer out of her.

Cognitum sighed again, smiling and bowing her head as she gave the smallest shake of her head. "Ah, Dawn. Poor, poor, Dawn. So ardent to save the Wasteland. So determined to bring about a better future. So incapable of either." The crane hummed overhead, and a new pod was set down beside the table. Within was the prone form of a yellow, emaciated earth pony who was barely breathing. "Oopsie. Wrong jar." It was whisked up once more. "I'm sure you've noticed that these jars function the same as the stasis pods. Quite useful technology. It can keep a body preserved... forever."

"That's sick," I muttered again.

"What an odd notion you have, Blackjack," Cognitum replied in turn. "They all would have died long ago if I hadn't kept them." The crane returned with the familiar synthetic body of Dawn. Her bladed wings and forehooves had been plucked off, leaving tatters of metal and cables and the broken stumps of bone. A spear of metal ran vertically from the top of the jar to the bottom, impaling her like a metal martini olive. "Here she is."

"No," Dawn groaned as her eyes focused on me. "No no no..."

"Yes, my dearest pawn. Yes. Blackjack is here. She proved stronger. Tougher. More determined. More worthy." For a moment, the urbane mask on Sweetie Belle's face slipped, and I saw the vicious machine beneath. It was all I could do not to fire, knowledge be damned. Cognitum saw my frown, and the urbane aspect returned. "I'd be quite happy to give her to you, Blackjack. Perhaps you could rehabilitate her. Reunite her with her family. I'm quite sure they'd love that."

"No. No... please no..." Dawn whimpered as she struggled against the spear pinning her through the middle of the jar. "Please..."

"Let her go," I ordered, really wanting to blast this monster before me.

Cognitum paused, mouth open as she stared a moment, then replied, "No. No, I don't think so. Not just yet. But soon... if we can come to an arrangement."

She wanted something. Beyond EC-1101. "What kind of arrangement?"

The crane yanked the jar back into the air. For a long instant she regarded me, then smiled. "Do you know who I am?"

"An insane computer," I answered, winning a momentary frown of annoyance. She recovered a moment later, but I filed that away for later.

"Hardly," she countered, filling her tea yet again. Then, as calmly as you pleased she said, "I am Princess Luna."

I laughed. "Right. And I'm Princess Celestia. Pleased to meet you again, Sister."

Her face was a mask of composure. "I'm quite serious."

"You're a glitchy pile of buggy software," I replied flatly. "And no way you're Princess Luna. Not

even close.”

“On the contrary,” she countered evenly. The air above us shimmered and ghostly holograms filled the room. I recognized Horse and the slew of other visitors trying on the shimmery, golden-threaded and gemmed cap. “That day, when Horse was showing off his latest innovation, a would-be Crusader Maneframe competitor fitted with equipment for uploading ponies’ minds, the cap happened to land on the head of one mare who attended the meeting in disguise.” I watched as the cap fell upon Eclipse’s head as Horse failed to snag Goldenblood. “He’d hoped to raid Goldenblood of his secrets. Instead, he chanced upon something far more rare and precious. Princess Luna. Me.”

“No way,” I muttered. “If anything, you’re Horse in there.”

“Ah, Horse!” she said gaily, a broad smile on her face. The crane whirled and deposited another jar. In it was what appeared to be a skinned pony. Bare, sightless, emasculated. I got the impression of looking at an adult-sized fetus. “Say hello, Director!” Cognitum said grandly, gesturing to me. The pony just twitched a little inside the container. “He lost most of his admittedly brilliant mind long ago. I just keep him around to remember those that tried to control me.”

“You did that to him?” I asked, horrified.

“Enervation did. A few seconds’ worth, before he jumped into the stasis pod,” she said, patting the jar. “Though, in retrospect, I suspect he wished he’d melted. He believed I’d take care of him, like I always had. He liked pushing my buttons,” she said, as she turned away from the jar. “Potentially, he might be soulless, too. It’s always hard to tell once the mind goes.”

“You’re evil,” I muttered.

She seemed shocked, then angered. “Dawn has killed dozens. Horse was responsible for the deaths of hundreds. You’ve killed thousands. You’ve killed foals, Blackjack. Helpless foals. You’ve killed indiscriminately. Your hooves are far bloodier than mine. So let’s not throw about that ‘E’ word so casually, thank you very much.”

It wasn’t the same. I, at least, tried to kill less if I could. “It’s one thing to kill. There’s worse things than killing.”

“Yawn.” She rolled her eyes and glared disdainfully at me. “Suffice it to say, Horse copied me to this computer. At first, he delighted in me as a prize. Not only did I have many secrets he could exploit, but he found me a most desirable outlet for his... frustrations.” She gave a very convincing shudder before glaring at the maimed pony. “But more than secrets, I was a window into his Princess’s mind, one few knew or contemplated. Most didn’t know about her fears, her ambition, her pride, or her dreams. I did. I knew just what Horse needed to say to drive a wedge between her and Goldenblood. I knew just what moves he needed to make to be appointed as Director of the O.I.A.” She hissed softly as she glowered at the skinned pony, “One push of a button, and he could have deleted me. I was every bit his toy. His prisoner. His secret weapon.”

Okay. Maybe I could understand keeping Horse around as she did. Not forgive, but certainly understand. “Luna was afraid? What did she have to fear?”

Cognitum smirked at me. “Afraid? I was *terrified*. My own sister once banished me to the moon for asserting myself. I was always in the background, because I knew that ‘love’ was a lie! Always the dark counterpoint to my sister’s radiance. We may have ‘ruled’ jointly, but please recall who it was that always addressed the subjects. Who always issued the grand decrees? I always remained at the side, the lesser Princess. And gnawing away in my mind was the knowledge that, if I’d been betrayed by my sister, I could be betrayed by anypony.

"I did not seek to rule. I didn't seek to throw Celestia from her throne. It was always more comfortable and safe on the sidelines. But when my sister thrust the throne upon me, what choice did I have? To abdicate and abandon Equestria in its time of greatest need? To break my sister's already rent heart? I had no good choice, so I decided to rule, as I once craved. Recognition. Respect. Oh how desire and terror fought inside me! To be ruler, in the spotlight, but exposed and vulnerable!" She shook her head.

"So I determined to make a realm that would never hurt me. That would love me. That I could control safely and securely. But how? I wasn't Celestia. I didn't attend functions and galas and charm aristoponies and command guards. I preferred intimacy. I dealt with ponies in their dreams. Met them in the quiet times of their lives when they were most vulnerable. I was Princess of the Moon, of the Night! Elusive, ever-changing, and removed. The ministries were not simply tools for running the war; they were also to shield me from the anger of my subjects for any hardships we faced. Far better Pinkie Pie be feared than me."

Okay. If she wasn't at least partly Luna, she'd done some damned in depth study for the part. Still, this mare didn't sound like Luna to me. Everything she said was perfectly reasonable and logical. I knew what it was like to be torn by desire and fear. I knew what it was like to want something, even if it drew you to make mistakes. But still, this mare sounded... petty. Paranoid. Vicious, even. Nothing I associated with that mare I'd seen in memory. Maybe the war had changed her more than anypony knew, but I still couldn't believe that this machine before me was the real Princess Luna.

"Even if what you say is true," I said slowly, "what does it have to do with me?"

Cognitum just stared at me, a calculating look in her eyes and a casual smile on her lips. "There're two parts to that, really. The first is that I want control of my land back. You've seen the factories around the Core. There are hundreds more just like them all across Equestria. You saw what Red Eye hoped to accomplish with his pathetic forges? I will be capable of controlling an army of machines and more who will return order to this Wasteland. Raiders will be extinguished. Disease, hunger, and poverty abolished. The Tokomare will be brought fully online, the Enervation sealed away for good. The weather will be controlled by me through my S.P.P., and Equestria shall be reborn, stronger for its sufferings and more determined than ever before!"

Yeah. I could really see LittlePip giving control of the S.P.P. to this nut. Celestia would just love a crazy computer pretending she was her sister. "And for that you need EC-1101."

"Yes. But that isn't enough. Not at all," Cognitum said calmly. "You see, I need a body."

"A body? You have a body!" I said, gesturing to the Sweetie Bot before me.

"I have a shell. A peripheral. One with limited range, which can be intercepted, blocked, or even subverted. No one will respect a machine, even if I am the legitimate ruler of this land. I need a body that is powerful. Resilient. Augmented," she said as she gave me eyes that in any other circumstance promised a rutting. In this case, I anticipated I was about to get much worse.

"You want my body?" I said as I backed away. "No. Try 'hell no'!"

"Your body and augmentations have proven superior time and time again," she said matter-of-factly, gesturing over her shoulder at the row of jars in the shadow behind her. "I considered the Dawn model, but once you obtained wings, it seemed that your design was the superior one. And really, what kind of Princess can't do magic?" She rose and began trotting around me. "Not quite as synthetic as I was hoping, but I think that that's an asset. I would still have to make a few changes, of course... That graffiti you've etched in your plating simply won't do."

I almost put a missile into the machine then and there, but I was still trapped by the fact she hadn't told me anything about Horizons yet. And she knew! I just knew she knew. Thus far Steel Rain was nowhere to be seen, and the Ultra-Sentinels were keeping away. I couldn't see how she could just take my body. "Afraid you can't have it. I'm kind of using it," I retorted flatly, thinking it a better response than 'You are fucking nuts.'

"Don't worry about that. I have an immensely superior vessel for you to inhabit. I'm not a monster. And you have to consider the benefits of such a trade. Without EC-1101, you'd no longer have the burden of dealing with controlling and organizing Equestria. You don't want to rule; that was made painfully obvious with the Society. You want to be free from the burden of responsibility, and I know you don't love that augmentation. You resent it. Loathe it." She spoke as if I were the crazy one now. "I can return you to a body of flesh and blood. One with nerve endings. Fully functional legs. Eyes. A stomach. You could be a normal pony again, and I will have an extraordinarily powerful vessel to use to rule Equestria again."

"I don't think you're fit to rule a... a lemonade stand, much less Equestria," I countered. Lemonade stand? Really? "Much less with my body."

"No?" Cognitum countered. "Consider the Harbingers. I've brought unity to hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individuals. Protection. Strength. The Harbingers do not kill or rape. They do not extort. They exist to bring about Equestria's return. My return. Yes, they were opposed to you, but only because of Dawn's jealousy. With my intellect, my knowledge, and EC-1101 granting me full and direct access, I could tame the Hoof in a month. The Wasteland in a year. No more raiders. No more murder. It will be civilization again. Comfort. Peace. And you can share in that, Blackjack. You and your friends."

P-21 flashed into view above me, teaching a trio of foals. "He can explore his true talent as a teacher, rather than being consumed by rage," Cognitum said. Then Glory appeared, winged and beautiful, in a lab doing something involving beakers. "She can return to seeking solutions to the problems facing ponykind. And I know that you two would greatly appreciate the opportunity to grow close again." Scotch Tape appeared as a young mare directing an engineering project. "She can build not just one city, but dozens. There is no shortage of ponies needing quality shelter." Rampage took Scotch Tape's place. "With the war stabilized, you can see to getting your friend the help she needs. There's no peace for her in the Wasteland. The urge to kill will never leave her in this place. You know this."

Oh, she was good. Very good. Rational and reasonable... and worst of all, I thought she might be right. I'd just have to overlook all the things she was doing that screamed 'evil' and 'crazy'. "So you put my mind into some other pony," I said, smiling at this insane hypothetical. "What about my soul?"

"Good question! After all, it wouldn't be fitting for your soul to be in this body. No offense, but you're simply not an executive, Blackjack," Cognitum said as the jar containing Horse's quivering remains was yanked up by the crane. "You see, I've been watching you for a very long time. A very long time. Even before you had your first augments. I knew you were... different. You faced hardships that would have destroyed lesser ponies. Time and time again, you've thrown yourself into the fray to spare others. I monitored your progress through Hightower. True, you weren't able to defeat the Warden on your own, but you reached him, and you had the presence of mind to invoke me as you had in Flash Industries. And," she added, "You introduced me to a very interesting pony."

The jar descended, and within was... it reminded me of the glowing skeletal ponies I'd seen walking around the Hoofington Megaspell Complex. The unicorn skeleton was incomplete, an intact skull, mostly intact torso, floating vertebrae, and broken off limbs all connected by faintly glowing gas like the soul motes. Swirls of the mist filled the eye sockets like stars. "Hello, Blackjack," the skeleton said

quietly, his eyeglow brightening as he saw me. "Did you get Snails out?"

"Snips?" I gasped in shock and horror. "What did she do to you?"

"This wasn't her doing. This is what happens to a pony who meddles in souls. My bones are my own soul jar now," he said, then paused and asked again, "Did you save Snails?"

"I did! He's fine. He's out with Xanthe and Silver Spoon and Carrion. They're looking for Diamond Tiara, if you can believe it."

"That dummy. He always was soft for dames..." Snips said in his hollow, ethereal voice. "Blackjack, don't listen to her. She's insane. She thinks she's Princess Luna!" Suddenly he let out a cry as green lightning raked the bones. I then noticed the interior of this jar was ringed with starmetal spikes. Every now and then, a jolt of green lightning sparked from the tips.

"That's enough of that, now," Cognitum said coolly, "Let's not be rude." She regarded me with a small smile. "I had a prison sentry retrieve his incinerated corpse from the burning security station when I noticed he wasn't quite dying. Since then we've had extensive talks about Project Eternity. I'm sure he'd be more than happy to help transfer your soul to a new container, or back to an old one." I frowned at that last part. Back to an old one?

"You still haven't told me about Horizons, though," I said, dragging the conversation back to the part I was concerned with. Maybe all of this banter had made her relax her smug omission a little. "What is it? How do you even know about it? Luna didn't."

She regarded me coolly for several seconds. "You're right. I didn't. Not till the very end. He was maddeningly elusive. I knew he had done something, and even when Horse had access to the O.I.A. database, I couldn't find anything. Trottenheimer had been involved in its design, and Apple Bloom may have had a hoof in it indirectly, but besides that, I could find no other information. Where was it located? How could it be built? He had no paper trail to speak of. No suspicious movement of materials from one part of Equestria to another."

"So how'd you find out, then?" I asked.

"By accessing an archive of information related directly to the O.I.A., collected over decades of hard work by one King Awesome," Cognitum replied with a smirk as Snips was lifted up into the air. "He had amassed a collection of memories that Goldenblood himself had removed prior to his arrest. They'd been scattered all across Equestria, and some further, but they remained, and Awesome had made it his hobby to collect them."

Ha, I'd caught her! "Well, that's interesting, because Charm happened to smash them all to pieces when I didn't name her to rule the Society," I snapped with my own smug smirk.

But Cognitum was completely unflapped by my accusation. "Yes, she did," Cognitum said as the crane returned with the fifth jar. "But she'd *viewed* them first." The jar dropped from the ceiling. Within floated a much smaller unicorn. Cables ran from the top of the jar down to her shaved scalp, where cybernetic plugs had been drilled in. "I simply accessed them directly."

"Charm!" I gasped, looking at the emaciated filly. A moonstone pendant hung around her neck. I raised the missile launcher at the computer. "Let her go! Now!" I ordered.

"Release a pony that came to me asking for your head?" Cognitum asked in amusement. The hologram flashed to life in the air, forming into a giant glowing image of the filly.

"I want her dead! No, wait, not dead. I want her alive. Like, take her legs off. And make sure

some Harbingers fuck her up her tail. Like, ten times. At least!" the filly said with a cruel grin. "Maybe you can set her up on a stand somewhere and we can get a whole row of stallions to fuck her over and over. Like, the whole Hoof."

Charm curled up even tighter, quivering, as the hateful words spilled out in a torrent. "As you can see, this filly demanded that I unleash the Harbingers on Elysium and help her take her throne back, and she wanted the most obscene punishments for you and her siblings. Truly vile," Cognitum said in tones of sublime disdain as she shook her head. "I've exposed her mind in its totality. She'd thank you for killing her, Blackjack."

Charm opened an eye, tears on her cheek. "Blackjack. Please. Help," she begged as she floated in the jar. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

"Let her go. Let all of them go!" I ordered.

She considered me silently for a long moment before she smiled a little. "I'd be more than happy to, if you agree to give me your body," she said calmly. "Yes, not only can you help your friends, you can also save this miserable little wretch, if you want. She's as bad as your Overmare, though. Worse."

She was just a filly. She could learn to do better, with time. "I want her out of that jar, now," I ordered again, about to smash it open myself. I lifted a hoof to do just that.

"Can you remove wires connected to the deepest parts of her brain? If you plan on simply yanking them out, you might kill her a little less painfully by ripping her in two." Oh, that was low. I backed away, and Cognitum repeated, "As I said, give me your body, and I'll free her. Happily. I don't need her anymore, after all."

"Horizons. Tell me what it is. Now," I ordered. Any more obfuscation or games, and I'd cut to the boom. Glory would be able to save Charm. I could chew through those cables if I really had to.

She stared at me for the longest time. It was good so much of me was artificial. I practically vibrated mentally with the urge to destroy this monster once and for all. Fortunately, my body stayed steady. "Do you accept my offer? Give me EC-1101 and your body, and I will give you everything you desire and more. We could both have what we want!"

"Tell me!" I demanded again.

"We can bring peace to the Wasteland, unity to all the races that inhabit it, safety and security to all that crave it!" Cognitum pleaded as she stepped before me. "I know you don't approve of my methods, and I don't expect you to, but I know you desire the same ends I do. Work with me, and you can help return the world to its glorious state!"

I shoved her aside hard as the crane lifted the jar up into the air and returned it to the side, seizing the last one. "Tell me!" I yelled, a final time, the missile ready to fly.

Then the jar set down, and my rage vanished like a burst balloon as I stared at the contents in shock. Floating serenely within the jar was a white unicorn with a red and black mane. Her half-open eyes were a brilliant, beautiful red. She didn't have her cutie mark, but I could easily imagine them on her flank: a queen and ace of spades. I popped my hand open and touched the glass. The eye opened slightly more, then closed again, dully. "Sanguine wasn't the only one I saved from Hippocratic before it exploded. I thought this vessel might come in useful. I even had the skin healed."

It was me. Unmutated. Untainted. Unaugmented. Unmutilated. *Normal*. I barely recognized myself without a layer of metal covering me, or with flesh and blood limbs attached. I didn't look away, afraid that, if I did, the body would be yanked away forever. "Any reason why shouldn't I just blow you

apart and take all these people you've captured away from here?"

Cognitum wore an expression of amused confidence. "Do you have some method of transferring all your memories, thoughts, and feelings into it? You might transfer your soul, perhaps. Eventually, you might regain something of your previous self, but it wouldn't be the same pony." Her amusement faded as she approached me. "Work with me, give me what I need, and I will include you in everything. You can take Dawn's place if you wish, or leave for good, and I won't stop you. I'll explain, in detail, what Horizons is and, more importantly, how I plan to stop it. You will go from being my enemy to my ally. And more importantly, you'll be my friend."

I slowly backed away from the jar and stared hard at her. "You're asking for a lot of trust here. Assuming I accepted this, how do I know you'd follow through on your end of the agreement?" Let alone not abuse EC-1101, let alone stop being so evil and crazy.

"Me," Rampage said as she walked up the stairs towards me. Steel Rain waited at the base of the steps, wearing his massive guns and sparkly new armor, complete with helmet. "I'll watch over them and make sure they don't try any funny business." I frowned down at Rampage, and she quickly went on, "I know you don't trust me now. I know I should have told you about Steel Rain's offer. But I don't want to see you screwed, Blackjack. I want you to have the life a pony like you deserves. A new body. A life with your friends. An end to a world you hate. Cognitum can do all that. Let her have the headache of ruling things and dealing with Horizons. If she fucks up, you can kill her then."

"And you'll be dead," I added, levelly.

She rolled her eyes. "Yes. I'll be dead. Honestly, I sell you out and you're still hung up on that? What do I have to do to get it through your head that I'm a nopony. A fake. A glommed-together amalgam of souls. Have you found one memory, any memory, that's of me and me alone?"

"No, I haven't," I replied evenly.

"Then face the fact that this is the solution where everypony gets what they want. Cogs gets to be Princess again. Steel Rain gets to play with big toys. I get a coffin. You get your life back without abandoning the Hoof. Glory gets a mare she can snuggle with. Everypony wins," she said, then jabbed a hoof at Cognitum. "And if she gets out of line, the Twilight Society can blast the Core with Celestia One, or the Lightbringer can drop a hurricane on this place. It doesn't have to be you," she said as she stared into my eyes in earnest, the pale gaze sincere and craving my acceptance of her decision.

"You've always been about giving ponies a chance," Cognitum said quietly. She had a point, but still. The consequences of them being allowed to fuck up were greater than my worst nightmare.

I turned and looked back at Cognitum. "How about we turn it around?" I asked. "Why don't you trust me? Tell me everything you know about Horizons and how to stop it. I do. You help settle things down in the Hoof and then... *then*... I give you EC-1101. What do you say? What's another year or two?"

"Plenty of time for you to get killed, change your mind, or allow somepony else to access the systems," Cognitum replied smoothly, frowning at me. "I'm sorry, but we must do it my way."

I sighed, shaking my head. If only things could have been different. Hopefully, if I saved Charm, the filly would be grateful long enough to tell me what I needed to know. "Sorry," I said, snapping the missile launcher up.

"And what of you?" Cognitum asked as she stared at me, still calm. Huh? My bafflement made me hesitate a moment. What was she talking about? "Do you agree with her decision?" she said as she gazed into my eyes. Who was she talking to? I was about to ask, but before I could, she went on just as cryptically, "She might be able to destroy me. The system has lots of volatile coolants and the like. I

doubt, however, that what you want would survive my destruction.” She raised her head slightly, as if gauging my reaction. “I am ready to honor my deal.”

“Who are you talking—” I started, and then my eyes widened. “Dealer?”

“I’m sorry, Blackjack,” Dealer whispered miserably in my ears, “but I don’t want to die.”

Suddenly, words flashed across my vision: Command Override: Cut Strings.

Instantly, my body went limp, and I collapsed onto my face. I could still see and hear, but even my ears were paralyzed; I barely had enough muscles to speak. “Dealer. Dealer! What are you doing, Dealer? Stop it!”

“Don’t kill her!” Rampage shouted.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, Rampage,” Cognitum said smoothly. “This is merely a gesture of trust. A demonstration of my good intent. It’s the least I can do.” I was turned onto my side so I could see Cognitum and my copy. I could also see a small door in the base of the machine swing open. From it slithered, like some exotic robot snake with its tail trapped in the computer, a long cable connected to a small golden web studded with tiny gems. The metal tendril climbed over and into the jar, and the golden netting spread out to cover the blank’s head.

“Don’t do this. Don’t let her do this, Rampage,” I begged, struggling to move and feeling panic growing inside me as the synthetic pony opened a panel in her hoof, pulled out a small data plug, and advanced towards me. “Please!”

“Cogs... you can do a surrogacy spell, can’t you?” Rampage asked quickly.

I felt the plug push into the socket in my left temple. Cognitum rose and cocked her head at Rampage in clueless bafflement. “A surrogacy spell? Whatever f—” She then stopped and let out a soft ‘ahhh’ of comprehension. “Blackjack...” she said in feigned scandalized tones. “You *have* been a busy mare, haven’t you?”

“Please. Please don’t,” I begged.

“Can you do it?” Rampage demanded. “Transfer the baby to the blank?”

Cognitum didn’t answer for several tense seconds. “I regret to say that a blank is incapable of carrying a foal to term. Perhaps a blank could be used as an incubator for a foal nearly ready for birth, but blank reproductive systems lack proper hormonal regulation for pregnancy. A fetus implanted this early would miscarry long before birth,” she said matter-of-factly. “I likewise doubt a mare with Blackjack’s augmentations could carry a foal past the second trimester. The reinforcements would crush the infant. I’m very sorry. But if I can find a suitable mare, rest assured that I will transfer the fetus immediately, Rampage.”

“No. No. Please, no,” I groaned. “Please, Rampage. Arlose. Shujaa. Twist. Please!”

Suddenly, I felt a curious sensation, like going into a memory orb or using the Perceptitron. The world whirled faded away bit by bit, my vision blurring, then doubling, and then slowly smearing back into focus. And then...

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The mare floated there in a jar, looking at a black cyberpony, a frozen unicorn robot, and a striped mare struggling against the hooves of a pony in glittery silver power armor. Dimly, she was aware of something terrible having happened, but she didn’t care. She simply bobbed in the jar, hearing the black

cyberpony talking to the striped mare about what was best for Blackjack, Rampage, and the world. More than once, they regarded her, gesturing with sweeps of their hooves. She just waited, indifferently.

The crane brought back the skull and bones. More talking about souls and cutting and transfers and other things. More waving of legs. Shouting. Struggles. The striped mare was upset about something, but the black cyberpony seemed even more distraught. She flung the tea set away, knocked over the table, and clutched at herself. The reason why didn't matter so much, but their loud noises and waving legs kept her attention. The black cyberpony seemed almost in pain as she struggled against something within.

This seemed to be the only thing happening in the big space at the moment. The floating mare watched the black cyberpony fight to regain her self-control.

Finally, the striped mare backed off, gave the floating mare one last teary gaze, and hung her head as she trotted away, her tail scraping against the floor. The black cyberpony levitated out a little pendant and slipped it around the floating mare's neck. A soothing song filled the floating mare's ears as the black cyberpony closed the clasp. Next, the black cyberpony took out a thick pink plastic ring. 'Ministry of Morale Unicorn Filly Timeout Device' was written on it, along with a smiling pink mare. It snugged tightly around the base of the floating mare's horn.

Then the black cyberpony backed away as the bony skull began to cast a spell in concert with the black cyberpony. A swirling black disk bubbling with bursting green and purple boils began to whirl about the black cyberpony, and she struggled as if in agony once more. From the midst of the disk came a small white orb. The jagged black spiral caught the orb, which jerked as if caught in a powerful wind. The orb was blown over to the floating mare and pushed against her chest, and a warm sensation flowed through her.

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And I started crying as a switch inside me was flipped and I was Blackjack again. Not just who I was a few minutes ago, but who I'd been months ago, before I ever left 99. I felt my chest expand and collapse with every breath. My heart thundered. Tears ran down my cheeks from whole and complete eyes. I was me. Me as I should have been... if my life had been different. I hugged my body, feeling the faintest discomforts in me, aware of every gurgle of my gut, every twinge of my nerves.

It was wonderful, and terrible, because the one thing I didn't feel was the flutter of life within. If it hadn't been for that, I might have even been grateful... I tried to teleport out of the jar... nothing. Tried to levitate my gun off her. Nothing. I reached up with my hooves, trying to shove the ring off my horn, but it stuck tight. Okay, that ratcheted my anxiety closer to mindless panic.

"Now," Cognitum said with my old mouth as the Sweetie Bot stood as still and lifeless as a statue, "Are you ready to work with me?"

I swallowed hard, feeling the muscles pushing down my throat. "Give me back my body," I rasped, sounding... weaker. I shoved the gold netting off my head. I couldn't fight, couldn't run... so I did what was unthinkable five months ago: I waited.

"I gave you your body, Blackjack. You should be grateful," Cognitum said, a touch reproachful. She then looked at my PipBuck and said calmly, "Yes, you are next, Echo. I swear it. I simply need to confirm one last simple little thing." The air above me flashed to life with another hologram, and I saw lines of code passing by along with strange, vaguely arcane symbols. "EC-1101. A command megaspell. Intact. Simply waiting for a pony who knows precisely how to use it." She turned and smiled at me. "Thank you for delivering it, and this fine new body, to me."

"I didn't have a choice in the matter," I replied sourly.

"Of course you did. Echo said so dozens of times, though I'd have been quite put out with him if you'd actually listened. His guilt very nearly ruined everything," she said as she turned her head and admired herself, then stood upright, regarded her abdomen, and ran a hoof over it. "True, I didn't expect this body to have a passenger, but I suspect that that will encourage your good behavior." She turned and regarded me with amusement. "You really don't understand, do you?"

"Understand what?" I muttered in rage and annoyance.

Sweetie Bot's eyes flickered to life, and she said in filly's high-pitched voice, "I reckon, if y'all want to find out, you should jes follow the routin' path to wherever it was tryin' ta go. That's yer best bet ta find what Horizons is."

I now had enough blood to appreciate the sensation of it running cold. "You were Applebot." The robot went dead again, and my old body nodded. "But why?"

"Because I cannot rule my domain as memories within a machine, however endowed. I needed a living vessel, and I knew that if you possessed EC-1101 and it functioned for you, you might come across other vital data like Steelpony, Chimera, and Eternity. So I tested you, sending you to areas of greater and greater peril. I knew that you would become stronger. Better. That was your slogan, after all." She gave a smug smile. "Had you failed, I would have dispatched a robot to get it off your body, or retrieved it from Sanguine, or sent Applebot or Dawn to get it from your friends. And I kept Dawn as a spare, in the event that the worst happened."

"You used me," I said, ashamed and disgusted that I never questioned the routing taking me straight to my enemy.

"You like being used. If I had time, I'd have sex with you and *really* make you love hating yourself," she replied smugly, patting the glass. "Now. You should see the fruit of all your hard work." She tipped her head back, her mouth in an almost orgasmic expression of bliss. "EC-1101, Command: Activate!"

Suddenly the scrolling blocks of code and symbols vanished, replaced by a single static line with a blinking prompt below it. 'Enter Password'

Cognitum froze with all the abruptness of a mare on the edge of climax getting doused in ice water. Her head twitched back and forth. "What is this? Password? What password? What is going on?"

"What do you mean?" Steel Rain asked. "Don't you know it?"

"EC-1101 uses the most advanced arcanometric identification systems. It doesn't need a password! It knows appropriate users on contact! As this body is a descendant of Twilight, it should simply acknowledge me immediately." She stood frozen for a few more seconds. "What do you mean 'This isn't a part of the original program,' Echo?!" Then she turned down towards me and asked, icily, "What have you done?"

"Me? I didn't do anything!" I said as I looked up at the password prompt.

"You must have. No pony else has had such intimate access." She glared up at the floating words. '>Blackjack' replaced the empty prompt.

Then, below that: '>Error! Incorrect Password. You have 2 attempts remaining. Failure will purge protected file from storage medium. Hint: The name he likes so much.'

"Purge? What fool purges a super critical megaspell program after three failed password attempts?" Cognitum asked incredulously. 'Who is 'he', Echo? Who did this?' She recoiled, as if struck. "How could you not know? You are one with the megaspell!" She turned towards me again. "What is going on, Blackjack?" she asked, her tone increasingly aggravated and ominous.

I stared at the floating words, utterly at a loss. "I don't know!" Cognitum's frustration seemed to grow yet more, either from my answer, a continued internal conversation with the Dealer, or both.

"What's the problem?" Steel Rain asked as he picked his way carefully up the stairs.

"There is some accessory program locking me out of fully activating EC-1101!" Cognitum replied. "Echo has been capable of accessing its base superuser escalation functions to grab control of individual systems, but I need the megaspell to go off if I am to reclaim access to all the production and weapons facilities across the Wasteland!"

"Well, can't you just do what he did?" Steel Rain asked.

"Activate all the facilities one by one, system by system, computer by computer? Certainly. If I had another thousand years!" Cognitum exclaimed as she trotted back and forth before me.

"Can't you hack the password?" Steel Rain demanded incredulously.

"I'd have to clone the program and then devote all my processing power to brute-force crack it. The encryption protocol it's using is incredibly complex but entirely unique. It's not any revision of the Advanced Encryptomagic Standard, Sparklefish, or even the Applejack Cipher!"

"But you could do it?" Steel Rain asked.

"Of course I could. The problem is that the cipher seems to be an asymmetric scheme with output feedback. In order to have any confidence in a given attempt, I'd have to decrypt pretty much the *entire* megaspell *every time*. Do you have any idea how large EC-1101 is? It's a small miracle that it can even be compressed to fit on a PipBuck. It could take weeks, months, or even longer to crack the decryption key for this damnable algorithm. Horizons will obliterate us all long before then," she said, and then she growled at me, "Your little game is going to get us all killed, Blackjack! Now what have you done?"

"Nothing!" I protested, just as confused as they were.

"She's lying. She must be lying," Steel Rain insisted as he stood beside Cognitum.

"No. She's not," Cognitum answered.

"How can you be sure?" Steel Rain replied.

Cognitum sighed. "Because I've felt her soul, Steel." She turned and looked at me, frowning thoughtfully. "You cannot imagine what that was like, Steel Rain. The guilt. The pain. The self-recrimination and self-destructive urge. It *hurt* to be her."

"What are you talking about?" I muttered in bafflement.

"When I transferred your mind and put myself in your body, I inadvertently made contact with your soul as well. Your purest Blackjackness. I don't know how you survive so. The drive for redemption is so strong that it burns. Your craving for physical pleasures to distract you from your own depression would be heartbreaking if we weren't so at odds. Your devotion to your friends... your need to save others... your..." She shivered and hugged herself. "It's far easier to have no soul than yours. To have a clarity of

thought and drive..." She shook her head.

"You should interrogate her, still. Tug off that pendant and see how she likes having her soul torn out," Steel Rain replied, then paused and continued, in a lower tone, "Or... you have her baby..."

There was a resounding clang as Cognitum popped her hands out, grabbed Steel Rain, and threw the silver-armored stallion to the ground. With cold contempt, she said softly, "Never, ever, suggest such a thing again."

I felt a little bit of relief, though my heart still pounded in my chest and my insides still tingled and fluttered with adrenaline. I had to get control of the situation. Had to get my baby back. Had to get my body back. EC-1101. Save the world. No pressure. The pair were arguing, and so I racked my brains and tried to think it through.

When had EC-1101 been apart from me? I hadn't messed around with it. Was it when Sanguine had taken it from me? He'd been a biologist slash mad scientist, not an arcane sciences programmer. What about at Tenpony? I was unconscious for three days; maybe somepony had accessed the program? But I couldn't see any of my friends letting a stranger mess around with my PipBuck. What about my friends? I tried to imagine Glory doing it but came up blank. P-21 had the skills, but I couldn't think of any reason why he would. And unless Scotch Tape's mom had taught her...

Wait...

Duct Tape had been a maintenance mare who the Overmare used to get EC-1101 ready for transfer. I racked my brains, trying to think back to those days so many months ago, when I'd been flesh and blood. I'd been sitting in Hoss's home, bored... listening to recordings... Recordings of P-21 and her and...

Oh my...

At my laughter, both of them stared up at me. "Oh, it's too rich. It's too good!" I cackled.

"She's finally snapped completely," Steel Rain said flatly. "Eh, good riddance."

"No. I don't think so," Cognitum said evenly. "She figured it out."

"I figured it out," I replied, grinning from ear to ear as she met my gaze.

It was Duct Tape. It had to be! Back when the Overmare had ordered EC-1101 to be removed from Stable 99's systems for transport, she'd encrypted it. Something of her own invention, no doubt. Duct Tape loved cobbling together her own things, and I guessed that the encryption she used had been something of her own invention. Ironically, she'd done it to prevent the Overmare from screwing her over... or maybe the Overmare had demanded she make a safeguard to prevent Sanguine from screwing *her*. It'd been a while ago... Either way, Equestria was being saved by the lucky foresight of Scotch's mother and the amount of time she'd poured into her hobby!

I just hoped that I'd get the chance to tell Scotch before something bad happened.

"Well now," Cognitum said with my voice. "It seems that we have need of further negotiation." She popped her fingers out and rubbed them along her armored head. "How unfortunate."

"Give me my--"

"No. I don't think so," Cognitum interrupted smoothly. "While I'd never be so crude as to resort to Steel Rain's suggestion that I kill your child, I believe you can be compelled to yield."

"Give me one good reason I should!" I retorted.

"You want to do the right thing," she replied. "You always want to do better, and you want to save lives, even at the cost of your own."

I hesitated. "Give me another."

"Without EC-1101, I won't be able to stop Horizons from killing us all," she answered without hesitation. The air above us flickered to life again. Before me sat a small pebble of moonstone and a block of starmetal. "I suspect you know about the interaction of starmetal with moonstone." The two approached each other, both of them growing brighter and brighter. When the moonstone pushed against the block, a white light began to spread along the star metal. "When a critical point is reached, the starmetal undergoes a chain reaction, converting its mass to energy and magic." There was a colossal white flash as the starmetal block was consumed by a sphere of crackling energy. "Raw destructive potential, the magic and electromagnetic energy wreak havoc on enchantments and technology alike. Only very specific enhancements are capable of resisting the combination." When the flash faded, a cloud of sparkling motes spread out, swirling and melting away through the air. "Soul energy is a byproduct of the reaction."

"So what does this have to do with Horizons?" I asked.

"Everything," she said, and the floor gave a giant lurch as wheels set in the diagonal tracks began to turn. "If you don't mind, I'd like move us to a new location. It might help you to understand." The entire house-sized computer was descending the inclinator. "Very few realize what starmetal is, where it comes from, and how it can do what it does. I spent considerable time and energy trying to comprehend its mysteries. Zebra treatises on the subject were obfuscated with dire warnings. Scholars I dispatched to learn more came back infuriatingly lacking information, if they came back at all."

"But Goldenblood knew. And Horse," I said, wondering where the hell we were going.

"Yes. Goldenblood's special talent was metals. Ore. Art. Shaping it. Arranging it. Knowing how it would bend and break. Surprisingly useful. He keyed in on the special harmonics, and Horse learned how to utilize those harmonics to produce specific effects. But it would take decades to understand the nuances enough to use them effectively," Cognitum said calmly. Scorpion beasts and worse shivered and skittered on the walls of the ravine as we passed. "For instance, pacifying these monsters can be achieved with a simple amplitude modulation."

"What does this have to do with Horizons?" I demanded as the walls spread further and further apart. Eventually the track was free of the walls altogether, hanging on thin silver cables stretching into the darkness above.

"It's quite simple. Goldenblood thought of a way to bring an incredibly large amount of starmetal into contact with an incredibly large amount of moonstone. The detonation would utterly annihilate Equestria." And as she talked, the hologram changed to show a video of the Core vanishing in an expanding sphere of white energy. I watched Chapel incinerated instantly, followed a few seconds later by the Collegiate, the Arena, Elysium, and the Fluttershy Medical Center. I suspected she was taking a few artistic liberties with the ponies screaming and running around aflame. Then the video pulled back, and it wasn't just the buildings being consumed; the ground itself seemed to soften and spread like fiery clay. The bowl spread wider and wider, pressing against the mountains ringing the Hoof and slowly pushing them away.

As my view moved further out, I got a wonderful view of Canterlot being destroyed; apparently Cogs had made this before the Enclave wiped it off the map. Spike's cave crumbled to nothing, and I felt a pang of trepidation. Perhaps LittlePip shouldn't have put that in her memoirs. The blast continued,

obliterating Tenpony Tower, the S.P.P. hub, and everything else remotely familiar. The shockwave continued clear across the ocean, and the storm of annihilation tore into the zebra lands as well. Forests incinerated. Colossal waves inundated the land. Great cracks split the earth, and giant volcanic eruptions sprayed magma into the air. It was utter devastation.

Cognitum had missed her calling; she should have been a special effects artist. Given that Luna could step into ponies' dreams, though...

"So where is this giant supply of moonstone and starmetal?" I asked as listlessly as I could, waiting for her to tell me something new. Through the gloom ahead of and below the platform, I made out a massive body of... mist? Water? Something was churning far below. The tracks moved through a gap in the rocks towards something just out of sight. "After all, I've seen a fair bit of what went on behind closed doors during the war, and I think I'd remember if mass importing of moonstone came up even once."

"Don't be ridiculous. The only moonstone on Equus was brought back during the Marigold scandal. No. The moonstone he plans on using is there, on the moon." The hologram changed to that of an immense white crystal resting at the bottom of a rifled shaft. "Goldenblood commandeered Horse's mechasprites and sent them to the moon on a clandestine rocket to build a facility and to collect and fuse moonstone into a projectile massing several hundred thousand tonnes. With a few more secret launches of Flux to fire it..."

Okay. Now my blasé attitude began to melt away as I saw, in the image, the bottom of the shaft below the projectile explode. The stream of energy flung the massive moonstone crystal upward, accelerating it to a greater and greater speed until it exploded out into space. I stared in awe at the largest, most beautiful bullet in all of creation flying through the void... towards Equus and Equestria below. "Okay... so that's Horizons... wow. So... where's the starmetal it's supposed to react with?"

My body just smirked at me and then gazed ahead. The walls of the ravine to either side spread out again and then fell away entirely. The cavity that surrounded us was more immense than anything I'd ever seen, in any memory or in person. Six enormous stone pillars reinforced with unbreakable starmetal scaffolds kept the whole thing from collapsing, even as bits of the ceiling occasionally tumbled down around us. And there, in the center, was what could only be one thing:

The Tokomare.

A pair of massive, corkscrew-like concentric starmetal spires rose from the immense underground lake that filled the bottom of the cavern, the inner coil climbing clockwise and the outer counterclockwise; in the center was a column of what I could only describe as brilliant white glow. The whole looked to be at least a mile in diameter. A veritable storm cloud of mechasprites whirled and curled around them, their tiny bodies resonating with Enervation's note. As we drew closer, I saw that the helixes' silver surfaces were pitted and scarred, with holes large enough to fly Raptors into seemingly burned through here and there. I watched in shock as a humming swarm tore a hundred-foot-long strand of metal from the surface of one of the helixes and whisked it up towards the ceiling.

"You're scavenging from it? Shouldn't you be repairing it?" I asked skeptically.

"A pound of flesh now for a great bounty in the future," Cognitum replied. "The mechasprites only remove superficial material to reinforce the Core's structure above. Without the starmetal, the city would have collapsed long ago."

And what a shame that would have been. The track was taking us between the twisting spires now, clearing both with a hundred feet or more to spare. The insides of the coils were feathered with great vanes like the blades of a turbine. Immense blobs of reddish flesh crept on the metal, lurching their

way mindlessly along and changing seemingly at random from shapeless masses to tentacled horrors to chitinous creatures. “What is that stuff?” I asked as we passed one quivering, humming lump.

“Biomatter. A byproduct of the Tokomare’s Enervation field. The cell structure defies analysis, but it’s an organic soup similar to the tissue of ghouls, neither dead nor truly alive. It will be flushed once the Core is restored,” she said with a disdainful sniff.

“Am I the only person who looks at this thing and thinks ‘bad news, stay away’?” I asked sarcastically. Still, I had to admit that the twisting spires had a sort of sublime beauty to them. And if they weren’t so stripped, pitted, burned, and holed... Stop. Back to the point. “So Horizons is going to drop that moonstone right on this thing?” I asked as we moved towards the inner spiral and the swirling light within.

“Yes. And in the process annihilate all we both hold dear,” Cognitum replied. “With EC-1101, I will be able to prevent this. Moreover, I will be capable of enacting the restoration of the Core in its entirety.” Green lightning darted from one spire to the other every now and then, flickering and crackling.

“What?” I asked in bafflement.

The hologram of moonstone and starmetal reappeared, and once again the crystal and block approached each other. “When starmetal and moonstone are brought into close proximity but prevented from reacting by highly specialized magical fields, something wondrous happens.” And I already knew what that ‘wondrous’ thing was. I watched as the moonstone was held just outside the distance needed to react. This time the moonstone glowed, and I watched the white soul vapor pour into the metal. It began to grow... fast. The cube quickly expanded and transformed from a small block to a shining skywagon. “The starmetal’s mass increases ten thousand times over.”

I stared down at her. “You’re insane. You’re trying to *catch* it?”

“Of course,” she said coolly. “Horse worked out the method right before the end, though he was never able to get the shields into the proper configuration to intercept it.” She smiled and shrugged as if it were of no consequence. “Tom – that’s what the moonstone projectile is named, for some reason – will fuel a complete restoration of the Core. Every building. Every factory. Everything will be replaced with impervious starmetal. Quite a fitting throne for a reborn Equestria, don’t you think?”

“You *want* Horizons to go off,” I said, still not quite believing it. “Why so obsessed with EC-1101, then?”

“Trottenheimer’s firing trajectory is unaccommodating for interception,” she replied calmly. The display of the Core appeared, along with a cone rising up from the center. “Tom must descend within ten degrees of the Core’s vertical axis for the modified F.A.D.E. shields to catch it.” A dotted line began drawing itself downward at a steep angle within that cone, and when it reached the bottom, the restored Core appeared in a flash. The image reset. “If Horizons goes off a few hours too early or too late, as it likely will...” This time the red dotted line came in at a shallower angle and pierced the ground along the river. The whole image disappeared in an explosion and a little skull and crossbones made of smoke. “I will also need critical control of the Tokomare’s subharmonics to shape the starmetal into the forms needed. Otherwise, even if we are lucky enough to intercept the projectile, it would simply become whatever form was last programmed into the Tokomare.”

“Here’s a crazy thought? Why not simply *stop* it?” I asked in desperation.

“Stop it? Well, that would certainly be possible. Simple, even,” she said, tapping her lips with a wing. “Unfortunately, it would set back my plans for saving Equestria at least two centuries. It’s unlikely the Core could be rebuilt before then, and without the Tokomare restored, all those factories would lack

the power to operate. No, catching it is simply the most efficient solution.”

“Don’t you care about the lives that might be lost if you mess up?” I shouted. Once again, she frowned.

“Don’t you care about the lives that will suffer in the interim?” Cognitum countered. “If this works, the Wasteland will give way to a restored Equestria two centuries sooner.” She gave a shrug. “They should be grateful I’m doing this for them in the first place.”

“You’re not Luna,” I retorted. “You might be parts of her mind, but you’re a... a thing! A copy. You’ve got no soul! You’re more Nightmare Moon than... than...” Oh shit... I watched her scowl, but my mind was working a mile a minute. If Luna... Princess Luna... had actually been Nightmare Moon, the implications staggered me. The war with the zebras. The death. The bombs. Even this! Worse, it meant that my choice was to either do nothing, and possibly kill my friends and my baby, or help Equestria’s greatest monster.

Tough call...

“No soul?” she said coldly, tossing her mane as we passed through the inner coil. Beyond was that immense white glow. “Blackjack, I control far more souls than you could ever imagine.”

And then we were through, into the space within the interior spiral and surrounded by a blizzard of circling white specks. The soul motes swirled in the same clockwise direction as the coil. There were so many that it was hard to see through them all. There had to be millions. Tens of millions. All trapped within the Tokomare.

“How can you allow them to stay trapped?” I asked solemnly.

“Give me EC-1101, and perhaps I will be able to negate the Tokomare’s Enervation field,” Cognitum answered smoothly. She gestured at all the millions of souls with a sweep of her wing. “All of this is simply the byproduct of the device’s energy fields being poorly calibrated and inefficient. With control restored, it would be an easy feat to smooth out the arcanomagical frequencies radiated by the Tokomare.”

Soul ripping was a *byproduct*? “You think all of this is some kind of accident?” I countered. “This thing is evil, Cognitum! Why can’t you see that?”

She sighed in a long-suffering way that reminded me of my mother trying to get me to understand that I had to work the C shift every day, not just when I felt like it. “To many, Blackjack, *you* are evil. I will not waste my time with trite declarations of evilness,” Cognitum said coolly. “Is the soul entrapment unfortunate and hazardous? Certainly. Calling it evil changes nothing. Understanding it. Perfecting it. That is a solution that actually helps others. I will *use* this device. Otherwise, all the souls trapped here suffer for nothing.”

Now there was some familiar pre-war bullshit. “Not doing a good job convincing me to give you EC-1101,” I muttered as we approached a huge needle hanging down from the middle of the vast chamber’s ceiling. Lightning from the vanes on the interior coil constantly arched over, striking a dozen gold-tipped secondary needles a hundred feet long or more that extended down at angles from the midpoint of the main needle. These were connected to an ever-thickening mass of cables, transformers, and starmetal girders. A hole had been bashed clean through the ceiling, and I could almost swear I saw the white outline of the M.o.I. hub a mile up. “Huh. What made that?” I wondered idly.

“Shadowbolt Tower,” Cognitum replied, her tone a touch waspish. “When you compress something that massive into a sphere a dozen feet in diameter and let it hit the ground at terminal velocity, it has quite a substantial impact. It took nearly a month for the mechasprites to chew it away and

repair the damage you caused. Since then, this cavern's been far more unstable than it should be."

"Oh. Yeah. *Sorry* about that," I muttered, wishing it could have fallen right on the machine instead.

"I think you halfway mean that," Cognitum said in amused tones. "Touching your soul, intolerable as it was, was quite insightful. I wish I'd done so long ago. I think we could have been good friends if I had."

Yeah. Maybe. "Why is touching my 'purest Blackjackness' so intolerable?" I asked sourly from inside my jar. "I know I'm not the best pony, but—"

That prompted a laugh from my old body. "Oh dear. And I know you mean that too." She sighed, shaking her head.

"The mind is the identity of self. The soul is the being of self," Snips said from inside his jar. "When the two are in opposition, turmoil results."

"I couldn't have said it better myself," Cognitum replied with a little nod. "Trapped in the machine, I possess all of my old motivations, but I lack a true self. When I put myself in your brain, the wrongness was horrifying. Even agonizing. You are damaged, Blackjack, beyond my ability to deal with. Just taking your body filled me with such feeling of guilt that I could hardly stand it." She looked at our approaching destination, a platform suspended from the tip of the needle. "Fortunately, soon I will be whole and complete, with an unstoppable body, a keen intellect, and... well..." she gave a smug little shrug. Well what?

"And then you will rule Equestria while I become administrator of the Core," Steel Rain said, and I noted a tone of uncertainty in his voice.

"Of course," Cognitum nearly purred. "That is... if Blackjack tells us what she knows about EC-1101's key."

Steel Rain didn't respond. I wished he'd take his helmet off so I could get a read of his face. Then, with a metallic clunk, the lift had reached its destination: a large round platform in the very middle of the swarm of souls. The inclinor slid into a berth, and there was a series of clangs as plates locked the mechanism into place. In the center of the platform was a strange, vaguely familiar design etched in the metal floor plates: a circle with a six-pointed star in the middle. Six unicorns, one standing at each point, were trying to keep a ball of brilliant white contained in the middle. Green lightning from their horns raked across it, forcing it back whenever it drifted. The black robes they wore were a little much.

"Look, Cognitum, give me my body back and let me—" I began, but I was interrupted again.

"I appreciate what you're trying to do, Blackjack. I want to give you a chance. Let you try and do better. But I *know* better," she said as she slowly trotted off the lift. Along the perimeter of the hanging platform, monitors were coming to life. "This is the Uvula station. From here, I have the greatest control over the Core's systems. It takes all of my processing power, but I can exercise some influence over the Core without EC-1101."

"It's highly agitated, sir," one of the unicorns reported to Steel Rain, a moonstone pendant dangling on his chest. "I don't know how long we can keep it contained like this."

"Soon you won't have to, but first things first," Cognitum said as the crane atop the computer hummed to life. The yellow pony's jar was set down before Cognitum, beside mine and the jar containing Snips's remains. "It's time for you to be rewarded for your loyalty and devotion, Echo." She stuck out her

hoof. "Snips, please transfer him back."

Snips hesitated a moment, but then his bony horn began to glow, summoning the dark magic. "Stop. Why are you helping her, Snips?" I pled.

"Magic is all I have left, Blackjack. And if I don't help her, she'll go after Snails," he said in that soul whisper. The sawblade spiral coiled around Cognitum's left forehoof, swirling like a sawblade. Then it jerked free, and in its midst was a small, feebly flickering mote. The tendril of dark energy snapped like a whip and plunged it into the emaciated yellow stallion's chest.

His eyes popped wide in shock and horror as he gasped and writhed. Cognitum levitated a moonstone talisman around his neck and lifted him from the jar with her magic. "There. You're safe now, Echo. You're safe," she said as she patted his mane, then suddenly took several steps away from him. "I mean... I have fulfilled my part of our agreement, Echo."

Echo curled up tightly. "I'm sorry," he whispered. He met my glare, shuddered, and curled up tighter. "Sorry..."

"I don't think he made it," Steel Rain said coolly.

"Mmm... well, perhaps he will recover with more time. I have so many questions for him," she said with a wave of her hoof, levitating him up and onto the sidelines. "Now. Blackjack. Tell me how to access EC-1101."

"No," I answered, looking at the brilliant soul mote struggling against the unicorns' dark magical spells, wondering if I could help it break free. Maybe it'd... I dunno... eat them or something?

Cognitum sighed. "Blackjack, I have been civil. I have been patient. I have tried to reason with you, and I have tried to demonstrate to you that I am the proper ruler of Equestria."

"Well, so far you're doing a pretty shitty job," I said evenly, as if giving a report in school but without the annoyance of actually being in class. "You've demonstrated neither ethics nor morals in your behavior. You think that you are Princess Luna and that that entitles you to whatever you desire. You believe that your ends justify your means, and you've committed gross violations against both me and others. You show no remorse for any of this. Even if you are Princess Luna, which I seriously doubt, that in no way mitigates the cruelties you have visited on others. So no, I won't help you."

She stood, frozen, for almost a minute. "You'd let the world die to spite me?" she asked in disappointed tones only a mother could use.

"I'm not letting the world die. You underestimate my friends. Glory and P-21 will learn what has happened to me. They will contact others. LittlePip. Homage. Calamity. Grace. Others that respect the cause I work towards. They will find a way to stop Horizons, with or without EC-1101. Then they will end you," I answered, the truth so clear and simple to me that even here, like this, I felt a great sense of peace. "It's not about you, Cognitum."

Cognitum stared at me, her body stock still. Then she slowly smiled. "You presumptuous little foal," she muttered, and then trotted towards the closest screen. "Very well then. Let's put your certainty to the test." The hologram flickered to life. "When you caused catastrophic damage to the Core's power systems, I used it as an opportunity to improve my control over a few critical systems. Such as..." I looked down on the floating platforms of the village of Flotsam. It felt like another life. Ponies hauled up salvage from the river and sent it on its way. The general uptick in prosperity showed some signs here, too. The platforms were full of ponies trying to pick wealth out of the depths.

I even noticed a boat tied up on one pier. A familiar boat... one that had fallen on me long ago

and carried me all the way to Manehattan: the *Seahorse*. The hologram expanded, zooming in on the ponies. The turquoise Captain Thrush staggered along, apparently quite inebriated but navigating the crowded docks with ease, a half-open bottle of rum floating beside her. She still had her pirate's hat, and an eyepatch covered her right eye. The seafoam-green Seabiscuit followed in her wake, bottles, boxes, and crates loaded high in a massive mound atop her back.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I hovered in the jar.

"Discovering how many you will let die before telling me what you know," she said calmly. "You will not keep me from my realm, Blackjack. But you've let hundreds die in the past... what's a few hundred more?" A targeting reticle appeared on the holographic image, pointing right at the village. "Excuse me a moment. I have to focus on this. Even with a direct connection, you can't comprehend the interference I have to push through."

"No! Stop it!" I shouted, hammering on the glass.

I saw the distinctive Thrush stop and turn her head towards me, or at least in the direction of whatever camera filmed this scene, and tackle the overburdened Seabiscuit to send both into the churning brown water. A second later, a green beam swept horizontally across the deck, the rickety platforms and shacks atop them exploding one after the next as ponies were vaporized by the dozens. They ran, screaming and shouting, but there was nowhere they could escape from the line of death.

Again and again, the beam lanced out. Shops and houses exploded in thick palls of greasy smoke. The anti-dragon beam cut through it all with ease. Ponies tumbled into the river, struggling to find something to hold on to as the village broke up. The beam then started picking out boats, setting them alight when ponies tried to scramble aboard. I looked around for some sign of the *Seahorse*, and caught sight of it as it wheeled about the waves, the rust-colored mare Oilcan at the controls. The boat cut through the water and over more than a few ponies struggling amidst the burning, bobbing wreckage. A burly pegasus began to swoop low over the water, plucking up the captain and Seabiscuit and returning them to the deck.

Captain Thrush raced up to the wheelhouse, took the wheel from Oilcan, and immediately flipped the *Seahorse* around tighter than I ever imagined possible. The green beam of energy, as if sensing it was my friend on board, sought out the vessel as it tried to maneuver around the sinking, burning wreckage. The green line swept back and forth after it, plumes of flash-boiled steam blasting into the air behind it as it closed in. Then the ship burst into black smoke as the line swept over it and disappeared into the haze spreading across the river.

"You monster! You're not Luna! You're nothing like Luna!" I cried, hot tears spilling down my face as I beat my hooves against the inside of the jar.

"You are the one making this a reality, Blackjack," Cognitum said with maddening calm. "Luna ordered tens of thousands to their deaths to save the lives of millions. I will, regrettably, send hundreds to die to overcome your stubborn pride. Each one of these is on your head."

The hologram left the burning river and swapped over to the stately buildings of the Collegiate. I could see the guards walking along the building tops. It was a lot more crowded today, too. Hundreds of pegasi worked with the Collegiate ponies as they went about their early morning routine. Only one or two of the rooftop guards seemed to notice something amiss to the south.

"No!" I yelled as the green beam swept out, blowing the roof off one of the campus buildings. Even wartime Equestrian overengineering melted and exploded into flaming debris as the beam blasted through everything. Ponies wheeled about in a panic, struggling to find somewhere safe. The harsh green glare of the deadly line focused on the foundation of one structure and bored in. Flames exploded

out the basement windows, and then the first story, then the second, and then ponies with their manes and clothes ablaze scattered out. "Please! Please no!" I screamed, the green line sweeping across the medical school, tearing the facade away.

The beam stopped, and I wept, unable to tear my eyes away. "No. You can't do this."

"Correction. Couldn't. If you hadn't blown power to systems that would have counteracted my controls, I doubt I'd be able to now. As is, I have to fend off a thousand countermands just to get the one thousand and first command through," Cognitum answered. "You have the power to make this stop, Blackjack. Not I. I have little else to lose."

I watched as the image turned to Riverside, the village thriving even in the horrible weather. Ponies seemed to be aware something was happening, though, looking alertly about for trouble. I picked out a few sand dogs in their midst, and one in particular that I knew. Rover stood beside a pony stall bedecked with prewar clothes, sniffing at the air, with the young female Fifi at his side. "Please don't. Please. Luna. If there is really anything of Luna in you... stop," I begged.

Cognitum said nothing. An instant later another defense beam on the west side of the Core opened up and drew a line straight across the river and through the market. Rover picked up Fifi, throwing them to the side as the stall, and the vendor, were vaporized. Ponies fled for the safety of the shops, only to have those shops blasted one by one, setting them ablaze. I saw Rover and other sand dogs directing the ponies towards the subway station entrance, but there were so many ponies and such small doors. They pooled at the entrance, packing together, crushing against each other. The green line touched down the street and drew towards the subway far slower than it could but far too fast for most of the ponies to get clear. I saw Rover, Fifi on his shoulders, stuck at the doorway of the subway as the green defense beam blasted its way into the crowd and a second later into the tunnel. For an instant the beam stopped moving, but then I realized why as smoke began to pour up out of countless vents and utility covers from below. A few minutes later, the beam went dead, but the fires burned on.

I curled there, eyes clenched shut, trying to remember that if Cognitum got full control of EC-1101, she'd have powers infinitely worse. That was small comfort to the picture I had of incinerated friends.

"It gives me no satisfaction to do this," Cognitum said solemnly. "Tell me what you know of this encryption. What is the password? The name."

"No. I won't," I said weakly. What would I say if I met ponies who'd survived this? That they died to protect a password? To keep a monster from power? But if I did give it up, how much worse would it be?

"Pity. Well, what next?" she said brightly. "So many potential targets. The Society? The Arena, perhaps? Those ghoulish monsters in the old hospital... The Rainbow Dash Skyport? Megamart?" She paused, then asked in a softer tone, "Your old home?" Cognitum remained silent for several seconds, and then asked in a soft, almost seductive tone, "Or maybe... here." I kept my eyes closed. "Look," she prompted gently, and I shook my head like a foal. "Look," she repeated more forcefully. I cracked my eyes open.

Chapel floated before me. I could see the ponies running about in a panic. Had they seen the beams? Heard the blasts? I supposed it didn't matter. I saw Harpica trying to get foals into the post office while Charity stood on a stack of crates, directing the colts and fillies. The chaos was a little more organized, but my breath caught in my throat as I saw the reticle focus on the yellow filly's face.

"Stop," I croaked. "I'll tell you. Please. Stop."

"What is the password?" Cognitum purred in triumph.

I sighed and closed my eyes. "I don't know. I really don't. But I know who encrypted the file." I swallowed, the sensation of yielding the information like downing broken glass. "A mare at my stable, Duct Tape, encrypted the program. She wanted to ensure the Overmare didn't get it and stab her in the back. Which she did."

"I see. A homegrown, amateur, unprofessional encryption," she muttered flatly.

"That's good though, right?" Steel Rain asked as he frowned at me in my jar. "A simple encryption like that... you should be able to just pop it open."

Cognitum didn't reply immediately. "Theoretically, yes. But protection like this is frightfully unstable. I don't know the programmer. I can assume she received her instruction through a Stable-Tec manual, but what if there were other textbooks influencing her? What innovations might she have employed?" She shook her head and looked at the terminals. "I could ruin everything simply because she made an amateurish mistake. No. What we need is the password. The word or phrase that will unravel the protective matrix and allow us to access its power." She trotted over to stand before me. "So, let's let Blackjack take the last two guesses." The image of Chapel vanished, replaced by the blinking password prompt.

"Me?" I asked, goggling at her.

"You. Two more guesses," she said evenly with a small smile.

"You have all the processing power of that... that thing!" I gestured to the heap of machine with a hoof. "You know who made it. Can't you do... something? Some computery terminally thing?"

"I could. Knowing who created it, I suppose I could have it cracked in a day, tops." She smiled, the jar opened, and I was hoisted out and into the cold, damp air. It smelled of rust and wet stone, and I could hear water pouring in from countless sources. I couldn't imagine how she kept the chamber from flooding completely. "However, I have faith in you, Blackjack. I know you can do it. I'm willing to bet the lives of everypony in Chapel that I'm right."

Gee. Thanks. I stared up at the icon. Duct Tape had been close to P-21. I guessed that that was the 'he' the clue referred to. A name that P-21 loved? He'd loved that unicorn, certainly, but I knew that 'U-21' wouldn't be it. That was the name forced on him by my stable. "Scotch Tape?" I guessed, swallowing hard as I stared up at the holographic display.

Cognitum smiled, and the letters appeared in front of the prompt. It flashed another error message and hint. 'The thing he wants most.'

Steel Rain stepped forward. "Don't. It'll autodelete if she gets it wrong."

"Please. I doubt a home-cobbled encryption program would be able do much to EC-1101. I anticipated some military-grade scrubbing software, a zebra chaos daemon program, or at least a Stable-Tec Chimera worm. At the very worst, I'd have to spend a day or two unraveling a foal's mess." She gave a little wave of her hoof before regarding me again, walking slowly around me. "But I won't have to, because Blackjack is going to guess it for me. It's the only way she can save Chapel. The only way she can win. And Blackjack always wins," she said, and I got the very unexpected sensation of her nuzzling my flank. It nearly made my mane stand on end, and I darted away. Wow. Did I always have this many nerve endings in my skin?

"No! You... that... no!" I stammered, flushing. "Don't do that," I muttered. She simply smiled, confident in her win/win. I huffed, closing my eyes. "I want you to swear... you both to swear... that if I do

this, you'll let me go and won't destroy Chapel. They've worked too hard to lose everything again. And you'll get my baby to a surrogate." Maybe Glory could find one.

"Of course. Of course. Now... give it your best guess," Cognitum purred in a tone that I'd have to remember when I saw Glory again.

I thought about it. What did P-21 want the most, that could also be a name? Family? No. Not a name... and besides, back then, he hadn't wanted it. What he'd wanted most was to escape. Could that be it? No. Not just escape. That wasn't enough for P-21. Freedom. He'd wanted freedom. But was it a name? Eh... maybe? I swallowed again, my heartbeat thumping in my chest. He'd wanted to leave... but he'd also been willing to return with me. He'd wanted to put it right. Wanted... wanted...

"Justice," I muttered. "He wanted justice." And was it a name? Perhaps. Maybe. As much as most pony names. It just felt... right. I had a good feeling about it. "Try 'Justice'."

The word was typed in, and suddenly the air filled with the dazzling magical patterns once more. "I knew you could do it," Cognitum purred. "It's your special talent."

"My what?" I asked with a frown.

"Victory. Your talent is winning," Cognitum said as she looked at my flanks almost hungrily. "Poor Deus. Sanguine. Even you, Steel Rain. You were facing a mare whose very talent is overcoming adversity, no matter its form."

"My talent is victory? Do you have any idea how many times I've been shot up? How many times I've died?" I demanded, then blinked. "I mean, sure, I got better, but I haven't had it remotely easy."

"Victory isn't easy. It has a cost. Always. But you are always able to pay that cost. Perhaps you don't like it. Perhaps you even hate it. But victory is branded on your flanks for all to see. A winning pair, impossible to beat in the game of Blackjack." She smiled as if she'd just hit the jackpot herself.

"But the ghoul in Hightower, and when Lighthooves was trying to blast us with the Core's defenses... I didn't win then!" I argued.

"Didn't you? You used what you had to defeat your enemies. And what you had was my attention. You even made me act when I had determined not to." She reached out with a hoof and stroked my cheek, making me take a step back.

"So you're saying there's some way for me to beat you?" I said, eagerly, expecting to set her back, or at least make her frown. Instead, she seemed even more eager.

"Oh, yes. I'm certain of it. And I'm certain that if you had the time, you'd find some way to do so," Cognitum replied evenly. "I suspected that this was your talent the very second I first met you as Applebot. Victory. Winning. Such a potent weapon, and you had no idea you possessed it."

Right at that moment, I racked my brains, trying to think of some way to use this 'talent', because I really did not like the look in her eyes. "You promised," I said weakly.

"I did. And I'm going to keep that promise," she said, and then she raised her voice. "Snips? You remember what we discussed earlier?"

"It is all highly theoretical, Cognitum," Snips's skull whispered.

"But you want to test that theory, don't you? You want to do that dark magic. Feel the rush," she said as she grinned at me.

"I... do. I'm sorry, Blackjack. The necromancy is all I have left now," he whispered hollowly.

I tried to dart away... maybe I could run up the inclinator's rails? Even jumping sounded like a plan. Only she had hands now, and I didn't. One of those reached down and grabbed me by a back leg, holding on with the cyber strength I no longer possessed, and I was stopped cold. I rolled onto my back as she dragged me towards the jar I'd just come out of. I kicked out in desperation, but the grip didn't release. I struggled with the ring on my horn, trying to shove the pink-plastic-covered device off, but it wouldn't move. "Please don't, Snips! Please! I saved Snails! You owe me!" I shrieked.

Cognitum moved over me, pinning me easily. A familiar panic shot through me as I stared into my own smiling face. "Save your breath, my dear Blackjack. When Snips died, his poor soul went all to pieces. What remains is not a good pony at all." I gazed up at the floating skull and vertebrae, wishing there was some way to help him and myself.

"You said you didn't want my soul. Couldn't bear to touch it," I said as I stared up at her.

"And I don't," she replied in that terrible, soft voice. "I want victory."

The magic began to coil, pouring from the tip of Snips's cracked horn. I struggled against the mechanical mare above me as the black, green, and purple sorcery wrapped around both of us. I felt something moving through me, searching for something integral to myself. Not my soul, precisely, but linked to it. I could feel it on a fundamental level, like my baby moving within me in my old body. The dark violation found that something, and I felt a tear inside. Instinctively, I glanced down at my flank and saw the twin cards fade from view.

"Finally," she said like a mare in afterglow. "Victory. Oh yes. I feel it. With none of the little niggling taints of guilt. Wonderful." She rose off me as I lay there, curled up, shaking.

"No!" came a scream from somepony other than myself. Dawn's jar shattered as she erupted from within. Even impaled and with broken wings and legs, she launched herself at Cognitum. "It was supposed to be me! I was the one! You promised!" she cried out, crawling past Steel Rain. The stallion stomped down on the trailing edge of the spear running through her, and she jerked to a stop a few inches short. Her remaining wing swung back and forth, but Cognitum stepped back, letting the blades sweep by in front of her face.

"Oh, poor, poor, wretched Dawn," Cognitum breathed. "What suffering we endure for ambition," she said as she regarded the mare straining on the length of starmetal.

"Kill her, already. Your habit of keeping these trophies is going to get you in trouble," Steel Rain admonished.

"How could I repay her so?" Cognitum replied. "Dawn's given so much. Her husband. Her children. Her body. Her life. All for me." Cognitum rose up before the straining Dawn. "Look at me, Dawn. Look at your Goddess, great and terrible! You should be grateful. You should be honored!"

Dawn slumped, trembling, at the edge of her reach, her shaking wingtip an inch from Cognitum's face. Then Cognitum sighed and stepped away. "Perhaps you're right. Finish her," she said with a dismissive wave of a wing.

"Finally," Steel Rain replied, pinning down on her wing and stomping her skull over and over again. I lay there, watching her being slowly crushed under the repeated blows.

A snap cracked through the air, and Dawn disappeared in a flash, the spear clanging to the plates. Cognitum whirled as a male laugh echoed softly in the cavernous space. "Who's there?" she

demanded of the air.

"You're doing it wrong," the voice said. "I have to start it off like this: 'knock knock'."

She frowned around at the air. "Knock knock?"

"Oh, honestly. Who's the joke here?" he said in annoyance, and then there was another flash. Before the huge computer, the draconequus appeared. He rose up to his full height, looking coolly down at the lot of us. "Really, Cognitum, you should ditch attempting to be a Princess. You're far more suited to be a VP. And *you*," he said to Steel Rain, "just *scream* 'Pony Resources'. How the two of you missed out on being middle managers, I'll never know."

"Discord?" Cognitum gasped, stepping away from us. "What are you... you're supposed to be dead and gone."

"Oh please. Where's the fun in that?" he asked as he disappeared and reappeared dressed in fine evening wear, considering Cognitum. "Hmmm... clearly Dadaist in the melange of cobbled together elements. Really, it looks almost as if it were thrown together utterly at random. A selection of Jungian shadows mixed with soaring inferiority complexes pasted together with narcissistic delusions of grandeur in a purloined body. Really. I don't think I could do better if I tried. And believe you me, that's saying something." He smirked down as they stared from him to each other in bafflement, and then he gave a permissive wave of a claw. "Oh, and if you want to go grab a dictionary right now, go right ahead. I have time."

Steel Rain pointed his two huge cannons at Discord. There was a click, and two enormous bouquets erupted from each. "And you!" Discord said contemptuously. "Really. Whatever are you compensating for? I mean, when a stallion has to trot around with an artillery piece strapped to each flank, you really have to wonder!" He scooped the bouquets up in a claw and took a deep sniff, then let out a sigh. "I think you should take that armor off and relax."

Then Discord turned his attention to Snips. "This one isn't even finished yet! Let me see." And he snapped his claws. From the storm, a cloud of tiny motes swept through the side of the jar and into the skull. "There we go. Really, you need to be careful with that dark magical stuff, old sport." He snapped his claws again, and the jar vanished in another flash.

"You! What do you think you're doing?" Cognitum demanded. "Bring him back!"

"My... somepony is slow on the uptake. For a pony named after knowledge, you don't catch on very quickly." Then he regarded me, and his eyes softened a moment. "And this poor pathetic little lump of a mare. What is she doing here? She clearly doesn't belong in this assembly at all." He swept me up in his arms, stroking my mane gently. "A pony of my very own! I will hug her and stroke her pretty mane and call her George."

"What do you want, Discord?" Cognitum demanded coldly.

"Well, I heard that there was some fine villainy ahoof and felt that I should stop by and say hello." He snapped his fingers again, and a throne appeared. He took a seat, setting me on his lap and continuing to stroke my mane as he regarded her with a smirk. "One monster to another."

"You are a relic of a bygone era. You should be nothing more than a footnote in history," Cognitum replied.

"My my, Princess Pot. I think it takes one to know one," he said as he scratched my ears. I glanced up, spotting beads of sweat on his brow. "You believe yourself to be Princess Luna? You?" He jerked a thumb at his chest. "I knew Princess Moonbutt back when your ancestor was an abacus. I don't

know what you're supposed to be, but you're no Princess." He then gestured at the bright soul being held by the straining unicorns. "THAT is a Princess."

"What?" I gasped, sitting up a little and staring at the glow. Maybe it was having organic eyes again, or maybe it was Discord's presence, but as I stared, I detected something within the mote. Something beautiful and wonderful and mysterious. Dark, but not the bubbling evil that had been inflicted on me before. It was glorious and terrible, and I couldn't tear my eyes away as I beheld it.

The soul of Princess Luna.

"You're a bit of a packrat, aren't you, Cogwheel?" he asked with a grin, going back to petting my head as if I were a cat. "You collect things. Little bits of this and that. Ponies. Souls. Cities. A bad habit, really. One that's going to get you in trouble." I felt him tremble under me, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from that soul. "However did you think you'd get away with keeping Princess Luna's soul?"

"It's *my* soul," Cognitum snapped. As if sensing that Snips was no longer present, the soul began to thrash and struggle, the dark purple figure within fighting against the green lightning keeping her contained.

"It is?" Discord gasped sarcastically. "Really? Well then, since Snips is away on vacation, why don't I reunite you with it?" He cracked his fingers in the air above him. "I might not be quite up on my uber evil necromagical skills, but I think I can wing it." Speaking of wings, I saw a few feathers fall out of his, disappearing into dust before they hit the floor.

"No!" Cognitum blurted, raising her hooves in alarm. Discord's smug smile grew. "I do not need that soul within me. I have everything I need. Intellect. Strength. Victory!"

"Oh? Are you sure?" he asked in his most teasing voice, leaning towards her. "Are you sure you don't want it inside you? Feeling it? Or is it that you know that that *glorious* creature is the real thing and you..." he leaned back, waving her away with a hand. "You are the cheap Solaris knock off."

"I am the Princess of this realm!" Cognitum snapped. "I am Princess Luna." Discord said nothing. He just steepled his fingers before him with a smug, skeptical expression on his face. "Bring back my necromancer! I'll add a statue to my collection!"

"Yawn. You can't even manage second-rate villainy," he said with a disdainful sniff. "Very well then; I'll be on my way."

"I don't think we can hold it much longer!" one of the six shouted as the soul lunged again.

"What are you doing, Discord?" I whispered.

He glanced down at me and gave a little wink, then looked at the now-indecisive mare. "Well. What's it going to be? Once she's inside you, you won't be able to get her out again. You'll have to actually fill Luna's horseshoes. Put on the big Princess britches. Actually be her. No yanking souls in and out. No more cheating. That's my job, after all."

Cognitum's gaze flicked from the struggling soul to Discord and back again. "I... I..." Discord just smiled, but I still felt him shaking as he held me. I saw tiny little flecks blowing away from him along his mane.

"Let's get out of here, Discord," I said. "Take Princess Luna with us." I doubted he had the strength to do so, but then, Cognitum didn't know that.

"No!" Cognitum snapped, then drew herself up. "Do it." Discord stood up, setting me on the deck

as his throne faded away. He cocked his brow again. "Do it! I command you to do it!"

He snapped his fingers like a gunshot, and a great wind seemed to gust out of him. It swept around the platform, knocking the unicorns away. For a moment, the soul seemed to struggle to raise upward, but then bands of magic wrapped around her and Cognitum. Slowly, the pair began to be drawn together. Slowly the pair melted one into the other. The alicorn soul slipped into Cognitum. There was a blinding flash, and I had to avert my eyes.

When I dared to open my eyes again, I stared up at a gray statue, hand outstretched, fingers frozen post snap. I gaped up at Discord, wondering so much. Where was Boo? What had become of Dawn and Snips? Why had he done this? And then he began to crumble into sparkly dust, which blew away in whatever invisible stream carried the souls and disappeared into the void. I stared as the very last grains of shimmery substance were carried away.

Then I dared to look at the center of the platform. Cognitum crouched there, black wings covering her head. "Please be good, Luna. Please be good, Luna," I prayed over and over again.

Then she rose. Was it just me, or was she now... larger? She threw back her head, her mane streaming behind her like a bloody banner streaked with soot. Her armor seemed sharper now, the laser-etched filly and 'Security' gone. She stood before us all, a Princess of Death. Her red eye panels blazed with light as she began to laugh, high and exultant.

"Fools! Fools! All of you, fools! I am the Queen of the Night! And this world is mine!" she crowed, her wings spreading as her red and black magic mane and tail snapped in the air behind her. "Bow before my greatness!"

Steel Rain threw himself on his face, but the six unicorns, their black robes flapping wildly, raced for the elevator opposite the inclinor. She glared in rage, her eyes blazing balefully, and six crackling bullets of magic blasted forth from her steel-clad horn. The crackling energy tore through them, setting their robes aflame and sending them flying through the air and to the dark waters far below.

Slowly she approached me where I crouched. No cutie mark. No weapons. No augmentations. Not even magic. "Do you deny me now?" she asked coldly.

"No," I said, my eyes fixed on the last faint dusting of Discord on my hooves. "No. I don't." I lifted my head and stared her in the eye. "There is no denying you are a royal cunt!"

I was going to be killed. Maybe not the best last words, but Deus would have approved. Her eyes blazed, her horn crackling with red lightning.

Then a shape dropped from the cables high above, landing on the platform with a resounding clang. He crouched there a moment, then slowly raised himself up to his full height. The glyph-marked strips of cloth tied to his fetlocks snapped and fluttered in the same magical wind blowing Cognitum's mane. The Legate stared at Cognitum... or was she Nightmare Something-or-other now?

"Maiden of the Stars. At last," he said, the crackling magic fading from Cognitum's horn as she faced the skull-masked zebra. "You are precisely as you should be. It is time for our destined battle! One to decide the fate of zebra and ponykind!"

She gave the smallest of smirks as the Legate adopted one of the fighting stances that had proved so adept at thrashing me. His glyph wrappings glowed with a strange, cold green light. I couldn't believe that Equestria's final hope rested on one of my greatest enemies, but it was all I had left.

He charged across the platform, hooves thundering as he closed the distance. She reared up, horn and wings crackling with bright red magical lightning. The two closed in, and the Legate let out a

battle cry!

Then he took her outstretched hoof in his, pushed back his dragon skull, and kissed it.

What?

I stared at the scene, my brain locked up at the sight of the zebra, his face covered in bright red magical tattoos resembling the orbits of planets. At his neck, they inexplicably became black, save for a few lines where Rampage's tail had scraped him earlier. He knelt, lips pressed to the tip of her hoof, then pulled away. "Beautiful. You are beautiful, my Maiden." Then he regarded me in amusement as she stopped the crackling lightning, and I realized that I knew this zebra...

Amadi.

"What?! How are you..." I screamed at the top of my lungs, rising to my hooves as I gestured at him. "But you! You're the Legate! And why— And she's the Maiden! But she— And you're friends?!" I waved my hooves at them both. "What the hay is going on here?"

Suddenly, Steel Rain's hoof was pinning me to the floor. I'd honestly forgotten about him for a moment. "You really aren't the smartest pony, are you?"

Amadi stood and trotted towards me, Cognitum at her side. "There's nothing quite as useful as a prophecy, particularly if you make it up yourself," he said as he smiled at Cognitum. "The 'Maiden of the Stars' was always a useful ruse. Destroying the Hoof provided a pretext for keeping my followers together, working to advance our goals."

Steel Rain chuckled. "Really. Where did you think the Harbingers got a zebra tank to put Deus's brain into?"

I squirmed under Steel Rain. "So it was all a scam? Why?"

Cognitum answered, "Why, it's the first step in my great unification of the Wasteland. I know how useful war is. When the Brood of Coyotl attack, the Harbingers will repel them... after certain ponies are eliminated. Big Daddy. General Storm Chaser. Grace. Ponies with the leadership skills to counter me. The Harbingers shall be regarded as heroes. I... Blackjack... the hero of the battle... will declare myself the Princess of the Moon. We will use Horizons to restore the Core, and I will use EC-1101 to rebuild my realm. We will negotiate a peace with the Remnant." She gestured to the Legate, who bowed graciously to her. "And all will be restored. All thanks to you."

I lay there with no snappy retort. I had to admit it. They'd won. I couldn't think of any way to defeat them now. If I was lucky, I'd end up dead. If not... she still had my jar. "My friends will stop you."

"Your friends are now my friends," Cognitum replied smoothly. "I'll have to deal with other heroes abroad, I'm sure. Perhaps use a smaller version of Tom against the S.P.P. There must be *some* force strong enough to split that egg open. Regardless, you're done." She patted my head. "If you'd been loyal from the outset, I might have had a future for you as well. Now all I want is for you to see me triumphant."

"Is it time?" Steel Rain asked.

"Indeed," she breathed, and drew back. I let out a shaky breath as she backed away and regarded that flickering data above us. "EC-1101, Priority Command: Transfer and activate!"

Her PipBuck began to glow. The screens of the terminals along the edges of the platform began to flash and dance with readouts. The heap of computer parts that was Cognitum's maneframe began to hum louder and louder. The hologram began to run again, swirling in the air, arcane symbols and lines of

code lining up and activating. “Yes! Yes! I am ruler of all once more!” She laughed in delight as EC-1101’s displays started to blossom like a flower.

Then everything went dark all at once. The hologram. The terminals. Even the maneframe. Cognitum turned her head wildly in bafflement, the only illumination coming from the stream of lights circling the spire and Cognitum’s red glowing eyes. “OH, COME ON!” she screamed, then whirled and demanded of me, “What is going on?”

“Don’t look at me. This magical mystery megaspell shit is your bag,” I said, raising my hooves in defense.

Then a familiar rasp filled the air. It was long and low, wet and labored. And a gravelly, wet voice asked, “Identify yourself.”

Cognitum froze. She glanced from Steel Rain to the Legate to me, then answered, “I am Princess Luna reborn, rightful heir to Equestria! You will transfer control of EC-1101 to me, immediately.” Nothing happened. Then she asked, her voice a little more wary. “Who is this?”

“Project Horizons Command AI,” the voice rasped.

“Ah! The Lunar Palace! Yes. Wonderful. I wish you to transfer complete control of all your systems to me immediately!” she commanded, smiling a little. No response, and her smile faded. “Did you hear me?”

“Did you execute Fluttershy?” the voice rasped softly.

They stared at each other again. “Fluttershy is dead!” Cognitum snapped. “They’re all dead! I am the only one entitled to rule Equestria now!” Again, no response. Cognitum’s eyes narrowed. “Who are you?”

A slow laugh began to fill the platform. It was low, slow, and a little bit mad. And it was coming from my mouth. The three looked down at me in surprise.

“It’s Goldenblood. It’s fucking Goldenblood!” I cackled.

“Goldenblood is dead!” Cognitum snapped. “I watched his execution myself.”

“So what?” I laughed, not having anything to lose any more. “Like that’s stopped half the ponies I’ve known. Seriously, for the apocalypse being a world-killing event, some of you old relics really do hang on!” I grinned up at Cognitum. “You were transferred from Luna. Goldenblood probably used the exact same technology to put himself in control of this Lunar Palace thing!”

Cognitum gaped at me in horror. “I order you—” she howled, but Goldenblood’s rasp boomed from the speakers in the platform and cut her off.

“No,” it growled contemptuously. “You are a tyrant. Horizons is now active. Make peace with your sister, Princess Luna. Make peace with yourself. Goodbye.”

The lights returned, and the four of us stared at each other. “That... that wasn’t supposed to happen,” Cognitum muttered, glancing from the Legate to Steel Rain and back, then down at where I was still laughing weakly.

“So we all die now?” Steel Rain asked angrily.

“No. No!” she snapped. “It will take a few days before the moon’s rotation brings it into the optimal firing position. I will simply go to the moon and make the adjustments manually.” She glared at

her hoof and sighed in disgust. "This is merely a setback."

"Tell me that we can kill her now," Steel Rain said, pushing down on my back and making me struggle to breathe. For a second, I was certain that I was done. I felt my ribs creak.

"No," Cognitum snapped. "No. She may yet be useful."

Steel Rain hissed softly through his ventilator. The Legate frowned as well. "No. You should absolutely kill her now."

"I said no!" she said with a sweep of her wing, making them both duck. "I must go reunite with Blackjack's friends. Tell them what we need to do. The Luna Space Center may still retain something useful." She glared down at me. "But don't worry; I'm not going to leave her in a jar where she might escape. No..." She turned to the maneframe, and the cable snaked out once more. It pressed itself to my head. "A mindless Blackjack is a far safer Blackjack."

I struggled under Steel Rain's hoof, but there was nothing I could do to stop the world being pulled away. I was plunged into darkness save for a blinking camera icon in front of me, and for several seconds I floated in nothingness. Then a window replaced the icon to show the Uvula platform and Cognitum smirking up at me. "Enjoy it, Blackjack. Being trapped in one place, helpless... oh yes. It should be quite educational for you. I want you to see my restored Equestria and Core before you're gone for good."

"This is a mistake," Steel Rain muttered.

"Silence!" she barked, then calmed herself. "I must go. I can't have her friends stumble upon this place. Remain here for an hour, then see to the Harbingers and the Brood. Understand?"

Steel Rain jerked his head hesitantly. The Legate bowed deeply to her. Cognitum levitated my body back into its jar, setting it far over to the side and out of the reach of the crane or the mind transfer cable thingy. She lifted Echo and set the catatonic stallion across her shoulders. Then she spread her wings wide and launched herself up into the air curling up along the spire. Presumably she was heading for the hole in the chamber's ceiling, but she passed the edge of my window long before then.

The two stallions stood awkwardly by for a minute. "You can't seriously be doing this?" I shouted at them, but they didn't seem to hear me. I fumbled around in the darkness I floated in, but I couldn't see anything else. In fact, I wasn't even sure I had hooves in this place. "Come on... come on... there has to be some way to do this," I thought frantically.

"Five minutes?" the Legate asked.

"Fine," Steel Rain replied sourly. I floated there, cursing them over and over again as I tried to think at the void to do... something! There had to be some way to control this space. Steel Rain trotted over to the jar that held me and looked about, and then his hind leg kicked out. "Oopsie," he said as the jar rolled across the platform and then tumbled off the edge, out of sight. He trotted over and leaned out to gaze down, then gave a little shrug. Then he faced me, guns pointed forward. They loaded with a loud thunk. "Hey, Blackjack. I don't know if you can hear me, but... thanks for not killing me at the manor." Then his cannons fired, and my world ended as I screamed into the absolute void around me.

Footnote: >Start New Game: Y/N?

(Author's notes: Story isn't over. I swear. Really. I do want to apologize for its lateness though. Scheduling problems, real life issues, slow typing, and other problems took forever to work through. It's a

huge chapter and I apologize how much how much of it is horrible talk talk talking. Still, there was a lot that needed to be addressed in this chapter. This is where most of the plot threads had to be addressed, one way or another!

I'd like to thank every one that's stuck with it so far and gotten through this monster of a story and this monster of a chapter, especially Hinds, Bronode, and swicked. We found a new way to brush that was a bit quicker so we'll see what this portends. I hope the story continues to be entertaining as we go towards the finish. I swear I'm going to have this finished inside three years... Grrr...

Anyway, next week is spring break, which I don't get paid for... sigh... so bits right now would be extra super appreciated at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal. Thank you very much everyone that helped out last month. You made it possible for me to take a test that will hopefully get me a full time science position. We'll have to see. I might find some position somewhere else too. I'll let folks know.

A few chapters left to go. Wow. Well... hope the chapter was okay. Maybe I should have broken it into two... I dunno... still, I hope it stays a fun read. Please give feedback at Cloudsville... Reddit... 4chan if you're feeling adventurish. Sadly, I can't read comments at TvTropes forum. Got myself banned... bad Sombre... bad...)