

## Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

### Chapter 67: Goldenblood

*"No. You won't. You may have made it impossible for Shining Armor to perform his spell, but now that you have so foolishly revealed your true self, I can protect my subjects from you!"*

The shadow world played with my senses of distance and time. A dozen steps took me halfway to Chapel. A hundred more got me to the village itself. Spectral ponies moved in unnatural jerks and starts like images on a broken projector. With no sun, I had no grasp of any direction other than up once I got away from familiar landmarks. I had tried to teleport back to a room in the Citadel but hit some kind of magical barrier that kept me from reaching my destination; every time I'd attempted it, my horn had sparked and I hadn't moved. And with no idea where it was or even if I *could* eventually walk back, I was left alone in the shadows.

I sat beside the dark, empty bed of the Hoofington River and laughed bitterly. I'd died two, maybe three times, and now I was stuck in a shadow world, unable to do anything to stop Cognitum and Amadi, return to the castle, or contact my friends. And most maddening of all: the realization that Goldenblood was alive. That shouldn't have surprised me. Twilight had survived as part of the Goddess. Rainbow Dash a ghoul. If LittlePip had been right, Fluttershy was a *tree*. At this point, I could have come across Rarity's brain in a levitating robot, a Pinkie Pie spritebot, or the ghost of Applejack and not been terribly surprised.

Goldenblood. On the one hoof, I desperately wanted to talk to him, and on the other, I wanted to put a magic bullet through his head. He'd been the enabler. Maybe Luna would have ruled the same without him; maybe she'd have done even worse than she had with his help... or maybe, without him behind the scenes, the war would have ended peacefully instead of in fire. I didn't know. All I knew was that I had to find him. Above all else, the question of *why* burned inside me. Why had he suddenly broken down towards the very end? Had he really gone mad, as Cognitum suggested? A doomsday weapon that killed everyone on the planet? Why did it go off on Cognitum? Was it mad too? I'd had plenty of experience with crazy machines! Madness. It was the simple answer, and that wretched stallion didn't have a simple bone in his body.

The shadow world had water of a sort; it trickled out of the rocks cold and clear and sterile. It didn't have life, though. Just shadowy parodies. Ghostly trees shifted and flickered around me as I walked, disappearing when I stopped. Translucent ponies trotted by, froze at a crawl, and then suddenly blurred away in long streaks. Then some zoomed backwards like a rewinding recording. The silence was absolute; there were no echoes, and it didn't matter how loudly I yelled. This strange place seemed to render every noise I made a whisper.

Sweet Celestia, forget Goldenblood and Cognitum. I was going to go crazy myself if I didn't get out of here!

"There you are," Tenebra, clad in dark purple armor, said as she flew out of the blackness with perfect timing. "I thought for sure you'd end up dead out here."

"There are dangers here?" I asked, skeptically glancing around me. "I haven't seen any."

"Blackjack, there are pockets here where time flows so fast that a pony will live out their lifespan in ten seconds... or so slow that you'd be frozen permanently like a fly in amber," the gray batpony said as she landed. "Cracks in space that can split you in half. Distortions that can turn you inside out."

Granted, they're all rare, but you only have to run into one once for it to kill you. And yes, there are... *things* here. Unique. Deadly. And nothing I want to fight. We should get back to the castle."

"So it's a place that kills me just by existing. Haven't ever dealt with that before," I said a touch more sarcastically than I'd intended. I sighed, peering out into the bleak twilight around me. "I'm sorry. I'm just..."

"Frustrated?" the mare asked innocently. That simple little word made something snap in me.

"Frustrated? My whole life has been people telling me what to do," I said as I started pacing. "And you know what? I was cool with that. I was! Mom. The Overmare. Didn't matter. So long as somepony had a modicum of virtue or a little bit of authority and a direction for me to go in, I went. I did." I laughed, my voice echoing like a chorus of whispering ghosts in the shadows. "I let a robot send me on a wild mare chase all across the Wasteland. A quest! A Luna-damned quest for secrets and answers, going against the bad ponies who hurt people and trying to justify all the collateral damage I caused by trying to be good! I ran myself into the fucking ground rather than taking my loved ones and getting as far from here as I possibly could. When a bony hallucination started giving me advice, what did I do? Did I ignore it? Did I tell my friends? Did I mention it even in passing to any pony I met with a stethoscope and a theoretical doctorate? No, I gave him a spot as my chief fucking advisor!" I snapped towards her. "And do you know what it's gotten me? Huh? Do you?"

"Uhhh..." Tenebra backed away from me a step or two.

"This!" I shouted as loud as I could, spreading my hooves wide as I gestured to the gloomy void all around. "Nothing! I didn't even get a decent death. Three times!" I said as I paced even faster. "Outside of P-21 and Scotch, everyone I knew prior to six months ago is dead, and that's just the tip of the iceberg. People I didn't even know died because I was too hasty, or too slow, or too stupid to do the right thing. I lost my body for one made of steel, and then I lost that when my enemy decided she wanted to trade up! I got myself knocked up, and now she has my baby. She has my friends. She has my very special pony and made her cry!" I hissed through my teeth at Tenebra, who stared at me as if I was deranged. "She took my fucking cutie mark," I said in a murderous mutter, jabbing at my flank with a hoof. "She took my talent."

I grimaced as I stepped towards her. "And you know what? I'd be okay with THAT too," I hissed at her, jabbing my hoof at her chest. "I can deal with losing shit. I'm an expert at that. I can try and get it back. Talk to Glory. Talk to P-21. Tell them I fucked up again and see if they can work something out. Only I can't, because I went from being stuck in a city filled with swarms of pony-eating robots to being stuck in a world of eternal darkness *and your father won't let me out!*" I roared at her, making her take another step away. "So yes! I think 'frustrated' is one way to put it!"

And then, because no utterly foalish tantrum is complete without it, I clenched my eyes and screamed as loudly as I could. I put as much of my rage, frustration, and self-disgust as I could into it... and this damnable place bled my outrage down to an anemic cry. When I finished, my throat ached and my eyes stung with tears as my heart thundered in my chest. I sat down hard on the rock, bowing my head. "I just... I didn't want to lose it all. I can't even be a mother here. This body is sterile," I muttered raggedly, forlornly. I'd blown out all the fury inside me, leaving behind nothing but cold cinders and ash.

I felt a wing tentatively drape itself over my shoulders. "Please, don't yell," Tenebra said quietly, quickly. "I'm going to assume at least half of that was true. Are you going to give up? Are you done?"

I took a deep breath of the cool, sterile air. "No," I said, so low I could barely hear it myself. I glanced at her. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

She gave a small shrug. "I've grown up wanting to smack my brother upside the head for his stupid plans. Like gluing all the furniture on the walls. Or trying to do a pantomime of Nightmare Moon's demise. Or using oral sex to ease into the fact that eventually I was expected to do the deed with him knowing that every biology textbook said it was wrong. Never mind morals. I know what it's like being trapped, so I can sympathize." She gestured off into the darkness with a wing. "Shall we go?"

I nodded, and we started walking quietly along the dry riverbed. "How'd it get so bad?" I asked with a frown. We walked past an immense, broken black obelisk, now lying on its side by the riverbed, engraved with icons of an alicorn. As we travelled past it, it shimmered and disappeared into a ridge of broken rock, evaporating like a mirage.

She took a while to answer, glancing back at me several times as she struggled to find words. "Stygus and Father aside, most batponies don't have the ability to travel from here to the world of light. Luna blesses us each in different ways. Most have to use the portal to the Citadel. Since the majority of our kind were in towns and cities, they died along with the rest of Equestria. Those that didn't were left trapped in the Wasteland. Only a few made it back."

"And those that did?" I asked.

She gave a wry smile as a forest of ebony trees flickered into existence around us, disappeared, and flickered back again. "You're a stable pony. We bottled things up and got busy doing nothing. King Ebonstar ruled us, but generation after generation things simply... dwindled. We trained. We studied. We did all we could to excel... then we bred with second cousins, then first cousins, then half siblings..." She shook her head. "Genetic death."

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

Her tufted ears dropped. "Not as much as I am. Stygus is an utter idiot. I'm twice as smart as he is, but he was the one who left our home to try and save our species. I thought he was a randy fool. What he's done... it may just work." Then she glanced back at me as the ground beneath her shifted into an obsidian road. "Of course, if you're right, we may only have bought a few generations."

"If I'm right." I sighed. "Sometimes I don't think anyone's right. Not me. Not Cognitum. Not Princess Luna. Not anyone." I tapped the side of my head. "I have the memories of... at least two dozen ponies in my head. I can't think of a single one that had it all together." I closed my eyes. "Does the name 'Goldenblood' mean anything to you?"

"No. Should it?" she asked as the shadowy road flickered back to uneven piles.

I let out a grunt. "I guess not. Tell me, do you think it's possible for one pony to manipulate an entire country from behind the scenes?"

"Of course," she answered. I glanced at her in surprise, arching a brow. "Princesses. Caesars. Generals. Everypony always remembers the leaders, but dig down a little more. Commander Ebonstar served Princess Luna's night guard. Just what did he do under her command? How did he execute orders? Was he loyal? Did he bend rules? What of the ponies under them?" She shook her head again. "No pony really knows everything. But if a pony was skilled enough, certainly. The thing you'll never be able to answer, though, is the question of who was manipulating *them*."

Her words echoed in my head, but again everything came down to that one question: Why? Why did Goldenblood do what he did? Why make Horizons? Why betray Luna? Why did he freak out at the end?

All about us sprang a shadowy metropolis of buildings. An entire city of black stone. "What is all this?" I asked, whirling at the looming gothic architecture.

"Princess Luna's capital," she said with a wing sweep at the grand structures of flickering, shadowy rock decorated with a moon and star motif. I gaped, then peered at her skeptically. "It was never built," she said with a wry smile. "This was Princess Luna's dream, before the Nightmare. Her own city, her Canterlot. But Celestia refused, and it drove Luna to darkness. Lunaria was never to be. But it persists here."

"So this place is a dream?" I asked. "Or is the dream a place here?"

She gave a silent shrug as we trotted past soaring buildings with flying buttresses decorated with bat wings and pointed arches. Obsidian statuary dedicated to the night was everywhere. I'd seen pieces of Canterlot in memories; this place was dark but no less grand. What if Celestia had let Luna go and found her own kingdom of the night? Would she still have rebelled? Been banished? Returned and been forced to rule a realm that was never her own? Would Twilight and her friends have met, formed their bonds, and then watched those bonds melt in the fires of war? Would I have ever been born?

Everything was connected, whether I wanted to admit it or not. Had I killed Sanguine, or Dawn, or Charm, I wouldn't be here. When you examined the intricacies of a life, any life, it all seemed so contrived, yet what else was there to do but accept it and move on from there?

As the city melted away around us, we approached the only thing that seemed real: a looming black fortification rearing up into the eternal dark sky. Then I said words I didn't expect to say. "I need to talk to your father."

She jerked her head, eyes wide. "That is not wise, especially so soon after—" I saw her ear twitch again and she froze. We stood motionless in the Hoofington riverbed, the dry sand and pebbles shifting around us silently as if an invisible current flowed past.

Freezing wasn't good, but it was better than talking and getting killed. My magic lifted the dark purple spear I'd taken from the armory. "What is it?" I whispered.

"I hear an echo," Tenebra whispered back, her yellow eyes narrowed in focus as her ears twitched.

"That's it?" I asked, sounding let down. With all I'd faced, this seemed a little anticlimactic.

"Not an echo of sound. An echo." She paused, and then I heard it too. A wailing noise mixed with sobs. It would have been pitiful if it hadn't sounded so big. "An echo of a life."

"Ghosts? You're telling me there are actually ghosts here?" I said, both skeptical and freaked out. I talked to the soul of Princess Luna, so my credulity limit was set pretty high. "What do we do?"

Suddenly, from the darkness, a shape appeared. Its body seemed to be that of an immense weeping serpent. In its wake, the shadowscape was ripped up as if by a potent current. Dimly through the darkness, I thought I heard the immense creature sobbing over and over, 'What a world' and 'It hurts! It hurts so much!' "Flee!" Tenebra shouted, turning and racing away from the immense beast.

The floating serpent creature turned towards us, weeping and thrashing through the air. While its smoky quartz body wasn't actually touching anything as it swam after us, its motions were releasing waves of force that I could feel, even from this distance. I tried to teleport to Tenebra, and my focus popped like a soap bubble. Eyes widening, I fled by manual means after her.

Surprisingly, I caught up with her inside a minute. The batpony had an odd hitch to her gait which made her stumble every dozen or so feet. "Why is it chasing us?"

"It's an echo of a life. It's not a real thing! It just wants to be experienced. Live its life again," she shouted, her flapping wings barely keeping her from faceplanting.

"What's so bad about that?" I asked, glancing back at the storm that was ripping up the riverbed behind us. The closer it got, the more clearly I could hear something like screams and the unmistakable 'Skoom' of balefire bombs.

"It died!" she shouted back. "You want that to happen to you?"

Okay. Fair point! "It wouldn't be my first time," I retorted, but I wasn't sure if I'd come back this time if it happened. I tried to get off a teleportation spell again, but the disruptive field around the serpent kept scattering my focus. I gritted my teeth, trying over and over again, and finally my horn flashed and I teleported up to the rim of the river. I turned and saw Tenebra stumbling along. "Okay! You can fly now!" She didn't. The spectral serpent had ghostly balefire bombs going off above it as it swam through the air. Dear Celestia, what was wrong with her? "I'm clear! Fly!"

But she still didn't fly. Her wings flailed about unevenly and only threw off her stride even more. Then her eyes rolled back and her legs spasmed out from beneath her. She collapsed onto her side, jerking in the throes of a seizure. The ghostly creature zoomed in for the kill.

I didn't think. I simply acted. I teleported to stand atop Tenebra and let the monster hit me first.

At the contact, I was jerked in a way that felt similar to the effect of a memory orb or the Perceptitron, but far more intimate. I swam through the Hoofington bay alongside the massive battleship as it prepared for another mission. I didn't like the pony war, hated it, in fact, but bad things happened to non-ponies who didn't support the ministries' war effort. Patrolling the bay for talisman mines was far simpler than resisting, and it wasn't like I was killing anyone.

Suddenly alarms went off at the base, and sirens sounded further in. Sailor ponies ran back and forth along the buildings and on the ships. Contrails snaked across the sky; not one or two, or even a dozen, but hundreds. It seemed surreal. Then they started to fall, and instantly the naval base was silhouetted in a garish rainbow glow. I went blind, hearing the screams and then the concussive roar as it rolled across the bay. I dove for the safety of the water, and then... the *Luna* exploded. The blast was so intense, I felt myself burning even beneath the waves. I swam down, buried myself in the mud, and prayed for the pain to end.

It didn't. When I emerged, my magnificently coiffed mane began to fall out, and my scales sloughed off. Then my skin. Then the muscles beneath. I was larger than the ponies dying in the green snow; it took me weeks to finally perish. And when I did, I died thrashing and blind on the banks of this river. I hadn't wanted to die. It hadn't even been my war...

I don't know if it was my blank body, the fact that I had way too much experience dying, or simply that the echo wasn't fatal after all, but the ghostly serpent whisked through me and continued down the river. The screaming faded away, along with the roar of balefire. Soon, the only sound was Tenebra spasming at my hooves.

I had exactly enough medical knowledge to put the haft of my spear between her teeth to keep her from biting off her tongue, then wait for the seizure to pass. Thirty seconds later, her jerking slowed, then stopped. I pulled out the spear haft and held her as she went from seizing to crying.

"Well, that was an interesting death," I commented quietly.

She opened a teary, yellow eye and wiped her snotty muzzle on a hoof. "You... you experienced it? And you lived?"

"Well, honestly, on a scale of one to ten, it was about a four. I mean, dying of radiation poisoning sucks butt – I mean, I should know; I've nearly gone that way twice – but being in a room of screaming, melted flesh and metal is a whole lot worse." She stared at me for several seconds, her incredulity shifting to shock. "Really," I said with a small smile. "I've had worse."

"I suppose Whisper is less of an exaggerating braggart than I thought," she murmured as she carefully rose and adjusted her armor. She dripped wounded pride. "I'm sorry I was not able to fly to safety," she said in a faintly tremulous voice. 'I wish you hadn't seen that,' added her posture.

"I'm guessing this wasn't the first time?" I asked softly.

"No. It happens quite frequently when I am... apprehensive and stressed. All batponies have physical, social, and educational regimens to keep us fit and sane. I've... frequently... failed them. My brother's... *mare*," she said delicately, as if she'd much rather have said something else. "She found them quite amusing at first. Thankfully she found organizing orgies much more diverting."

"Your parents are... um..." Well, this was getting into awkward territory.

"Half brother and sister. They share the same father," she replied. "Mother suffers from acute angina. Father from frequent migraines."

I stared at her for several seconds. Her parents like that, and she had seizures; if she actually had kids with her brother... I shoved the ugly thought aside. "You guys can't stay here," I told her quietly. "If you're at the point of genetic collapse, bringing in a few dozen ponies isn't going to save your people. You've got to convince him to let me go."

"Even if I told him about your rescue, he would criticize my weakness, not reward your courage," she said as she pulled herself to her hooves.

"But her mother would thank you," a gentle voice said from above us. The pale Persephone landed before us, along with Whisper and Stygius. She trotted towards me and gave me a firm hug, then a second to Tenebra. "Thank you," she said, looking at me with her pale red eyes.

"You're welcome," I replied. "But I meant what I said. I can't stay here in the shadows. Every second, who knows what Cognitum is doing? Can't you do something?"

"Perhaps, if we had a month, but according to you and my son, we don't," she said, glancing over at Stygius.

I turned to face him, and he held up his board. 'Fighting. Zebra & ponies. Bad'.

"Oh, isn't he just so *eloquent*?" Whisper cooed, stroking his cheek with a power hoof. Tenebra made a gagging face behind his back.

I groaned, rubbing my temples. "That was the plan. Harbingers and Brood build up. Brood start to attack. Harbingers save everypony in the Hoof. Cognitum takes over."

"Security takes over, actually," Whisper said. "The heavy metal version of you apparently wasted no time asserting she was the biggest badass in the Hoof. I can only imagine how pissed Big Daddy is."

I sighed and looked at Persephone. "Queen Persephone, if you can't help me get home, then can you tell me if the batponies have a prisoner here named Goldenblood?"

Her expression sobered immediately. "You know of him?" I gave a slow nod.

"Is he still alive?" I asked.

"I..." She swallowed, then looked at the Citadel behind her. Then back at us. "When the bombs fell, we followed the Princess's orders. The Citadel was sealed, and all members of the O.I.A. were kept out. Apparently, this was quite a surprise to them. But there was one we fetched when we realized we could not save Princess Luna. We retrieved this Goldenblood, brought him here. He instructed... demanded, really... that we fortify his cell. He's been there ever since. I am not sure what he is, but he is alive."

"Please. I have to see him. I need to know why he did what he did," I said quietly.

She seemed to struggle with the choice. Finally, she gazed at Tenebra and answered, "Only my husband is supposed to have any contact with him. His cell is completely automated. But." She nuzzled her daughter. "You saved my child, and this I can help you with."

Together, with Stygius and Whisper carrying me, we returned to the Citadel.

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We passed by several strange chambers on our way. Libraries that I had no doubt Twilight would have given a few molar to examine. A cold, defunct chemistry laboratory that still held an acrid tang. A huge purple gemstone carved in the shape of a heart that filled me with a sense of numb fear.

When Persephone, Tenebra, and I reached the bottom of a winding staircase, I beheld a massive, round, gear-toothed door with the symbol of the O.I.A. on it set in the wall of dark basalt. A modification had been made, though: the crescent moon in the center had been turned on its side, points upward, with wings drawn up and out from the sides and a star-topped wand rising from the center. Persephone trotted to the control panel set beside it and typed something in. "There's a stable down here?" By reflex, I checked my hoof for a PipBuck location tag.

"Indeed. Where did you think we got our food and water? While Stygius and my husband enable us to bring in fresh food, there's no way we could both rely on just that and stay hidden." The door groaned and hissed, then rumbled slowly away. "It took almost three years to build, using a wide variety of clandestine contractors and secret arrangements with Stable-Tec."

Goldenblood's arrangement with Scootaloo, looking the other way while she planned her stables and their various social experiments. "But why are you living up there if you have a stable down here?" I asked as the door rolled aside. I half expected there to be a whole crowd of ponies within, but the door opened to a large, empty, and dimly-lit entry chamber. Tables were set in rows beneath banners that read 'present identification', 'military personnel', 'government personnel', and 'civilian personnel'. "Did something happen to the stable?"

"Not at all. We'd simply prefer to live in our ancestral home rather than a hole in the ground. We also lacked the technical skills and numbers to run this facility," Persephone said quietly. "Our ancestors simply put as much on standby and automated maintenance as they could and left it down here. Every year we come down, do what we can to keep things tidy, and raid the food stores and water talismans."

There was something amiss about this stable. We walked from the entry into what I'd assumed was an atrium. Instead, we walked past directories pointing to the left and right. 'Atrium A', 'Atrium B', and 'Atrium C'? "How big is this place?" I said as I gaped at the map on the directory. 'Big Macintosh Megastable Redoubt' was printed at the bottom.

"As large as the castle above, and then some," she said as we trotted to an elevator. We stepped in, she pushed a button, one of twenty, and the car started to descend. "This place was built with the intention of protecting critical features of the Equestrian government in the event of a catastrophic attack. Being in the shadow world, even the most powerful assaults could be endured. The war, if necessary, could be commanded even if Canterlot were lost."

"And after Luna learned about Horizons, she made sure nopony used it till she was sure it was safe," I said, Horse's memories niggling at me with impressions of him trying to weed out who was loyal, who was useful, and who he could purge to win points with Princess Luna. "The evacuation plans were all messed up. No wonder only the pegasi were able to regroup and organize." And the Steel Rangers, by commandeering other stables and smaller bunkers.

"Yes. Only a token skeleton crew remained. We took over, but even then we didn't even have a tenth of the number this place was made to hold." The doors hissed open, and I immediately shivered. Our breath turned to mist in the frigid air. Persephone started forward, and a minute later I followed. "Without the Redoubt, Equestria was in chaos. Command networks were destroyed, but there were still some agents that continued with the old plan."

"Garnet. You shut the door on her," I said with a small smile, remembering her dying slowly of radiation poisoning. Normally I wouldn't wish that on anypony, but Garnet had been abnormally vile. I could appreciate the fitness of the batponies' decision. If Garnet had made it in here, she'd have probably killed everypony who crossed her. "What about Goldenblood?"

"I don't know what he said to my ancestors, but somehow he convinced them not to execute him, or throw him out into the green snow to die. I know not why, but he was entombed, by his own request, within this empty place. Every year we come down and find him still sealed."

I shivered as we trotted along. Behind glass walls were racks upon racks of boxes. "What is this place?" I muttered, levitating one box off its shelf. My magic brushed off the frost. 'Seed stock AJ-2011-BM: Wheat' was printed on its side, along with an expiration date almost three hundred years in the future!

"A storeroom. One of many. Some, like this one, hold seeds and spores. Others hold animal embryos." I twitched at the word; I'd gotten a D in reproductive education, but I'd answered that one right on the multiple choice test. "Hundreds of different species." There had to be enough seeds here to cover the Hoof in food. Or more. No telling how much of it might have spoiled, but still.

Tenebra added, "There's a surprising amount of material for fabrication. Machine shops. Almost no weapons, though. Curious, given the purpose of this place."

We reached the end of the hall. Etched on the door was one word: 'Nopony'. I glanced at her, then at the door. It hissed open. There was a second door on the far side of the cubic room within, one every bit as heavy as the entrance door above. A desk and a terminal sat in the middle of the room, facing me, with a beam turret in each corner. A trio of memory orbs sat in a sealed glass case beside the terminal, each one radiating that golden yellowish light. I tried to tug the case open, but it remained shut.

"What the heck is this?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at the four turrets. Was it just me, or did they look like the extra hot beamy death model? Glory'd know for sure. Damn, I wished she was here.

"They were installed per Goldenblood's request, to discourage idle attempts to access his prison. My husband has the override to the turrets, but I'm afraid I do not know it. Since a unicorn is needed to use these memory orbs, we've never risked opening those doors." She gestured to the terminal with a

snowy wing. "Once you turn it on, the case will open. I can only assume they contain memories to help you open the door."

I looked at the three in their case. "Oh, is that all?" I said sarcastically.

"No," she replied evenly. "There is supposedly an enchantment upon them. If you do not know the password, your heart will stop and you will never wake again." I gaped at her, and she gave a faint smile. "You asked."

I sighed, then chuckled softly. "Yeah. I did," I said as I sat before the terminal. "I don't suppose I could just chat with him without going through all this, could I?" I asked lamely, hoping the answer would be a surprise 'yes'.

Persephone smiled and shook her head sadly. "That is not the way these things are done, Blackjack. Good luck," she said simply as she leaned in and hugged me. "May the night comfort and bring you rest," she said solemnly before turning and walking out of the room.

Tenebra averted her eyes, then moved closer and gave me a shoulder nudge. "Thank you for your assistance in the riverbed." She backed away, glancing over her shoulder at her retreating mother. "I..." She met my gaze again. "You don't have to do this. Give me a few days. I'm sure between us we can get Father to relent!"

"In a few days, none of this is going to matter, one way or the other," I replied with a quiet smile. "Either Cognitum or Amadi will win, or Horizons will obliterate everything I care about. Goldenblood has answers. I need to know..." I trailed off as my eyes returned to the terminal. "You should get out of here. Knowing my luck, I'll sneeze and seal you up in here with me."

"Right," she said with a sheepish smile, then started for the exit. I turned, examining the terminal keys. Okay. Time to do this. I stretched out a hoof and— "Because I just..." Tenebra blurted behind me, and I froze, my hoof inches from the button. I turned, glancing back at her with a hard stare. "I just wanted... I mean... Whisper said how you like mares, and..."

"I'll ask Glory," I said as lightly as I could, then gestured to the door with my horn. "Now excuse me, but I need to set off the room of death for answers to questions."

"Come, daughter. She'll return on her own later," Persephone said in that offering-condolences tone of voice.

"Right. Right," Tenebra said as I returned my attention to the terminal. I sighed, checked to make sure she was going, then reached out a hoof again to the buttons. Time to get this party— A thunderous sneeze detonated behind me, and I jumped in shock, landing with my hooves splayed to either side of the terminal. I glanced back at the blushing batpony mare standing in the doorway as she wiped her muzzle with a wing. "Sorry. All this dry air..."

Funny how a spike in anger can give you just enough telekinetic force to toss a batpony down a hall like a paper glider. Persephone watched her sail overhead and sighed, gave me a shrug of resignation, then, shaking her head, moved down to assist her offspring. I trotted back to the terminal and smacked the keys with a hoof before the universe conspired some way to somehow accidentally throw her into the chamber and seal her inside with me.

As soon as I did, there was a flicker as a magical shield was erected around the room. The turrets hummed, all four orienting on me. Finally, the memory orb case popped open. I saw each orb was conveniently numbered. I stared at the cursor on the terminal.

>WHO DID IT?

Well, that was refreshingly vague. "Rarity, in the atrium, with the candlestick," I drawled sarcastically as I lifted the orb. I stared into the golden depths. "Okay, Goldenblood, deal the deck and let's play." With my courage and bravado running neck and neck, I touched the orb to my horn.

As soon as contact was made, I felt a growing pressure building in my head, the world's strongest migraine. It felt as if my skull was going to explode, and for all I knew, it was! A rasped question thudded in my skull with each throb. "What did I teach?"

Betrayal and lying? Secret conspiracies 101? But with each flippant thought, the pain increased. The thudding was starting to grow and grow, yet every muscle in my body was frozen in place. Was it just me, or could I feel blood dripping out my nose? Think. Think! It'd been before Luna... at Littlehorn. Geology? No... arrgh, my head. No, he'd taught something else. Something that'd made Luna pick him. Politics? Government? Nnnnnngggh... things were getting really blurry. History! He'd taught– the world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

I didn't recognize the body immediately. Goldenblood always felt like a sack of rusty nails in all the memories of his I'd been in thus far. If I hadn't known better, I would have thought that this was Vanity. He lay in a bed in a room filled with books. A hoof rapped on the door over and over again. "Mr. Goldenblood? Mr. Goldenblood?" a colt said to accompany each knock.

Goldenblood sighed and slipped out of bed, his body fatigued. He shook with a yawn and then walked to the door, opening it and staring down at a gray unicorn colt with a small frown. "Icebrand? What's wrong? It's two in the morning."

"There's a problem with a zebra, sir. The dean wants you to come talk to her and calm her down before something bad happens," he piped. Goldenblood gave a small nod and immediately stepped out into the amethyst and ebony-lined hallways with decorations depicting silver stars and crescent moons.

"Are you adjusting well, Icebrand?" Goldenblood asked in quiet tones as they walked past doors. Through one that was half open, I saw a half dozen bunk beds. "It must be a big adjustment from the orphanage to here."

"A bit, sir. Mum always wanted me to get an education. She wanted me to be smart enough to avoid stupid fights," he replied. "I didn't expect the school to be so big though."

"Littlehorn has almost two hundred students, and it had been built for a thousand. Unlike Princess Celestia's school, we accept any pony of merit who yearns to learn," he gave a little smile. "Not that Princess Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns isn't a fine institution, of course."

"I'm just glad they took me. My grades haven't been good since Mum... ahem..." he flushed and dropped his eyes. "I didn't expect them to, mister."

"Special accommodations were made for orphans and victims of the war effort." There was a pause, and then a muttered afterthought, "I didn't think there'd be so many, though."

As they walked along, I could see through windows that the school was shaped like a giant crescent with a round structure in the middle of the arc. Four stories below us was a cluster of a half dozen wagons. Ponies and zebras could be seen sleeping and keeping watch in the moonlight. At the end of the hall, we stepped into an open-topped cagelike elevator hanging in a vast central shaft. The car dropped silently in the grip of levitation talismans. "Um... sir?" the colt said hesitantly.

"Yes, Icebrand?" he asked, his eyes staring straight ahead at the wall of the shaft as it slowly passed by.

"Is it true you used to live with zebras?"

"When I was your age. Maybe a little younger." Goldenblood smiled a little. "Mother liked to travel. She went all over the Zebra Empire, and I went with her."

"What're the zebras like?" he asked, shuffling his hooves.

"What do you mean?" Goldenblood asked, glancing down at him. "Which zebras?"

"All of them," Icebrand said as he shuffled on his hooves. "Thimble said they're all witchdoctors with spooky masks, but Briar Rose told me they have big cities. And Sweet Grass, he... ah... said they... um... did..." He went bright red, the rest of his words lost in a mumble.

"Sex stuff?" Goldenblood asked with the arch of a brow. Icebrand let out a faint squeak, and the pale unicorn chuckled. "The Carnilia celebrate life. All life. And the creation of life. For details, see Mrs. Amber Jewel in health class." He watched the colt squirm in embarrassment for a moment, and then went on, "These zebras were a different tribe, though; you can tell by the feather decorations they wear."

"On their clothes?"

"In their ears." Goldenblood chuckled. "These are Tappahani. Refugees. The Tappahani are jungle hunters and shamans. Excellent cooks too, by the by."

"I thought all zebras were the same," the colt muttered. "The way they live and fight..."

"Tappahani? Fight?" He laughed softly, shaking his head. "No, Icebrand. They're not fighters." He rubbed his chin with a hoof. "Though, their duels are rather interesting. Some will attempt to cook meals so spicy that their enemy is incapacitated with tears. Or they'll compete to see which can steal the egg of a giant roc. Or shoot the leaf from the tallest tree with a blowgun. They are not Roamani fighters yearning for combat and battle. This war has been harder on them than on us."

That sounded like my kind of zebra! Make lunch, not war. I wondered how Glory's cooking would stack up against theirs.

The doors chimed and opened, and the pair stepped out into another hallway. The shrieks and cries of a mare could be heard in the distance, echoing off the dark walls. "I can find the way. Get to bed, Icebrand. And remember, you have a test on the Champions of Harmony tomorrow."

"Still?" the colt whined. "Sir, there's a camp of zebra refugees in the school courtyard. How can we have a test now?"

"The Tappahani aren't going to hurt us. Not unless they plan to cook dinner for us. Now get to bed. I'll see to the dean."

The colt nodded, started to reenter, then paused. "Mister Goldenblood? Can you tell me more about zebra tribes tomorrow?" Goldenblood smiled and nodded once to him. Icebrand beamed. "Thanks!" He pressed a gemstone, the cage doors swung shut, and the lift rose silently out of sight.

"Such a good kid..." Goldenblood muttered trotted in the direction of the cries.

As he approached an office door, it flung wide, and a sallow yellow unicorn emerged. "There you are! What's taken you so long? She's been screaming and babbling for an hour in her savage tongue. I

nearly cast a sedation spell on her.” His angry scowl instantly made me want to buck him upside the head.

“I came straight here, Dean Bitterbrew,” Goldenblood said evenly. “Is she okay?”

“Okay?” The yellow unicorn sneered. “She’s a sneak thief. We caught her away from the others, skulking about. Soon as we caught her, she started babbling and jabbering.” He looked back over his shoulder. “Probably poking around for something to steal. The principal said a whole box of spark batteries, a mana capacitor, and some conductors have gone missing from the student lab. Who knows where she stashed them.”

“She was likely looking for a bathroom, sir. If things have gone missing, we can take it up with the arcane sciences club. They’re likely working on a project.”

“How do you know she didn’t take it?” Bitterbrew asked, narrowing his eyes.

Goldenblood replied coolly, “She’s Tappahani, sir. If she wanted to hide from us, we wouldn’t have spotted her. And she wouldn’t have hidden a belonging. The Tappahani are communal. They share everything.”

“Savages,” Bitterbrew muttered before opening the door to the office. A young zebra mare sat curled tightly in the corner, crying out in rapid fire speech. Three other unicorns stood to the side, looking tired and uncomfortable. “Go. Get her to shut up. See if you can find out what she did with the things she stole.”

Goldenblood nodded and approached. He took a seat, cleared his throat, and then flung his hooves wide. “Sastimos, sendrin a Tappahani. Du’ dera o ushalin zhala sar o kam mangela.”

She stared at him, falling silent for several seconds. “Rakesa tu Propli natsia?” she asked in bafflement.

“Me shavora xari Propli.” He paused, then laughed. “Ne me ohano kushi trāshful.” The mare relaxed just a little. Her mane and face were speckled with dozens of dots of red and blue dye, and there were bird feathers piercing her ears. She didn’t share the laugh, though, and Goldenblood soon frowned.

“What did she say?” one of the unicorns asked.

“I said hello. Made some standard greetings for her tribe. Joked about my horrible pronunciation,” Goldenblood said, trying to smile, but it died on his face. “She didn’t laugh. They always laugh at jokes. Even my jokes.” He glanced over at the yellow stallion. “Something’s very wrong.”

“No, really?” Bitterbrew said sourly. “Get her to shut up and tell her to give back what she stole!” he demanded. “Damned zebras probably have it in those wagons.”

“They have their mares and foals in the wagons, sir. They’re not going to hide a hundred bits’ worth of equipment you can buy at any hardware store in them.” Goldenblood rolled his eyes and said, “Me boro ri kam jenesi tu dika fiz? Spark kurrimu? Ohano scienzie?”

The mare blinked, then shook her head rapidly. “Ni. Niksus kam keda.” He frowned at her, and she said in greater earnest, “Te merel muro muri dei, wowa ne kaerawa dowa!” The expression of fear returned.

“She doesn’t have it,” Goldenblood said flatly.

“Roadapples!” Bitterbrew growled. “She’s lying!”

"Tappahani do not lie. Propoli lie. Zencori lie. Roamani lie if ordered to. Tappahani do not."

"Me diktom tam lendi-le!" the mare blurted out, trembling.

"What was that?" Goldenblood asked, then repeated himself in Zebra, "Who?"

She shook her head. "Me ne kur pen!" she said, near tears. "Kako nashti zhas vorta po drom o bango!"

"She did take it, didn't she?" Bitterbrew said with a triumphant smirk.

"No," Goldenblood said. "She doesn't want to tell me who."

"Well, of course she has it! Who else could have taken it?" the sallow stallion snapped crossly.

Goldenblood regarded the zebra mare. "Kai lelled fiz?"

The mare closed her eyes, trembling. "Kako..."

"Kai lelled lendi?" Goldenblood repeated in a softer voice as tears ran down her color-speckled cheeks.

"Starkatteri," she whispered. "Starkatteri kinshna-wowalelled lendi. Diktom-ye lendi wi-ye mok vardos. Kako muk-me. Te shordjol muro rat... Kako..."

"What did she say?" the others asked.

"Starkatteri. She said a Starkatteri took it," Goldenblood murmured. At their baffled expressions, he sighed. "They're a different tribe from hers. Cursed. Dangerous."

One of the unicorns adjusted her glasses. "Actually, 'cursed' is a misnomer. There actually aren't really curses but instead—"

Goldenblood spoke over her. "Thaumaturgical nomenclature distinctions aside, she wouldn't have spoken their name unless she was deadly serious. Naming them brings a curse of misfortune down upon you. Normally they're called the Fallen One, or just the One." He looked from one to the next. "Did any of you see a zebra with magical markings on their face? Or maybe a zebra that took great pains to cover himself?"

"I think there was at least one, but everything was so crazy with the injuries and all," the unicorn mare said nervously. Then a low, cynical laugh interrupted them both.

"Oh, please. This is just too much," Bitterbrew said with a sneer at the trembling mare. "She steals from us and then conveniently says the 'evil zebra' took it. She must think we're foals."

"She wouldn't have said that name if she wasn't serious," Goldenblood snapped. "It would be like us joking about Nightmare Moon returning."

Doubt began to show on the assembled unicorns, and even Bitterbrew seemed a little less contemptuous and a little more unsettled. "Fine. Take her back to the others. Everyone should go out in pairs and see if they can find this mysterious evil pony. I'll wake the principal and find out if we can't get those soldiers from Canterlot here any faster."

The orange mare in glasses who'd tried to talk about why curses didn't technically exist stepped up to Goldenblood as he talked in low, earnest tones to the zebra mare. She nodded her head, gave a thickly accented 'thank you', and walked slowly from the office, followed by the other pair of ponies. "We'll

take the north wing," the orange mare said, and together she and Goldenblood went out into the quiet school. "Everypony is nervous."

"They'll get the refugees out in the morning, and the children can have an early break," Goldenblood replied evenly as they walked along the hall, unlocking, checking, and securing each classroom in turn. Their horns cast beams of light into still, quiet chambers loaded with even rows of desks for the dozens and dozens of students above. "If there's a Starkatteri here, though, we need to find him."

"Why? I mean, we can't have any of them running around the school, but are these zebras so bad?" she asked as she peeked through the window of an office. Inside there were more than two dozen wounded zebras in an improvised hospital, cared for by a half dozen ponies and a harried looking school nurse. The attack must have happened only a few hours ago.

"They're... complicated. Millennia ago, they tried to enslave the other tribes. They were marked with magic so that all that were born into the tribe would be noticed. Most zebras think of them... well... the way Bitterbrew thinks of zebras in general," he said as he swept his eyes across another classroom. A foalish scribble of Princess Luna. Paper pegasi dangling from a mobile. A graded paper left on a table top, B-.

"Why didn't they just kill them if they were so bad?" she asked.

"Because they're still zebras. They're hated, but tolerated. That's part of their punishment. They know serious dark magic though. Powerful zebra curses, and the calling of malevolent spirits to harm their enemies."

"Ugh. Why does everypony make that mistake? They're not curses! They're--" she began to lecture again when he silenced her with a hoof over her mouth.

Very softly, he heard the click of a door closing. "Everypony is either asleep, patrolling the other wing, or watching the zebras, right?" Her eyes wide, she nodded, and he trotted down the hall, checking doors. The one to stairwell wasn't locked.

"Oh no... The children..." she said as together they made their way up.

"Try and stay silent. We don't want a panic," Goldenblood said. "If you see him, be careful. He could be up to no good, or he might have been thrown out of the wagons for his marks. I don't want to provoke a Starkatteri if we can help it."

Hoofbeats echoed distantly down the hall, and together they made their way back towards the stairs in the middle of the dormitory wings. There was a soft thump from a closet marked 'linens', and Goldenblood glanced at her, and then opened it slowly with his magic. "Haja nanka—" Goldenblood began to say, then froze at the sight of two colts in an embrace, blushing furiously as they sat amid rumpled sheets. "Really?"

"Sorry, Mister Goldenblood. Miss Silverspire," one of the two said ruefully.

"We just wanna to say goodbye in case we got sent home," the other explained as he flushed.

"Will you get them back to bed?" Goldenblood asked with a groan as he rubbed his temple.

"Of course. Come on, you two," she said as she nudged them back down the hall the way they'd come. Goldenblood sighed, looking around at the closed doors. Then, across the large central rotunda, he spotted a doorway ajar. He made his way slowly around towards the doorway, a filly's bathroom.

From within came a wan glow of light and a soft thump. Carefully, he pushed the door wide enough to peek through.

Within, a cloaked figure worked furiously, attaching wires and cables to a hoofball-sized slab of pink quartz with a dark purple talisman glyph within. The zebra was in the process of duct taping the spark batteries to other equipment. "What are you doing? Keena-te sa ru?" Goldenblood asked, and the zebra in the ragged cloak turned to peer at him, breathing hoarsely. "Kasana—"

"Don't profane my language with your foul tongue," the zebra snapped back.

"What are you doing?" Goldenblood asked as he stared at the talisman. "Stop. This is a school." Then he turned his head and snapped, "Silverspire! Bitterbrew! Anypony!"

The zebra finished taping the wires to the talisman. Goldenblood's horn glowed, and he yanked it into the air. "I don't know what you think you're going to do with this, but—"

In a flash, the zebra closed the distance, spinning in the air and slamming his outstretched hoof across Goldenblood's neck, snapping his focus. Smoothly, he caught the wired talisman on his flank and ran over Goldenblood, out into the hall. Silverspire, who'd been running back, let out a shriek. "Who are you? Stay back!"

Goldenblood groaned as he rolled to his hooves. More teachers were appearing, some thundering up the stairs and others coming out of their quarters. The zebra backed away as the talisman began to glow. "What is that, Silverspire? Is it a bomb?" Goldenblood asked tensely.

"No! I think... I think it's some kind of industrial strength lye generator. For manufacturing. But he's modified it and wired it to those capacitors..." she trailed off, then her eyes shot wide. "Grab it! Quickly! He's overcharging it!"

Three teachers lunged for him, their horns glowing as they tried to grab the wired talisman from the zebra. He spun, dodged, and flipped away from his attackers with grace and swiftness. He just wouldn't let them get a grip on the device, and when a unicorn did, the zebra struck out, smashing horns, throats, and eyes with lightning kicks and punches. The pink talisman began to glow.

Goldenblood charged in and tackled him, hooves wide. The zebra tried to spin out of the way, but Goldenblood powered both of them towards the edge of the rotunda, looking down at the ground floor fifty feet below. The zebra clasped the talisman in his hooves as they both went over, the onlookers screaming in terror.

Goldenblood tumbled through the air and landed with a crash in one of the hovering elevator cages ten feet down, making it sway and bob wildly in the air. His whole body ached as he rose and crawled to the edge of the elevator, looking down at the prone form of the zebra. Goldenblood hit the control talisman with his magic, and the lift lowered itself quickly to the floor.

The achy white unicorn approached the prone zebra. The fall was at least forty feet onto hard black marble. Blood spread outwards from the zebra's head as he curled around the pink talisman. It was humming and throbbing, and a sharp tang filled the air. Goldenblood peered down at the body.

"Get back! Get back!" Bitterbrew shouted as he approached, then stopped short of the corpse. "Is he dead..?"

"I think that's some of his brain by your hoof," Goldenblood said, gesturing to a marble-sized glob.

"Ah good," Bitterbrew said before the unicorn levitated out a pair of wire cutters, reached down, and held it to the wire. Goldenblood took several steps back. "Now, is it the red wire or the blue wire?" he mused.

"Dear Luna, don't cut it if you're not sure!" Goldenblood cried out. There were more hoofbeats as an older unicorn mare and a half dozen others trotted up to the fallen body.

"Hello, Principal Dew Blossom. I was just about to deactivate it." Bitterbrew smirked. "And don't be so fearful, Goldenblood. It's always the red..."

The corpse reached up and grabbed Bitterbrew's head, yanking him down towards the nightmarish ruin of his face. "Yur firsh!" he cried out, and then he flicked the talisman with the tip of his tail. From the end of the device, a twenty-foot-high plume of pink vapor blasted out. Bitterbrew's head disappeared in the spray, and when his spasming body fell back, a dripping stub was all that remained. The jet of vapor started to die, but then a white mote was pulled into a silver ring around the pink talisman, and it surged and vomited forth an even more intense stream.

"It works! It works!" the zebra cackled as he turned the plume of pink gas on the adults around him. Every second, the jet grew more intense and thicker. As Goldenblood watched, the cloak's blood-matted hood fell away, and he saw the zebra clearly for the first time. The black stripes ran like ink, but every second his horrible injuries were restored. The stripes on his face didn't look like natural zebra patterns but the glyphs of some horrible arcane spell. And as Goldenblood fell back into the lift, the zebra turned and looked back as the last of his skull popped back into place. With cold, terrifying certainty, I put a name to the face.

Amadi.

Goldenblood desperately hammered the elevator control and winced as a little patch of the pad remained behind. The lift jerked up into the air as the Pink Cloud spread, billowing in every direction and rising higher and higher. Screams of terror from far too many children and teachers alike began to echo as the pink vapors thickened and rose. The Cloud spread like a rising tide, the zebra whirling this way and that.

I'd been in Pink Cloud before, so the terrible burning sensation felt familiar. Everything inside and out burned horribly as he rose up to the dormitory floor. Vapors were already curling upwards as the lift continued to rise, and he slumped against the bars in a desperate bid to stay upright. "Stop the lift! Stop the lift!" Silverspire screamed, levitating up a foal as the lift continued upwards toward the observation tower.

Goldenblood tried to hit the controls to stop the lift, but his body was stuck to the bars of the elevator. He stared down at the sight of his hide melting against the pink coated metal and cried out, then broke into hacks and coughs. With that much pain, I couldn't blame him for not being able to stop the lift. Still, he gave a herculean heave, and fire exploded along his side as he pulled free, leaving a dozen strips of his hide attached to the metal. The movement made the lift lurch, and he slammed against the bars on the opposite side. He screamed, but his scream was one of dozens filling the central shaft.

He watched as the teachers and students fell back from the edge of the balcony as Pink Cloud began to curl up over the edge and outwards. The panicked ponies tramped each other as they fell back from the stinging vapors. The other lift rose, but it was filled with a squirming mass of a half dozen ponies, and from how they moved, it was hard to tell where one ended and another began. Tiny white flashes could be seen in the depths as the Cloud spread more and more.

The third lift dropped with two adult ponies coming down. Goldenblood tried to call for them to stop, but all that came out were rasping, gasping coughs. The two disappeared into the swirling pink

without a clue as to how dangerous it was. He heaved once again, his Pink-Cloud-softened hide tearing, but this time he adamantly remained standing in the center of the lift.

When it reached the top of the tower, he slowly stepped out, every footstep burning. His whole world was pain. Two more unicorns rushed over. "What's going on? What's that screaming?" Along the far wall, large bulky electrical equipment pinged and crackled. "Mister Goldenblood? Is that you?"

"Dugghh tusshhhhh mehhhh!" he grasped and then started coughing and rasping, bloody drops fanning out from his mouth with every breath. "Pingh... posson..."

"Poison?" the mare asked. Both of them stared in horror, and then she continued, "Hold still, Gold. I got you." She shot a bolt of magic up at the roof.

"No!" the other shouted. The bolt struck a talisman in the ceiling, and suddenly water began to rain down on Goldenblood... and the equipment. It sizzled, crackled, and finally popped with a great cloud of gray smoke coming out the back. The machine fell silent as the second unicorn rushed to it. "No no no... the radio..."

The pain abated a little. The mare saw to him, casting healing spells that mended his hide, but they did little for his chest. The stallion fussed over the radio. Out the tower window, far below, a pink fog bank rolled across the wagons and camps. Zebras fled towards the forests, but the school gates barred their path. Some began to scramble up, hooking their hooves around the bars and scrambling over with a haste I'd never imagined before... but they weren't fast enough. The Pink Cloud blasted past them, and their screams reached the tower before being cut short. Most hadn't even made it that far. In the courtyard, more jets exploded here and there. There were still yells and cries for help from the levels below.

"Why? Who did this? How?" the mare asked as tears streaked down her cheek.

"Zeee... bra..." Goldenblood gasped weakly as he collapsed on his side. "Sta... sta..." but then he broke off, coughing and hacking.

"A zebra did this?" the stallion asked, looking up from the equipment. "No. How could they? This is a school! Why?"

"Do you think they need a reason?! They're monsters! They used their own refugees to get into the school and then killed us all after we helped them!" the mare snapped through her tears.

"No..." Goldenblood murmured as things started going dim, his chest feeling as if it were full of molten rock. "Sta...aaaaah..."

"Don't worry, Goldenblood. We'll get you help. Just hold on," the stallion said as the pain abated with another healing potion. "We're going to survive. We're going to make damned sure everypony knows what happened here tonight!"

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory orb, swayed, then straightened. Amadi. He'd been there. Two centuries ago... he'd *been* there! No wonder, when Goldenblood had seen him in the Image archives, he'd freaked out. The zebra who'd started it all had been there!

"But why couldn't he tell them after he recovered?" I asked myself as I stared at the screen.

Suddenly, the terminal flickered, and the grainy image of a mare appeared. At the bottom of the screen read a tagline: zebras responsible for school attack. "...multiple eyewitnesses to the massacre say the zebra were responsible for the attack..."

The image changed to a picture of a bandaged-covered Goldenblood as a stallion voice said, "...teacher saw with his own eyes the zebra commando responsible for this attack..."

A new image. The mare from the memory orb appeared on the screen. "It was horrible! We could hear them screaming, trapped in their dorm rooms, as the poison gas got stronger and stronger! I can still hear them screaming!" she said, sobbing brokenly.

Another picture of several formally adorned zebras surrounded by reporters. Behind them was an angry mob. 'Zebra officials deny Littlehorn Massacre', read the tagline. 'Denounce Equestria for the murder of 'refugees'. Suggest Littlehorn School front for chemical weapons lab. Hoofington burns. Follow-up terrorist attack?'

Finally, an image of Celestia with Luna standing beside her. I'd never seen her look so... old. Even with the grainy picture, I could see the prominent shadows around her eyes and the heartbroken stare. "...national period of mourning. I regret to inform you all that I am stepping down for an extended leave of absence effective immediately. The events of this war have become... more than I ever imagined. Not since ancient times has Equestria suffered as it does now, and I fear there is no way for harmony to be restored. Fear not, though. I am passing control of the kingdom to my dearest sister. As she has sheltered us all through the night, so shall she protect us all through these dark times. She has my absolute confidence." The camera then focused right on Princess Luna as dozens of flashbulbs went off. I'd never seen a mare so terrified in my life.

"I... I want to... um..." Luna began as her eyes darted from one reporter to the next as a long, tense silence went on.

"How will you retaliate for the attack on Littlehorn, Princess Luna?" one reporter finally said. Princess Luna's mouth worked silently for a second, a shadow of pain flickering across her face as she struggled to answer.

However, before she could express the feelings, another reporter waved a hoof at her. "Can you respond to Prince Blueblood's comments about peace with the zebras being impossible?" shouted another.

"Princess Luna! Princess Luna! What about the burning of Hoofington and the rumors that a zebra was responsible? Can you comment?" hollered another.

Luna's mouth moved silently as she looked from one to the next. "I... well... I just wanted to say..." But whatever she wanted to say was trampled by more questions.

Then Princess Celestia cleared her throat, and the questions stopped immediately. "Naturally, you have many questions and concerns. Princess Luna will undoubtedly answer them all in time, later. Excuse us." Together they turned, but I caught the momentary downcast eyes, the worried expression... and the furrowed brow.

The screen returned to the first question.

>WHO DID IT?

I typed in 'AMADI', then stopped. That was the right answer, but was it the right answer for *him*? No one could blame him for the rage that was unleashed after Littlehorn. Amadi was the killer. Goldenblood had been near death. If he'd died, the two up in the tower could have come to the exact

same conclusion, regardless of what Goldenblood had said. Everypony could have died, and nothing might have changed.

But I imaged how Goldenblood must have felt... watching the world die... his Equestria die... I knew what it was like to survive things like that. How I blamed myself for things that hadn't been entirely my fault. How it'd torn me up inside. Slowly, I typed the answer.

>GOLDENBLOOD.

The terminal went blank, and my breath caught in my throat as the beam guns hummed.

Then:

>WHAT DID HE DO WRONG?

I glanced down at the remaining two memory orbs. "Gee, where to start?" I carefully levitated the next orb and eyed it. "Why can't you ever make anything easy, Goldenblood? Even now?" I sighed as I glared at the orb. "Okay. Round two." I touched the orb to my horn and made the connection.

'My only friend' came the rasp. Friend? Goldenblood didn't have friends, he had accomplices. He had minions. He had...

Okay, why wasn't I breathing? I sat down hard trying to perform the simple motion of pulling air into my lungs and not quite remembering how. Luna? Sadly no. Psalm. No. She might have been closer than that. Twilight Sparkle? Fluttershy! No... starting to get light headed. Rainbow Dash? Applejack? Pinkie Pie? Rarity? No no no no. Princess Luna? Damn, I was repeating myself! Why were there all those black spots in my vision? Somepony he regarded a friend... Spike... Horse... no... not Horse. Garnet? No... somepony else... Somepony who actually gave a shit about him. Fluttershy? No... Lacunae... no... think... Somepony... Some...

Trottenheimer...

oooOOOooo

Okay. Once again I was reminded why Pink Cloud wasn't your friend. Having fire erupt with every shallow breath sure was distracting. Still, the sensation of breathing was quite welcome after trying to get into this damn orb. Memory orbs that shut down your breathing? That was fucked up. Knowing my luck, the last one would stop my heart. How long could a pony go without their heart beating?

Worry about that when you get to it. Pay attention now. Goldenblood was walking down a very seedy back street in Canterlot. In the distance I could see the ministry buildings, their colorful spires hung with black banners. A layer of wet slush covered everything, and it dripped and drizzled into the alley. A gaunt cat hissed at him as he trotted past, but he paid it no mind.

A scar-covered brown pony quivered between two boxes, one forehoof ending in a truncated stump. "Spare a bit for a vet? I fought with Big Macintosh," he pleaded as he held out his remaining hoof.

Goldenblood stopped, peering down at him with tired eyes. At the pony's hooves, barely covered by the rags, was a red pamphlet with a large green apple half upon it. "No. You didn't," he replied in cold, hard tones. The crippled stallion flinched back and pulled his rags over him more. Then Goldenblood levitated three bits from his bag. "Go stay at the Ministry of Peace shelter tonight. It's going to be cold."

He left the stallion behind and walked down an even narrower, dimmer side street. I wondered what sort of horrible things he would be meeting in a place like this. Zebra infiltrators? Equestria death squads? Mad scientists?

Outside a doorway, a batpony mare guard stood at attention. "Is she still inside?" Goldenblood asked.

"Yes sir," the guard replied with a salute of her wing. Then concern crossed her dusky blue face. "She's... in a bad way, sir."

"They're all taking Big Macintosh's death hard. It's been a rough week. I expected this of Applejack, but not her." He frowned, looking over towards the immense tree that, from LittlePip's descriptions, was the Ministry of Peace. "I wish I knew what they talked about the other day." What, something that Goldenblood didn't know? Be still my... strike that. "I'll see if I can help her. Are the premises secure?" he asked as he looked at the door. Sad music played through it.

"No one's going to touch her, but... I can't be sure they won't talk," the batpony said with a frown. "Should we detain them?"

"No. Clear them out discreetly. I don't want her upset any more than she already is. Image will keep it from getting further than this. Make use of the slush account to compensate them for their inconvenience. If they want more, they won't like the more they get. I'm in no mood for blackmail attempts these days," he muttered as he walked through the doorway and into a kitchen. He glanced at the kitchen staff and nodded to the door. Then he stepped through.

The bar was dingy, smelly, and dim. Dingy in the fact that whoever owned it didn't seem inclined to fix the carved table tops, the dented flatware, or the chipped mugs. Smelly in that 'sour hops and faintly spoiled wine with just a tang of sharper whiskey' scent kind of way. Only the dimness seemed intentional, as if the owner had tried for cozy and intimate and landed squarely in creepy and sinister territory. Actually, I kind of liked it. In the corner, a jukebox played a sad Sweetie Belle tune. 'When is my stallion coming home?' seemed to be the refrain. A dozen or so patrons waited tensely in one corner watched by two larger, bulkier batpony stallions. The mare followed Goldenblood in and walked over to them. A few quiet words were exchanged, and then, single file, the ponies vacated the bar. One started to give a drunken protest, but the stronger stallion incapacitated him, wrapping leathery wings around the inebriate's head and then hauling him across his back.

"Thanks, Lionheart," the mare said with a little nod as the stallions trotted out. "All yours, Goldenblood."

He nodded as he stared at the lone figure at the bar. This was the last place I'd have expected to see Twilight Sparkle. Her mane was a rat's nest of tangles; her eyes were puffy and bloodshot. On her head perched a tiara with a six pointed star atop it. In front of her was a mug of something smelling strongly of apples.

Only the bartender remained, the scruffy brown unicorn tilting his head towards the scarred pony as he approached the bar. "You're ruining the party," Twilight Sparkle slurred, "Go away."

"Thanks for contacting me, Scruffy," Goldenblood said to the unicorn behind the bar. The brown unicorn nodded to Goldenblood. "The usual."

"Of course you know each other," Twilight grunted in disgust, levitating her mug and trotting towards the jukebox.

Goldenblood remained at the bar, watching Twilight. "How many of those has she had?"

"She hasn't even had that one," the brown stallion replied with a grunt. "I don't think she's figured out she needs ta drink the damned thing first." He paused. "You think she's spit her bit or something? She's played that song a dozen times already."

"Something. I don't know why this is hitting her so hard. Applejack, yes, but Twilight? It makes no sense. If she has..." then he shook his head and glanced at the pony. "How're the wife and kids?"

"Wife's in Zebratown now. Took your advice. The kids..." He shook his head. "Dunno if they should stay here with me or go stay with her. Nobody wants zonies anymore." He set a glass of something sharp down on the tabletop. "She's got another packet ready. Her aunt with the Propoli got it to her."

"I'll send somepony for it. Thanks for being discreet," Goldenblood replied, then paused and added, "I'd send them to be with their mother, Scruff. Zebras might resent them, but their stripes might get them hurt." He then took the glass and trotted towards the jukebox as Twilight selected the same sad song again.

"Go away, Goldenblood. I don't want to talk to you right now," she said as she stared into the jukebox.

"Fair enough. I'm just here for a drink," he said as he slipped into the booth nearest to the jukebox.

Twilight snorted and stared into the machine as Goldenblood waited, sipping his drink. When the song ended, Goldenblood asked, "Can you pick 'Away, away my heart' next? Just for a little variety?" Twilight Sparkle grimaced, then glanced over at him, and her horn glowed. The tune changed, still just as sad.

Twilight stared into the jukebox's glowing, shining talismans as they whirled and played the record. "I'm leaving the ministry."

"Mmmm..." Goldenblood replied, gazing out at nothing in the dim interior.

"I've had it with this war. This killing. This... everything..." she said as tears ran down her cheek. "I keep trying to come up with something that'll end it. Some spell or trick or enchantment or... something!" She thudded the jukebox in frustration. "I can't do this anymore!"

"Mmmm..." Goldenblood said again.

"Is that all you're going to say?" she snapped waspishly.

"No," he answered. "I'll start processing the paperwork this afternoon. Speak to Princess Luna. We'll frame it as 'extended leave' and next week work in the retirement. Mosaic and Gestalt will take over the Ministry of Arcane Sciences. I imagine Princess Celestia will be glad to have you as a teacher at her school." He glanced at her, and his lips curled in a small smile. "I think you'll like it, Twilight. Teaching can be... surprisingly rewarding. Just don't fall behind on the grading. It can be a killer."

Twilight stared at him, appearing shocked. "That's it?" He gave a little nod and sipped his drink. "You're not going to try and talk me out of it?"

Goldenblood gave a little shrug, then broke off coughing for several seconds as the magma in his lungs erupted for several seconds. He levitated over a napkin and spat a pinkish red blob into it. "If it's what you really want, I won't stop you. I imagine that Princess Luna will want to know why, but I'm sure that, as long as your friends know why you're quitting, that's all that matters."

Twilight Sparkle winced at the word 'quit'. "I'm just sick of it all. At my ministry there're ponies who don't seem to know that there's a war on at all. Even I feel that way sometimes. It's all projects, puzzles, checklists, and reports. But now Big Macintosh's dead, and... it hurts, Goldenblood. It hurts so damned much and I can't figure out why!"

"You saw Fluttershy. Did she..." he began, but she shook her head.

"She prescribed some drugs and therapy. Drugs." She rubbed her face with a hoof. "Sweet Celestia, hasn't she seen what they're doing to Pinkie Pie? I can't take them."

"Not all drugs are the same, Twilight. There's a big leap between Mint-als and aspirin. And you know that too," Goldenblood answered. Twilight sniffed and arched her back a little. He watched her passively as she shook her head. "What's the matter?"

"I don't know!" Twilight cried out, flinging the mug away from her, the dark contents splashing across the floor. "I just feel... I hurt! And I don't know *why*! I see pictures of Big Macintosh and *think* that he was my friend's brother and he's gone and that's bad... but I don't *feel* that way. And every time I try and figure out why it... it hurts even more!" She bowed her head, eyes shut, tears falling on the glass cover of the jukebox. "We can't even talk to each other about it. Rainbow Dash just says soldiers die but... but we knew him. Fluttershy just cries. Rarity..." She shook her head. "We knew him, Goldenblood. We knew him."

"And now he's gone," he said softly. "You've never lost someone close to you before, have you, Twilight?"

She sniffed and shook her head. "I don't know what to do. I've read books and asked Celestia and... and... I just don't know how to make this hurt stop."

"It doesn't stop, Twilight. What you're feeling... millions have felt. It's normal," he said in his rusty, wet voice.

"It is?" Twilight asked. "But when... how does it stop?"

He didn't answer for a moment. "It doesn't, if you're lucky. It fades with time, bit by bit, but it never completely goes away." He levitated a napkin to her and dabbed at her tears. "It's like a scar that lingers and aches when the weather is cold and wet. It reminds us of those who have gone so that we keep on living. The most important thing is that we don't miss them so badly we go and join them."

She sniffed and peered up at him, then lowered her eyes back to the dirty floor. "You feel this way a lot?"

"I've had a lot of practice," he replied in his rusty, wet voice. He helped her over to the booth and waved a hoof at the bartender. Twilight breathed a little more steadily now. "You're not going to quit, Twilight. You don't know how."

Twilight frowned at him. "You don't know that. I can too quit," she said, almost petulantly.

"No. You can't. You'll stick it out, because that's what you do. Your whole family is incredibly tenacious," he said calmly as he folded his hooves on the table before his face. "You'll get over this, Twilight. People are counting on you. You won't let them down. We have to win this war."

Twilight sat back in her seat. "Win this war? For what?"

Now he frowned. "For what?"

"That's what I'm asking you. What are we fighting this war for? You know better than anypony. You've been in the government since before the ministries. So what is all this for?" Twilight asked.

Goldenblood didn't answer right away. "Well... to protect ourselves from our enemy."

"And they attack us to protect themselves from us. Seems like the better protection would be if everyone stayed home," Twilight countered.

"It's not that simple. There's economics to be considered too. Our energy requirements—" Goldenblood began before Twilight cut him off.

"Aren't what they were fifteen years ago. We've got the Hoofington dams for example. We're researching gem energy reactors that don't require coal. I know the M.W.T. is looking at solar energy. Heck, the zebras aren't any different. They're less and less dependent on gems than they were at the start of the war." Twilight sniffed and rubbed her eyes as she drilled her gaze into his.

He took a moment, fighting for breath before he murmured, "It's not... that simple. Twilight... what you're feeling for Big Macintosh, everypony is feeling. We've all lost friends and loved ones to this war. They want revenge and payback for all we've lost. We can't just stop after we've given so much to—" he began when she cut through his words again.

"That's a sunk cost fallacy, Goldenblood. We can't stop fighting now because we didn't stop fighting in the past because we won't stop fighting in the future. We have to spend more lives for lives spent. No. I refuse to accept that," Twilight said firmly.

"It's not just that. The zebras... they have a religious fear of Princess Luna. A superstition. They attack us because they feel they have to. Especially now with the peace talk blown to pieces."

"And do you really think that in a choice between superstition and peace, they'd choose superstition?" Twilight asked sharply. Goldenblood almost physically wilted under her glare.

"We're fighting... because we have to. That's all there is to it," he finished lamely, dropping his eyes to the table. He sighed, shaking his head a moment, and then said, "You're right. There isn't any good reason to fight. But that won't stop this war, Twilight. You know that. And we need you. You know that too. In a few more years, the zebras might be open to another round of peace talks. Maybe we can work out an armistice then. But in the meantime, we have to keep fighting."

Twilight leaned back in the booth with a sigh. "Sometimes I think Princess Luna really doesn't want peace. I can't imagine why, but it just feels... wrong." Goldenblood said nothing as she looked at her hooves. Twilight was silent too, then sighed. "At this rate, there's not going to be an Equestria left worth fighting over."

"What do you mean?" Goldenblood asked with a little frown as he peered at the wistful purple unicorn. His rough rasp had grown more rough and wet. He coughed something foul and oily into the handkerchief.

"I mean that at the rate we're going, all that's going to be left is a poisoned, polluted wasteland. I know you've seen the reports. Do you even know how much alchemical waste we're producing, Goldenblood? Or chemical waste? And don't get me started on that Flux junk that Flim and Flam got their hooves on. This stuff is dangerous and reactive, and we're making a whole lot of it."

"That's why the M.A.S. facility was set up in Splendid Valley. To store and protect—" Goldenblood began.

"It's not enough," Twilight interrupted.

"There's more than twenty miles of tunnel under Maripony," Goldenblood said with a faintly pained expression.

"And I'm telling you it's not enough," Twilight replied. "Our alchemical waste is so toxic and reactive that we can't even put it all in the same caves. There's already been a serious incident. Thank Celestia nopony died, but the product was so corrosive it was eating through our suits. And that doesn't start to address the industrial waste being made. Everypony is churning out all kinds of stuff for the war, and in the process they're making stuff so toxic we can't do more than bury it. But it's not going to stay buried forever. Even our most corrosion-resistant drums are going to leak eventually."

"Something Princess Luna can deal with after the war," Goldenblood said with a small frown.

"And by then it'll be too late, Goldenblood. You don't seem to get how much stuff is sitting around. There's tens of millions of gallons of it all across Equestria. And if you talk about it, a pony in a uniform says 'war effort', and the debate gets shut down. And bad as magical waste is, this 'Flux' seems to go out of its way to mess things up," Twilight said with a scowl, then sighed.

"We have to keep on fighting. Equestria is worth it," he said as he looked away from her, staring off into the gloom.

"You really mean that?" Twilight said skeptically.

"I spent most of my colthood travelling around the world. To me, it was an adventure, but Mother travelled to keep me safe from Father. Celestia finally forced him to acknowledge me, and he never forgave that. Scruffy over there was one of our retainers, helping to keep the baggage from getting lost or a wayward colt from wandering into a poppy den."

"Keepin' ya from those Carnilia fillies was more a chore," Scruffy chuckled.

Goldenblood actually blushed as he went on, "Yes, well, I always had stories of Equestria. I dreamed of this place. When Mother died and I came here, it was the first time I felt like I was home. Certainly, Father didn't make things easy for me, but I woke up each morning glad to be here. I hiked all over it, collecting rocks, minerals, and gems. I've always been in love with Equestria." He spoke like... I didn't know what. As if he was looking at some distant dream.

"Well, enjoy it while it lasts," Twilight said quietly. "You heard what Rainbow Dash discovered?"

His smile vanished, and his eyes fell. "Yes. The zebras have megaspells." There was the sound of a bottle smashing, and both looked over at the horrified bartender.

"M'sorry," the pony muttered as he levitated over a broom and dustpan.

Twilight sighed, "I don't know how they got the framework. Pinkie Pie must have been taking more of those damned drugs and missed it while she was bouncing off the walls. Or worse. What if someone at the M.o.P. gave it to them?"

"They didn't. I'm completely certain that neither Fluttershy nor anyone in her employ was responsible," Goldenblood said firmly.

Twilight arched a skeptical brow. "Regardless, you know what this means. They're using the megaspell matrix to supercharge weapons grade talismans. It'll be Littlehorn all over Equestria."

"Not if we have megaspells of our own to counter them," Goldenblood said.

"Yeah. Funny how fast that research went. Research I didn't even want my ministry to do. Suddenly I turn around and there's all kinds of megaspell weapon theories practically lying around in the hallways," Twilight said sourly. "If it all goes off, will there be an Equestria left?"

Goldenblood said nothing for several long seconds. "There's nothing we can do about that," he said quietly, once again looking away.

"Maybe there is," Twilight said as she took the tiara off her head and stared at it. "It's something I thought up this morning. Megaspells... they operate like the Elements of Harmony. What if we combine the two? A megaspell array powered by the magic of the Elements to cleanse and restore Equestria if the worst should happen?"

"The Elements?" He frowned at the tiara. "I thought you couldn't get them to work."

"True. I couldn't, but that doesn't mean somepony else couldn't be a bearer. I don't think that the six of us were meant to be the bearers forever anyway," she said as she looked away. "I have to do something, Goldenblood. If I don't... I just have to do this."

"Luna won't allow it, Twilight. I'm sorry. She doesn't want to risk the Elements falling into the wrong hooves. Besides, she won't tolerate any talk about losing the war. Building something like this is just that. Especially if she thinks it could be repurposed into a weapon," Goldenblood said, giving the mare a long frown.

"You honestly think that I would make a weapon with the Elements to use against Luna?" Twilight asked with a laugh. Goldenblood didn't share it, and it sickened and died. "Goldenblood, are you saying Luna doesn't trust us?"

"Luna respects the six of you greatly and values your contributions, but you used the Elements against her once," he said levelly. "She won't risk you using them again."

"She was Nightmare Moon at the time!" Twilight said with a wave of her hoof.

"I'm sorry, Twilight. I don't even have to ask her. She'll say no," Goldenblood said. Twilight stared at him, and something inside her crumpled. She slowly collapsed back in the booth seat. "Have faith, Twilight. Soon, this will be over, and Equestria can get back to normal."

"Normal?" Twilight said without looking at him for a second. Then she raised her head, her mane covering half her face with one eye glaring at him. "You think Equestria will return to normal? Before the death? Before the corporations and the guns and the poison? Do you think Equestria will ever be a land of sunshine again?" She suddenly levitated the table up and flipped it away, pointing a hoof at Goldenblood. "You told us these ministries would help Equestria. Well, I don't see anything in this war that's *close* to normal! It's just getting worse and worse. And you had a hoof in that. Do you love Equestria or Princess Luna, Goldenblood?"

His mouth worked a moment as he stared up at her. "I don't understand... I love both..."

"No," she contradicted. "You can't. Either you love the Equestria you used to dream about, or you love the ruler who's changing it to suit her own vision. I respect Princess Luna too, but this is wrong. So which is it? Equestria or Luna?"

He didn't answer. He just closed his eyes for the longest time. "I love Luna, Twilight. I do." He opened his eyes and looked at the unicorn as she slumped and seemed to age before his eyes. "But I love Equestria even more. And you're right. If we lose this war, we're going to need something like what you're proposing. And if we win..." He trailed off. "If we win..." he repeated, and once again went quiet.

"If we win? What?" Twilight asked with a frown.

He opened and closed his mouth before stammering, "N-Nothing. Just... I had a thought." He closed his eyes and nodded once. "Make me a list. Tell me what you need. I'll get it however I can. I

know ponies who are experts at fudging requisition orders and misfiling papers. They could make a battleship disappear if they needed to."

"Are you serious? Goldenblood, this could take months. Maybe years. I'd have to research specific spells to place in the megaspell matrix. I can't begin to imagine where we'll get the processing power to make it work."

He stepped towards her and took his hoof between hers. "Just tell me what you need as you need it. Spike is a trustworthy intermediary. He can be our point of contact. Stay at the M.A.S. Do what you need to. And I'll make this work. You're right. We do need something to take care of things if we lose the war." And then he added, softer and almost to himself, "And if we win it..."

Twilight nodded. "I... thank you. I didn't expect... I don't know what I expected. But still. Thank you."

"I do love Equestria, Twilight. Anything worthwhile is done for love," he said with a small smile.

She nodded and flushed, then turned back to him. "I feel... better. Thank you. I... goodbye." And with that, Twilight trotted away, still hurt but moving once more. Goldenblood's small smile melted away as he walked to the middle of the bar.

"I have to say, that was some smooth work. I'd heard you had a silver tongue, but I think it's pure gold," the batpony mare said as she trotted in from the kitchen. "She was ready to quit, but after a liberal application of bovine fecal matter, you had her back on the job."

"I meant every word," Goldenblood said calmly as he sat, then broke into coughing.

"Yeah, right. 'Love Equestria'? Really? I didn't think anyone older than a blank flank could fall for that," the mare said with a grin. "Let me guess: you're going to let Twilight build it and then hand over the keys to Princess Luna?"

"Something like that," Goldenblood said quietly. "Where's the others?"

"Escorted everyone away from here. Standard BS about security and a gas leak," she said with a sharper grin at Scruffy. "Want me to take care of the loose ends?" The brown stallion fell back, his eyes wide.

"No. I'll take care of it," he said as he levitated from his saddlebags a small, compact pistol and calmly screwed a silencer on to the end.

"M... Master Goldenblood! I've known you since you were a colt! You can't!" he stammered as he fell back against the wall.

"I'm sorry," he replied, as he stood beside the batpony. Then his horn sparked, and she collapsed. The pistol was turned aside, and he bent over her, focusing intently for a few moments as Scruffy gazed on in confusion and fear. Without meeting his eyes, Goldenblood coughed and added softly, "The less memory I have to modify, the better."

Scruffy didn't take his eyes off the gun. Given it hadn't been put away yet, I couldn't blame him. "Okay..."

"We need to make this quick," Goldenblood said calmly as he looked towards the doors and then down at the still mare. "Do you still have that secret trap door in the cellar?"

Scruffy stared at the mare, then at the scarred stallion as if he'd never met him before. Then he gave a jerky nod of his head, "A...aye."

"I'm afraid you and your family are going to have to go much further than Zebratown," he said as he began to levitate the bottles, spilling them all over the bar. "Get to Applewood. Talk to Greasy Rag in the O.I.A. motor pool. He'll get your family to the Crystal Empire. Tell him it'll come off his bill. He'll understand." The brown unicorn glanced down at the batpony again. "Scruffy? She'll be fine," Goldenblood said, calm and cool, and even I'd have shivered at the soft menace in his voice if I'd had my own body.

Scruffy's eyes went wide as he met the firm gaze of Goldenblood, the pistol still levitating in his magic. Then something in the brown stallion firmed up, and he gave a little nod. "A...aye. I can do that. But... you really are going to help Miss Sparkle against the Princess?"

"Everything Twilight said was true. If we lose this war, the damage to Equestria will be phenomenal. And I was right that Princess Luna would never authorize this project; she'll see it as a sign of no confidence. So it must be this way. But that I can handle. What I'm really worried about is... something else," he said as he put the gun away, pouring more spirits around the bar. I wished I could lick my lips at the perfectly good eighty proof Wild Pegasus going to waste!

"What's that?" Scruffy asked with a frown, rescuing a bottle and taking a long pull from it.

"Twilight is worried about saving Equestria if we lose the war, but I've had an epiphany: what if we win? What will happen to Equestria then?" Goldenblood asked.

"But... isn't winning the war the point?"

"Yes, but I'd never thought about what was best for Equestria, only what was best for Princess Luna. She wanted a government that would stand for a thousand years. That's exactly what I helped her create. But when the war is over... what then? Luna could easily be a worse tyrant than Equestria has ever known. It's been five years and we're already taking ponies away and brainwashing them for thinking the wrong thoughts. Erasing ponies' memories to keep secrets, or just killing them outright. What about in five more years? Or ten? Or twenty?" He sighed and closed his eyes. "Luna may turn out to be a good and kindly ruler, but a contingency should be in place for what happens if she turns tyrant. Something that will sweep all of this away and give Equestria and the world a second chance."

"That's treason," Scruffy said as he pulled open a trap door behind the bar. "Yer talking treason."

"No. Not treason. Responsibility. I created a government where she has absolute power with almost no accountability. Even Celestia could be held responsible for her actions. Luna will rule as an apparent figurehead, shielded by layer upon layer of bureaucracy and obfuscation. No. Something must be put in place. A plan. A contingency. Otherwise, we may win the war, but Equestria may lose its very soul... if it hasn't already."

"The games yer playing are going to cost you yer life, boyo," Scruffy said as he started down the stairs.

"The games I play may cost everypony far more than my life," he replied, giving a fond smile. "Take care of yourself, Scruffy. Get out of Equestria as soon as you can. When you get to the Empire, keep your head down. Hopefully, Cadance will prove wiser and keep out of the war," he said as he levitated up a lantern and walked back into the kitchen. There was a thump of the door closing. He set the lantern on the bar with his magic, then hooked the gas pipe by the stove with a broom handle and, with a shaky grunt of effort, pried a pipe joint open. A hiss filled the air, and he quickly stepped out into the alley, levitating the unconscious batpony mare with him.

A minute later came a curiously muffled 'fwoosh', and fire billowed out the kitchen door. Smoke rose into the sky as he calmly walked back the way he came, fire in his wake.

oooOOOooo

I pulled myself out of the memory orb fugue, swaying on my hooves. Gardens of Equestria, and I was guessing Project Horizons, born from the same fear. One that we would lose the war and the world would be uninhabitable, and the other that we would win it. Equestria under the control of a pony with absolute power and no responsibility for that power... it was a chilling prospect.

And of course, he couldn't just quit. He'd been like Twilight. He couldn't have simply stopped or confronted Luna about it. He had to be there, in the thick of it. He couldn't stop playing the game any more than I could stop rushing to ponies' aid when they needed it. He also couldn't have sabotaged Luna by that point. Everything had escalated; I doubted the zebras would have let Luna go for any peace project.

>WHAT DID HE DO WRONG? So many answers. That was the point, I supposed. Goldenblood hadn't been perfect. For all his ability to structure, manipulate, and arrange, he hadn't been perfect. Getting caught? Betraying Luna? Helping Luna in the first place? I sighed as I stared at the screen. I had one chance at this.

It had to be like before. What did *Goldenblood* think he'd done wrong? Trusted Luna? Maybe, but he hadn't made it sound like he'd been terribly wronged by her. More the opposite. "He loved Luna," I murmured. "Not sexually... but he'd loved her. And he'd loved Fluttershy. And Equestria." I stared at the screen. Would Goldenblood think falling in love had been a mistake? After Littlehorn, he'd been sure he'd die. A relationship with Fluttershy... Seeing that his plan had been too effective... Love had changed everything.

If it hadn't been for love, would anything have stopped Luna, or the zebras?

I swallowed and hoped there was a little wiggle room in an answer like this. Maybe one or two critical words to prevent me from being zapped? But what if entering one wrong word took me out? Oh, what I wouldn't give for P-21 to be here, get at the guts of the program, and pick from a dozen or so possible passwords. Or just Glory, so I could bounce my ideas off her. I swallowed hard, typed >LOVE, and clenched my eyes closed again as I hit the key.

Five seconds later, I opened them again. "It worked," I muttered as I read the third prompt. >WHAT DID SHE KNOW?

She? Which she? Goldenblood had a whole lot of 'she's complicating his life. Luna? Fluttershy? Twilight? I levitated up the third orb. "Okay. One to go. Just one." I tapped my horn to the tip.

Huh. Nothing. Then the phrase rasped like a rusty file across my brain: 'Who did I betray?' And then I felt a very familiar stillness in my chest as my heart stopped. Instantly the edges of my vision darkened and I felt myself start to collapse. One second. 'Luna!' Two seconds. 'Fluttershy!' Three seconds. 'Twilight'. My face hit the terminal keys. Four seconds. 'Yourself!' Everything went black as my brain gave one last feeble thought: 'Everypony!' Then it all went to black.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood sat behind a garish pink desk, the starmetal tuning fork beside his head as he stared out the window at a rainy Manehattan day. His basaltic lungs crackled slowly as he pinged the

tuning fork against the edge of the desk. From the view, the kitchen in the corner, the safes set in the wall, and the gaudy balloon wallpaper, I guessed this was Pinkie's office.

His eyes slowly panned along the walls. The scribbles and doodles of her friends on the desk. A mirror half-covered by a cloth, sitting in the corner with the tag 'Move to fun house ASAP!' He pulled open a drawer and looked down at a dozen tins of Party Time Mint-als.

The calendar on the desk had a number of entries written down for the next week: Arrest Badpony List F. Cake testing. Interrogate. Get confessions. Arrest Goldenblood, Garnet, Onyx, and Quartz. Play time with Gummy. Interrogate Goldenblood. Arrest Badpony List G. Interrogate. Review party procedures for GGG. And on the week after that: Raid 4stars. Arrest Badpony Lists H, I, and J. Arrest Princess Luna. Throw retirement party.

Goldenblood's eyes lingered on the second to last, the tiny screaming note resonating in his ear when the door opened and Pinkie Pie trotted in. I hadn't seen her like this before. Her normally curly mane was flat and dull. Dark shadows lay under her blue eyes, giving them a haunted, hollow appearance. She didn't seem to realize he was there as she trotted over to a filing cabinet and pulled out a file marked 'Badpony List F'. When she turned back to the desk, the pink mare jumped and dropped the file on the floor.

"Goldenblood? What... how... who... huh?" She shook her head hard and glowered at him. "What do you think you're doing here? You're not director of the O.I.A. anymore!"

He levitated out a tin and set it on the desktop. "Have a Mint-al, Pinkie." His ghoulish voice was barely a whisper as he opened the tin with his magic and levitated out one of the pills, setting it on the desk before him.

Her glower deepened. "I could have you arrested. I'm going to have you arrested. I know all about you. You're a bad pony! All of you. Bad ponies." She stormed to the door and yelled, "Pumpkin! Pound! Stardust! Gambol! Get in here!" A few seconds later, a light gray mare and light green stallion, both earth ponies, stormed in, followed by a yellow unicorn mare and pegasus stallion. Pinkie grinned at the scarred pony. "Goldie here was so nice to come here to save us some time! Take him down to Room Fun oh One."

"Director?" the gray mare said in bafflement. "What are you doing here?"

Pinkie gaped at her and pointed a hoof at Goldenblood, hissing, "He's not the director of the O.I.A. anymore! Take him out of my office! Now!" But the four hesitated. Goldenblood just sat there, not moving a muscle as he stared at them. Pinkie's glare slowly changed to one of bafflement. "What are you doing? He's nopony now but a criminal! Luna fired him. Get him." But none of them moved.

"Have a Mint-al, Pinkie," he repeated softly.

"Pinkie," Pumpkin Cake said as she trotted up to the mare. Pinkie started, almost jumping away as their shoulders brushed. "We can't."

"What do you mean you can't? He's right there. I'm your boss. Arrest him!" Pinkie said, thrusting a hoof at the scarred stallion.

"But Princess Luna is your boss, Pinkie. And... we're not allowed to arrest him without her order," Pound said. "There was a memo." Pinkie's eyes grew rounder as she stared at the four and then back at the scarred stallion.

"But I. You... he..." she stammered.

Goldenblood continued his refrain. "Have a Mint-al, Pinkie."

"We'll be outside when you're done, sir," the green stallion said, trotting from the room.

The gray mare trotted from the room after him, touching an earbloom. "Stand down. It's just Pinkie being Pinkie again," she mumbled as she left.

Pinkie stared at the unicorn and pegasus. "Pumpkin Cake? Pound Cake?"

"Sorry, Auntie Pinkie. We'll be outside," the slim orange unicorn said, followed by the guilty-looking buff pegasus. "Don't hurt her, sir," Pumpkin warned with a frown. Then, fighting tears, the unicorn and pegasus stepped out of the office. Pinkie stared at the doors as they closed behind her, eye twitching.

Goldenblood tapped the tuning fork, making her jump. She pointed a hoof at him, the older mare's limb shaking slightly. "You... what did you do to them? What... a spell... blackmail... what?"

"Have a Mint-al, Pinkie," he repeated as he levitated the pill off the desk towards her. Her eyes focused on the little round tablet, pupils constricting as she trembled, and then she smacked the pill aside. That made him smile a little, and he set the tuning fork on the desk before him. "To answer your question, few law enforcement officers respect a commander that is routinely drugged to the tip of their tails and who blatantly, flippantly flouts the law she is supposed to uphold. Princess Luna and I have made certain they know where the real orders are supposed to be coming from."

"But Pumpkin... Pound..." Pinkie said weakly.

"Don't respect you either. They *love* you. That's not the same thing. They want to help you. Like the others. Like Twilight." The name made Pinkie Pie twitch. He levitated up another pill. "Have a Mint-al, Pinkie," he rasped as he floated it towards her once more.

"Stop it!" she snapped, swatting it away as well. "You're a bad pony, Goldenblood. I've known it for years."

"Right. Because your rump twitched or your ear flopped or your hoof itched," Goldenblood said low and skeptically. "I don't think that's admissible in court."

"You're the reason why the ponies I arrest keep ending up back on the street," she hissed.

"Correct. You were useful when you were scaring the aristocracy. You have no idea how much money they paid me to keep you off their backs. Business ponies, too." He rose to his hooves. "You don't get that those minor crimes and offenses don't matter. The war needs certain ponies running things and keeping things going smoothly. So long as they don't go too far, they get their autonomy. In return, Princess Luna gets her war materiel."

"It's wrong. Everywhere I look, I can feel bad things happening." Her mane curled a little. "Only the little ponies aren't bad. They're the only good ones. Everypony else... everypony..."

Slowly he approached her, levitating the tin of Mint-als. "Have a Mint-al, Pinkie," he said as he levitated out another tablet and floated it towards her mouth. For a second her mouth opened, watering, before she stiffened and it bounced off her nose. "What's the matter? You're normally so fond of them. They make your body twitch and itch and you use that to justify arresting ponies that I need. That Princess Luna needs." He levitated up another pill. "You have no idea how infuriating it is," he said casually, tossing the pill at the older mare.

"I might," Pinkie growled back. "You're dirty. So's Princess Luna. So're Twilight and Rarity and everypony!"

"So are you," Goldenblood said, and Pinkie jerked as she glanced over at the half-covered mirror, then glared at him.

"You think I don't know that?!" she snapped. "I know I'm not a good pony. But I... I haven't done half of the things you have," she said. "You're a sneak and a liar and a manipulator and—"

"None of which are crimes," Goldenblood rasped, his rear hoof tapping upon the floor.

Pinkie glared at him for several seconds, her face going from pink to red. "You just admitted to taking bribes from criminals!"

"Oh behalf of Princess Luna," he answered, tapping faster beneath the desk.

Pinkie narrowed her eyes at him. "Did you murder for her too?" His hoof froze.

He didn't respond for several seconds. "Did you know that I didn't want any of this to happen? When Luna came to me, I was quite ready and happy to die. But Equestria was at war and needed her. She needed me. I needed Equestria. So I helped make her a government she could control... and she's done so brilliantly. There are some ponies now who actually don't know a Princess rules them. It's all ministry, ministry, ministry. And when we finished organizing the ministries, I was ready to step aside and let the whole bloody plan commence. But I was connected. From my travels as a foal, I knew zebras in the Empire who were sympathetic to us. My lineage gave me access to the aristocracy. My work with Luna gave me access to the bureaucracy. And if I didn't have access, I knew a pony who could help me get it. And suddenly I had my hooves deep in the greatest sociopolitical piece of performance art in history!"

He paused, then narrowed his eyes, jabbing a hoof at her. "But don't think that it was easy, Pinkie Pie. Don't you dare think that. None of it. Keeping you six apart and focused on the ministries was a constant battle. You in particular. I had to keep you distracted, because if you dropped out, then one by one, the others would have followed. That was why I told Luna to indulge your 'law enforcement' farce! I've struggled for ten years to keep everything together for Equestria so that when this war ends we can all go back to normal. So that it will be good again." He slapped a hoof on her desk. "But you are insisting on making it difficult!"

Pinkie Pie's mane curled a little as she giggled. "Have a Mint-al, Goldenblood. No, really! You could really use an orange one. My achy butt says so." And then she stuck her tongue out at him.

Goldenblood started at her for a moment, and then there was a click as the doors to the office locked. "Achy butt, is it?" he said as he levitated out a dozen mint tins, emptying them out so that a cloud of pills hovered beside him. "Tell me..." he said as he advanced, and Pinkie's smile slowly evaporated as her eyes went even wider. "What's itching now, Pinkie?" he yelled as he jumped upon the older mare. "Have a Mint-al Pinkie! Have all the fucking Mint-als!"

She opened her mouth to scream, and he shoved a dozen tablets into her mouth. "Chew them up! Swallow! What's itching now? What's twitching? What's your Pinkie Sense saying! What!" The door thudded and pounded. Pinkie swallowed if only to keep from choking to death, but the second that she opened her mouth, he shoved more in. "Have another Mint-al! Aren't you having fun yet? Isn't it fun, Pinkie?!" he yelled, dumping the Mint-als on her face. She struggled, flopped, gasped, and choked as he climbed off her. "You are done. Stay in your office and binge to your heart's content, but you will not interfere any longer."

Pinkie retched, bringing up a slurry of pills in a reeking heap, coughing and gasping as she lay on the floor. He levitated over his tuning fork, struck it, and listened to its tone. His whole body relaxed as he turned his back and started towards the office doors.

"You serve the Eater of Souls," Pinkie rasped, and he froze. "That's what my Pinkie Sense is telling me."

Slowly, he turned and looked at her. "What?" he murmured. "How do you know that name?"

But Pinkie didn't answer. She started eating from the scattered Mint-als like a mare obsessed. He jumped on the older mare again. "How do you know that name?"

"I can feel it. It's dripping off you like razor blades. It screams all around you!" she said, her pupils mismatched, wide and staring. "You serve it! It sings inside you!" She laughed madly before grabbing more pills and forcing them into her mouth.

"That's a myth. A story. It's a zebra legend!" Goldenblood retorted.

"Look in the mirror!" Pinkie sobbed and laughed all at once. "Look in the damned mirror. It'll show you! It'll show you my Pinkie Sense is true! Look if you don't believe me!"

Goldenblood rose off her, staring at the mirror in the corner. He trotted towards it and then brushed the cloth away with a forehoof. The single cold pane shimmered, framing a reflection perfectly. That reflection, though, didn't appear to be him at all. It was an unscarred stallion covered in blood. He stood on a field of salt and ashes, the air above him black and rolling. And in the background, something horrible was breaking out of the barren land, clawing from the earth like a colossal ghoul. Its head broke the surface, and it let out a scream, and the blood-drenched stallion let out a small smile. A star fell into its wide jaws and world split in two as something horrible was reborn.

"No! No, it's a trick! It can't be true!" the stallion on this side of the glass shouted.

His reflection smiled as more and more of the monstrosity pulled itself free. "Of course it's true," it said. "In trying to save Princess Luna, you have slain her. In trying to preserve Equestria, you have ushered in its annihilation. You destroy all you hold most dear."

"No!" he said as he threw the sheet over the mirror. He looked over at Pinkie, stretched out prone, her body twitching. "No..." he murmured, rushing back to Pinkie, and his horn glowed as he undid the lock on the doors. He held the mare as she jerked and shuddered in his hooves. "I'm not that thing, Pinkie. I'm not!"

Pumpkin and Pound Cake rushed in. "What happened?" cried the former as the latter shoved Goldenblood away from Pinkie.

"She kept on eating them," Goldenblood murmured. "She knew. She always knew... and I didn't believe her." He looked at the covered mirror and sobbed. "Oh Luna, she knew..."

Pinkie spasmed, foam on her lips, eyes wide and her pupils pinpricks as she stared at Goldenblood. "I'm so sorry, Blackjack!"

"What?" Goldenblood said as he backed away, but Pinkie Pie kept babbling and sputtering over herself as she struggled to string words together.

"The Cakes! Spike! Twilight... Goddess! Murky... how..."

"Call an ambulance, Pumpkin!" Pound shouted, and the unicorn rushed to the phone. Goldenblood knelt beside the jerking pink mare. "You should get out of here, Director," Pound growled, hugging Pinkie close. "Before I do something you regret."

"One moment. Please," Goldenblood replied. "What do I have to do?" he said to Pinkie. "What can I possibly do to prevent... to... to change what I saw in that mirror?" Pinkie was foaming out the corner of her mouth, and Pound cake turned her on her side. The pink mare pulled more white tablets to herself and ate them before either could stop her.

"No!" Pound swept them all away with a swish of his wings, glaring angrily at Goldenblood. "Get out of here, teacher. I mean it!"

"What can I do? Please. Please!" Goldenblood begged, tears running down his cheek.

"Tell Twilight..." Pinkie gasped, going still a moment. "Tell Twilight what she wants to know. Show her how... Show... Be what you are..." And then she stretched out a hoof towards the sodden heap of pills and finally passed out.

Medical ponies rushed in, and Goldenblood was shoved away. He stood there, watching them levitate Pinkie onto a stretcher. Pound and Pumpkin Cake glared at him, frowning in worry and confusion as she was carried out.

"What happened, Director?" Pumpkin Cake asked. "We heard you shouting."

"Tell us, or orders from the Princess or not, I'll bust your legs and arrest you," Pound threatened as he glared and held Pinkie tighter.

"Pinkie kept eating them. You saw her..." he murmured weakly. "I have to go," he said, then looked at them. "Go with her. Get her friends, if they'll come. Stay close to her. I have... I need..." he glanced at the covered mirror and shook. "I need to... to make some decisions..."

Pound lunged at him, but Pumpkin stopped him. "No. We need to be with Pinkie Pie now. Hurry." The stallion snorted, and together they rushed out of the office.

Goldenblood staggered out of the office and down the hall, around the corner, and out of sight, then grabbed a waste bin and vomited violently into the receptacle. When his guts were empty, he sank to the ground. "It's not true. She's crazy. Just like Mother..." he whispered, rubbing his face with his hoof. Then he glanced over at the starmetal tuning fork, floating next to him as if it had his own magic. "Is it possible...? The legend? Have I really been serving the..." He shook, swaying slightly back and forth. "Oh Luna... somepony... anypony... please... help me!" he whimpered to the empty air, the silver fork gleaming at his hooves.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory orb with my face mashed against the keys. Goldenblood finally snapping. It was like me at Yellow River... horrifying and yet making perfect sense. I didn't know if I should cry or not. I felt as if I'd seen something obscene, and I couldn't stop it. I wanted to beat Goldenblood on Pound Cake's behalf and then some. Still, I needed to stay focused. I deleted the '>HRRGGGGGGGGGGGG GGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGGG' my face had entered on the terminal and sat back.

What had she known? Well, Pinkie Pie had known many things. She'd outright said that Goldenblood served the Eater. That he was a no good badpony... It was almost quaint, considering other badponies I'd met. I closed my eyes. These passwords were written by Goldenblood. They weren't the kinds of things you could just guess by watching the memory orbs. Goldenblood had wanted

whoever reached him to know him, and I probably knew him better than most. What could she have known?

No. Don't think about Pinkie Pie. Goldenblood was a lot like me, now. He may have had me beat in spades where intelligence was concerned, but he had the same self-destructive streak. He'd wanted to die for years, and when he'd screwed things up with Fluttershy, Big Macintosh, and Luna, he'd probably felt like he'd deserve to die regardless. Goldenblood wasn't just a bastard. "That's it," I murmured as I stared at the keys.

>HE WAS A PUPPET. Hoping it wasn't some other word like peon or slave, I hit the button.

For several seconds, nothing happened. Then two lines popped up.

>ANSWERS ACCEPTABLE.

>ACCESS GRANTED. WELCOME, EXECUTIONER.

Wait. What? I stared at the words as field dropped, then tore my eyes away as the door ahead opened. Beyond was a room not much bigger than this one but packed with strange equipment that beeped and clicked, cool mist creeping around the devices. In the center of it was a pod just like the ones in the Fluttershy Medical Center. Within lay the reposed stallion, and upon his head a mesh just like the one Cognitum had used to transfer my memory. Beside the pod was a machine identical to the ones I'd been hooked up to in Happyhorn. A dozen monitors were arranged facing the door; when I stepped in, they flickered to life with a dozen green images of Goldenblood.

"Welcome, Executioner. If you've gotten this far, you are clearly familiar enough with the accused to render final judgment. This subject has been interrogated one hundred thousand four hundred and twelve times since being interred here, and I believe that every crime this individual has committed has been accounted for," the green Goldenbloods said. One monitor changed to a list of crimes, starting with Conspiring against the Throne: 2 counts and First Degree Murder: 1 count and ending with Jaywalking: 12 counts.

"You're a machine," I said warily. "Like Happyhorn."

"Indeed. Repurposed by the M.o.M. and M.o.P. to extract every last detail of the accused's life. Any memory can be used against the accused in a court of law. If you have accessed this room, it means that you are qualified to pass judgment. Please list whatever execution you deem appropriate from the list." A different screen began to scroll with words like 'Burning Alive', 'Defenestration from Shadowbolt Tower', and 'Drawing and Quartering'.

I stared at the list in horror. "You want me to kill him?"

The green ponies in the monitors all looked thoughtful. "Well, you could, I suppose, but why get your hooves dirty? I can increase his neural sensitivity to the point that the shock will eventually kill him. To him, it will be real. In fact, you may wish to choose several different choices to queue to save yourself the inconvenience."

I shook my head. "I want to talk to him. Let him go."

The computer froze a moment. "I'm sorry. That's not on my list of executions. If I may recommend, any execution involving Fluttershy is high on the psychological stress level."

Yeah, that wasn't going to happen. "I want you to let him go. I'm not his executioner," I said flatly. Clearly, this computer was on the crazier side of programs. Just my luck.

Instantly, the four turrets in the room behind me all whirled to aim at my back while two more dropped from the ceiling of this room and immediately pointed right at me. "I'm sorry, but there must be some mistake. Only a pony who would want to kill Goldenblood would want to come here. A lackey wouldn't have made the appropriate responses. No, I'm afraid only an executioner will do. Please make your selection, or you will have to be disintegrated."

"What?" I shouted. Seriously, I couldn't win with robots! "Why?"

"Password security. Can't have you writing the answers on the door. Then just anyone could get in," the computer said as if it were perfectly reasonable rather than perfectly insane. "What do you believe would be a fitting death for Goldenblood? Thanks to accelerated neural perception, even slow, lingering deaths are possible. Colon cancer? Certainly possible. Venereal disease. Easily done."

I rubbed my face with my hooves. "I want to talk to him. Is that possible?"

The computer frowned. "He's currently queued in a round of interrogation simulations. Forty-eight hours until completion. He might have a brief window to interact with you at the end of each simulation, if you wish."

"I'm not waiting forty-eight hours. I need to talk to him now," I insisted, scowling at the computer. I needed to do something truly radical here... I needed to *outthink* an obstacle. The computer wanted me to kill him and torture Goldenblood. "If I can taunt him, I'll be able to select the perfect death."

The computer monitors flickered and flashed. "Mmmm. Very well. There is an observation helmet for an observing interrogator. When this interrogation session ends, you should have a brief window for your questions." A small door opened at the base of the machine, revealing a second golden net. I carefully levitated it over and set it atop my head.

"Whenever you're ready," I said as I stared at the scarred pony in the pod. Time to call. The machine beeped and flashed, and once more, everything swirled away.

oooOOOooo

Goldenblood sat in a cell, his body aching and a sick sensation in his stomach. A foul taste lingered in his mouth as he slumped, surrounded by a dozen pegasus, unicorn, and batpony guards. On a table to the side were a half dozen bottles. His mouth moved slowly, his words, the few he spoke, slurred. A frowning and powerfully built batpony officer trotted up, glaring down at Goldenblood, then spoke with grim authority. "Is he prepared?"

A unicorn glanced at the scarred stallion, then said in a low voice, "Yes, Officer Lionheart. He's drugged to the tip of his horn, sir. He keeps on trying to rant and rail, but he shouldn't cause a fuss."

The other guards fidgeted and muttered softly to each other. Lionheart eyed each with a scowl. "What is it?"

A pegasus fluttered his feathers, shifted on his hooves, glanced at each of the other guards, and mustered his courage. "Permission to speak freely, sir?" Lionheart pursed his lips, then nodded his head. The pegasus took a deep breath. "Execution, sir? Is the Princess serious about this? A public execution? Like this?"

"Princess Luna has made her decree. We will carry out her orders," he said simply as he looked around the room. "This pony has betrayed Her Majesty, and all of us. He will be punished accordingly."

The pegasus stiffened. "No pony is questioning that, sir. But public execution? That's never been done before. That's something the enemy would do. If we refuse—"

"You are relieved," Lionheart said firmly. The white pegasus jerked as if he'd been struck, then saluted with his wing and marched from the room. Lionheart's yellow eyes swept across the rest of the guards. "Now hear this. This is going to happen. If any of you have moral or professional objections, so be it. They will be noted in your record. But we do not decide for Her Majesty. We execute Her Majesty's decisions. This will be done. Is that understood?"

He stared around the room, meeting the eyes of each pony. Some dropped their gazes, shamed, and trotted out. Others stared back defiantly, then left as well. In a minute, only three guards remained, all of them batponies. Lionheart sighed, slumping. "So be it."

Lionheart himself ducked his head and scooped Goldenblood up across his shoulders. The scarred stallion hung limply, his lips continuing to move numbly as he was borne through the hallway. The sound of a crowd grew like the rumbling of a waterfall. Eventually he was carried out into the bright sunlight of a large plaza in the middle of Canterlot, his yellow eyes blinking blearily at the rows upon rows of ponies. Some shouted, but others looked on with worry and pity.

A platform stretched along one end of the plaza. At its center sat the ruler of Equestria, looking tall and cool, beautiful and terrible. To her left sat a number of dignitaries and officials, among them Trueblood and Prince Blueblood. On her right, however, sat six seats adorned with the ministry icons. Only one was occupied; Rarity sat stiff as a board, her eyes fixed on her hooves. The seat for Princess Celestia was also vacant.

"Mistake..." Goldenblood murmured.

"Yes, you made a mistake. But it's too late to—"

"No. Princess Luna," Goldenblood muttered. "She shouldn't have empty seats. Makes her look weak." The batpony stared at him incredulously, and the corner of the scarred unicorn's mouth curled. "Should have filled them with representatives."

Lionheart's eyes showed doubt, but he set Goldenblood down in the middle of the plaza, then trotted off to the side. Goldenblood struggled to remain upright as he faced the stage. Luna gazed down, cold and impartial, then said in a thunderous voice, "People of Equestria! It is Our solemn duty to present to you the greatest traitor in our land's history. For years, Goldenblood has conspired to undermine the authority of the ministries, the government, and the people. He has maintained clandestine contacts with Our striped enemies, extorted money from the aristocracy, misappropriated materials for his own ends, and allowed wanton profiteering by dozens of enemies of the state. Many more crimes of his are more disturbing still and unfit for the ears of you good ponies.

"These are grave and disturbing revelations that shake us all to the core. And for crimes so grave and so audacious, what penalty is sufficient? Shall We throw him in a cell to reflect on his crimes?" she asked, and some in the crowd began to shout 'no' and booed. "Shall We exile him from our land and run the risk of him returning to our striped enemies?" Louder shouts now. Luna sighed and shook her head. "Were that the times allowed Us to banish him for a thousand years, but even that would be insufficient for his deeds and conspiracies. He has plotted the overthrow of Our crown and the death of Our beloved sister. There is no imprisonment, exile, or banishment sufficient for one of his evil."

The shouts were mixed now. Some were roaring for blood, but there was also worried muttering. Luna glanced at the crowd, then down at Goldenblood. "The only response for such crimes against Our subjects is the same penalty given to our enemies on the battlefield: death." There were shouts and whoops and stomping of hooves, but far too few for the crowd assembled. "The condemned has prepared a statement," Luna thundered, her voice a little waspish.

Speakers turned on. Goldenblood's harsh breathing filled the plaza, a touch of deep reverb with every breath, and then there came a deep and angry tirade, full of insults and rage, started against the weak, ineffectual, pathetic people of Equestria. The Goldenblood present in person sat quietly, a small smile on his face. His eyes were locked on Rarity, but the mare didn't meet his gaze. When the recording ended, Luna said solemnly, "As you can see, his contempt is absolute, his loathing for our people unflinching. Thus, it is Our solemn and unwelcome duty to condemn Goldenblood to death."

The crowd was so solemn that the ones trying to cheer and whoop were shamed into silence. From the edge of the city, a green and purple behemoth swooped up into the air, looped around, and an enormous dragon landed on the other end of the plaza. Goldenblood could barely look up at the beast above him. His eyes fell and met Luna's. His mouth worked weakly, and he rasped, "Luna..."

She stared down at him, cold and imperious, then her head gave a little jerk.

The dragon made a noise eerily similar to the noise made in Goldenblood's lungs when he breathed in, but when the noise ended, an all-consuming green glow filled his entire world. Then darkness...

...and he reappeared in a cage, every nerve of him burning inside and out. He lay weakly, gasping as his heart thundered in his chest. Above him, Princess Celestia stared down at him contemptuously. The alicorn appeared... old. Tired. His eyes rolled, and he gaped at the heaps of golden coins lying all around them. Then, without a word, she turned away and strode towards a tunnel.

"Wait," Goldenblood rasped. Celestia stopped but didn't face him. He struggled to sit up in the cage. He swayed, staring at her back. "I'm sorry," he choked.

"And what, exactly, are you sorry for, Goldenblood?" she replied.

He stared at her silently for a minute. Then he slumped against the bars. "Everything."

"You should be," she said in solemn finality, walking out and leaving him to collapse into a heap in the bottom of the cage.

He lay on his side for a long time before the ground rumbled. A green and purple dragoness strode in and stretched like a cat, shaking her body as she strained every muscle. "Well, that was overdramatic," she said in a rumbling voice as she scooped up a massive heap of gold coins and flopped down upon it with a sigh. "I don't know why she went through all the trouble. If she wants to kill you, she should just kill you."

"She wants to interrogate me first," Goldenblood rasped weakly. "Something more substantial than just digging through my head." He closed his eyes, resting his cheek on the cage's cool metal bottom. "She'll dispose of me then." He opened one, looking over at her as she flipped open a chest loaded with gemstones. "Maybe she'll have me eaten."

"Pass," the dragoness said, sticking out her tongue. "Pony wreaks havoc on my waistline. Plus, I have no idea just how many potions they crammed in you to make you survive my flame. You'd probably turn my scales blue." She tossed a dozen of the gems into the air and caught them with her mouth. "Give me gemstones any day." She chewed a moment, then observed dryly, "You seem rather composed, all things considered."

"I have things to tell Princess Luna. Important things. Mistakes I've made." He closed his eyes and shook his head, rocking his cheek against the floor. "She doesn't trust me now, but when she rips the secrets from me, she'll know. Then, maybe, she'll do the right thing."

"And not kill you?" the dragoness said wryly, toying with a handful of gems.

He chuckled. "No. I deserve to die," he answered, struggling to make himself heard. "I've done things you can't imagine. Overseen nightmares that I didn't realize were nightmares until it was too late. Far too late."

"Such melodrama," the dragoness said with a roll of her eyes. "You ponies thrive on spectacles. It's not healthy. If you were a dragon, you'd just do things, and if someone killed you for it, so be it. 'Might makes right' may not be the fairest world view, but it's far less hysterical." She scooped up another handful of gems. In the midst of the heap was a large hoof-sized chunk of bubblegum-pink quartz. It seemed to have a silver ring set about it, and a talisman glyph glowed in the middle.

"Wait!" Goldenblood rasped, but he was too weak. Too slow. Too late. The gemstones tumbled into her maw, and she smacked her lips. Goldenblood struggled to his hooves. "Where did you get those gemstones?"

"I don't know," she said with a shrug. "Wherever you ponies get them from, I suppose."

"You need to vomit! I think there was something in there!" Goldenblood rasped weakly.

The dragon rolled her green eyes. "Ponies. Always with the drama," she said as she lay back down on her bed of coins.

"I think there was a talisman in there!" Goldenblood said in alarm.

The dragoness rolled her eyes. "Sure was. Those are extra tasty." She smirked at him. "Relax. In a day or two, it'll pass like all the rest."

"Please, tell somepony—" Goldenblood began, but the dragon thumped her tail down beside the cage.

"Hush up and go to sleep. I'm sure they'll come and get you soon enough," she said with a snort.

Goldenblood tried repeating his warning again and again, but the dragon squeezed two handfuls of gold into her ears, curled up, and resumed sleeping. Finally, his throat throbbing, he fell silent. The dragoness occasionally gave a soft groan in her sleep. Goldenblood finally sank to the floor of the cage, dropping into unconsciousness.

He was awoken by an especially loud groan from the dragoness. From somewhere high above came a soft 'whump' noise again and again. He opened his eyes, seeing her on her back. "What's going on?" Goldenblood asked as he looked at the dragon. Pink foam flecked off her jaws.

"Some sort of attack. I'd be out there swatting down those missiles except all of a sudden... I feel... sick!" She rolled back and forth on her bed of gold coins. "I never feel sick." And then she was interrupted by an enormous belch, and a cloud of pink roiled in the air above her. She stared at it with pained eyes. "That's... not right..."

Goldenblood's eyes went wide. "Guards! Guards!" he screamed, rising to his hooves, his rusty, harsh voice echoing in the gold filled cavern. She gasped, her belly becoming distended, eyes bulging. Another thunderous burp erupted, but this time it was accompanied by a larger blast of pink vapor. He froze, staring in horror as she let out a horrible retching sort of noise and thick, pink gas blasted out across her hoard like burning napalm. The gold bubbled and began to run like wax as she rolled in agony.

"AHHH!" she screamed. "What's wrong with—" and whatever else she might have said was stolen by a continuous, flaming, pink torrent erupting from her mouth. Fortunately, it was pointed away from

Goldenblood, splashing across more of the hoard as she thrashed. The pink fluid seemed to dissolve her lips so she couldn't keep it within, but her thick hide contained it for the moment. Her tail slashed back and forth as she writhed in agony. A squad of soldiers rushed in and immediately collapsed, screaming, as the bank of pink mist rolled over them.

The same mist covered Goldenblood, but at most all it caused was the faintest irritation. He hammered his hooves against the bars, but it availed him nothing. Then the dragon's tail, dripping both globs of gold and purple scales the size of his hoof, smashed the cage. It bounced away over the mounds and slammed up against the wall. The lock snapped open, and Goldenblood staggered out and followed the wall through the thickening mists. The dragon's body was ballooning out grotesquely as her tough hide stretched. Liquid Pink Cloud dripped from her mouth as she fought to contain it. He reached the door beside the half dozen guards groaning and twitching as their skin fused to their armor and the floor.

Goldenblood galloped along the hallway as fast as he could. He reached an empty guard post, hit the intercom, and started calling furiously, but nopony answered. He tried again and again for several minutes... and then Pink Cloud rolled down the hallway and through the guard station. He stared as it began to flow down numerous side tunnels.

He tore down a hallway, galloping as fast as he could until he found a staircase that led him out of the pink mist. He stormed up to another security station that was similarly abandoned save for one baffled-looking stallion guard. "Hey. You're not supposed to come up that way!"

Goldenblood advanced on the reedy blue stallion. "What's going on? Where is everypony?"

"We're under attack! The zebras are launching attacks all across Equestria! It's nuts. How—" but Goldenblood raced out the doors and gaped up at the sunny Canterlot sky. A massive blue dome extended overhead like the inside of a bubble. Every few seconds, there was a detonation that made it flicker.

"How long has this been going on?" Goldenblood asked.

"The bombardment started a while ago. The Princesses themselves are holding that shield up. Had to extend it underneath the city, too, after some stripes smuggled mortars into the woods around Zebratown." Then he froze as he stared at Goldenblood. "Wait. I know you! You're that traitor we executed yesterday!" His eyes widened. "You're supposed to be dead!"

"You need to get on a working intercom. Contact the palace! Let them know there's a gas weapon that's been activated under the city. She has to order an evacuation immediately!" he said.

"All I'm doing is taking you back to a cell! I don't know how you got yourself undeaded, but I'm not about to let you trot all over the city right now, trai—" He froze as a pink mist crept out to the stairwell and started spreading along the ground.

"Stay away! It's poisonous!" Goldenblood warned. "It's making its way through the larger passages first, but it won't be long before it has enough pressure to spray up every drain pipe in the city!"

But the blue stallion glared at Goldenblood. "Poison, eh? Then how come you're not dead, eh? How come—" The mist rolled past their hooves, much warmer than it had been in the hoard below, and the guard jerked. "I... I... I don't feel so good."

Goldenblood backed away, but the guard stood in place, trying to tug his hooves from the floor. "I... I can't move... Why..." he said as he stared down in helplessness.

Goldenblood turned and ran, galloping towards the towers of the ministries and the palace. All around, guardponies were telling ponies not to worry, to get inside and wait for further instructions. And there were many ponies who didn't seem even that concerned. They trotted along in clear urgency, but they obviously weren't panicking.

"I'm not missing this hooficure appointment," one mare said sharply as she waved her PipBuck at a guard. "They have to be scheduled months in advance!"

A mare carefully herded her three colts along the sidewalk. "Let's get home. Don't be scared. Princess Luna will keep us safe."

Goldenblood whirled from one pony the next. A fruit vendor set up on the corner. A soldier helping an elderly pony up some steps. A small cluster of children laughing that the zebras got them out of school early. He finally froze, tears streaming down his face as he sat down hard before a fountain. It lay right beside the plaza where he'd been burned just the other day. "No..." he whispered.

Then the ground shook. From the storm drains came a sharp whistling as a pressurized front of gas displaced the air. The fountain suddenly sprayed twice as high, then twice again, the drains bubbling furiously in the basin. Everypony froze, staring in shock as the world seemed to scream around them, and then the whistle dropped to nothing. The world was quiet and still. Even the barrage seemed to have paused as everypony looked around in bewilderment. Down the street, a pink fog drifted from the doors of the guard station, looking as if somepony had set off a smoke bomb within.

Then another pulse shot through the tunnels, and from the two storm drains at the end of the street blasted plumes of roiling pink gas, then the next closer two, then the next, erupting down the street in quick succession. Metal utility covers were thrown into the air to rain down with clangs and clatters. The fountain sprayed a jet of Pink Cloud, the ever-expanding gas swirling into the sky.

The thuds of the missiles hitting the shield resumed, but they were drowned out by the horrified screams of Canterlot dying.

Goldenblood sprinted along the road, dodging past and around the terrified, milling ponies. The Cloud swirled in banks and eddies, and where it drifted, ponies died. Not all at once. The tiny pink droplets seemed to take longer to kill some than others. Where they touched, cloth dissolved, hide oozed, and even metal seemed to visibly corrode. The horrible chemical ravaged all it came across. Mares, stallions, foals. They ran. Screamed. Died.

A modern-looking apartment building's facade shattered with an eruption of the gas, a great billowing plume of pink rushing out in a shower of broken glass. Ponies threw themselves from windows, trailing streamers of the deadly toxin and smashing into the ground with horrifying wet noises. Foals curled up in corners, screaming and sobbing for parents as the mist thickened around them. They didn't scream for long. Goldenblood, however, barely felt the burn of the Cloud. His lungs crackled with every inhalation, but nothing more. The droplets stung with mild discomfort, but they just rolled off his scars.

Others weren't so lucky. Pegasi and batponies struggled to find clear air, fanning their wings to blow the mist away, but the magical bubble keeping the missiles out kept the Cloud in. No matter how hard they flapped, eventually the air curled above, beneath, and behind them, slipped around their frantically flying forms, and sent their screams to join the others. As Goldenblood ran, ponies fell through the fog, sounding like wet fruit being dropped on the sidewalk. Not everypony seemed to be dying fast. Some lay in agony, gasping at the toxic air, their lives bleeding away with every inhalation. Others staggered around, eyes and lips melted shut.

The city began to fall silent... horribly silent. But not completely. Broadcasters on the hooves of some ponies crackled, the gas apparently reacting with the magical components, many of them issuing

an Enervation-like scream that made Goldenblood's ears bleed when he passed too close. Too many times, he had to double back and make his way through an alley. All the while, the Cloud thickened and the quiet grew. Eventually, even the missile detonations ceased.

Goldenblood raced past the front of the M.W.T. hub, a limp crowd of ponies slowly oozing their way into the pavement. His hoofbeats were terribly loud, echoing off the silent edifices surrounding him. He passed a mare sitting oddly upright on one bench, her hoof stretched out towards him as she softly whimpered for help. The bench had fused with her back. "I'm sorry," he told the aquamarine unicorn.

And then he raced towards a giant tree. The doors were open, and pink mist curled through the halls indolently. "Fluttershy!" Goldenblood croaked. "Fluttershy!" he screamed, making his way past all the bodies. He poked his head into an amphitheatre, then heard a noise behind some double doors. He trotted to them, hesitated, and then pushed them slowly open.

The office was in disarray, but the mist was thinner here. Thin enough that Goldenblood could see, albeit indistinctly, the mare by the window. "Fluttershy?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

There was no answer for a second, and then a mare said quietly, "I'm afraid she's not here, darling. Terribly sorry." Goldenblood slowly approached the unicorn. Her coat seemed to be running like a beautiful painting splashed with turpentine. Her magnificent mane had a plastic appearance, the individual strands glued together in a purple mass that had fused with her hide. Her hoof pressed to the glass panes on the window, the end smeared like a blob of glue to the cracked glass. Her eyes streaked her cheeks like running make up.

"Rarity," Goldenblood murmured.

"I'm sorry, darling. This mist has gotten so accursedly dark," she said as she tugged her hoof. "And I fear that I am stuck," she added quietly. "Who is it? You sound like..." She stilled. "No. It's impossible... unless... I'm dead?"

"No, Rarity. No. It was a show," Goldenblood said quietly as he moved closer to her. "I think she just wanted a few months to interrogate me properly."

"Ah," the mare breathed softly. "So bothersome not to be forwarded the memo."

"Rarity, where is Fluttershy? Is she... is she here?" Goldenblood asked, his voice tight with dread.

"No. I sent her away. Used every bit of my magic to send her and Angel Bunny to safety," she murmured. "It was the most I could do for my friend," she whispered.

"Where, Rarity? Please. I need to find her," Goldenblood begged. He reached out to touch her mane, and it stuck to his hoof like chewed gum, making the mare quiver with a gasp of pain.

"Why should I tell you?" Rarity whispered.

Goldenblood sat beside her. "I want to make sure she's safe," Goldenblood said softly. "I... I love her, Rarity. I always have, even if I hurt her."

"We tend to hurt the ones we love," she murmured, then shuddered again. "Then again, loving nopony is its own kind of hurt." They were both silent, and then she whispered, "Zecora's cottage, near Ponyville. She's at Zecora's cottage in the Everfree. It was the safest place I could think of. She wouldn't be happy in some metal tomb in the earth."

"No, she wouldn't."

The mare made a soft choking noise, her body shaking, and a whimper escaped her lips. "Tell me. Do I look dreadful?" she said with a sniff.

"You're always beautiful, Rarity," Goldenblood said. "Nothing could ever change that."

She sniffed again, the corner of her mouth curling. "Liar. You always were such a liar. But thank you..."

"Thank you, Rarity," Goldenblood murmured. "For saving her, and for telling me."

Rarity quivered again, then took a deeper breath. "I always was... too generous... for my own good..." Rarity murmured. Then the breath left her, and she sagged. Her body started to fall, but Goldenblood's magic caught her and steadied her so that when he released it, Rarity almost appeared to still stare out at the city with her hoof pressed to the window.

"Goodbye, Rarity," Goldenblood murmured, and then he turned and trotted quickly from the office. He continued along through the thickening mist towards the vague shape of the royal palace. He passed a few ponies in emergency hazmat equipment, but the concentrated pink gas had liquefied them as well. Goldenblood picked his way across the steps with their slain guards and trotted through the foyer. The Pink Cloud was dissolving the elaborate tapestries, making them drip in clumps of reeking fibrous matter. Even the marble seemed to pit and hiss at the pink vapors.

And then he came to the throne room.

Princess Luna stood before the throne in a nimbus of cool purple light, but as Goldenblood stepped closer, he could see the burns covering her dusky frame. The chemical wasn't liquefying her just yet, but the agony on her face was clear. From her horn, a blue beam projected towards the roof.

Slowly, Goldenblood approached. "Your Majesty," he rasped softly as he approached the dais and bowed before her.

"You!" Luna hissed through her teeth, the blue beam wavering. She gasped and then grunted, restoring the beam. "Of all those who should die, you live! By what treachery do you persist?"

"I don't know, Your Majesty. I suppose my partial exposure at Littlehorn made me immune to the chemical. It doesn't matter," he said, keeping his head bowed. "You must flee this place, Your Majesty."

"Flee? To where? Manehattan is lost. Cloudsdale is gone. Fillydelphia is annihilated. Hoofington is dead."

"To the Redoubt. Equestria must have a ruler," Goldenblood said. A horrid choking noise, half sob and half laughter, ripped from her throat. "You can drop the shield. The city is lost."

"But the countryside is not. I may at least grant my subjects a few hours more to flee," she gasped.

"Equestria needs its ruler, Your Majesty," he said. "There must be emergency plans enacted. Orders given. Evacuations organized."

"Another pony shall do so," she said, swaying. "I have released EC-1101."

Goldenblood slumped. "Your Majesty."

"It is only fitting. May it find somepony more worthy." She closed her eyes, tears running down her cheeks. "I wished to rule for a thousand years. To prove to my people that I was kind and loving, that I would care for them and protect them from the things they feared. That I was not Nightmare Moon. My

reign was a mere hundredth of that, and I protected them from naught!" She spasmed in pain. "At the very least, I can do this. Protect the people of my land for a while longer."

"Princess... I wish to confess," Goldenblood said solemnly. "I have conspired against you. I feared that, with victory, that you would become a tyrant. I lost faith in you. I tampered with EC-1101 so that, if it was ever deleted by you or the enemy or found an unworthy pony who tried to use its power for harm, it would unleash a weapon to destroy any victors. But I was manipulated, Your Majesty. It is a poor excuse, but it is the only explanation I have." For some reason, that made her smile sadly. He bowed his head. "If you wish it of me, I will conduct my own execution."

Luna stared at him, trembling. "Frankly, Goldenblood, I don't really care anymore. Go die if you wish. I will remain here until I can no longer."

"Princess Luna, I don't want you to die," Goldenblood rasped. "I betrayed you, but I never wished you... this..." he said, sweeping his hoof at the blackening tapestries. "I don't want you to have to die here, alone."

"She will not," Celestia said from behind Goldenblood.

"No!" Luna cried out. "Sister! Why aren't you in Stable One?"

"Why aren't you?" Celestia said with a gentle smile. Her horn flared, and a second beam, thicker and golden yellow, lanced up towards the heavens. "Rest a moment, Sister. I will hold it for now."

"Princesses, please... you must not... you should not... you..." he faltered as Luna stopped casting the spell, panting as they both looked at him.

"Still trying to advise me, traitor?" Luna asked, and Goldenblood jerked his head away as if he'd been struck. "We are past the points of mustn'ts and shouldn'ts, Goldenblood. We will do what we think is right. My reign is done. I will use the last of it as I see fit. I will hold the shield as long as possible."

"But your people..." Goldenblood protested.

"Were you not the one who worried I was a tyrant, Goldenblood?" Luna retorted, and once more Goldenblood jerked. Both were silent a moment, and then the dusky Princess continued in softer tones. "I'm glad you took steps, Goldenblood. I thank you for putting Equestria above me. I wish they'd been more moderate ones, but still. You tried to do what was right." Slowly, Goldenblood looked up into the burned face of his Princess as she smiled at him.

"I know I have no right, but... please forgive me," he begged.

"Forgive *me*. I wish I'd been a wiser Princess," Luna replied, then glanced at her sister. "I know what it means to betray another. And I know what it means to be forgiven, and to feel remorse." She turned to Celestia, adding to Goldenblood as she did, "Now, my final order is to go. I release you from my service. I wish to speak to my sister alone."

Goldenblood bowed his head. "I know I have less right than any to ask anything of you, Princess Luna, but could you please send me to Ponyville? I... I have one last apology to make."

Luna seemed to consider it, then gave a small smile. "Fluttershy?" He gave a short little nod. "I thought... nevermind. She is in Ponyville?"

He swallowed and gave another little nod. "I don't know if she'll hear it, but I owe it to her to try."

"Sister," Celestia said in a warning tone. "Are you certain?"

"No, but I suppose that, in a small way, it is due." She slumped against Celestia and began coughing. "Could you help me please, dearest Sister?" Luna said as her horn glowed.

The white alicorn sat and hugged her close, their horns touching. "Always, Luna."

A white glow formed around Goldenblood. "Goodbye, Goldie," Luna said quietly.

And Goldenblood gazed at the pair, embracing, dying, tears running down his cheeks as time seemed to slow. "Goodbye, Your Majesties."

The castle disappeared, and so did the gas. He found himself in a dusty cottage decorated with flowers and butterflies. For several seconds, he simply stared, sitting in the middle of the living room, and then he began to shake. He clutched his head in his forehooves and started to sob, rocking back and forth as he choked and wept.

"No time," he rasped after a few moments, pulling himself together and to his hooves. "I have to find her... tell her... get her somewhere safe. The Redoubt. Stable Two. 101. Somewhere." He rose to his hooves and staggered out of the cottage. Far off in the distance, he could see the solid pink sphere obscuring Canterlot. Beyond that, radiant mushroom clouds rose on the horizon. Dozens. Cloudsdale was nothing but glowing mist. Ponyville lay in the distance, the village oddly silent, as if a bomb had fallen and the remaining buildings were just a memory.

Slowly, he turned towards the forest. The dark trees loomed above him as he walked, hooves tripping over vines as he wandered along the trails. It was more than an hour before he spotted the tree hut decorated with colored bottles and masks. Instantly, his heartbeat quickened, and he rushed in. "Fluttershy! Fluttershy!" No answer. His eyes darted around the forest, and then atop a nearby hill he saw a flash of yellow and pink.

He tore up the hillside. There, at its peak, sat Fluttershy. Her teal eyes were old as they stared out at the roofs of Ponyville, tears dripping slowly down her cheeks. Yellow feathers drifted slowly in the breeze towards him, her gray-tipped mane waving in the ghosts of distant blast waves as she watched her world die.

"Fluttershy..." Goldenblood said as he stopped short. She didn't turn. Didn't acknowledge him at all. And then he took another step closer. "We need to—"

That was all he got out. A white missile flashed out of the grass, smashing into him like a bullet. He staggered back, and the white blur rammed him again and again. He slid halfway down the hill before he came to a stop.

Atop a rock sat a white rabbit, glaring at him flatly. Without taking his eyes off Goldenblood, he reached behind him and from seemingly nowhere pulled a tablet of Buck, which he proceeded to chow down on. His free paw pointed back the way Goldenblood had come.

"Please, Angel, I need to speak to her. She can't—" Goldenblood began, trying again to climb towards her, but a fuzzy foot hammered his face and knocked him back down the hill once more. Goldenblood sat up, horn glowing. "Damn it! Let me talk to her one last time."

The white bunny reached behind again, plucked out an inhaler, shook it three times, and drew in the contents in one long pull. Goldenblood charged up the hill, and the white bunny kicked him back down again. Up. Down. Up. Down. A half dozen times Goldenblood tried to storm past Angel, and a half dozen times he was knocked back. "Damn you! I need to speak to her! She—" And then the rabbit stopped holding back. In a series of kicks so swift that the beast could barely be seen, Goldenblood was

flipped backwards into the air, slammed back down into the hillside, and struck so hard that all he could do was curl up. Every time his horn glowed, a white furry foot struck the spire, shattering his focus.

The rabbit knocked Goldenblood out of his curl and left him face down in the dirt, twisted one forehoof behind his back, stomped hard on the back of his head, and wrenched it up and pointed back toward Ponyville. Fluttershy still hadn't moved. She stared ahead, eyes sad and broken. Goldenblood heaved as if to move one last time, and Angel Bunny brought a foot down on Goldenblood's spine with a resounding crack. Goldenblood cried out in pain, but his hindquarters instantly went numb.

His cry died in his throat as the shield covering Canterlot began to flicker. Then it popped like a soap bubble, and the air around the city became filled with pink: pink gas exploding into the sky and pink water cascading down in an annihilating sheet of poison. Angel Bunny hopped off the crippled stallion and raced back up to hug the weeping mare. Goldenblood lay sprawled on the grass. Slowly, he tried pulling himself up the side of the hill, dragging his limp hindlegs. Even with the bubble gone and the gas dispersing, a hazy cloud clung to the spires, as if it would always linger. For the longest time, he stared at the rolling vapors as they filled the sky and plunged along the mountainside. Almost five minutes later, a roaring boom echoed like thunder across the land.

A few minutes after that, Ponyville was backlit by three immense balefire blasts tearing through a forest. "Whitetail woods... why?" Goldenblood murmured weakly, his vision now filled with blurs and spots. Slowly, he continued up. Inch by inch. "I just... have to tell her. Angel can kill me then, if he wants... but she has to know..."

"Traitor Goldenblood?" a stallion asked, and Goldenblood turned his head to look up at a batpony guard standing above him. Three more hovered above

"Please..." Goldenblood begged, then stretched a hoof towards Fluttershy. "Please..."

"We have orders to take you into custody for interrogation," the stallion said. "I don't know how you escaped to here, but I can't wait to make you tell us."

"No... I need... please..." Goldenblood said.

One of the batpony mares landed next to Fluttershy, keeping a bit of distance between herself and the bunny. "Ministry Mare Fluttershy? Do you need... anything?"

Fluttershy didn't answer. She only shook her head slowly back and forth.

"She's not a part of our orders," the stallion said, scooping up Goldenblood and draping him across his back. "We need to hurry back to the Citadel."

"No..." Goldenblood begged. "Please..."

The batpony mare looked from unicorn to pegasus. "Um, ma'am? Mister Goldenblood would like to speak to you? Would that be okay?"

Fluttershy didn't say a word. Didn't look at him. She closed her eyes, hung her head, and let her pale pink mane shield him from her view. Then she gave the tiniest shake of her head. Goldenblood stared at her, tears of anguish rolling down his face. "Let's go!" the stallion said, and together they lifted into the air.

"No! No! Fluttershy!" Goldenblood screamed as he was borne up into the air, his eyes locked on a yellow mare who grew ever smaller. "Fluttershy!" he screamed as she became just a tiny yellow dot atop the hill. "Fluttershy!" he raggedly screamed one last time, and then he sagged on the batpony's back, weeping once more as everything faded to black.

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I felt my body shift. I was sitting on something, on that firm plastic smooth nothingness that existed in places like this. A beam of white light illuminated me in the void. "So, you've finally come," Goldenblood said softly from behind me.

I turned to see him sitting in another beam of light. He looked as I remembered: middle aged, scarred, and tired. His yellow eyes locked with mine, and his lips curled up a tiny bit. "Blackjack."

"Goldenblood," I replied as I turned to face him. "It is you, isn't it? No... hologram? Or computer simulation?"

"It is," he said calmly. "I'm glad it's you. I knew that only you or Cognitum would have any chance of finding me. And I knew only you would be able to appreciate what I've done."

"What you've done?" I said with a small frown.

"The crimes I've committed," he amended. "You've finally come to judge me for all that I've done."

I rolled my eyes a little. "Yeah... no. Actually, I'm here to ask you some questions, and then I'll be on my way. You can go on experiencing horribleness as long as you want."

Goldenblood's mouth opened and closed a few times as he seemed to struggle with what I'd just said. "Blackjack, you know what I've done. You know who I am better than probably any pony who has ever lived. Between sessions, I've used this machine's connection with Hoofington's system to keep tabs on you. Watched what you've done. How could you not do anything about my crimes?"

Oh brother. I rubbed my face with a hoof. "Goldenblood, I hate to break it to you, but this isn't about you. I agree, you fucked up big time. I have to admit, I'm pretty good at doing that myself, but you beat me hooves down. Congratulations." I clopped my hooves together weakly. "Now, what I want is for you to tell me about Horizons."

Goldenblood turned his back on me. "Get out."

I blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. If you're not here to kill me, then clearly you haven't been paying attention. Good day." He turned and started to trot out of the circle of light.

"Right. So you're just going to wait another two hundred years for somepony to come down here with the answers to your little riddles so they can give you an appropriately horrible death? I don't think so," I said as scornfully as possible, making him pause. "You going to go back into memories and spying on the Wasteland, leaving it to rot? Fine. Maybe I can give the king a *really good* blowjob to get him to let me go. I'll do what I have to do. But you know things, Goldenblood. You could help me, if you just pulled your head out of your masochistic, egotistical, self-loathing ass long enough to!"

My words seemed to have broken through. He turned and regarded me coolly. "I deserve to die. I deserve to be punished."

"Oh for the love of..." I muttered. "Yes. You did bad things. Really bad things. So have I. In some ways, worse things than you. No pony's perfect. The difference is, I haven't shoved myself into a computer waiting for somepony else to come along and put me down." And construct ridiculously elaborate death traps to test their worthiness to execute me. I pointed a hoof off to the side. "I'm out there, trying to do better."

"Better," he muttered. "Blackjack, have you ever thought that maybe you *should* have given up? That by trying to help, you've caused nearly as much pain and misery as there would have been if you'd done nothing at all?" He walked slowly towards me, the shaft of light moving with him. "I saw you at Yellow River. I saw what you did to that foal."

I stared at him for several long seconds. "You plugged me into Happyhorn," I said.

He gave a small nod. "I directed this system to access the robotic orderlies and put you into a therapeutic mindscape, yes. I rather didn't expect you to come out of it. Quite surprising, actually," he rasped softly. "After that, I occasionally peeked in on you from time to time, like Watcher. You were... interesting."

"I get that a lot," I said as I stared at him. "That wasn't the first time, though, was it?" He smiled a little, looking a touch impressed.

"No. Not the first time. The first time was when you managed to fire Trottenheimer's Folly. Then when EC-1101 was connected to a broadcaster. I worked with Echo on EC-1101's development. I knew the backdoors to follow it."

"Which is why Dealer could do things with it without setting the damned thing off," I said. I seemed to have his attention. "Dealer... Echo... his soul was bound to the program."

Goldenblood let out a soft 'Ah' of comprehension. "I'd wondered about that. I couldn't understand why you kept on going."

"He'd needle me and keep giving me vague answers. I wouldn't give up, but I also never stopped and really questioned things." I sat back, crossing my forelegs and tapping my cheek. "And in the labs under Hippocratic. You were the other source cutting off Cognitum, keeping the robots from storming the place."

"I merely ran what interference I could," he said lightly. "You had EC-1101, and you were taking it to Cognitum. Am I correct in thinking that Echo was helping her?"

"She had his body. It was the only way he could survive," I replied.

"I hadn't realized that. I thought he'd died in Canterlot, and the Dealer was just some variant of Wasteland psychosis. Clearly, I should have observed you much more closely." He sighed and shook his head. "A mistake I've made all too often."

"One of many," I replied.

"Oh, so many. In this place, I've had ample time to review my life," he said as he trotted in a circle around me. "Where to begin?" A glowing square appeared in which I saw him talking with the Tappahani zebra in Littlehorn. "I could have sounded the alarm the moment she mentioned a Starkatteri was here. Evacuated the entire school." Then an image of him in the hospital bed, covered in bandages. "I could have simply declined Luna's request for help." Then an image of him with Fluttershy. "I could have put Fluttershy first, and not neglected her when she needed my love and affection most." Another window of Fluttershy in the rain. "I could have simply arrested her. She'd have been disgraced and fired, but the megaspells would have been secured." Horse appeared, grinning and looking suave and confident, then Garnet, then Trueblood. "I could have put somepony less ambitious in charge of the M.W.T., removed ponies I knew were corrupt and dangerous, and considered the actual harm other ponies did." A picture of Goldenblood in Scruffy's bar. "I could have had faith in my Princess and never conceived of Horizons." He finally came to a stop, and the last gap around me was filled with an exhausted Goldenblood being arrested. "I could have told them about Amadi sooner." Dozens of smaller

windows appeared around him. "There're plenty of other mistakes, too. Over twenty thousand various things I did wrong. I haven't even hit all the highlights."

"Pretty impressive. I can do it too," I replied, then launched into the list, punctuating each item with a jab of a forehoof in his direction. "Scoodle. Fluttershy Medical Center. Brimstone's Fall. My home. Almost killing myself. P-21. Going underground. Fallen Arch. Using Folly on the *Celestia*. Not dying. Neglecting my friends. *Endless* self-loathing. Yellow River. Boing." I hesitated, tilting my head. "Stygus... eh..." Then I glared at him again and resumed jabbing. "Tulip. Hightower. Lying to Silver Spoon. Dawn. Lacunae and the damned Goddess. Lighthooves Lighthooves Lighthooves! Councilor Stargazer. Thunderhead. Shadowbolt Tower. Dealer. Rampage. Cognitum!"

I became aware of a great glow behind me and glanced back at around two dozen windows of shame. Some computer was being cocky. I returned my attention to Goldenblood. "Do I deserve to be punished for those screw ups? Abso-friggin-lutely! And I'm pretty sure that half the shit in my life *is* punishment for those screw ups. But do I let them stop me? No! Because the second I did, I'd be you. Maybe not plugged into a machine, but being curled up on a mattress somewhere, positive that I deserved to die, is just as bad! And what good would that do? None." I spat the word with as much contempt as I possibly could.

Goldenblood didn't answer. He just stared at me as if I were a painting or some piece of performance art. "You can't begin to compare... the consequences of my actions were..." he finally muttered.

I jumped on him, smacking him upside the head with a hoof. "It! Is! Not! About! You!" I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "What about Luna's fuck ups? What about Celestia's? What about Twilight and her friends'? Do you seriously believe you were to blame for them and their fuck ups? That if you'd never existed, the war wouldn't have happened? Everypony's got blood on their hooves!"

"But without my actio—" Goldenblood started to stammer, but I slapped him silent.

"Maybe it would have been different. Maybe it would have been better. Or maybe it would have even been worse. That's the problem with 'what if's and regrets. There's nothing you can do about them, and you'll never know for sure. Even with all this." I waved my hoof at the countless floating windows. "None of it will change what has happened. And neither will killing you."

He just sat there in horrified silence for a long while. Then he closed his eyes. "How can I go on after what I've done, Blackjack? To Equestria? To Luna? To Fluttershy? How do you move on after you've hurt so many?"

I sighed. "You try and do better. You make each day count. You don't punish yourself eternally for your mistakes; you try and learn from them. And you never, ever, give up," I said as I put a leg around his shoulder. "And there is one particular way you can do better, right now, and that to tell me what you did. Tell me about Horizons."

He sighed and held out his hoof, looking up at the window of him talking with Princess Luna about the ministries. Then, as if he was shifting away an enormous weight, he waved the hoof to the side, and all the windows faded away.

"What do you want to know?" he asked.

I took a deep breath. "Cognitum thinks she can use Tom and the Tokomare to restore the Core. Is she right?"

He didn't reply at once. "She is correct that, if she catches the stone and holds it at the Enervation threshold, she could use the power to restore the Core, yes. And a great deal more besides. With that much raw magical energy, she could rebuild all of Equestria. And then some."

That made me shudder. "And that would be bad. But Amadi seems to think something different, something even worse, would happen," I said, and Goldenblood closed his eyes. "Is he right?"

"Very likely, depending on what you believe," Goldenblood whispered.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Is it a machine, or a monster? Cognitum believes one. Amadi the other. Whichever one is right will be victorious if Horizons fires."

"So which is it?" I asked.

"I don't know. Ancient legendary abominations seldom have warnings such as 'may resemble impossibly advanced technology', and most alien technology fails to point out features like 'unholy souls may be present'. Regardless, both outcomes are undesirable and frequently inevitable," Goldenblood said simply.

"So how do I stop it from firing?" I asked. He did another hoofwave. A sphere appeared, orbited by two smaller spheres, the larger of the two further away and the other closer in. "The sun and moon?" I asked. He nodded. Then I jabbed a hoof at a red icon on the moon. "And that's the Lunar Palace?"

"Correct. Because it was placed on the richest deposits of moonstone, it never points directly at Hoofington. Thus, it has to wait for a perfect alignment of sun and moon to hit." A dotted line rose out of the palace, then started to curve. It looped around the planet, then around the sun, then back around the planet, back to the moon, and finally down right on Hoofington.

Buh? "Why does it zip and loop around like that? Shouldn't it go straight there?" I asked.

"I once asked Trottenheimer the same question. He just sighed, patted my head, and called me a 'poor Euclopan pony'," Goldenblood said with a ghost of a smile. "Suffice it to say that it does. If you can tamper with the firing timer, the odds of it hitting Hoofington are miniscule. The impact would be terrible but hardly world-threatening. Indeed, it might not hit Equus at all." Seemed simple enough.

I stared at him. There was something missing. Something he wasn't telling me. "Why'd you build Horizons at all?"

He jabbed a hoof at the blackness, and a diagram appeared of a building that seemed to be built underground. "Project Horizons was my reset button. If the Caesar won, or Luna won and became a tyrant, the potential for atrocity was unimaginable. There were plans in the Zebra Empire on those last days. Factions that wanted complete genocide of the pony race. The hatred in those twenty years was absolute at the end. But the zebras knew that they were losing. Eventually, Equestria would have enough megaspells that, with a word, the Empire would be annihilated with no chance of striking back. And Luna had so much power that she would have been unstoppable. A figurehead controlling her own puppet government. Mind magic. Drugs. Power-armored soldiers. Alicorn troopers. Cybernetic mind control. She could have been invincible. If my worst fears came to pass, the world would need to be reset."

Killing all the innocents in the process. Nice. I didn't say that aloud, though, given that he was finally talking. "Horizons is in two parts. The weapon and the Redoubt. The weapon was built on the

moon with Robronco's mechasprites and, later on, computer-controlled Flux clones from a supply of Flux shipped up in one of the rockets. The Lunar Palace."

"It looks kinda like a stable," I said, thinking back to Stable-Tec R&D, and then I glared at him flatly. "You ripped this off from Apple Bloom too, didn't you?" He smiled, and I sighed. "Why did I even ask?"

"I like to call it *appropriation*. Given what Scootaloo was up to with the stable program, it was an easy arrangement. I keep the M.o.M. from poking into Stable-Tec, she let me pick out the tastiest of Apple Bloom's designs. Then, later on, I used that leverage to get materials for Gardens and the Redoubt completely off the record. I had more than sufficient dirt on multiple executives to get cut rates," he said casually.

"So the Lunar Palace shoots a big wad of moonstone at Hoofington. It hits a big wad of starmetal. World goes boom. Everypony dies," I said dryly. "Let me guess: the Redoubt was to add an 'almost' to that last part."

"Yes. It would be the ultimate stable," he said as a second stable diagram appeared. The Big Macintosh Megastable was even bigger than I could have imagined. "Built under the premise of being exclusively for Equestria's elite and government agents, at least those who could reach it instead of having to shelter in Stable One, it wasn't hard to get permission and materials. Few realized that it was shifted into the shadow world, where the power of the detonation would miss it entirely. The idea was simple. If EC-1101 was ever deleted, say by a tyrant who had had an interest in there being no way to transfer her power, or if it could not find a successor, say because the zebras killed us all, then Horizons would be activated."

"And an alert would go out for everypony to get to the stable," I said as he brought up a window with a list of hundreds of names.

"Of course not," he replied quietly. "No pony would come at all. How could they, if Equestria were under martial law or occupied, or if they were all dead?" He looked quietly at me. "You forget, I had Projects Chimera, Steelpony, and Eternity as well."

I stared at him. "You weren't going to save ponies. You were going to *make* them," I muttered.

"Flux for the raw material. Thousands of blood samples. Thousands of memory engrams. And the soul binding rituals, courtesy of Rarity." He said it all matter-of-factly. "The first generation would act as incubators for the embryos in storage. And so the world would be saved." He glanced at me. "You know the flaw in the plan, don't you?"

Where to begin? "Cognitum said that Flux clones can't carry fetuses to term," I answered.

"Correct. I don't understand the biology, but apparently blanks lack the ability to form the placental support system. Regardless, a critical flaw. One of many," he muttered as he looked at the diagrams. "And not the worst."

"Still. Even if the Redoubt wouldn't have worked at the end of the war, we could use it to save a lot of people *now*, if Horizons goes off. Thousands, at least." Though that would still mean *losing* millions...

"The Redoubt will never save a single soul," Goldenblood nearly whispered.

"What?" I asked. He turned his head away, and I stepped closer to him. "What did you do?"

"Blackjack... please... I just wanted what was best for Equestria," he murmured.

"What did you do, Goldenblood?" I asked, trying to keep my temper even. *You're not an executioner, Blackjack...*

"I knew that, even with the Redoubt, it would take decades, even centuries for life to be restored to Equestria. That perhaps the Redoubt would fail. But I had an... epiphany," he said as he looked sorrowfully into my eyes. "The first star impact was terrible, but the spiritual life energy released was immense. I theorized that if Tom was infused with that same amount of spiritual energy, the world might recover far faster. Perhaps in as little as a generation..."

I stared at him. "Are you saying..."

"Yes," he answered solemnly. "There's a star spirit bound within the moonstone."

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Footnote: Loading, please wait...

(Author's notes: Sorry for the long wait. Things got busy the last few weekends and we weren't able to get finished till now. I'd like to thank everyone who's followed along up to this point. It's been a long haul. I hope that we can finish this year... I really... really want to finish this year. As always, huge thanks to Kkat and my editors. It can be a little crazy at times, but Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine have carried me through.

I'm also done with sub work until I can pick up some temp work. I have no idea what I'll get, but hopefully I'll pick up something. Folks who want to help me out with bits can do so through paypal at [David13ushey@gmail.com](mailto:David13ushey@gmail.com). Also, some folks want me to go to Bronycon. I have no idea how to make this happen, but some folks are trying to put together a musical collection as a fundraiser to get me there. I don't know if it'll happen, but it'd be nice to meet some folks face to face.

Next chapter, reuniting with friends, new and old. Hope it finishes well. Thank you again for reading.)

(editorial wisecracks:

swicked: DUN DUN DUNNNNNNN!!!

Bronode: Still loading. Lolbethesda. Also, OH GOD MY MOUTH.

Heartshine: I hope we finish this year, too. Otherwise I'll probably end up under Somber's desk as he tries to write. For 'motivation.' (Somber: :D ) Bronode says he wants motivation. I'm too flirty for my own good. Hinds was confused. Swicked said I would regret this for the rest of my life. He may be right.

Hinds: I was told that I had to put a wisecrack here and that this would count. :)

Oh, and apparently math has a very low LD50 among Heartshines.

swicked: IT'S A MATHACRE!

Somber: I love my editors...

Bronode: I like how we've kicked you off your own footer section.

Hinds: We do seem to be getting a bit silly...

Bronode: No, we're 'MERRY WITH TIREDNESS'.)

(Hinds on 2014-6-15: Just so you know, Blackjack was mistaken about the proper procedure for handling someone having a seizure. From Silver136, who's the closest readily quotable source on this I have to

hand at the moment: "When someone is having a seizure, you're supposed to turn their head on their side so they can't choke, try to cushion their head, and prevent them from hurting themselves as the thrash." My apologies for not thinking of doing this earlier, and my thanks to Icy Shake for suggesting it. And to Silver136 for being nearby, quotable, and, as far as I know, correct. Oh and to clarify: we were aware of this during production of the chapter. Blackjack is quite correct that she knows just enough to know to do this, as her knowledge stops just short of adding the "don't" to the beginning. :))