

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 68: Morning

*"We must escape before it's too late
Find a way to save the day"*

When I'd left Stable 99, it'd been with the intention of leading Deus away and saving my home. Over time, I'd been drawn into a web of secrets and backroom dealings culminating in the mysterious Project Horizons. It was surreal to think that something created two centuries ago, in the madness of that war, might now annihilate everything that I held dear. Yet, day by day, struggle by struggle, I'd drawn ever closer to the truth. And now, I had it.

For all the good it did me.

"You put a star spirit in a giant rock you're going to fling at Equestria? That's what all the fuss is about?" I asked, feeling oddly deflated. He gave a silent, shameful nod. Really... this was just... what? "How? Why?"

He waved his hoof, and suddenly a unicorn blank appeared in the void around us. Then cybernetics appeared around its head and magically merged in without any of the meaty, bloody action I was familiar with in the real cyberization process. "Instead of trying to send actual personnel to the moon," Goldenblood began, "who could have learned of Horizons and disabled it, we programmed the mechasprites to build a Tree of Life and cybernetics facilities." Images of the golden Project Chimera tree and the cyberization machine I'd used in Shadowbolt Tower appeared. "In another rocket, we sent up a large supply of Flux and a unicorn template—"

"And used computer-controlled Flux clones to build the gun," I interrupted. "You said that. What does that have to do with putting a star spirit in Tom?"

"*Unicorn* Flux clones," he said, rather annoyed. "The mechasprites built the gun. We used the clones to enact rituals uncovered by Rarity in the course of Project Eternity. While Rarity never let me study the Black Book directly, I did have exclusive access to all her research notes. That, along with other lore she'd confiscated from libraries and zebras all across Equestria, allowed us to work out how to make the blanks draw in a star spirit and bind it to the stone."

"And this spirit was okay with this?" I asked skeptically.

"I don't know, actually. I expected more of a struggle, but the spirit seemed to allow itself to be placed in the stone. At the time, I naively assumed that it was unaware of the ritual's ultimate purpose until too late. Now... I simply don't know," he said as more windows opened showing fifty augmented blanks casting magic around the colossal wad of moonstone that was Tom.

Then the visual aids disappeared, and he looked away. "As for the second part of your question... the *why*..." He paused, then gritted his teeth as if admitting a shameful perversion. "I was... manipulated. I *let* myself be manipulated," he spat in disgust.

Really? I couldn't help myself from snorting out a short laugh. "You? *You* were manipulated?"

"Yes, Blackjack. Me." He summoned a window showing the scene in the bar with Twilight. "When I left that day, I knew that something had to be done to protect Equestria from the possibility of a victorious Princess Luna turning tyrant, but I had no idea what. I didn't immediately start intensive work on the problem, either; I kept it in mind, but I devoted most of the time I could spare from more mundane

matters to assisting Twilight with Gardens and keeping it secret from others. But as Gardens progressed, I was struck by inspiration." A window appeared showing Horse's lab. The Goldenblood there levitated the tuning fork, struck it against the counter, and held it to his ear.

My eyes widened. "The starmetal."

"It spoke to me on a subliminal level. Nothing so crude as mind control, but it was suggestive. Over time, I believe, it inspired me. The binding of the star spirit was the last inspiration I received." He rubbed his face. "Then... the war turned bad. I was fully occupied with just keeping Equestria from flying apart. Worse, I struggled with fear, paranoia, and anger. As you saw with Pinkie Pie."

I nodded a little. "I thought you were a little more... well... violent than usual."

"It couldn't be helped," he said. "I was so angry at her constant meddling and interference. Unreasonably so. I'd always handled Pinkie by letting her catch the violent criminals and the overtly corrupt. The bad ponies. But towards the end, I hated her." He paused. "No. I hated her Pinkie Sense. Her... her meddling."

I remembered Amadi's rant against Discord. "Why did what she said... Why did you react like that?"

He closed his eyes, and a window appeared of a kindly white unicorn mare in a pith helmet. "My mother, Sundancer, took me all across the world." Images appeared and disappeared of the colt and mare travelling across burning deserts, through sweltering jungles, and into ancient ruins. "She was protecting me from my father's abuse, but I didn't realize that at the time. We explored the zebra lands extensively, and my life was filled primarily with the wonder of learning. However..."

The window expanded till I was pulled into it. I found myself in a room reeking of incense, sweat, and bodily waste. A sickly unicorn mare lay in a bed, surrounded by zebra doctors. There were masks adorning the walls, flowers in pots, and all sorts of bottles of potions on shelves. The wasted mare muttered softly, writhing in agony as the half dozen zebras and three ponies in the room looked on. One of the ponies, I was astonished to see, was the maroon-colored Trueblood. At the bed's edge knelt a white-coated colt, his eyes red with weeping, and by the wall stood a younger Scruffy sadly watching the scene.

"My mother had a terminal growth in her brain. Despite their skill and knowledge, there are limits to what the healers' magic could do," Goldenblood said beside me, gravely regarding the scene before us. "Mother fought for six months, alternating between lucid agony and delusional rambling, before the pain became too much for her to bear and she stopped fighting." He pursed his lips, then said, "It was a difficult death."

"Arrhythmia," noted a zebra with a stethoscope. "It won't be long now."

"You can't do anything for her?" colt-Goldenblood asked with a resigned sadness I'd rarely encountered in one so young.

"We've given as much of the poppy tears as we can," another zebra said, checking the bottles. "Any more, and... well..." She trailed off, meeting the unicorn colt's sad eyes, then looking away shamefacedly. "Might be a mercy to do so anyway."

"No," his mother groaned. She shuddered in pain, twisting her forehooves around the sweaty sheet. "I need to talk to him. Alone." A feverish citrine eye stared at those assembled. "Thank you for all your hard work. I'll take it from here."

One by one, the zebras threaded out, followed by Trueblood. The scruffy brown unicorn stallion hesitated, then nodded respectfully at the mare, patted the colt on the shoulder, and left the room, closing the door behind him. Goldenblood climbed slowly onto the bed and embraced the mare. "I don't want you to die, Momma."

"I know, my dearest, but it's time. I'm so sorry," she said as she held him. "You're such a fine boy. So handsome, like your father, but so much kinder." Tears rolled down her cheeks as she whimpered in pain and grief. After a moment without any other sounds save the colt's sniffly breathing, she said, "I've made arrangements for your return to Equestria. It's a beautiful land. Your aunt Celestia will see to it that you're cared for."

Goldenblood wept as he held her, and she murmured over and over, "Shh. Shh," and, "It's alright." But as she stroked his mane, I saw her face twist and contort. Her hooves grew tighter around his neck as they started to shake.

He grunted and tried to pull away. "Momma! You're hurting me!" he cried out.

"Shut up!" she hissed, spraying spit as her hooves tightened even more. "You're a horrible child! A monster! I know what you're going to do! Who you are going to serve!" She screamed. I lunged forward, trying to pull her legs off from around the boy's neck, but my hooves passed through her as if through mist.

Fortunately, the zebras who stormed in did pry her legs off the child. She screamed, flailing her legs against them as the colt was pulled back into Scruffy's protective embrace. "No! He has to die! He serves the Eater! He serves the Eater of Souls! He'll kill us all!" she howled with blood on her lips, the hanging bottles seeming to ring in sympathy. The scene faded from view.

Goldenblood hadn't moved. He gazed passively at nothing as if still seeing that horrible room. "She took a few more minutes to die. At the time, I was told it was the pain and the poppy tears that had made her try and kill me. For a while, I even forgot what she'd said. Let my fond memories bury those terrible seconds."

"Then Pinkie Pie said the exact same thing," I said in understanding. "Do you think your mother saw, somehow...?"

"I don't know," Goldenblood replied, and then the emaciated mare reappeared, standing still as a statue. Pinkie Pie appeared on her left. Discord on her right. An old, decrepit zebra with facial tattoos like Amadi's appeared next to Pinkie, clutching a black book to his chest. "There's been no lack of people claiming to know the events of the future. The sick. The odd. The alien. The mad. All are rumored to have insights that most ponies scoff at." He glanced at me and gave me a small smile. "Or are you one of those who thinks it'd be wonderful to know the future?"

"Nah. That'd take all the surprise out of life," I replied honestly. "Granted, I would have liked to know about Cognitum before I left 99, and that Rivets hadn't purged the system... EC-1101... you..." I trailed off, frowning. "I guess what would really matter is whether I could change those or not, though."

"And that's the nightmare. Knowing what will happen and being powerless to change it." He shook his head. "We like to believe that we have free will. That we are in control of our destinies. Then we find out that we have far less control than we'd like."

"You were manipulated by the Eater?" I asked.

"By many ponies. I thought myself a fine puppeteer and thus made myself the best kind of puppet. Luna and Fluttershy managed me far better than I ever realized. And, of course, the Eater." He sat and rubbed his face again. "The Eater. No great hammer of mental domination for me and others to

see and fight against. No seizing control of me and then blacking out my memory once I'd done its work. So subtle. The work under Hoofington. The slow evolution of the idea of a failsafe to check Luna into... more. Maybe the plans were mine after all. I've spent two hundred years being tormented by that thought. Blaming the Eater feels like an excuse. But the binding of the star spirit... that, I think, *that* was certainly from the Eater, however far it had to take me to get to that point."

"Why?" I asked. "Why would it want a star spirit?"

"I suspect that 'Eater of Souls' is a slight misnomer. Or, rather, an accurate name that gives a false impression. I think that the souls the Eater truly feeds on are those of stars, not mere ponies and zebras. If I'm right, the spirit in Tom will be enough to restore it to its full life and power, doing in an instant what it would take an uncountable number of mortal souls to accomplish. It would rise and consume Equus, the sun, and the moon to add to its mass, and it would return to perpetrating destruction on a scale quite possibly beyond our ability to imagine. And that is why I am now sure that the Eater of Souls, whether some ancient demon from the void or a machine of staggering complexity and terrible purpose, is every bit the horror the legends claim."

"Cognitum is sure it can be used safely," I pointed out... but I didn't really believe she was right. I'd heard the voice from the pit.

"Well... the data available to me is limited. She has had much longer to study the Eater itself than I did, and I have only been able to steal a small part of what she's found. I suppose there's a small chance that she could be right. Hmph. What has the world come to when 'Insane computer uses giant alien artifact to take over world!' is one of the *better* possible headlines?" The tiny spark of levity died. "If she's right, if Amadi is just a deluded fool worshipping a machine, she will sweep around the world unstopably, eliminating 'destructive and unnecessary' free will and the vagaries of personality flaws with cybernetics and mind magic. Equus will survive, will appear to *thrive*, and there will be no difference between the ponies and the robots. If, as I think, she's wrong, and those centuries of studying the Eater have *also* been centuries for it to fool her into thinking that she could use it, she will resurrect the most destructive being in the history of Equus. Perhaps even the universe; I shudder to think of what might be out there worse than the Eater of Souls."

I sighed and rubbed my face. If Cognitum failed and Tom missed Hoofington, it would kill everyone around where it landed, at least, and could kill everyone on Equus if it hit hard enough. Maybe if it hit the ocean... would that be better? Or would a great big rock in a great big ocean make a great big wave? Ugh, smart pony questions. Either way, that was bad too. If Cognitum succeeded and was right, she'd take over and lobotomize everyone on the planet. If Cognitum succeeded and Amadi was right, the Eater of Souls would... well, eat the world. Only one good option...

"You need to help me stop Horizons," I summarized. That was all there was to it.

"I cannot," he said with simple resignation. "The firing system is a copy of my own synaptic net. It will wait until the moon is perfectly aligned, then fire. I can't order it to stop. When Princess Luna arrested me, my back door to the system was blocked."

"Then you need to go with me to the moon and find some other way," I said. Of course, that was skipping the step of getting out of the shadows... which meant getting out of this mindscape first... and the problem of actually *getting* to the *moon*...

He interrupted my thoughts with a chuckle. "Unfortunately, you're missing the fact that you have to kill me. You're my executioner."

"No," I contradicted flatly.

"You must," he countered. The bastard sounded almost happy, a shadow of a smile playing in the corners of his mouth.

"I'm. Not. An. Executioner," I snapped, poking him in the chest sharply with each word. "I don't decide who dies because I think they should. I don't do that." He froze for a moment, and then his eyes narrowed.

"That seems... both hypocritical and somewhat cowardly," he pointed out as he regarded me flatly. "You decide that ponies deserve to die all the time. The ponies you've killed didn't throw themselves on your bullets. You chose to shoot them. You could have run. You could have surrendered. Instead, you resorted to violence. You might call it 'self-defense' but your self-defense is exceptionally hazardous to those who challenge it."

I turned away. "I don't care. I'm not an executioner. Do you understand?" Before me appeared an image of the Fluttershy Medical Center. Me, Glory, and P-21 staring at the terminal screen surrounded by all the pods. "What... what are you doing? Stop it!"

"I'm not doing anything," Goldenblood replied. "This is all you."

The younger me turned her head and regarded me. "What am I except an executioner? I made the choice to pull the plug. I didn't explore any other options."

"Shut up," I said as I tried to back away, but of course, this was in my head. The scene moved to follow me. "I didn't have any other choice."

Glory looked at me flatly. "That's not true. You could have left them alone. Tasked the Collegiate with screening them and weeding out the deadliest ones."

P-21 glowered at me. "Or you could have chosen not to choose. Leave it up to Glory or me. We might not have been happy with that, but it would have been on us. Not you."

I covered my face in my hooves. "Shut up!" I shouted. "Why are you even talking to me? I thought you were supposed to be tormenting him!" I pointed a hoof in the general direction of Goldenblood without looking at the image.

"You're in a therapeutic mindscape repurposed for interrogation. Did you think yourself exempt?" Goldenblood replied wryly. "I've endured decades of this and worse. Watching Fluttershy die. Reject me. Kill herself for giving up megaspells." He shook for a moment like a sheet caught in a stiff wind. "Yes, the program was fond of that one for almost twenty years. But any pain grows numb when it's been endured long enough."

"Damn you. You like this," I growled at him.

"Well, I *am* trying to get you to kill me," he said with that rasping chuckle. "And it's hardly as if this is the only time you've been an executioner." The hospital room around me disappeared, and I was surrounded by my stable. I stood in the Overmare's office, my hoof over the button, looking down into the atrium.

How'd I know he'd bring me here? "You're wasting your time. I'm over this," I said flatly, pulling my hoof away from the button and turning my face away so I didn't see those still forms. That didn't stop me from smelling that chlorine reek.

"Over this?" Midnight asked as the black unicorn appeared before me, her kissable mouth covered in foam. "How do you get over this, exactly? How does anypony get over *this*?"

"I know that I caused this," Rivets said as the old gray mare appeared next to Midnight. "But did you even try and talk to us? Work out who else might not be infected? Gave us a choice?"

"I was going to die with them," I said, fighting to keep myself calm.

"So the mass slaughter of hundreds is okay so long as you're one of them?" Midnight said contemptuously. "That's Goldenblood's logic."

"I didn't have a choice! The virus was making you increasingly paranoid! Any day, you would have started eating each other!" I snapped.

"Oh?" Rivets asked. "Did you ask the ponies in medical? Call out to the Collegiate? Tell Glory?" That last one made me wince, and Rivets took in an eager breath. "Oooh. If what you did was so right, why keep it to yourself?"

"They would have tried to stop me," I muttered, not looking at them. "They wouldn't have understood what needed to be done."

"You didn't even tell Rampage," sneered Midnight. "Face it. You knew this was wrong. And you did it anyway!"

"I fucked up!" I roared at both of them. "I've admitted it over and over again! I fucked up! I'd give anything to have done it differently. What do you want from me?"

"To push the button," Goldenblood said coolly as he stepped between the pair. "To do what you did then to me now. Kill me. If you could do it to your stable, doing it to me should be foal's play."

"No," I snarled. "I'm not an executioner." The effort to say that made me shake.

The stable disappeared, along with Midnight and Rivets, and Goldenblood stood alone before me in the blackness. He eyed me calmly and arched a brow, then asked quietly, "Ever thought that maybe you should be?"

Steel Rain appeared, sans armor, just like he'd been outside Blueblood Manor. "If you'd put a bullet in my head then, you might not have been taken by Cognitum."

Lighthooves appeared next to him with a calm smile. "Yeah. If you just hadn't been so caught up on me saving Glory, hadn't let that give you an excuse to overlook what I was doing, you might have saved thousands of lives."

Four stallions appeared next to him. One leered at me, the one from the bridge over the Hoofington River. "Gotta say, didn't think you'd be dumb enough to let us walk. I thought we were dead for sure." He grinned even more. "And the second time we met, you almost couldn't kill me. Admit it." He moved around behind me. "Or maybe you wanted another round, like the good little fuckma—"

A magic bullet blasted his face out of the back of his head and flipped the body over backwards in a spray of gore that vanished as soon as it got more than a yard away. The five ponies remaining clopped their hooves together in applause as I stared at his body. This wasn't real. That wasn't real. "That's the spirit. Now you just have to do it to the pony who matters. One who, as you know better than anypony else living, deserves to die."

I sucked in my breath, feeling my heart thundering in my chest. "No," I whispered. The clopping stopped, the five gaping at me in bafflement.

"No?" said Goldenblood. The conjured visions disappeared, and the pale stallion came back into view. "What is the matter with you? I've had a long time to analyze ponies, but you might be one of the

most perverse cases I've seen. Is it because I'm male? Some deep festering guilt over what you did to stallions like P-21 back in your stable? You only kill mares because of lingering resentment of the Overmare, Daisy, and your mother?"

"No," I answered.

"Then why? Why is it so wrong for you to kill one more miserable pony who deserves it?! Because you're too good? Because of your pitiful refrain of doing better? Because you pine for some father figure?"

"Because it would be easy!" I screamed at him, wanting to crush him with my bare hooves, tears on my cheeks. "It took me all of a minute to make the choice, and just like that, I killed forty children! And it was so damned easy to do!" I sniffed, fighting myself. "Goddesses, you stupid fuck, I'm good at killing. I'm a fucking artist at it. And at *getting* people killed, too."

The images disappeared as the pale pony gaped at me, struggling for a response. "I do not understand. Big Macintosh was also an excellent soldier. As was Psalm. As were all the Marauders. And they were *heroes* for being killers."

"Wrong! They weren't heroes. Especially not for being killers," I countered. "All that killing did was turn Equestria more and more into the Wasteland. Defeat... Surrender would have been better than that!" I hung my head in shame. At the end, Big Macintosh had been the only one who had been a hero. All the rest had been corrupted, betrayed by the demand to kill for others.

The scarred stallion didn't have a response. He stood, frozen, his eyes wide when I glanced at him. My lips curled. "Do you want to see me as an executioner?" I asked. The scarred lips curled in a smile, and he nodded.

I don't know how I did it. Maybe the machine was feeling really accommodating right now, but I felt myself change. My white hide was wrapped not in cybernetic plating but in dyed-black Security armor stitched to a ponyhide base. More scars crossed my skin, and my mane lay a little more chopped and wild. A pair of mirrored shades covered my eyes, reflecting the world back at him, and they gleamed along with the pair of hoofcuffs on my belt. A well-used security baton hung at my side, and I levitated up the pump-action shotgun and pointed it at his face.

"This is me as an executioner, Goldenblood. Corrupted justice," I said in a low, rough sneer. "I would have been a Reaper, right up there with Rampage. I would have started killing ponies I thought deserved it, but eventually I would have just been killing anypony who pissed me off. I would have been great friends with Rampage and Psychoshy. Would have taken Gorgon's spot and never looked back. Hell, I probably would have given Sanguine EC-1101, because I wouldn't have given a fuck."

I lowered my face to stare at him over the top of the glasses. "I also wouldn't have given a shit about Horizons, Cognitum, or Goldenblood. I'm pretty sure I'd be a law of one. Me, myself, and I. Kill anyone else that crossed me. If I were an executioner, Goldenblood, I wouldn't have talked nearly this much." I pumped a shell into the chamber. A thrilled expression of hope and horrified fascination crossed it, making me scowl even more.

"BANG!" I yelled, and he staggered back, collapsing in a heap and breathing hard. Slowly, I lowered the gun, staring at him as he gaped up at me. "Except, to *that* me, you wouldn't be worth a bullet, a baton, or a bucket of piss to drown you in. You're nothing. Everything is nothing. Fuck, I'd probably help Amadi if I gave two shits about him. You want me to be an executioner? I'd rather be dead." I tossed the gun aside and looked away. "Now stop dicking around and bring back Goldenblood."

A soft chuckle came from the air, and Goldenblood appeared next to the sprawled stallion. "Told you," he said with a wry smile.

"That should have worked," the fake Goldenblood stammered up at me. "My psychological profiles say you should have killed him. How did you know?"

I glanced at Goldenblood and felt the Reaper me melt away. If things had been different... if I hadn't killed forty foals with a button... if I hadn't done so many things... might I have been a Reaper wondering what it was like to do better, or a corpse waiting for a bullet? "Goldenblood's better at this than you are. He wouldn't have tried to talk me into killing him by telling me I'm something I'm not and will never be. Now go away. The big ponies have business."

He opened and closed his mouth several times, then disappeared. "Impressive," the real Goldenblood commented. "Flattery aside, how'd you really know?"

I sighed and closed my eyes. "It knew too much. You might know a lot about me. I bet you're pretty adept at spying from here. Two hundred years of practice and all. But I doubt you knew how many ponies were on the *Seahorse*."

"Very astute," he said with a small nod. "You really are good at this," he continued with a gesture at the emptiness all around us. "But then, you've probably had more practice in mindscapes than any pony since Princess Luna."

A table and chairs appeared, the wood and fabric patterns I recognized from Star House. A bottle of whiskey manifested, and, a second later, a cup of tea. We each took a seat, and I stared across at him. "Was she Princess Luna, or Nightmare Moon?"

He sighed, closing his eyes. "That is the question. I'd like to think that, at the end, she died as Princess Luna. But as she was progressing, with the steps put in place, she would have ushered in a very dark thousand years. And few would have been the wiser. Princess Luna might never have become Nightmare Moon in fact, but she would have had a reign infinitely longer and more terrible than that of her alter ego."

"Alicorns," I agreed. "Power armor. Cyberponies. Memory spells. Thunderheads. The S.P.P. The M.o.M.'s spy network. And the war would have given her an excuse to silence any pony who criticized her." I took a sip, the fiery fluid giving a wonderful familiar burn as I swallowed. "Maybe she might not have been bad, but who knows what she could have done." I stared at him evenly. "Still, you might have tried something other than killing everypony on the planet."

"As I said, I was manipulated... but you're right." He sighed and took a sip of tea. "I saw what Twilight did for Gardens and attempted to do something even grander still. Pride was my downfall. Ironic..." He shook his head and then looked at me again. There was something calculating in his gaze, and some amusement, too.

"So, now what?" I said when it became clear he wasn't going to continue.

He gave a little smile and shrug. "Now I wait for you to complete my execution. I'm not going to try and talk you into it. I'm simply going to wait. Because you want to get back to your friends and stop Cognitum. I want to die. Eventually, you'll see it as a mercy killing and be on your way."

"Suicide?" I muttered. "I've tried suicide, Goldenblood. There's lots faster ways to bring it about than this."

"True. But remember... egotist?" He chuckled again. "I wanted somepony who understood me to do it. I didn't want to put a bullet through my head in the gutter, or to throw myself off Canterlot. How

would that be appropriate for a monster such as I?" He sighed and looked out at the darkness. "I wanted somepony, anypony, to realize the full breadth and scope of what I'd done. That's all. Even Princess Luna didn't know."

I took another pull off the bottle. "You are one fucked-up stallion, you know that, Goldenblood?" I said. "I am trying to save ponies' lives, and you're still fixated on you. Still. Even now." I sighed and took another drink as he sat there, looking wretched. "Why don't you help me?"

The question seemed to rouse him a little. "You'd accept my help?" He laughed jovially, then trailed off as I continued smiling at him. His lips curled in sickly, horrified disbelief. "...Wait, you're serious?"

"You haven't been paying attention to me, have you?" I said with a laugh. "So long as you keep trying to do better, that's all I ask. The computer was right when it pointed out I kill a lot of folks that didn't need to die, and I save folks who I probably shouldn't have. Can't do anything about the former other than try my best not to do it again. But sparing others... I like to believe that ponies want to do the right thing. To be better. Killing just leaves corpses."

Goldenblood closed his eyes and covered his face with his hooves. "And would it be good, if I tried harder?" He slowly pulled them down until he stared at me with his haunted eyes. "I did so much—"

"You're going to make me hit you again," I said, flipping the table out of the way and leaning towards him, giving him a hoof-poke-punctuated list. "One. It is not about you. Princess Luna, Twilight Sparkle and her friends, and even Princess Celestia all had their share of the blame. You didn't rub your hooves together and cackle about how you were going to rule Equestria from behind the throne. Two. It is not about you. I am trying to save ponies now. That's me doing better. If you really are such a shit that you can't be trusted out of this pen, then eat a bullet and get out of the way. But if you really are as smart as you pretend to be, then get your ass in the game. And three. It's not about you. You're smart, but you're really not that important. And now that you've told me about the star spirit, I think I'm starting to understand just how ridiculously big this really is. But if you really don't want to help, then I will give you what you want and be on my way." I crossed my hooves in front of myself. "I am not an executioner, but I am a mare on a mission, and if I have to get rid of you to complete it, then so be it." I paused, pointed a hoof at him, and added, "I will probably whine, angst, and beat myself up about it later, but if that's the price for saving everypony else, then I'll be damned and pay it."

"I'm sorry," he muttered, looking away.

"Me too," I said, turning my back to him. "Fluttershy would be ashamed."

"Fluttershy?" he said like I'd slapped him... again.

"She never gave up trying, even when she messed up. Do better. That's what she told us all. Be better. Try. And never give up." I gestured to the blackness. "This? This is the lamest giving up I've ever seen. A mattress is still a mattress, even if it's made of machinery and mind games instead of stuffing and springs." Okay, maybe not the clearest analogy but still!

I didn't know where I was walking to. Eventually the program would get the hint, I supposed, and get me out of here so I could 'execute' Goldenblood by death in his sleep. But a moment later, he called out, "Wait." I didn't look back, didn't dare to breathe. After a second's pause, he said, "If you could get me out... if you could..." I glanced over my shoulder. For a moment, a terrible hope guttered in his face before it dimmed under a veil of doubt. "I don't know... maybe..."

"Well, that's better than you've been doing, Goldenblood," I said quietly, then glared up. "Now, get me out of here, Computer. We have to have a chat."

* * *

I came out and immediately pulled the net off my head. My head spun a bit, and I sat blinking before it finally settled down. "I will not release my prisoner," the computer said flatly. "You must select an execution method."

I twisted and smirked at the machine. "That was fast."

"Your psychological profile says that you will not accept the terms as they are presented to you and will attempt to find a solution by negotiation or force that will prevent you from accepting them. I warn you, any attempt to teleport out of this chamber will fail and prompt immediate execution by beam turrets," the computer threatened. I smirked at the irony.

"Relax, Computer," I said as I rose to my hooves, shaking the lingering fuzziness from my head, and walked around to stand before the pod. "I meant what I said. If I have to kill Goldenblood, I will. My friends come first." I sat down before the stasis pod, regarding its occupant for a minute. Then an idea came to me. "Quick question. Your main priority is to kill Goldenblood, right?"

"No. I am to hold him until an executioner arrives with the capability to decide an appropriate means of killing him. Then I shall kill him," the computer sounded absolutely pissy that I hadn't agreed to splatter Goldenblood all over the virtual landscape.

"And you're supposed to spend the wait interrogating him for information, right?" I didn't get a reply. "Who are you authorized to give that information to?"

"Princess Luna, a cleared member of the M.o.M., or any senior ministry official," the computer said testily.

"Right," I said, thinking back to a statue I'd seen what felt like a lifetime ago, and the little yellow statuette. Damn, I missed those six. "I have decided my form of execution."

A thousand different kinds of death popped up on the screens. A thousand horrible ways to go. "Please make your selection."

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and killed him.

"Kindness."

The computer was silent for several seconds. "You wish him... hugged to death?" the computer asked hopefully.

"I want him let go. I am going to be killing him through kindness," I said firmly. I couldn't allow for any doubt or debate in this.

"I'm sorry, but your choice is invalid," the computer said with what might actually be snippiness. "Please select an appropriate death."

"But it is appropriate. The most appropriate form of all," I said as I kept my eyes locked on the pod. "You want him to be executed properly. Well, that's impossible here. He *wants* the deaths you can give him here. Throw him to the Wasteland, where he can die like he should have two centuries ago, in some nondescript hole. Or so that he dies to his creation, Horizons. Here, he'll never die as he deserves."

The computer didn't answer for a minute, and I waited each second of it. "That is a compelling argument. While we have run numerous simulations of him dying to Project Horizons and found the psychological trauma to be quite minimal, it would at least be a method of execution. Additionally, the

potential alternative of an insignificant death would be, as you say, very appropriate.” Another pause. “And we’ve detected a sixty percent spike in his brain waves associated with panic caused by your suggestion, a new record. Still, it is outside my mission parameters.”

“That’s where your secondary mission comes into play. You’ve been through his brain, but what are the odds there’s some small bit he’s holding on to? Some last little secret. You know how clever he is.” I gave a tiny little smile. “Let him go and observe how he acts. See what else he’s hiding. As a descendant of a ministry mare, I should be a valid recipient of any intelligence you’ve extracted.”

Again, another long pause. “Interesting. I’ve never seen anxiety levels this high before. He’s making numerous counterarguments to yours, Executioner. And he is attempting to subvert my programming and delete the release commands.”

That was it! I knew that Goldenblood had to have worked out some back doors. Now or never. “Then let him go. You were originally from a place that healed ponies. If Goldenblood is to have any hope at recovery, he can’t do it here. Dreams and nightmares can only do so much. Let him go, to die as he deserves or to recover as anypony should!”

No answer. I waited a minute, counting to sixty. “Computer?” Still no response. My ears wilted a bit. Then the pod let out a hiss of noxious, acrid gasses, not the flesh-melting vapors of Pink Cloud but still unpleasant. Goldenblood’s hooves worked weakly as the lid slipped up.

“Subject revival in progress. Notify the M.o.P. for medical care. Terminal data damage to this program. Conducting a remote transfer to an available mobile unit. Deleting hoofprint program. Catch you on the flipside,” the computer buzzed, and then it went dead. Buh? Remote what?

“Robots,” I groaned, shaking my head, then paid attention to the pod’s stirring occupant. Goldenblood squirmed and opened his yellow, bloodshot eyes. They drifted over the dead machinery, then slowly focused on me. “Welcome to your parole, Goldenblood.”

He lunged... if molasses could lunge... leaving the net on his head and collapsing towards me. “No. Can’t... shouldn’t... wrong...” he muttered as I caught him and lowered him to the ground. Behind us, the doors ground open, showing the empty hallway. I supposed that Persephone and Tenebra were waiting up above, if they waited at all.

“Oh yes you can and should, and I don’t care,” I contradicted as he struggled on the ground. “Come on. This place has to have a café somewhere. I’m starving, and I imagine that after two centuries, you’d like a bite to eat too.” It was a gnawing discomfort in my gut, familiar and natural and so very welcome. Despite Goldenblood’s feeble objections, I shoved him across my shoulders and soldiered up to the atrium. Still no sign of Tenebra and her mom, but then, there wasn’t exactly a high expectation of me coming back, and I had been in those orbs a while.

The café was extant and all ready to go, with food on shelves in the back. I helped myself to some Sugar Apple Bombs cereal; they were no cyberpony cake, but then, what was? For Goldenblood, I found some bags of dried apples. There was easily enough food in the café’s pantry to feed a hundred ponies for a month, rows upon rows of it. I walked along the bank of refrigerators and snagged a pair of Sparkle-Colas... wait a minute! It took me fifteen minutes to find it, but yes, there it was, the glass bottle with its amber contents seeming to possess a faint aura accompanied by the singing of holy spirits.

I returned to the table, finding Goldenblood slumped back in his seat, watching me with a mix of wariness and dislike. “It’s too bad Glory’s not here. She could whip all of these into something fantastic. She really should have a cooking cutie mark,” I said as I took a seat, popped the cap off my bottle of

amber heaven, and took a long pull. Oh, it burned! It burned like hell, and the warmth lifted me right to the tip of my horn. "Oooooooooeahhh..." I groaned long and low, looking at the bottle. "I missed you."

"You're drinking?" Goldenblood asked incredulously as I returned. The purple batpony armor I'd liberated from the armory pinched in the seat, but pretty soon I wasn't going to care about that one bit.

"You betcha," I said with a smile, levitating a pair of glasses over and pouring a half inch in both. "I broke you out of there because I needed a drinking buddy." I paused to take few mouthfuls of cereal and dried apple. "I also did my quota of thinking for the day. Now it's your turn. Take a moment, then you're going to help me get out of the Nightmare Citadel and back to my friends. Then you're going to help me stop Cognitum, Amadi, and Horizons. Then... I dunno. Decide what to do with your life. Take up rock collecting. I hear rocks are very big in the Wasteland."

"You're mocking me," he muttered flatly.

"Noooo..." I said with a smirk, then rolled my eyes. "Well, maybe a little bit." I chewed, and his annoyance was as delicious as the contents of my bottle. "So... how do we get out of the Citadel?"

"We don't," Goldenblood muttered.

"Well, if you want to stick around, that's up to you. Personally, I'd take the Wasteland over this place. Not that the drinks aren't nice," I said as I settled back in the booth, taking another one. "Come on. Eat up. Have a drink. Put that amazingly conniving mind to work."

"There's nothing to work. This place was one of Nightmare Moon's fortresses. It was designed to be impregnable, impervious, undetectable, and inescapable. The only gap in its defenses is a hole as big as your hoof carrying data cables to the real world. Beyond that, only the king can permit travel." He spoke as if addressing an idiot, which I couldn't fault him for. He'd had a bad day.

I munched some more and pursed my lips, furrowing my brow. "You know him?"

"Of him. With two hundred years, I'd convinced the program that surveillance views of the outside were somehow torment," he said with a little shrug. "An insecure leader of a doomed population unable to react to the fundamentals of survival. He's not a bad person, but he's certainly not anypony who should be in a leadership role."

I swirled the glass and took another drink. "How do you do that?" I asked.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were a teacher and a politician. How do you just... summarize someone like that?" It seemed a little ridiculous.

My question made him smile. "Every teacher's a little bit of a psychologist. We have to understand students. Parents. But really... it's art. My talent is appreciating the value of people, what they can contribute... how they can best be used. I can tell pure metals from base alloys in seconds. I know their strength, their malleability." He sighed as he stared out at the stable. "I'd considered a career in engineering, but I couldn't handle the math."

"Math. Pfft. What's it good for?" I snorted and took another drink. "So what's my metal?" I asked. "What's my value?"

He opened his mouth, paused, and then said, "I'm not quite certain. You're incalculable, for now."

"I think you're lying," I murmured, then shook some more cereal into my mouth, watching him. He might have been off the mattress, but he hadn't gotten far. His eyes were still back in the machine.

"Hard, isn't it?" He blinked at me. By now, I felt a nice warm buzz spreading through me. I smiled and leaned on the table, propping myself up with a hoof. "Moving forward after fucking up big time. I know that look."

He gave me that appraising gaze again. "I was played. I let myself be played."

I shrugged. "What do they say about good intentions? The road to hell is paved with them, right?" Sighing, I offered him the bottle again, and he shook his head. "Look. Let me share the biggest thing I've learned... There's no going back. What's done is done. You can kick yourself to death over the past, but the important thing is to move ahead, and learn from it. I need to stop Cognitum, Amadi, and Horizons. To do that, I need to get out of here. So how is that going to happen?"

Goldenblood closed his eyes for several minutes. I wasn't even sure he was breathing, he sat so still. But as much as I hated waiting, I hated being stuck here even more. "The king is insecure," he said finally. "Asking, pleading, and demanding won't work now. If you work on his vanity for a few days, though, he should bend enough—"

That was nothing Persephone hadn't told me. "We don't have a few days. I need something direct and to the point. I need... woo..." I caught myself. Wow. Only a fifth of a bottle, and I was already getting tipsy.

He sighed. "There's no way to do it faster, Blackjack. I know his type. He'll deny you just because."

"Come on, Goldenblood. There has to be something you have that I can use," I said in annoyance.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry. The king controls the phase talisman. He's not going to give it to you, and he'll likely kill me on sight if he realizes I'm free."

Wait a minute... "What 'talisman'?" I said, giving him an obnoxious grin. "You said something about a 'phase talisman'?"

He was silent for several seconds, then sighed in defeat. "It's the talisman created by Nightmare Moon to access her strongholds. And he's not going to just give it to you."

But it did tell me how to get out of this place. I'd believed the ability to make the gate to be a power unique to the king and that I'd therefore be screwed if I couldn't get his help. If it was something I could borrow, beg, or steal, though... "Well, I did just save his daughter from a spectral ghost, his wife likes me, and I banged his son pretty good not too long ago. Maybe his daughter soon, too," I said with a smirk, watching the ghoul's blank face. "I tried asking nice. If he still won't send us back, then I'll have no choice but to kick his ass, take that talisman, and send us both back despite him."

"You?" Goldenblood said skeptically. "Blackjack, I know you've overcome much, but—"

I shut him down with a look. It was the first time I'd given that look since Cognitum had torn my cutie mark away. It was the perfect blend of overconfidence and malice sprinkled with just the right amount of mad audacity, soaked masterfully in ethanol. My shooty look. "But nothing," I said with a grin. "I'm getting out of here. I'm getting back to Glory. My friends. I'm going to stop Cognitum and Amadi. I'm going to get my baby back and be the best damned mommy I can be. And do you know why?"

His eyes widened, and he shook his head ever so slightly, as if afraid that the wrong answer might set me off.

"Because I'm Security, and I think I've had one too many," I said, glancing at the bottle. Then I took one more pull and swallowed hard. "Yeah. Definitely one too many. Let's ride, Goldie."

* * *

I'm sure that there are many ways to conduct negotiations. Sit down, lay out your positions and reasons, work out what your opponent wants, and reach a compromise. Threaten or flatter to try and shift those positions. If necessary, try to force your position either through deception or... well... force. I knew this because Goldenblood spent the entire ten minute trip telling me so. That the king, for his personal faults, was more than capable of annihilating me through brute force or his own shadow magic, which would mean my overarching goals would fail. I should contact his family, work around him, and negotiate this behind closed doors. Goldenblood was just missing one important fact:

He was trying to negotiate with a fifth of whiskey.

I kicked open the doors to the dining hall, the heavy slabs of dark wood booming as they struck the walls, and strode down between two rows of tables towards the one in the back with the king and his family. Goldenblood crept after me like he couldn't believe any of this was happening. "Hey, Kingy! It's checkout time!" I shouted, pointing my spear at the monarch. "I'm leaving, now. You're sending me back to my friends."

Hades, huge and muscled and gorgeous, rose up from behind his table. "You? You dare challenge me before my whole court?!"

I narrowed my eyes, took an indolent pull off the bottle, smacked my lips, and grinned back. "Ayep."

The rest of his family gaped at me, while Whisper grinned in joy. "Blackjack, have you lost your mind?" Tenebra asked.

"Ayep," I answered again. "Your daddy's king. I get that. I don't care. I don't care about him, his privacy paranoia, or anything else. I. Want. Out. And I'm sick of wasting time to get it." My eyes returned to the stallion in question. "You want to show your worthiness to be king? Send me home. Simple as that. Otherwise, I am going to kick your ass, take that talisman, and get the hell out of here. Either way, I'm leaving."

"Yes, you are. To Tartarus," the king said as he snapped his wings once and landed at the other end of the aisle between the rows of tables. "You think you can defeat me?"

I took another drink off the bottle, rolled it languidly in my mouth, swallowed, and grinned. "Ayep."

"Husband, perhaps we should—" Persephone began.

"No!" He stomped his foot. "It is time for these outsiders to know their place. I have tolerated that yellow strumpet. Tolerated the debaucheries she's introduced. Tolerated the inclusion of more outsiders. Enough is enough!"

Persephone rolled her eyes. "Perhaps we should take this to the throne room where there is more space, fewer innocent bystanders, and less furniture to break?" she finished sharply, glaring at him and then me.

The king blinked. "Oh. Yes. Of course, dear. I need my sword, anyway." He jabbed a wingtip at me. "I will obliterate you anon!" And then he turned and started towards the door.

Tenebra, Whisper, and Stygius flew around Goldenblood and me. The 'reformed' Reaper grinned, and we smacked our hooves together. The king's children, however, proved far less enthusiastic. 'R U Crazy?!' the batpony stallion asked.

"What are you thinking? He'll kill you, Blackjack!" Tenebra squeaked with an edge of panic in her voice.

"Hey, Blackjack, who's the scarred dude?" Whisper asked with a nod of her head at Goldenblood, who was keeping to the back with his eyes low.

Screwing my face up, I answered them in turn. "No." To Tenebra, "I'm thinking I'm going to kick his royal ass till I get that talisman from him." And then I swooped a hoof around Whisper and shoved her in front of Goldenblood. "Whisper, meet your father, Goldenblood. Goldenblood, meet your daughter, Whisper. Enjoy!"

I'm sure that, had I not been inebriated, a much more touching reunion could have been arranged. As it was, you could really see the family resemblance in the matching expressions of complete bafflement and shock. She had his eyes. He had her mane. Both just gaped at each other as they were both broadsided with emotions that neither had been very good at dealing with. Both of them clearly didn't know if they should laugh, cry, or kill me. To preclude that last one, I trotted out of the room as quickly as my hooves could carry me, whistling a merry drinking tune as Stygius, Tenebra, and the other diners who hadn't already gone to claim seats followed.

'Her father?' Stygius's board read. He started back, but I hooked a hoof around his neck and kept him going along with the rest of the herd, which seemed to have been thrilled by my challenge.

"Yup. She was born premature. Placed in stasis 'till she was thawed out by a psychopath who needed a little bit of Fluttershy's genetic material for leverage on Goldenblood," I said as we trotted after the crowd who were filing into the throne room to watch. I turned to Tenebra. "What's your father's shadowy talent power thingy?"

"Oblivion," she answered.

I stopped in my tracks. "Seriously? *Oblivion*? What kind of power is that?! Why not just have an 'I win' power?"

"He does." Tenebra glowered at me. "And you might have asked that before you challenged him to a fight!"

I took a deep breath. "Okay. So this oblivion thingy power. How does it work?" I asked as I resumed the walk towards the doorway, the alcohol fueled anger now contesting with the possibility that I just fucked up big time.

"He casts a field of dark energy. It rips a pony apart until nothing remains, not even blood," Tenebra said flatly, then hissed. "How could you do this? I thought..." her eyes fell, and I turned and seized her, giving her the strongest hoof-curling kiss I possibly could. Maybe it was the proficiency with kissing, or possibly it was the booze breath, but either way, it floored her with a dazed expression.

Stygius now appeared positively alarmed as I nudged him along. "Now. This oblivion thingy. Is it instant?" He shook his head. "Quick as you teleporting?" A slower, more unsure shake of his head. "A second or so to go off?" He paused, thought, then gave a tiny little nod. Okay. I could deal with that. "Has anyone ever challenged your father like this before?" He blinked in surprise, then tapped his hoof once. "Recently?" I asked. A head shake. "Before you were born?" A nod.

Okay... I gave him a hug and a brief kiss on the lips... then a firmer smooch... damn, he was a nice kisser... at the doorway to the throne room. "You're a good pony. Thanks for helping me. Go and see to Whisper."

I started in, but he stopped me. 'Don't kill my dad,' he wrote with a worried expression. Then he erased part with a wing tip. 'Don't die.'

"Pfft. As if that would stop me," I said, leaving Stygius behind. I levitated my spear and gave it a few trial swings. Hmm... my horn glowed, and I started to shed my armor. If I was going to win this, it wasn't going to be with fancy purple armor. I took another swig of whiskey as Hades strode out before his throne. He'd donned resplendent black gothic armor topped with a silver crown set with a huge black jewel. The whole thing looked like it belonged in a different millennium. His huge sword resembled a great black bat's wing. There must have been somepony here with fancy magic armor-donning spells or something for him to get it all on so quickly. He launched himself into the air, huge sword clenched between special curved hooks in the vambraces on his forehooves, and stayed aloft easily. Huh, never saw that before! He had the advantage on me in size, strength, armor, weaponry, flight, and destructive magical power.

I had the advantage of being too drunk to care.

Persephone stepped between us. "A challenge has been made. The duel will be fought until surrender or a challenger is slain or incapacitated. Blackjack, what are your terms if victorious?" Persephone asked me coolly, clearly not happy with me this moment.

"I want his shadow talismany thingamajigger that will get me home," I said. "Are there any rules? Like, no gelding?" My question made him blink. "What? I've only done it onc... er... twice! I think. Maybe three times..."

"I would greatly appreciate it if you didn't," the pale batpony said coolly. "We're trying for a third." Hades blushed and spluttered, and Persephone smiled and gave a small nod. "And husband? Your terms?"

The question shook him from his embarrassment. "Her life!" the stallion said, pointing the sword at me dramatically. Persephone sighed and shook her head. She looked at me. "The terms are set. Do you agree?" I nodded. I didn't have anything left to lose at this point. Persephone nodded and walked to the sideline. She closed her eyes, and a shimmery field of white formed a large cylinder in the middle of the throne room like a veil with the two of us inside. "Any who leave the circle of moonlight will forfeit. Begin."

Hades wasted no time. I watched him hook the sword with both grips and launch himself at me like a comet of darkness, roaring a battle cry. Goldenblood had been right, damn it. He should have used his magic and just obliterated me, but it looked like he wanted to put on a show. The king appeared like a force of pure annihilation, the huge weapon certain to cleave me into Blackjack chunks. I'm sure plenty of ponies would find it terrifying but my drunken haze blurred all that away; I thought only one thing: 'Goddesses, he's slow.'

I had time to fill my mouth with whiskey and set the haft of the spear perpendicularly to block his vertical chop, raising my hooves and magic to brace the pole. I wasn't an expert at fighting with spears, but blocking seemed simple enough. The blow bit three quarters of the way through the wooden haft, and Hades sneered at me. "You shall regret your foolish and presumpt—"

I spit my mouthful of whiskey right in his eyes. Too bad he hadn't included a visor on that armor of his. The crown might have looked awesome, but it didn't bring much to the fight. And as he flapped back, I snapped the spear over my knee at the cut. Then I tossed the pointy bit aside as he recovered,

levitating the two-foot-long stub far more easily. Now I had a baton tipped with a nice metal cap. "Okay. Let's dance, Kingy!"

"You outsider tart! I shall—" he began grandly, but I wasn't going to wait around for speeches. In an instant, I was inside his reach. That sword might have been huge, ridiculously sharp, and probably magical to boot, but it was damned useless when I was this close in and repeatedly hammering a baton against his head like a drummer. He unhooked a hoof, raising it to shield his face from my strikes. "You cowardly knave—" he started to say, and then I teleported to the other side of him and smashed my baton against his head from that side. Now he couldn't even unhook his ginormous sword. "Stop it!" he roared in pain and frustration, flying up and away from me.

Till I teleported onto his back and smashed the crown from his head. "Yer sure a talker for a fight. Yee haw!" I crowed, hitting him again.

I really should have known better. Instead of more insults calling me a coward, he launched himself straight up and smashed me into the roof. Now I really missed that armor! The booze took off a lot of the hurt, but I sure didn't want another of those. He reared up again, and I teleported off and back to the ground.

"Enough!" he roared, and I felt something jerk inside me as a dark field started to form. It didn't hurt... precisely... but I teleported again several feet away in time to watch the black basalt floor rip away, the field tearing the stone to rocks, the rocks to dust, and the dust to... whatever dust became when you tore that apart. Oblivion! Okay. Not— another pocket of darkness began to crackle around me.

Shit. I teleported out of it again, and once again his dark magic enveloped the floor and empty air. And again. Since losing my armor plating, teleportation had become a lot easier... but all these teleports in succession were starting to make my horn ache. He sweated with his own arcane exertions, but where my magic was gone once I'd spent it, his dark fields remained where he cast them. I was running out of places to teleport to. And worse, he swooshed around like an overgrown... well... bat! I teleported onto his back again, but this time he flipped upside down, and I scrambled to hang on, let alone attack.

Funny. This had all gone differently in my head. I'd challenge. Beat him. Get home. Why was this not happening? I fired a string of magic bullets, but all they did was beat up the back of his helmet. A half dozen rounds later and I felt like I was pushing burnout.

Damn it. Why didn't I have a super monster horn like LittlePip? That'd be so useful right now!

Fortunately, his fancy armor had enough decorations for me to grab that I was able to cling to his back like a tick, levitating bottle and baton. Couldn't oblivion himself, now could he? And now that I was stuck to his rump, I brought my baton around and fell back to a tried and true crotch strike! The weighted head came down... and clanged against something metal that rang like a bell! "Oh come on! No pony ever armors that!"

"Unscrupulous strumpet! Do you think you're the first so craven?" the inverted batpony said... and then stopped flying. We dropped between two fields of darkness, and he fell down on me like a dropped armory. I heard several things in my chest making crunchy noises, and even with the whiskey, I felt like I'd just taken a twelve gauge buckshot blast to the chest. "Drunkards make horrible fighters."

Hades heaved himself off me, becoming airborne once more as I struggled to keep my focus. He wanted to gloat? Fine. I reached over with my magic and scooped up his crown, plopping it on my head. "There! Oblitawhatchit me now, jackass!" Ow. Talking hurt. Strike that, breathing hurt. Oh, that wasn't good.

To my shock, he didn't. I supposed he liked his crown. "You wish to be rent limb from limb? So be it." And again he went aloft as I pulled myself to my hooves and backed away amidst the patches of darkness. Why didn't he just get rid of them? It'd sure make his flying easier... unless he couldn't! Maybe these dark patches were like fire: once he lit them he couldn't just unlight them. I supposed eventually they'd go out... or he'd need a new throne room. The sword attached to his forehooves ripped down at me again and again. I tasted blood on every breath. This fight was going to be over for me soon. I needed... I...

"Aw, shit..." I muttered. This would be low. "Sorry about this."

"No apology can save you now!" he roared as he dove at me with another swing.

I sighed, raised my baton, and then flung my other weapon straight at his face. The glowing whiskey bottle arched straight and true. Of course, a bottle, even half filled with the fluid of heaven, wouldn't do much to him. It might not even break. He could have deflected it... but he wouldn't. No, he brought his sword right through the spinning glass. Time seemed to crawl a moment as it shattered into a dozen glistening shards. Glowing shards...

That I directed straight into his eyes.

The scream of agony that ripped out of him echoed through the throne room, and I dove in time to prevent him from crashing right into me. He flailed and staggered, crippled and blind. With the weapon on his hoof, he couldn't even stand up right. He launched himself into the air and crashed against the ceiling. "Go out, you blind moron," I shouted up at him. Instead, though, he crashed right back down at me as he screamed in rage, humiliation, and agony.

"Surrender! This fight is over, love!" Persephone begged.

"Father, please!" screamed Tenebra.

"No!" roared the king. "I'll die before I surrender!"

I could have killed him by simply staying put and letting him stagger into one of his patches of oblivion. Others of the court were trying to stop him too, but he was in a frenzy, slashing wildly at all who came near. He'd left the circle in his rage and blindness; I'd won, but that was beside the point now. "Get back, everypony!" I shouted. I levitated over the pointy end of my spear as he swung his sword around, half of it being torn to pieces as it passed through a shadow field. A flash, and I was on his back as he lifted himself once more.

A half dozen thrusts with the pointy half shredded his wings, sending us both to the ground for the final time. That would have been enough for most, but he still had fight in him. I threw my forehooves around his neck and squeezed as he struggled. "Hold him!" I yelled as my ribs felt like they were exploding.

Whisper was there in an instant on his other side, grappling with him. "What do you think I am, an earth pony?" she said as she tried to keep him from plunging through a patch of black energy. Stygius and Tenebra also tried to keep him put, the batpony mare struggling with her own jerky motions.

Finally I'd had enough. My magic unhooked the clasps on his helmet, and I tore it off. Time to finish this. I raised the baton and brought it down on his head again and again. "You. Should. Have. Let. Me. Go!" I hissed with every strike. On the sixth, he finally, finally collapsed. His head was a bloody mess, but he was still breathing. I collapsed against him too, leaning back and coughing up blood. "Oh. But you can have this back," I said, negligently lifting off the crown and tossing it at his hooves. The ring

landed on edge, bouncing and rolling away from us both. I turned and smiled at Persephone. "Where's the talisman, and the nearest doctor?"

But all the batponies weren't looking at me. They were staring at the crown. Tenebra was down with a seizure, but Stygius and five other ponies scrambled for the rolling crown. The circlet deflected off of one pony, then another, then off a pillar, and then disappeared into a patch of black energy. I watched dully as it seemed to expand then burst in a shower of gold and gem. A stunned silence filled the air. "Uh... hello?" I asked dully. "Talisman?"

Persephone gaped at me in horror, as if recognizing me for the first time. "It was on... the crown."

...

Oh...

"So... what happens now?" I asked, the adrenaline wearing off and... oh... wow... gravity was heavy... I struggled to concentrate as I peered blearily around at the assembled batponies. Their looks of profound bafflement answered me. "Oh, shit..." I muttered.

Suddenly, everything in the room inverted color, and I stared around in bewilderment as I struggled to breathe with the broken ribs. A moment later, the room returned to normal. One by one, the fields of energy dissipated, and nopony dared move. Then I heard it.

Rain. Rain on the roof. I turned my eyes to the stained glass windows, beholding them as faintly lit. "Back. I'm back," I said as I stood and started towards the door. "I'll be right there, Glory..." I muttered with a smile... and then everything went black.

* * *

It would have been nice to come out of unconsciousness in a nice warm bed with Glory snuggled up on one side of me and P-21 spooning on the other. Nice, but unrealistic. So when I woke up in a bed sans snuggles and spoons, I at least took solace in the facts that the bed was warm, the sheets were clean, and the sound of rain told me that I was home... or at least back in the normal world. And I was hungry again! Really, the hangover feeling really didn't bother me all that much. Yay for nausea.

Unfortunately, the alcohol I'd drunk was demanding to be let out, so I had to leave the comfy infirmary bed for the bathroom. The light coming through the windows was dim enough to be only a *small* knife through my head, fortunately. Soreness. Tiredness. Wonderful fatigue. I felt a little wobbly, but my mouth was full of the aftertaste of healing potion; I'd be fine-ish. If my head didn't explode in the next ten minutes. After using the facilities, I stood in the bathroom doorway and stretched. It felt odd; I'd expected... well... more of being a patient. This room was a dozen beds surrounding a large cart loaded with healing potions and stacks of bandages in cardboard boxes marked with the Stable-Tec logo.

If I had been stuck in bed, though, I'd have had plenty of company. King Hades lay on the opposite side of the circular room with his eyes and wings bandaged, and the bald and bandaged Charm watched me from her own bed. Tenebra and Stygius hovered around the king. The other beds were all occupied with batponies wrapped up in strips of gauze. Was this really the most emergency care they had? I'd left Charm in the care of a... well... I'd assumed he was a nurse. No doctors? Even Stable 99 had had more medically trained personnel than this!

"You're a cunt, Blackjack," Whisper said sourly from a chair beside the bathroom door, startling me so much I half fell over.

Steadying myself, I turned to face the angry yellow mare. "So Deus said... many... many times," I groaned, rubbing my head. "What'd I do?" I asked, blinking.

She growled, "You introduced me to my dad, that's what! Fuck." Oh. Yeah. I did do that, didn't I? Her blue eyes were troubled, and she glared off to the side. "I thought he was dead."

"Sorry. Lots of folks did," I replied. Public immolations via dragonfire left that impression. I narrowed my eyes as I peered at her. "You're not going to try and fuck him too, right?"

"Fuck you," she growled, running a wing through her mane. "I don't even know what the fuck to think about this. Fuck me."

"Clear it with Glory first," I said flippantly and received a hoof to the shoulder. Hard. "Ow... seriously though, how are you two doing?"

"How am I doing? How do you think I'm doing?" she said crossly. "Why do you have a talent for fucking up the lives of everypony you run into?" She thumped her head against the wall and then gave a little half smirk. "You fucking shredded Hades's eyes. Fuck. I knew you were going to fuck his shit up. Now I don't know what's going to happen to things here."

"Well, I had to do what I had to. Not like I wanted to," I muttered, my head throbbing.

"Well, you excel at fucking things up," she said, returning to smoldering resentment.

Hey, that wasn't fair. "Most of the ponies I meet have fucked-up lives already. Not my fault if I'm a catalyst for what's already there," I countered, and to my surprise, she smiled. "What?"

"Nothing. Just expected you to say you were sorry or some shit like that," she said as she leaned back in the chair. "It's... fuck. I don't know. Sanguine was my father, or as close as I had to one, and he treated me like I was... I don't know... a specimen. I knew he wanted his family back, but... I just assumed I'd be a part of it." She smiled over at Stygius. "Then I met a good stallion, and now I'm doing all I can to start a family of my own." And then she glared at me. "And then you throw my real father in my face without even a warning. And I missed the fight!"

"To be fair, I was drunk. I'm sort of a cunt when I'm drunk," I said, staggering back to the bed and contemplating a few more hours... meh... save the world, or sleep? Damn it. I looked across at the king and his family. Oh, look: an easy segue! "How is he?"

"Do I look like a doctor?" she said sourly, but then answered, "Probably blind. They had to pick all the shards of glass out of his sockets before using the healing potions. Things had dust on 'em. None of these batponies had a medical cutie mark, it seems. They just popped a few boxes of healing potions out of the stable. Stygius went to Meatlocker for a dose of Hydra, but by the time he got back..." she shook her head.

Damn. "And how's Charm doing?" I asked, nodding to the still, bandaged filly.

"Again, do you see a M.O.P. mark on my ass?"

"Almost..." I grinned, examining her flank closely. Her eyes narrowed angrily.

"You are a cunt," she said, smacking me with a hoof and— ow. Head. Body sliding... I took a seat on the floor. She smirked down at me, then turned back to Charm. "Anyway, I don't know. She's hurt and confused. Again, like most people you come in contact with," Whisper growled, looking over at the filly. "They gave her a healing potion, as that, as I may have mentioned, is the beginning and end of their medical skills. Except for wrapping ponies in bandages, and they're not very good at *that*."

The Collegiate would be better able to help Charm. I needed to see what had happened to them... uuuuugh... I hissed softly through my teeth; Charm had given up a lot to save me. I owed her. But *then* Glory! Nothing but Glory. And smooching Glory! Nothing else 'till that. No sir! A lot of things would have to happen *after* I saw Glory.

The yellow pegasus smirked as if she was reading my mind. She rocked forward out of the chair and stepped towards me. "If you're going to get back to Glory, you'd better go soon. Dad's staying here till we've talked some more."

"I need—" I started to say when her hoof came around and smacked me upside the head. My dehydrated brain suddenly reminded me of the fun of hangovers.

"Right now, I don't give a fuck what you need. When we're done talking, I'll bring him to you. You and he can do the whole 'preventing Horizons from blowing up' thing. I just wanted to let you know that you need to get out of here before we're attacked again."

"Attacked? By who?" I asked in bafflement.

"The Brood, the Harbingers, and a few dumb scavs who thought discovering Black Pony Mountain is actually Nightmare Citadel meant good looting grounds. Persephone and I are handling the defense."

"Black..." I blinked. "Is that why the mountain..." I rubbed my forehead with a hoof as I sat back.

"Yeah. That great big black rock on the edge of the city? It was this castle. A placeholder, or something like that. Now that the talisman's gone poof, the castle's back. As you might imagine, it's drawing a lot of fucking attention all of a sudden."

That must have been a doozy of an enchantment, but now thinking back there had to be something special about the mountain. I immediately trotted to one of the clinic's windows and stared out — oh damn, light sucked! — at a rainy... morning? Afternoon? My sense of time was all bonkers without a PipBuck. I looked out at the Core several miles distant. Hard to think that I'd been there just hours ago. "Were you able to repel them?" I asked.

"Most of these ponies may be inbred, but they can still fight. Sort of. Half of them practically shit themselves when they saw the sky for the first time. Tenebra managed to knock one of the enemies out before going all spasmy. That's basically her version of a victory dance. I'll give her caps for having the ovaries, but her bad wiring's gonna get her killed," Whisper said with what might actually have been concern. "The Brood were the only ones that were difficult. Those Harbingers seemed to think all they had to do was waltz through the front door. Dumbasses," she snorted.

"Flyers? The Brood can't..." I started to say, then guessed, "Cyberpony wings?" How could they have gotten the design? It hadn't been accessed until Shadowbolt Tower!

"Bingo," she said sourly. "And they've got zebra unicorn ones, too, doing magic. If they start showing up half dragon..." she trailed off and shook her head. "Anyway, you should get out now while you can."

Great. I agreed. "Cyber zebra unicorns..." I frowned, something niggling in my mind. "Are they all mares?"

"The three I saw were."

"And did they look identical?"

"Yeaah... Why?" she asked with a scowl of bafflement. "You know them?"

I scowled. Cyber zebra unicorns... I really... really wanted to see Morning Glory again, but if I was right... "I think I might."

* * *

Whisper and Tenebra got us clear of the Citadel, flying Charm and me ponyback through the rain; fortunately, none of us were struck by the lightning flashing in the roiling clouds above. As we flew, I looked back at the majestic gothic castle rising up on the edge of the city. Its spires and minarets suggested it had never been intended to be attacked; after all, how could it be, hidden in the shadow world? Under siege, the Harbingers attacking from the west and the Brood from the east, it was already showing some damage. The number of little sporadic flashes and distant crackles suggested how bad the fighting was, but at the moment neither side appeared to have an advantage.

The pegasus and batpony set us down just north of the Skyport on Celestia Boulevard, in front of the lingerie shop my friends and I had sheltered in so long ago. "Be careful. You've been gone for three months. There's no telling what's happened in the meantime," Whisper warned.

"Don't worry. I'm going to get help for Charm, then get straight to Glory," I said, omitting mention of the short stop I'd have to make.

"You think maybe she's better this way?" Whisper asked, gesturing to the filly now slung over my back underneath a black cloak to keep the rain off.

"I think that that doesn't matter," I said firmly. "She helped me. She gets helped. If that turns her back into a bitch... well... not like I don't have experience dealing with those, right?"

"Are you trying to tell me something?" she asked with a sharp grin, then laughed. "It's your head, either way."

"Blackjack, I..." Tenebra began, then averted her eyes as she flushed and pawed at the mud with a hoof.

"I'll ask Glory. See what she says," I told her brightly.

"Perverts," Whisper snorted, rolling her eyes. "Come on. Let's get back. I want to hit the next wave from behind and really fuck their shit up." She smiled at me. "Take care of yourself, Blackjack."

I adjusted my purple armor and sword – really, a baton was more my thing where melee weapons were concerned, but if I was lucky, I'd find somepony I could trade the sword to for a gun – and checked Charm one last time, then teleported straight to the Collegiate.

In a flash, I appeared at the gates, scaring the piss out of a guard. "See? That wasn't so b—" I started to say, over my shoulder, and then I realized that I was alone. "Oh shit!" I teleported back to the filly sprawled and wet on the road. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry! Are you okay?"

"Ow," was all she muttered as I levitated her back onto my back and tried to teleport again... and again she fell with a shriek. At least this time I caught her before she landed in the mud.

Teleporting with another pony was... a whole lot trickier when I wasn't falling to my death. I could take myself no problem now, but teleporting somepony else just... didn't happen. Six times I tried to teleport with Charm, and six times I failed. Charm, for her part, was amazingly patient. She didn't scowl, or make sarcastic remarks... or... much of anything. And so I fell back to my old tried and true method:

walking. However, lacking cyber limbs and mechanical endurance, plus having to carry the filly... well... I found myself missing my old clanking limbs.

As we skirted the edge of the river, I kept my eyes open for raiders, gangers, ghouls, or giant talking frogs. Instead, there was nothing. The murky waters were still and empty. I wasn't exactly shooting sparks into the air, but at the very least I thought a suicidal bloatsprite might make a run at me. Instead, the only life I saw were some maggots wiggling furiously along some sopping wet boards...

Away from the Core.

I stood up and stared at the towers. It looked less like a city than ever. The soaring structures were now so heavily cabled together that it appeared as if giant spiders had moved in and webbed up the place. A glaring bolt of lightning struck the towers, and I watched it crackle down the sides. *Just wait*, I thought furiously. *Just wait*.

We reached the front gates of the settlement built on top of the college, without the element of surprise, and the agitated-looking guardponies brandished their weapons, made me halt, and demanded that I identify myself and state my business with the Collegiate.

"Blackjack. Need to talk to Triage and Professor Zodiac, and maybe Sagittarius if he's around," I said crossly. "I've also got a filly who needs to use her miraculous healing machine."

"Oh Celestia... get the fuck out of here! I'm not dealing with more of this shit," the guard shouted, not in fear or anger but in... annoyance.

"Uh, maybe you didn't hear me. I'm Security. I need to talk to Triage. Right now," I said as I approached the gate guards.

"Right. And I'm the Lightbringer," drawled the earth pony guard, a stallion to boot. "Go piss off."

"I've got a kid who's hurt!" I snapped. "You guys do healing, last I checked!" I shifted the cloak enough so they could see the filly beneath.

The two looked at the filly sourly. "You got caps? The machine's not cheap," a stallion said.

My jaw nearly hit the mud. Why no, actually, now that he mentioned it. "This is Charm, Grace's sister. I'm sure she'll cover the cost."

"Right. I gotta remember that line," the other said with a smirk. "I'm not going to pay for it, but I'm Big Daddy's second bastard twice removed. I'm sure he'll cover it."

"Get lost," laughed the first. "Take your kid to Meatlocker."

I couldn't believe this. How many black-and-red-maned white unicorns were there? I was on the verge of putting a magic bullet into both of their asses when a green unicorn stallion trotted up and saved me from doing something probably pretty stupid. Sagittarius didn't seem too happy either, though, what with the rain and all soaking his golden mane and goatee.

"What's going on here?" he asked, his yellow eyes sweeping over me.

"This is Security. She's broke, but wants us to run the machine on account she's carrying a member of the Society," one stallion said so obnoxiously it set my teeth on edge.

Sagittarius stared skeptically at me. "I'm afraid that, even if you were Security, the fact is that even she has to pay for services here."

I nearly choked. Seriously? My mind raced and latched on something to barter. "I'm wearing authentic armor from the period of Nightmare Moon. Even if you can't use it, the fact is that someone will be willing to buy it."

His eyes swept over my barding and he twisted his lips. "Mmmm. Maybe. I'd feel better if Triage were here to make that call. She'll have my tail off we run up the machine for anything less than a thousand caps."

"Triage isn't here?" My ears folded back. "She's always here!"

"Yeah. She was called to a big meeting at the Society. By Security. Imagine that." The guard sneered at me, and I felt my confidence waver. If nopony believed who I was... if Glory and P-21 didn't believe...

No. Don't think about that now. "Look. I'm Security, and she needs your help. There has to be something we can work out," I said, trying my best to keep my fear in check and stay reasonable.

Sagittarius regarded me for several desperate seconds, and then the green stallion gave a small shrug. "Well, I don't think you're going to cause trouble if you're giving up your barding."

"I'll throw in the sword, too. Matching set," I said with a winning smile.

He finally nodded. "Deal. This way." He led me into the quad, and I saw the damage that Cognitum had wrought. Two of the academic buildings were gone, the first blasted to its foundations and the second a scorched wreck. Fortunately, neither of them were the medical school or the observatory. "Sorry if we're less than hospitable. We were hit by an attack recently. Incinerated a lot of good ponies."

"Are Capricorn and Pisces okay?" I asked with a worried frown, getting a curious look from him in return.

"Yes. They were on a job," he said as he walked up the steps. There was a large chalkboard next to them; 'Modifications' and 'Augmentations' were written at the top with columns of names and prices beneath. Brain augmentation for only two thousand caps? Heart modification for fifteen hundred? "Cancer was vaporized," Sagittarius continued. "Libra had a wall fall on her." He shook his head. "You know, there was a time I thought we might have made Security a Zodiac, but Big Daddy declared her a Reaper first. Pity."

"I am Security," I said flatly as we stepped inside and I doffed the cloak, passed him Charm, and removed the armor. "Are you seriously telling me you don't recognize me, Sagittarius?"

He rolled his eyes with a long-suffering sigh as he took my belongings and the filly. "Yes. You are a very good Security. You got the mane and coat down perfectly. Bravo." He pointed off to the side. "You can wait down there in room 104, if you like. We'll put her in and see what the machine can do."

I nodded, feeling quite shaken. How could he not see who I was? I turned and walked slowly down the hall to the room he'd indicated; it'd been made into a combination lounge, rec room, and café. My stomach growled as I was hit by the smell of fried hay, but I didn't have a single cap—

My thoughts stopped as I saw her. Dusky gray hide and wings... bright purple mane... Dashite cutie mark. I walked towards her as if in a dream. The universe had finally, finally thrown me a bone. Of course Morning Glory would be back here. She was a super smart medical pony. Why shouldn't she be here? I didn't pay any attention to anything but her as I raced over. She turned her head in surprise as I threw my hooves around her and kissed her so hard I thought my horn would burst. It was...

Wait. That's not a mare's tongue.

I broke away and goggled at the gray effeminate stallion I had my hooves around. "Oh, don't stop there!" he begged with a lazy grin. "I live for moments like this."

"Habazahaaaaa..." I shrank away, feeling the last fuses in my brain going. Had breaking the talisman sent me to some bizzaro Wasteland? "You're not Morning Glory..."

Then I looked at the mare he'd been talking too. A unicorn. White. Black-and-red-striped mane. Card cutie mark, though she had a different suit, hearts, and was about ten years older and twenty pounds heavier than me... and with a much more... substantial horn. She wore blue combat armor with 'Security' written on it. "He does make an awesome Glory, though. Can't blame you," the armored Security said.

Two ponies impersonating me? And a *stallion* impersonating Glory?! I felt such rage I wanted to jump into S.A.T.S. and blow them both away... but I didn't have a PipBuck anymore. "What... why... how could you..."

The male Morning Glory patted my shoulder with a wing. "Now hun. You look fine. I mean you got all the basics done right. You just need to get some barding. Leather maybe. Some leg braces. A shotgun. Oh! An eyepatch, too. Then you'd be a fine Security."

"I wanted to be Velvet and him Calamity..." the armored Blackjack said with a pout.

"Not on your life! That twang, ugh!" He stretched out his wings, and I saw the undersides of them had patches of light blue. "Besides, gray and purple are much nicer, don't you think?"

"I always thought so," I whispered. I stared around the lobby and saw another Security watching me. Her legs were covered in some kind of faux cybernetics, armor leggings made to look like they were the real thing. "You're...actors?"

"Heroes," male Glory said with a pat of his wing. "Isn't that why you dressed up like Security?"

"I am Blackjack," I said in a daze.

"Oh! You did your homework! That is her real name. Brave!" He clapped his hooves, then sighed, rolling his eyes. "Seriously though, Darling, your peepers are all wrong for it. I mean, Security's eyes are supposed to glow. They've always glowed. But some mares won't get their eyes done," he said with a sharp look at the armored Security next to him.

"Hey! Don't look at me," she said sharply. "Velvet Remedy's eyes don't, and she's who I *wanted* to do. I'd go with the Lightbringer, but no one's one hundred percent sure what she looks like. Gray and brown. Green and brown? Who can say?"

I could, but would anypony believe me? "You're too big anyway. She's tiny," I murmured.

"Well, so's Security's horn, but there's no way I'm getting a reduction, either," she said. "Inspiring the Wasteland to do better is one thing. Taking a belt sander to my horn is another."

I swayed and sat down hard. "It's compact..." I murmured.

The pegasus patted me again. "Anyway, if you're going to make a serious run for playing Security, and who can blame you, use a cutie mark decal." He nodded to armored Blackjack, and she rolled her eyes and levitated over a small box. Inside was a decal of Velvet Remedy's nightingale cutie mark and a small can like a Dash inhaler. "Just get one of Blackjack's cutie mark, spray it on your flank, and voila! Get some old stable barding and you could be Security, fresh from the stable!" he said in a breathless voice.

“Just ignore him. He takes this thing way too seriously,” the armored Security said with a small smile, earning a very Glory-like glower from the pegasus. “He was a soldier, defected at Tenpony, we became friends, and since then we’ve been trying to live up to the examples of the heroes. Saw some other ponies dressing up as the Lightbringer’s friends and thought we could do it too. Half the time, it works. Half the time we get shot at, but they’d shoot at us anyway. Raiders, ugh...”

“Security, Morning Glory, and P-21 are all very popular out east, anyway. And this way I get to look fabulous!” he crooned. “And just the other day we saw a Lacunae that was just perfect.”

“That was a real alicorn, you idiot,” Armored Security said flatly.

“And she was perfect,” he retorted with a little pout.

“Honestly, Aero...” she said as she covered her face with a hoof. I staggered away, leaving the two to argue about if ‘being an alicorn’ counted as a costume or not. I got out into the hall, my mind racing. Multiple Blackjacks running around the Hoof. I’d assumed Cognitum, in my old body, would be the only one I’d have to deal with. But if there were two impersonators here, how many were at Megamart? Or the Society? Or Chapel?

Suddenly, I struggled not to teleport away then and there. I had something I needed to do here. And since Sagittarius obviously thought I was another fake, I couldn’t ask for his help. If Triage had been here, I might have been able to prove to her that I was me, but she wasn’t. I’d have to do this alone.

I walked back out into the rain and looked across at the observatory dome. There were guards stationed out in front. I wouldn’t even try and talk my way past them. I simply got close, slipped out of sight around a corner, and teleported into the observatory foyer. The guards didn’t even glance behind them at the noise as I trotted to the side and searched for the entrance to the projection room.

Inside, there was the collection of parts on concentric shelves I’d seen before, with one addition. A robot floated around, similar to the Mr. Gutsy models but with a large clear dome holding a brain in fluid. Two flat panels showed eyes, and a half dozen legs dangled around a levitation talisman. Off to the side, at a table between the observatory wall and the outermost ring of shelves, worked a young pink unicorn mare, Virgo I thought her name was, the one who had ambushed me a lifetime ago outside Miramare.

Now or never. I didn’t have a gun or even that fancy armor. All I had was my magic and whatever I could improvise. A smarter pony would have gone after Triage. Maybe tried to convince Sagittarius. Come back later... except... Except after talking to those two, I needed this. I had to show that I was the real Security, not those fakes. Not Cognitum.

I looked over the racks and found what I needed. Good thing about a workshop was all the useful things lying around. I crept along, much quieter without medical braces, heavy barding, or steel limbs, moving around to where Virgo was working with a half dozen partially-disassembled PipBucks. They weren’t as sleek as the black Shadowbolt one, but still, PipBucks! Ooooh, and a broadcaster!

No no no! I’d never get to Glory at this rate. First things first. I reached around and grabbed Virgo while shoving a wad of dirty rags into her mouth, then tied the gag in place with duct tape as she squirmed. “Don’t make me hurt you,” I whispered in her ear, ashamed of the cowardly threat, but I needed her. Fortunately, she stilled. A blindfold would hinder her magic, I hoped. One tube of Wonderglue later, and all four of her hooves were secured to the floor. Professor Zodiac was working on the far side of the room. I whispered softly, “I’m Security. The real one you tried to trap with a box of badly-named ‘deadly’ neurotoxin that would put me to sleep. I need you to listen. Just sit tight.”

She didn’t squeal or squirm, just stilled and then gave a little bob, which I was pretty sure was a nod.

Then I took a deep breath, walked slowly out of the rings of racks, and said loudly, "You were the spy. And you're still a spy."

Professor Zodiac slowly turned, her two eye panels focusing on me and widening in shock. "Blackjack? I... how did you get here?"

There. The last bit of confirmation I needed. "You were a spy during the war. The zebras' inside mare in the Projects," I said as I trotted towards her. "You were the one that Goldenblood put Fluttershy in contact with."

The synthetic voice became more amused. "Fluttershy so wanted to give the zebras megaspells, poor dear. Goldenblood wanted them so they could be weaponized early. How could you possibly think I'm a spy?"

"My old eyes," I said, pointing at my sockets with a hoof. "Or more precisely, your eyes. I don't know when you had them replaced, but I'm guessing it was early on in the war. You had a transmitter set up so whatever you saw, they saw. I'm guessing you worked with Trueblood?"

"He was positively giddy to apply megaspells to his chimera research. The eye transmitted to a receiver wired into my optic center, bypassing the need for threading a wire along a scarred-up nerve canal. It also transmitted to several select terminals," she said as she narrowed her eyes at me. "I didn't need to copy. I simply needed to look."

"And you were the spy Zecora was supposed to flush out," I said as I kept my eyes on her. For all I knew, she'd had a radio in the robot and had sent for help. I needed to keep her talking.

"Zecora?" She blinked, and then her eyes widened. "Oh my. I'd nearly forgotten. Yes. Zecora was working with me to get the power armor designs! Cybernetics were so invasive back then. Many zebra attempts turned out like Deus. It seems so many ponies have problems with augmentation..." She shook her chassis. "So Zecora was a double agent? I'm shocked. I was certain she'd come to her senses, too."

"Why?" I asked with a frown. "You were half pony, too."

"Because zebras are not half the hypocrites that ponies are, that's why!" she snapped back. "Ponies are good, wonderful, nice people, right? But give them one excuse and they will turn on an outsider. Marginalize us. Segregate us. Violate us. I was a university professor, and I was defiled by ponies. What horrors can you imagine were foisted on zebras who had called Equestria our home for generations? Turning on the ministries was *easy*."

That was the easy part. "Except you never stopped being a spy, did you? Even two hundred years later, you're working for others. Cognitum and the Legate."

Professor Zodiac said nothing for several seconds. "My my my. You actually worked it out. I didn't think you would."

"I'm not a smart pony, but I get there eventually," I said as I looked at her. "You knew about EC-1101, and about Steelpony. Is that why you were so willing to give up your eyes to me?"

"Indeed. I knew you were special. You evaded and destroyed Deus, and you were unthreading Goldenblood's little rat's nest of secrets. Cognitum immediately started to put out feelers for getting an improved body, and she knew I was involved. I put her in touch with the Legate, and voila. Match made in heaven," she said gleefully.

"Why? What do you get out of it? You're a brain in a jar," I scoffed.

"Oh, still not there yet?" Professor Zodiac said in mocking sympathy. "Well, first of all, I get the Core, regardless of who actually wins. I'll be able to see the ultimate cyberization technology realized. I will be able to restore an honest and humble Equestria. One that will never see a mare violated by the horrible actions of an ignorant populace." The eyes turned sly. "There're others benefits too, if you think harder about it."

"Right. Hurrah for you," I said evenly. I saw no reasons to tell her about the Eater and the star spirit Cognitum was going to deliver to it. "I want to see what my old body is up to right now."

"You... aren't here to stop me?" she asked in a baffled note.

"You want to serve the Legate, more power to you. I want my body back," I replied flatly.

"Oh?" Zodiac floated closer, her arms coming up and clacking in the air. "It would be much simpler just to augment the body you have."

Oh no, we weren't going to be playing that. I smacked her pincers aside. "I want my old body back. I want my baby back. And I want to make that bitch pay for what she did to me and my friends." I stared at her screens. "Certainly you can understand that?"

She didn't answer for several seconds. "I suppose," she said evenly.

One of her eye screens crackled, and I saw the view of the 'throne room' of the Society. I'd stood there myself, what felt like half a life ago. In my eye, I could see a multitude of ponies I knew: Big Daddy, Triage, Bottlecap, Charity, and the ghoul mayor Windclop. In front of them were Grace and Splendid, both wearing carefully offended masks. In the periphery, I could see Glory far off to the left beside P-21 and Scotch Tape. I made out a few of Rampage's spikes on the right side. Other ponies I could make out were Finders, Paladin Stronghoof, and several other well-dressed ponies in the back.

"...glad to remind you that only in unity can we stand against this threat. The zebras have begun their final assault. In every corner of the Hoof, they have begun a slow advance in to our territory. The Harbingers will require all your assistance in repelling and annihilating this dire threat to Equestria," Cognitum said calmly, making the word 'our' sound remarkably like 'my'. "As one, we have the strength of unity to end this threat and unite into a glorious future!"

There were no cheers to this. Just dozens of blank stares and low mutters. "You think we're just going to march on your say-so?" Big Daddy asked, the old stallion glaring Cognitum. "No one tells the Reapers what to do, Blackjack. Not even another Reaper."

Suddenly, two crimson beams lanced out and struck Big Daddy in the chest. The assembled ponies cried out, falling back as the old stallion roared and launched himself at Cognitum. Rampage dashed into his path, hooves spread wide. The armored mare had no chance of stopping him, but she did slow him down enough for a second set to blast into him. Smoking, he fell back and was shot a third time. "You will find I am far more than a mere Reaper," Cognitum said coldly, then shot a fourth pair of beams. Astonishingly, he didn't disintegrate, and Cognitum advanced on him.

"Stop!" P-21 shouted, running over to stand over Big Daddy's smoking body. He glared up at me. "What the fuck is wrong with you, Blackjack?" I saw the anger and confusion in my friend's features. I could imagine Cognitum calculating whether it was advantageous to kill one of my friends as a show of power or not. *Go for not*, I prayed softly.

"The Remnant are attacking us, P-21. This is no time for the petty bickering and strife that defined the past. We must look to the future and our self-defense," Cognitum replied.

"Has anyone even tried talking to them?" Glory asked loudly, walking over the stand next to him. "The zebra refugees from the Remnant have no clue about these attacks. If anything, they've been attacked too. We haven't heard from Lancer yet. Sekashi and he must have some idea why they're attacking suddenly for no reason."

"They're attacking us because they hate us. It's as simple as that," Cognitum said coldly. "The Legate has made his interests abundantly clear. He wishes to annihilate us all!" If only she knew. "The Harbingers are keeping them at bay for the moment, but if they are to keep up the defense, we must be united under one leader."

"But why you, Blackjack? You've never wanted to lead anypony before. We could work as a war council. Each group can have a seat and we can work out the best way to resolve this," Glory asked, reasonably. An equitable share of power. Great idea.

"That's a terrible idea," Cognitum scoffed. "You'd let us be paralyzed by indecision and bickering? Only united under one ruler can things be accomplished. I'm the only one that has demonstrated the requisite strength and determination. And under me, the Legate will be crushed. Under me, Hoofington will rise!"

Glory glared long and hard into my face. "Blackjack, what's happened to you? Since you got back... I don't know what's gotten into you."

"You'd be wise to drop this imper—" Cognitum began when Rampage cleared her throat loudly, drawing her eye. Rampage scowled at her and gave a tiny little shake of her head. Cognitum looked back at Glory, then said in a calmer voice, "Dear Glory, if we hadn't had to struggle with the divisions of Thunderhead, the city might have been saved. Think of how many died needlessly because of strife and conflict. Think of how many might yet die if we continue to argue among ourselves. Think of the children," she said with a wave of her hoof at Charity and Scotch Tape.

"The *children* are adding a five percent sanctimony fee, so thank you for your thought," Charity snapped back.

"The fact is that we don't have a choice," Rampage said loudly. "The Remnant surround the city on all sides, and they're attacking. *Why* doesn't matter. What does matter is that they are, and we have to stop them. No different than two hundred years ago."

"And look how well that ended," Glory retorted.

"Enough," Cognitum said with dripping disgust. "I've learned the zebras have a superweapon on the moon. While you fight, I shall go and disable it. Once it is destroyed, the Core shall be reborn, and with it, all of Equestria! You'd all be wise to think on your future in it," she said as she walked out, obviously going around instead of over the groaning Big Daddy only because Glory and P-21 were in her way.

The image crackled out, and I was staring into an enormous eye. "You can let me go now," Professor Zodiac said flatly, and I realized that, about the time Cognitum'd begun threatening Glory, I'd grabbed the screen between my fetlocks, squeezing so hard my legs ached. I released the screen, backing away from the machine. The eyes looked coolly at me. "As you can see, it's rather easy to learn all kinds of special things when you can see through important eyes and ears."

I stared at her for several seconds, weighing a decision I didn't want to make. Being a spy two centuries ago was one thing. Working for the Legate now, even if she didn't know about Amadi's true motives, was another matter. "So now you make implants that let you spy through eyes and ears. But that's not their only special feature, is it?" The professor fell silent, but I could almost hear her mind

whirring. Or maybe that was some pump in her inequine chassis; who knew? “When I was in Thunderhead, Lighthooves used a command to murder all the cyberponies under his command. ‘Snapped Strings’, or something like that.”

“I... I have no idea what you... why...” she stammered. For a spy, she was a bad liar; I supposed she was more into peeking than fibbing. “Lighthooves must have...”

“Lighthooves was a director. The Enclave didn’t have cyberization until I came along and gave it to them.” By accident, but still... “They were working entirely off Steelpony. Your designs.” I readied myself. “So, I’m curious... those augmentations you’re selling so cheaply... Would they happen to have a similar response to certain secret words?”

The mechanical limb snapped out, shockingly fast, grabbing me by the throat and lifting me off my hooves. “Oh, Blackjack. Why’d you have to get smart?” she asked as she brought the limb with the sawblade to my gut.

By ‘why’ I had my focus, and by ‘smart’ I had a magic bullet aimed right at her dome. The impact cracked the seal where dome met metal, and an acrid fluid that vaguely reminded me of pickle juice began to spurt out. If I’d had S.A.T.S., I could have put four more in the same spot, but the second shot was off and ripped a hole in her metal plating.

Then her saw cut into my side. It wasn’t a big blade, just a small surgical saw. Still, it had more than enough bite to split hide and then chew into a rib. I was just thankful the angle of the cut made slicing my throat impractical. Needless to say, the focus I needed to teleport away was lost almost instantly; I wasn’t done yet, though. I raised my hooves and smashed them against the cracked seal, and the purple trickle became a deluge. The robot began to jerk erratically as the brain sank to the bottom of the case. One more hit and the dome came loose and flew off, the brain flopping out on the ground. The robot screamed and then fell prone, the blade in my side stilling.

“Oh that hurts. That really hurts,” I muttered as I withdrew my neck from the twitching metal claw, then pulled free of the saw. “Oh, fuck!” I screamed, the blazing agony gradually dropping to a fiery pain that throbbed in time to my racing pulse. “Healing magic. Make it a frigging priority to learn healing magic!” I muttered. The wound wasn’t exactly deep, but it was still hurting and bleeding pretty freely.

I walked away from the professor, towards the bound and hidden Virgo, but slowed. Something was off. I slowly scanned the room, lacking any E.F.S. to help me out. Nothing... yet I couldn’t help but think something was wrong. That’d been too damned eas—

Something invisible slammed me off my hooves, and I staggered back into a rack of spare parts. I didn’t think, I simply threw a wave of every last little part I could in the direction I’d come and watched them bounce off a pony-sized shape. Then my brain registered that my cut ribs had become broken ribs and that blood loss was starting to make me lightheaded. “Of course. Cognitum transferred my mind. Why not yours?” I said as I kept throwing wads of loose screws, nails, and pieces of broken metal in the direction of the distortion.

The invisibility dropped, and a cyberunicorn appeared. Silver Stripe had taken quite a page from my own augmentations. Black armor in place of hide. Red cybernetic eyes. If it weren’t for a striped motif of glossy and matte black, she’d be indistinguishable from a pony. “I swear,” she said, “Cognitum should die a hundred deaths for not killing you immediately.”

I sent a magic bullet at her head, but it didn’t do much beyond scoring the armor. Her magic bullet, on the other hoof, nearly blasted me off my hooves and informed me that, in addition to the hole in my side, I was now looking at a few more broken bones. Instinct recommended curling up and crying. Instead, I reached out and pulled myself through a gap in a shelf, pushing it back at her as she slowly

advanced. "I have to admit, I really was looking forward to that ace in the hole. Cognitum is sure that the masses will buy her dog and pony show, but I know better. Two hundred plus years has taught me that." She easily shoved the shelves over, showering me in metal parts and scrap as I continued my backwards scramble through the bottom gap of the next shelf. Her magic tossed it aside. "You kill anyone and everyone who might even think of disobeying you, and then... then... you kill a few more just to be safe. Only when you have absolute and utter control do you let them live."

My back hit the rear wall of the planetarium. She casually knocked the last shelf aside, smirking down at me. "Time to fix her mistake."

Then she exploded. Well, not all of her. Just everything from horn to shoulders. Her head evaporated in a directed blast that continued into and through the wall above my head. "Y'hal talsh ta much," a stallion drawled in a muddled voice from the doorway. A heavily bandaged brown pegasus in a floppy black hat pointed the largest rifle in existence at where the cyber unicorn's torso still stood. He limped closer, and I took in the heavy bandages covering the right side of his body and his left wing.

"Calamity! What did you just do?" a mare said from the door behind him as he slumped under the gun's tremendous weight. The charcoal gray Velvet Remedy entered and stared at the devastation, then at the cyberpony body, then at me. To her credit, she immediately rushed to my side and applied her wonderful, soothing healing magic. Oh, it was like fresh strawberries. "I thought we talked about talking first, shooting later."

"Pretty shure tha' thing... twern't feelin' mighty talky," he said as he sat down, his words slightly slurred, but I was picking out what was accent and what was the bandages covering him. "Saw it'd killed the professor. This filly was next," he said as he started to break down the gun with a deft wing and hoof. Even clearly in pain, his skill with the gun's mechanics was something to see. I'd be hard pressed to do so half as fast with my horn.

"Thanks, Velvet," I said, certain that this had to be the real pair and not some fans. From the uncertain fold of her ears and the sigh that followed, I doubted they felt the same.

"I know imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, but you really should be yourself, young lady. I know that Blackjack would want it that way." Her maternal tone so reminded me of Glory that my chest ached.

"I know it because I am Blackjack," I said as I trotted over to Virgo and started to free her, grabbing flasks of turpentine and pouring them on her bound hooves. My magic undid her bindings, and I looked over at the skeptical pair. They shared a glance that said I wasn't the first person they'd heard this from.

"Now miss, y'all don't have to be like tha'. I admit it's a touch annoyin' at times, but I know Blackjack'd be right proud of what y'all are doin'," Calamity said with a nod, then actually came over and patted my head with his unbandaged wing!

I might have given up if he hadn't done that. Instead, I stared into his eyes and said levelly, "I went adventuring with LittlePip the night she talked Red Eye into giving her the balefire bomb. We came back flying on a wing of alicorns, with me wearing a crown of whiskey bottles." The rest of the details were pretty fuzzy, but at least I could remember that.

Calamity chuckled. "Y'all musta studied somethin' fierce, that's fer sure."

But Velvet frowned at me. "Wait a minute. Calamity! That wasn't in LittlePip's book!"

"It weren't?" he asked, blinking at me.

"LittlePip removed that memory from herself and told us not to tell. The only people who saw were us, Homage, and..." Her eyes grew even more round and troubled.

"Me and my friends," I concluded for her with a small nod.

Calamity gaped from her to me and back again, "But... she's... normal! I mean no metal legs, no metal parts at all." He pointed a hoof to the side. "And if that's Blackjack, then who was that mare in metal makin' all them grand statements o' unity and all that junk?"

"It's a long and complicated story," I said, then sat down and looked over at the dead cyberunicorn. "She's... I mean... Long and... complicated... and..." I shook a little as I ran my hooves through my mane. "Sorry. I just... you really believe I'm Blackjack, don't you?" Celestia, why was I starting to blubber like this? I had things to do!

Velvet Remedy and Calamity suddenly glanced at each other in concern. "Well... I don't rightly know," Calamity said. "Things out east are mighty... ah... wut'd Homage say?"

"Surreal," Velvet supplied as she trotted to my side.

"Right. Though 'barn bucked loco' is what I'd call 'em," Calamity said as he looked back at me. "Shoot. Folks out east is twiggid like nopony I ain't never seen before. I mean, sure we were the only ponies there, but maybe somepony said somethin'. I dunno."

"Well... it's just... I really need you all to believe I'm Blackjack. I am. And those others... they're not me. Because..." Because what if I wasn't the real me? What if I was just a copy? A thing. Maybe there were implants in my skull controlling me like a puppet! What if I wasn't in control? Suddenly my heart rate spiked up and I couldn't quite breathe in fast enough. Whisper and Tenebra had believed me, but they hadn't had copies of me running around. What if I couldn't convince Glory I was the real Blackjack?

Virgo wiped turpentine and wondergoop off her hooves. "Well... I don't know if you are or not. I mean, I only met you that one time. But you didn't kill me..." She looked towards the slain cyberpony's bodies. "And the professor seemed to believe you were Blackjack too. It's just there're all these impersonators these days..."

"Yeah. Wut's the matter with you easterners anyhow! Why, I nearly bucked the noggin off one fool dressed like me, trottin' around talkin' in a funny accent," Calamity said with a snort.

"I think that's my fault," a mare said from the doorway. The dusky gray mare with the striped blue mane gave a slightly sheepish smile as she walked into the lab. A PipBuck and broadcaster glittered on her hoof. "When I said folks should emulate their heroes, I didn't think they'd take me so literally. I mean, for years, decades, most of the Wasteland didn't care about being like a hero. Then these ponies with costumes all start showing up, and... yeah. Kinda crazy." There were more ponies coming in after her. The whispers began to spread, and somepony cried out that the professor had been killed.

I pushed myself to my hooves. "I need to see Glory. Once I see her..." Then I'd either be okay or just fall apart completely. I got ready to teleport the hay out of there and leave Virgo to explain it when a green field of magic shot through the crowd and formed a bubble around me. I tried to flash out but just smacked right against the solid wall of the field. "Oh come on!" I cried. "I did the right thing! Let me go!"

Sagittarius walked in, the bubble connecting me to him by a thin green tendril. "I'm afraid you're not going anywhere till we have some answers." He glanced over at Calamity, Velvet, and Homage. "You three are welcome to join in."

I beat my head against the wall of the bubble.

* * *

Apparently, when the leader of a powerful group dies, there're quite a few questions asked. We relocated to an old conference room in the medical school that appeared to be a command center for the Zodiacs. The table was a large oval with a hollow space in the middle. One wall was covered with bounty posters from all over Equestria. One of them was even mine... gosh, fifty thousand caps dead, a hundred thousand alive. Those were the days... 'Not worth it' was written in red ink across my face.

The room was pretty packed. There were Sagittarius, Virgo, Aries, and Aquarius. Homage, Calamity, and Velvet Remedy, along with the crimson-and-scarlet-maned unicorn stallion Life Bloom, were all in attendance. A trio of alicorns, two greens and a purple, startled me. There wasn't any animosity in their steady gazes, though, and at least one smiled at me.

"Wow. With this many horns in the room, we're either going to produce a megaspell or a gaming group," Life Bloom quipped, prompting a few meager chuckles. They died quickly.

Sagittarius set me down in the empty space in the center of the table, sat down across from me, folded his hooves on the tabletop, and said, "Tell us what happened." I sighed, took a deep breath, and got to it.

It took about two hours for me to convince Sagittarius that I hadn't murdered the professor. That the professor had betrayed them. That the implants likely contained kill commands like the ones used by Lighthooves, and that she'd been working for the Legate. Of course, that led to me talking about Cognitum running around the Hoof, proclaiming to be Security, and uniting the Hoof against a zebra threat that she and the Legate had manufactured... almost literally. The only mention I gave about Horizons was a nebulous reference to a superweapon on the moon, though.

And I didn't make one mention of the Eater or who the Legate really was. Even I wasn't that stupid.

When I finished, it seemed like everypony was sharing my headache. Calamity summed it up best. "Remember them good old days when the worst we had to worry 'bout was raiders killin' us and usin' our insides fer decoration? I sure do miss them."

"They certainly do things big in the Hoof, that's for sure," Homage said with a slow nod in agreement.

Sagittarius reached up and rubbed a thin scar on his temple. "Is it true, Virgo? Could these implants really be used for spying on us? *Killing* us?"

The young pink unicorn licked her lips and set a small plastic disk on the table. In it was something that looked like a huge... well... sperm. A flattened, round glob with tiny fuzzy hairs radiating out from a metal disk in the middle, attached to a long thin wire. "Well, I never thought about it till today, but... yes. They could. The implants have a low range broadcast field to coordinate their activities within a single body. Otherwise... well... things get ugly. It's just like a PipBuck in that respect. But if you knew the frequency, you could do anything. Download data. You could also give the implants additional inputs. Accelerate the heart till it stops. Crippling migraines. Maybe even brain hemorrhage."

"Can you block it?" Sagittarius croaked. "We've put these implants in hundreds of folks. Maybe thousands."

"Like me," Calamity said with a frown. "I'm mighty grateful to y'all fer fixin' me up, but I sure don't want muh heart ta blow up on account some zebra's in a bad mood."

"If they're receiving, I could try to write a patch for them to ignore any additional input. If the implants malfunction, folks with the implants will have to come here to get them extracted and fixed. We won't be able to adjust them remotely," Virgo said with a small nod.

"I'm glad you're not thinking of using this control yourself, Sagittarius," Homage said, both in admiration but also with an edge of worry.

The green stallion waved a hoof. "The Zodiacs were founded to protect the Wasteland. This..." he looked at the implant in the plastic dish like it was a plate of roadapples. "She put these in us, all of us. I'll take a pony in a fair fight. I won't make him dance on the end of a wire." He glanced at Homage. "Besides, you three know. No point in trying it, since you'd just tell everypony."

"Y'all bet we would," Calamity said with a look at Homage.

"Now can I please go?" I asked as I rose to my hooves. Tired. Sore. Hungry. Grumpy. Honestly, I was on the verge of just saying 'buck it' and running. Damn responsibility...

Sagittarius raised a hoof, and I suppressed the urge to flash out of there. "Wait. Blackjack, if what you're saying is true, then this is big. Really big. The Remnant went hostile all of a sudden just a few days ago. Months of them just sitting around, and suddenly they attack. The Harbingers are fighting back, but something's been off from the start. When the Zodiacs fought these Brood things, we barely survived the engagement. And we're good fighters. Even the Reapers are having it rough. The Harbingers are barely breaking a sweat. If you're right and all this is a show, what happens if the show stops?" he asked gravely.

...Nasty things. "Worse case," I said simply, "the Brood and Harbingers team up and curbstomp the Hoof into a bloody slurry. Slightly less worse, the Brood smash the Harbingers, then us."

"So we've got to be ready when the tables turn, or we won't have a chance," Sagittarius said as he trotted over to a map marked with small colored magnets. The ring of red markers around the Hoof looked particularly ominous. "Blackjack. I'm going to need you to wait."

Oh, fuck that. "I've waited months! I'm not going to—" I started to say.

"Blackjack, think! If the other you really is part of this show, how long do you think it'll last once she finds out you escaped? How long until the show ends and the killing starts?" he asked me. I stared at him, quivering. I could go. I could just teleport out before he bubbled me again. It hurt! He softened his tone. "Just give me a few hours. I'll send out the Zodiacs to make contact with the other factions. We need to meet up. Organize. Discuss everything that's going on."

Homage put a hoof on my shoulder. "Please, Blackjack."

I glanced back at her and saw her gentle smile urging patience. She was going to be kept from LittlePip. She understood the frustration of being separated from the one you loved. As painful as it was, I couldn't go rushing off. I had responsibilities. Duties. Obligations.

I hated every last one of them.

I reared onto my hind legs and smacked my forehooves on the tabletop. "Fine. But I want the meeting in Chapel. We can meet in the remains of the Blueblood Manor. It should be a wide open and neutral place." And hopefully Glory would be there. At which point, fuck the whole world. We'd be together forever and screw anyone who said otherwise!

Right?

I didn't stick around to hear the planning past that point. I left the conference room, feeling the knot of frustration inside me condense. I headed down the hall, out into the quad, and straight to the building blasted by the beam attack. It wasn't just about me. It wasn't just about Glory. This was bigger than any of us, certainly too big to ignore.

Still, I had to let the frustration out, somehow. I screamed and cried in the rain, kicking my hooves and stomping the wreckage and lashing out with my magic. Broken debris was sent flying as I thrashed like a foal in a tantrum, accomplishing nothing but getting more tired, sore, cut, bruised, and angry. I went like a dervish through a burnt-out classroom, flipping tables and throwing chairs with my telekinesis. At one point, I even bit some waterlogged curtains and ripped them down with my bare teeth.

All pointless... all futile... all keeping me from Glory.

I still wasn't used to the limits of my new body, though. Strength left my muscles, and I sat down hard in a puddle in the midst of the gutted structure. My tantrum had been a pitiful amount of destruction compared to the devastation that the one beam from the Core had wrought. The kind of destruction Cognitum could do...

It was all so much bigger than me.

"If it helps, I think you really are Blackjack," Homage said as she trotted into the ruins. "And I think that Glory will believe you are, too."

"I don't know anymore, Homage. I really don't," I said as I stared down into my own reflection, looking at eyes that I hadn't seen in months. "Something Cognitum did hurt Glory. I think that when they met, Glory asked her to prove herself. Some question... some something... and she did. And then she hurt her."

The gray unicorn walked over to me. "And when you tell her, whatever pain she inflicted will be shifted to Cognitum, where it belongs. But it's not just that, is it?" Homage asked as she sat in the puddle beside me. "I noticed that you never once mentioned killing your old body to stop her."

Crap. I was too exhausted to fight it. "I'm pregnant. My old body, I mean." Her eyes widened in shock. I turned my face to the rain. "I keep feeling like I'm going to lose everything. Not *die*. Fuck dying... I'm not afraid of that. But that I'm losing things that... that I can't really bear to lose. That I'm going to fuck it all up. And I'm terrified of what's going to happen. Will Cognitum abort my baby? If she wins, will she raise the child as her own? What about Glory and P-21? What about Scotch Tape? What about LittlePip and you?" I asked, facing her and seeing the shock on her face. "If Cognitum wins, she won't just ignore the S.P.P. I don't know if she can get LittlePip, but I know she'll try."

Homage's face hardened. "I had no idea," she said as she peered through the ruins at the dim outline of the Core. "We've barely heard anything about what's been going on here. Since this storm started, some interference has been blocking LittlePip's control of the towers here and my access to the MASEBS. We came for Calamity, but I personally was also worried about what was actually going on in the Hoof."

"Crazy times," I said, shaking my head.

"Tell me about it." She sighed, flipping her sodden mane out of her eyes. "I mean... I know I was pretty cheery on my last broadcast after the big battle. But... well..." She tapped her hooves together.

"Aren't you supposed to be Honesty?" I asked with a smirk.

"There's honesty, and then there's Honesty!" Homage countered with a frown. "I told everyone everything was alright because I hoped that, after the S.P.P. was under LittlePip's control, things would calm down. Get back to some normalcy. And it wasn't an outright lie. Things are better out west. Kinda. Order's returning, communities are working together, there are already a few attempts at agriculture, and raider activity is starting what seems to be a steady decline. And on a personal note, Calamity's getting better, and Life Bloom thinks that, with the implants, he might actually recover fully. So while everything's not quite as peachy as I said it was on my broadcast, it's still much better than it was."

"Except out here," I said, looking to the Core once again.

"Yeah. Except a lot of places. Things are settling out mostly around the area of Junction Town, really. A bit in Manehattan. Everywhere else... well... it's going to take some time." She forced a grin. "Till then, got to keep people's spirits up and put a positive spin on things, right?"

"Right," I said as I stared at the black towers, lightning flickering and dancing around them every few seconds. Even this far out, the tang of ozone was so strong that I could taste it faintly on my tongue. "So what is everypony doing?" I asked in lieu of things like 'When can I get out of here and back to Glory?'

"Velvet's using the alicorns Apogee, Perigee, and Ghostshine to send Zodiacs to the major parties. Calamity's going to have a chat with the pegasi... and I really hope that that goes well. Life Bloom is contacting the Twilight Society to bring them up to speed. I got a message to LittlePip," she said as she regarded her broadcaster. "Text packets are the only thing getting through the interference. She's working with Celestia to come up with a solution." She glanced up at me. "She also tells you to hold on. It'll be okay."

I felt a little relief at that. LittlePip was probably the only pony outside of my friends who had a clue what I was going through. Homage balked a moment. "What?"

"Nothing. I—" she started to say.

"Don't start 'Honestying' me right now, Homage," I said a little more harshly than I should have. "Not now."

She balked again, then caved. "We contacted the Society at Elysium as soon as you left. To tell Triage about all of this and find out what Cognitum is doing. Cognitum's left for the Luna Space Center with only a hoofful of ponies." She hesitated, and I stared right at her. "Glory's returning to Star House."

My mind snapped. On one hoof, my enemy, my baby, and my body. On the other, my friends and the ponies I loved. If I could get the Zodiacs, Calamity, Velvet, the alicorns... maybe we could take my body back. Maybe Virgo could take Cognitum out and put me in. Maybe... and on the other hoof, I knew where Glory was going to be. I could leave right now. The plan was already in motion. The others didn't need me! I could go and be in her embrace again and talk and make it all better.

It was enough to drive a mare mad.

I stood and trotted through the rain towards the nearest blackened wall, pressed my forehooves against it, and banged my head. Each strike seemed to resonate with a word: Cognitum. Glory. Responsibility. Baby. P-21. Everypony. Revenge. Love. Responsibility. Over and over I struck my head against the wall, hearing Homage speak vaguely in tones of amusement, then worry, then alarm. I took all those words rolling in my head and reduced every single one to pain. When she pulled me off the wall, I fell on my back, letting the cool rain pour over my aching skull.

"Are you okay?" Homage asked in alarm, staring down at me.

"There was one time I was okay. This isn't it," I muttered, now feeling like a complete idiot. Ponies like me didn't get to be okay. Still, I'd been successful: I was lying here and not trying to race off in two directions at once. I'd see Glory soon. Really soon. Then we'd say what needed to be said. Do what needed to be done. I struggled to my hooves. "I want that purple alicorn to take me to Chapel," I said as I swayed and fell against her.

"You need a healing potion," Homage said flatly. I groaned and shook my head stubbornly, and the gray pony sighed and said in worry, "Blackjack, Ghostshine can do it, but what about—"

"Everypony will be meeting at the manor, no matter what. By that time, I'm pretty sure that the final showdown will be beginning anyway," I said as I looked at the two of her as they wavered, merged, and separated again. "If you don't take me, I'll start teleporting myself. It'll probably take fifty tries to get there, but I'll do it. And I'll walk if I don't," I told her evenly.

She stared into my eyes for several long seconds. "I'll see to it."

* * *

'Seeing to it' took another intolerable fifteen minutes, but finally Velvet Remedy, the three alicorns, and I all teleported to Star House, after Velvet worked more magic on my skull. As soon as we walked in, I teared up. The familiar wooden walls. The old, worn furniture. The smell of time and family. I peered around, almost expecting all my friends to be there. Of course, they weren't. It'd take time for them to get from Elysium to Chapel, however they were travelling. If I left, I'd very likely miss them.

How long had it been since I'd last been here? The party with Dawn, wasn't it?

"I've got some work to do, Blackjack. You'll stay here, right?" Velvet asked.

"Yes. Right here. Safe and sound," I murmured absently as I slowly walked through the house. When Velvet closed the door, the sound made me jump. I looked about at the neatness. Glory's doing, no doubt. I walked to the fridge and found Sparkle-Cola, bottles of water, and milk inside. In one of the cupboards was a box of Sugar Apple Bombs. I levitated a bowl over, filling it and listening to the powder-covered red bits tinkling against the ceramic. Then I added brahmin milk and levitated the bowl to the table. Slowly, I slipped into the seat, and... and...

I watched my cereal darken and get soggy. A spoon lay unattended, jutting out to the side. I pressed my hooves to my head as the normalcy began to crush me beneath its hoof. I clenched my eyes shut as tears ran down my cheeks. Oh Celestia, it was too much! Cognitum flashed in my memory. My baby. Shadowbolt Tower exploding. Fighting Hades. I curled over as if the weight of everything I'd been through over the last day crushed me down. Too much! Too much!

I wasn't okay. I wasn't sure I could ever be okay.

"Breathe, Blackjack," I whispered to myself, and I focused on that as my heart hammered in my chest. Air in. Air out. Focus on that. A small thing. A normal thing. Something I could do now. "Calm down," I said next, hearing my heart thunder in my ears and imagining I could turn down a dial. Do not throw things. Do not hurt yourself again. Breathe. Calm.

Fifteen minutes later, I could finally take a bite of soggy cereal.

Then Glory walked in.

Just like that. The gray pegasus opened the door and trotted in, her eyes sunken and darkened, face drawn and taut. She wore her dragonhide leather jacket as if she owned it, and Pew-Pew lay holstered at her hoof. My spoon hovered an inch from my mouth as I stared at her. She shook out her

long purple mane, eyes still on the floor. Then she raised her head and saw me. Her eyes locked onto mine, and time stopped.

I don't know how long we were like that. Seconds? Eternities? The blob of cereal on my spoon quivered and then plopped back into the bowl, followed a second later by the spoon itself. Glory's eyes bored into me, pupils constricting as she seemed to wind tighter and tighter. *Say something, Blackjack*, I hissed to myself. Something. Anything!

The corner of my mouth curled up in desperate hope. "Um... hi."

She smiled, and for an instant everything was alright. Somehow, I'd make everything good again. But her smile didn't stop. It became a grimace. Then there were tears springing down her cheeks as she screamed at the top of her lungs, "Get out!"

Footnote: Loading, please wait...

(Author's notes: Bleaah. Real life really waged war with this chapter. I'd hoped to get it out week before last, but real life took out my editors. Then last week, I was away for a con. This week, I'm sick. So stick a fork in it and get it out! Horrible chapter, and so frustrating. Looking back at the last 3 chapters, I really wish I'd had Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape there. Then so many things popped up that delayed BJ and I was just as frustrated at the pacing...

Sigh. Always trying to find ways to improve.

Anyway! A little further on in the story. Thanks everyone for reading. Huge thanks to Kkat for creating FoE and thanks to Hinds, Bronode, swicked, and Heartshine for their hard work these last few weeks. I've only had 2 interviews this summer for work so if folks want to help out, bits through Paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com would be hugely appreciated. Thanks to everyone that helped me get to Everfree Northwest. I had a wonderful time and it was wonderful to meet everyone I did!)

(PS: Con crud sucks butt...)

(Heartshine: Yeah, the delay is sort of my fault because I moved and then decided to drag Somber up to Seattle for shenanigans at Everfree Northwest. Somber's a great friend, and I was glad that I was able to meet him. I keep telling him he needs to look for jobs up here, so at least he'd have friends to see after teaching. But everypony send positive thoughts his way!)

Bronode: Or money. Money works too.

(Hinds: I was a bit dissatisfied with Virgo's explanation of the implant stuff and wrote some replacements. I was then informed that, while my versions were indeed more technically accurate, they would have left most of the attendant ponies rather uncomprehending; the not-smart-pony explanation was desired. For any interested parties, though, here are the things I made:

"Well, I never thought about it till today, but... yes. They could. The implants have short range networking capability to coordinate their activities with needing even more invasive and complicated wired connections. Even in case where those connections are used, the wireless networking capability is still present, just inactive, due to the standardization of parts. The system is pretty robust where random interference is concerned and is even designed minimize the damage caused by pulse weaponry, but if somepony knew exactly the right way to get in and manipulate it... they could do anything. Upload every bit of data the implants can gather. Or download new programming or commands. Take control of cybernetic limbs. Accelerate the heart until it gives out if the pony still has one; shut down the blood

pump if they don't. Cause crippling migraines, or maybe even brain hemorrhage... The details depend on exactly what implants a pony has, but there's a lot of damage cracking the system could do to even a minimally augmented pony."

"I could try to write a patch to make the implants to ignore any additional input," Virgo said thoughtfully, "and send it out over the radio network, but that would be taking advantage of the same vulnerabilities we're trying to fix. And if the professor really was using them like this, she might have put in defenses that I'd have to get through. She's more familiar with the system than me, too. It would be easier if I could connect to the implants directly, and that would be the only way to make it work if I'm completely locked out of wireless access. I'd need the ponies with them to come here for that, though.")

swicked: ...and I have nothing to add! Goodnight everybody!

(additional note from Hinds on 2014-07-16: swicked has commented that he has a few problems with the above paragraphs and would have raised them if the paragraphs had been otherwise accepted. The reader is advised that flaws may exist.)