

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 71: Ignition

"Darn it! Now you got me acting all sappy!"

There were ghosts in Star House. They breathed softly, silently, in the night. One moved through the rooms, restless, watching the slumbering occupants in the afterglow of desperate celebration. The house was in shambles; it'd take days to clean everything up and put things as nice and neat as when they'd first entered. The ghost walked quietly amidst the cast off Sparkle-Cola bottles and slumbering ponies. Many virtually sprawled out on the floor, snatching a few precious hours of sleep before the coming day. But not all.

Whisper and Stygius curled up together on the couch, oblivious to the outside world. That was how they survived and maintained themselves; they focused on that which was dear to them and shut out the rest of the horribleness. Like this, Whisper didn't need to inflict pain upon the world before it hurt her. There were the whispers, squeaks, giggles, and soft sighs of intimate cuddles. The ghost moved on. Time waited for nopony. Not even ghosts.

She walked past a sleeping filly murmuring softly in her sleep from underneath the kitchen table. "Eight caps per Sparkle-Cola times forty-eight bottles... sixteen boxes of Sugar Apple Bombs... carry the two..." Carefully, her head was raised, and an old pillow abandoned on the floor was slid under it. The yellow filly gave a tiny smile. "Five percent discount..." That was how she lived, by what the world owed her and what she owed the world.

The door to the room occupied by P-21 and Scotch Tape was open. The pair slept side by side with P-21 holding her safely in his hooves. They slept the sleep of the secure, the happy, the loved. The ghost couldn't help but smile as she looked down at the pair. They endured simply through being. Though hardship had battered both, they'd weathered it, father and daughter alike, with caring and concern. He'd given her security and affirmation. She'd given him hope.

Next door, in Rampage's old room, LittlePip's friends rested. Calamity snored blissfully next to a Velvet who seemed to have adapted to it. Ditz's family had refused to stay away where it was safe, arriving at the end of the party. Lionheart, Silver Bell, and the curious pink-eyed mouse lodged in the wagon, barely visible outside the window. What did ghouls do when the living slept? Did they walk among the sleeping like ghosts: enviously, hungrily, wistfully? Homage lay curled up, her back to Calamity, a pair of headphones covering her ears and plugged into the PipBuck she wore. Tears still lingered in the corners of her eyes as she slept, music a poor substitute for the warmth of the mare she loved.

The ghost ascended. There were others outside who kept watch and would give warning when trouble came. Outside the upstairs door, barely muted giggles could be heard. "...want to continue your research?" Tenebra said from within.

"I think that, with all I've learned from Triage, Rover, and the Project Steelpony notes, I could help ponies all across the Hoof. Maybe the Wasteland. Cybernetics are a double-edged sword, but if we're careful, the potential for good is phenomenal," Glory said.

"If it grants Father vision again," Tenebra murmured, "I suppose it is okay." Silence for a few seconds and a soft sigh. "Do you think you could help my... attacks... with some device?"

"Maybe. I think so. I'd be glad to find out. You didn't have an attack our last time," Glory giggled again. "I guess I didn't do a good job..."

"You were wonderful," Tenebra countered at once. "Though I'm glad you stopped trying to tie me up. And it was nice to do it without... well... everything. Whisper often tried to trigger an attack at her 'parties'. It was... aggravating... unlike this," she continued, followed by the sounds of kissing. The ghost rose, to leave them to their privacy. Then, "And you can help Blackjack, too." The ghost froze, silence pouring out from under the door. "I know you still care for her. I see how you look at her," Tenebra pressed.

"Blackjack... needs to get through this. I can't be both her special somepony and come along and help her. She gets distracted, and I don't want to compromise her. When everything is all done... when it's all done, then we'll see," Glory said. "We have to finish this. I'll do whatever I can so that she can be done and finally take the rest she deserves."

"And me?" Tenebra asked in a tiny, barely perceptible voice.

"You..." Glory was silent for a moment. "You're more than just a rebound, Tenebra. I like you. I'd like this thing we have to be more." A soft sigh. "Blackjack's got the biggest heart in the Wasteland. I'm sure she'll understand."

"Maybe the three of us?" Tenebra asked.

"Not you too," Glory groaned, then relented. "Maybe. Maybe something might work out. But it'll be tomorrow. Everything will be settled, one way or another, tomorrow." A soft sigh. A gentle kiss. A rustling of sheets. Silence broken only by the longing in the air.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow... the ghost walked to the last room, gaze sweeping over the cardboard boxes, the desk in the corner which held the IF-88, and the tousled bed. Tomorrow... time marched endlessly onward in plodding steps from now to the ending of the universe. What folly had it witnessed? What cruelties? What joys? What sorrows? And if the grand totality of the events of the universe were tallied, which would ultimately predominate?

In the window, the ghost beheld herself. White. Red. Black. A blurred panoply. So different from the mare who'd been birthed in the depths of a damned stable, blissfully ignorant of its wretchedness. She'd come full circle, but oh so much more worn for the passage. Pressing her brow to the cool glass, she stared through the warped and indistinct pane and into unknown darkness. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. What was the price to see tomorrow?

And could a ghost pay for the privilege?

"Bwackjack?" Boo asked behind me. I turned and saw her standing in the door, watching me with wide scared eyes. Not scared in general; I knew *that* expression too well. Boo's face showed an odd fear... for me? "You scared?"

"Me? Scared?" I said with a lazy grin I'd practiced so well. "No way, Boo. No," I lied as smoothly as I ever had before, but Boo trotted right up to me, put her hooves around me, and gave me a hug. "It'll be fine, Boo," I assured her.

"Mhmmm..." she replied, holding me tightly.

"Nothing to worry about," I said, now feeling awkward. "Easy peasy."

"Mhmmm..." she answered again. And once more I felt myself start to shake, and she murmured, "Don't die, Bwackjack."

"I'll try my best not to..." I started to say when my voice cracked and I swallowed hard. "I'm not going to..." Again, that lump in my throat silenced me. "Boo..."

"Don't die first, Bwackjack," she said as she pressed her face into my shoulder. The tremors increased as her words pierced me. Dying first. It was like LittlePip's Mint-al addiction; if tomorrow didn't go as perfectly as it possibly could, some of us were going to die. Who would be first? P-21? Glory? Scotch Tape? Boo? Any answer other than me tore me to my core. And that insidious part of myself that had always held me back, which had been fed by Psalm's own torments, now whispered about how noble it would be for me to sacrifice myself for my friends. Give myself first. Make sure I died first. Then... then I wouldn't have to see... who died next.

Lacunae's sad smile filled my memory, and I hated her, envied her. Nobly sacrificing herself for others so that her race would have a chance, giving back all the memories that made up her being. How dare she go first? Why couldn't it have been me?

Dying last... sucked. Was it any wonder Twist ripped the talisman from her chest to save Peppermint?

"Nopony is going to die, Boo," I told her, sniffing, the words halfway between a promise and a prayer. "It's going to be like LittlePip's fight. We're going to go out there and kick flank, get my body back, and save the world. Just like LittlePip."

Boo said nothing. She didn't have to. She just held me tight, because right then I needed to be held.

Just two ghosts, comforting each other.

Then the door swung wide as if more specters were coming to the party, and for a moment I stared at the darkness on the other side. Then it spoke, low and soft. "Don't shoot." The darkness shimmered and dropped, and from it stepped Lancer. He looked horrible. Gaunt and exhausted, with fresh scars crossing his striped hide. But he still carried himself with determination. "It's been a while, Maiden."

"A bit. Still cursed?" I asked lightly.

"We are all cursed," he answered with a small smile. "Some more than others," he added as he stepped in, and there was a second shimmer revealing Sekashi. A second later, a lump on her back slipped out from under the cloak and onto the floor, revealing Majina.

She rushed to me, looking a little better than her son, and embraced me. "I know a funny story about a silly mare who fights great evil, but I fear how the story ends."

Majina tapped her mother's shoulder, waited for her to turn so she could watch the filly's lips, then took a deep breath and explained, "Well duh, Mama. It ends with pzoow pzoow, vroom, boom, and then yay! Any other ending would be stupid."

"I sure hope so," I said as I addressed the trio. "Come to join the fight?"

My question wiped the smiles from their faces. "No, Blackjack. We have come to take you to the fight," he said gravely.

"What do you mean?" I asked, a chill running along my mane. "She's leaving in a few hours."

The three of them regarded each other gravely. "No Blackjack. She is early. Your copy is leaving within the hour."

Star House filled with yells and shouts as I went from door to door, rousing everyone and shouting for them to get ready. Lancer followed in my wake as everypony scrambled in the panic. Goldenblood entered from outside, took stock of the madness, and immediately relayed to Big Daddy and General Storm Chaser that it was happening now, whether the soldiers at Paradise Mall were ready or not.

"We were told it'd take hours to fuel the rockets. That it was too dangerous to fill them too soon," I shouted as I checked the drum magazines to the shotgun.

"It is not a danger if you force the ghouls to fuel them at gunpoint and you are not concerned with a few rockets exploding, especially if you know you can move before your enemies," Lancer called after us. "They lost two of the older rockets, but the rest are still functional. Father has been generous providing your copy with parts to restore them, and forcing the Propoli to repair them."

"Is the Remnant still following him?" I asked, turning to Scotch Tape as I saw the filly scrambling for some healing potions. "Make sure they're all good. We don't want any that have been sucked dry by Elevation."

"Right!" Scotch Tape shouted back as she flicked through them one by one, discarding a few that were too pale to be any good.

"The Remnant has been completely sidelined by the Brood. Father has taken them out of the fight, moved our people back to the staging depot for our safety. The few at the launch center were forced to come. I doubt the majority know he is working with your copy," Lancer said as he followed in my wake.

The staging depot that was being targeted by Storm Chaser. "Why didn't we have any warning?" I snapped.

"Your pegasi are good scouts, but the Brood has cyberpony unicorns with wings. It's impossible for them to get close enough to see," Lancer said tersely.

"Got everything?" Velvet Remedy asked Calamity.

"Let's see. Got my bardin'. Got my guns. Got my ammo." He blinked and then looked around. "Muh hat! Where's my hat?"

"On your head, Calamity," Homage replied as she checked a Defender disintegration pistol.

"Oh, right," he replied, relaxing. "I'm good."

"Do the Legate and Cognitum know this is Blackjack?" P-21 asked as he fell in beside Lancer.

"Thankfully, no," Sekashi said. "I read their lips though my son's scope. They think this is a ploy by Big Daddy and his allies to seize power. That you are just a particularly skilled imposter and a patsy to them. They think you are attacking to kill them, and will attack soon."

"Does the Remnant know that the Legate is Starkatter?" I asked as we stepped outside. My statement didn't prompt shock from the three. "You knew, didn't you?" I asked Sekashi.

The mare balked. "There is a story of a mare whose husband was burned. When he healed, the black marks were as red as blood. She watched him warily but told her fears to none. Then, one night, as she did her duty as his mare, she asked he remove the skull he wore, for love cannot thrive amidst the bones of the dead. He did so, for of his wives, she had the sweetest of silver tongues. What he did not know was that she wore a charm to help see in the dark, and saw his cursed marks. She told his other

wives, and they repeated the trick. When they learned what he was, they tried to flee. He could not go after them himself, so he sent his most devoted son after them.

Lancer had the decency to appear ashamed as he turned away. "I was so proud he picked me," he murmured, then looked at his mother a moment. They shared a smile, and he continued, facing me, "I have tried to spread the word, but they are ever skeptical. The Legate serving the stars above? It is more than they will accept."

"I hope they change their minds soon," I said as we trotted out. If we were fighting for the future of the world, I hoped the zebras didn't miss out on it because they blindly followed their leaders. Xenith, according to Calamity, was going to try to get zebras from Glyphmark to come to the fight, but none had arrived yet.

Outside, the chaos was rippling like a wave down towards Chapel. No, not chaos. Action. Most ponies knew where they had to go. Those that didn't were those who had come to Chapel for sanctuary: the weak, sick, and helpless.

"You have to get the Remnant to leave their places at the depot and come to the space center. If they see what he's doing with their own eyes, they have to accept it. Even if I have to blast that skull off his face and show everyone his marks myself," I said with a frown. So much planning had been done for Cognitum that I had forgotten there was an immortal fighter with scary star powers pitted against me. One that would be righteously pissed when he found out I was still alive. "You've got to get them out of there, though. There's a good chance that, one way or another, that depot is getting taken out, either by Raptor or megaspell."

"Ironical," Lancer said with a touch of bitterness, "that the Maiden of the Stars would care more for my own people than our leader."

I sighed and gave him a half smile. "You know he made that up, don't you?" All three blinked at me in surprise. "The whole Maiden prophecy thing. He used it to... um... manipulate people," I said delicately.

"My husband may make light of many things, but no zebra, not even the Starkatteri, would make up such a thing," Sekashi said gravely. "The Maiden of the Stars will exist, and she will strike down the city of evil. We thought it your Princess Luna. Perhaps she may still be. Prophecies may be manipulated. Exploited. But they always, always matter."

"Even if they are made by a monster like my father," Lancer added.

He started to turn away, but I touched his shoulder with a hoof and stopped him. "You are a better person than your father, Lancer. You know that, right?"

Lancer blinked, then gave a weary smile. "I know so, but it remains for me to prove it."

I quickly trotted them to where Ditzzy and Lionheart seemed to be having a heated debate over whether or not Ditzzy should remain at Star House. After a brief discussion, I told them where I needed them to take Lancer and his family. Lionheart swore upon the soul of Princess Luna at thunderous volume that he could get them there safely. I didn't inform him of where that soul currently resided, but then, my ears were ringing.

As they left, Goldenblood approached me. Of all the ponies in a rush, he appeared the most cool and collected. "I'd feared she might try this. Luna was always full of surprises, and she was *sane*." He lifted his PipBuck, checked it, then looked around. "We were going to start operations in two hours. There's no way to get you to our forces at the mall and get them moving in time to prevent the launch. It takes time getting three hundred mixed murderers, soldiers, volunteers, and draftees to act in concert,

even if they're only moving five miles. We're going to have to improvise." He paused, and for one moment I saw a crack form in his cool façade. "Blackjack... are you—"

I silenced him with a hoof. "I'm not sure about anything, Goldenblood, but I think you're going to be fine. Keep everypony alive, and try to save as many lives as you can. You want to make up for your crimes, this is your chance."

He swallowed, and then his features smoothed over as if he hadn't been upset in the slightest. "Of course." He looked over to where the alicorn trios were teleporting ponies. "Fortunately, Glory, Storm Chaser, and Velvet have worked out a plan B. It may save all our lives."

"Plan B's are good," I answered. "Listen, if everything goes bad, there's a secret weapon I want you to know about." I leaned in, whispered it into his ear, and was rewarded with something utterly beautiful: an expression of profound bafflement. Whisper leaned in eagerly, almost bouncing on her hooves, and I gave her a flat glare. "No. It's not another megaspell. This time."

The yellow pegasus sighed and rolled her eyes. "Damn it. I miss out on everything," she said, pouting as Stygius gave her a consoling pat.

Goldenblood's face still showed doubts. "Blackjack, are you—" he started to say, but I cut him off with a wave of my hoof.

"Enh! It'll work," I said solemnly.

"But—"

"Enh!" I repeated even louder and with another hoof wave. "It'll work just fine."

"How can—"

"ENNNNNNNHHHHHH!" I said, waving both hooves in his face. "Trust me! It'll work."

I stared at him with such an earnest grin that he finally relented.

"Blackjack!" Glory called from where a trio of alicorns waited. P-21, Scotch Tape, and Boo all stood there with varying expressions of impatience, worry, and eagerness. "Let's hurry. The alicorns are going to teleport us over the roof of the Luna Space Center." That didn't seem like such a good idea given that there were airships, pegasi, and flying Brood that would see the flash of our arrival in the middle of the night, but I trusted the ponies who'd planned this.

"What about Calamity, Homage, and Velvet?" I asked, gesturing back at the house.

"They'll catch up," Glory said as I reached her. Then she held up a harness attached to a backpack. "Put this on."

"What is it?" I asked as I magically shrugged into it. All my friends, save Glory, were already wearing ones like them. We'd also made sure that all of us had PipBucks and broadcasters like the rest of the battle leaders. Sure, Boo didn't know how to use it, but we could talk to her and find her a little easier if she disappeared. Given all the spare PipBucks in 99... well, I was glad they didn't smell of chlorine.

"Something that will help us get onto the roof if plan B doesn't work," Glory said.

"What exactly *is* plan B?" I asked with a frown.

"The alicorns can't teleport you to the general area of the Luna Space Center, since in all our hapless wandering, we never actually got down there. So plan B. It's dark, so the alicorns will teleport us

to a... position close enough to use a night vision scope to see where they need to teleport to directly.” She reached down and tugged on my straps, tightening them. “If we can’t do that either... eh... Hopefully, these earth pony contraptions will work right. The one we tested did, but... don’t worry about it, Blackjack.”

Don’t worry about it? Last time she’d told me that I’d woken up half machine! “Wait? What earth pony contrap—” I started to say when the world disappeared in a purple flash.

* * *

We were over the Luna Space Center.

Way over.

The entire Hoof stretched out around me, a great concave bowl with the inky black of the reservoir and the Hoofington River behind us. I could see it all lit by the full moon. I’d seen it before when I was rushing around outside of Star House, but I hadn’t *noticed* it; I was too busy. Not now. There was not a single cloud anywhere in the sky over Hoofington. The trio of alicorns suspended us easily in a telekinetic bubble as we hovered over a gigantic monolith of a building that had to be the Luna Space Center. It was shaped like a crescent, the points facing west, with sloped concrete walls. The area surrounded by the crescent was paved and filled with a complicated tangle of rail lines and turntables, pipes in shadowed trenches, pits, and scorch marks. Most prominent were the six sturdy concrete pads, a central one circled by five others, occupied by towers of metal, four floodlit and two dark. Every inch of the surrounding terrain was lit up by bonfires, flares, and spotlights, and in three places I saw the bulky outlines of double-barreled tanks. Two Raptors, the *Blizzard* and *Sirocco*, circled in the sky out away from the building. Suddenly I had a deep appreciation of the cesspit that we were all going to be dunked in.

Above, the skies were clear and dark, the stars shining down at me. The stars... I stared up at them with a sense of wonder. I’d seen the sun and the moon, but peering out into that sea of blackness, I could only marvel at their beauty. They seemed to be greeting me; zebras might think that stars were bad, and the Eater of Souls proved that some truly were, but I couldn’t believe they *all* were. Not all of them. So many stars amidst so much blackness... I felt tears on my cheeks.

P-21 pressed a forehoof against one of mine, and I looked over at him, seeing a confident smile that made me forget that I was far above the world and snuffed out any fears of splatting before they could form. Then Boo took my other forehoof, and Scotch Tape pulled herself along my body to a position across from me, joining her hooves with Boo and P-21. Glory hovered beside me, and I broke my hold on Boo’s hoof to make room for her. If only Rampage had been here...

Okay. This wasn’t so bad. Once the alicorns had a decent view of the roof, they’d teleport down. That was plan B, right? Hard to tell given what defenses there might be, given how high we were. Well... we’d just have to move fast. Hopefully it wouldn’t be too rough. Too bad there weren’t any blue alicorns with... wait. Where *were* the blues? There had to be some travelling with Velvet.

Suddenly there were flashes far below, clouds of dust and smoke rising from them. Flares burst to light like harsh, artificial stars, and I saw the horde spilling from the edge of the light towards the space center. A veritable flood of tiny shapes I imagined as gangers, Steel Rangers, and anypony else with guns, barding, and a willingness to fight poured from the darkness. First hundreds and then thousands of attackers. I gaped in shock. Where had they all come from? If you armed every stallion, mare, and foal in the Hoof, you still wouldn’t have that many attackers streaking out in thick streams, firing wildly as they ran. From the silent night came the rumble of far-distant gunfire, then the faint crumps of explosions I realized I’d seen over ten seconds ago as the first sign of the battle.

My blood ran cold. It was suicide. An undisciplined slaughter. As one, the airships and tanks opened up, followed by a deluge of bullets from the defending infantry that would rip the attackers to pieces. How could Big Daddy be so reckless and callous to the casualties of such a charge? Whole platoons of ponies were torn to pieces in their mad charge. Dust cast weird shadows across the open space, and the light danced wildly about as they raced along. And still they were coming, more and more charging and charging and charging and...

Wait a minute. I scowled as I watched the endless charge. There was something wrong here. Nopony would ever charge so recklessly forward seeing the people ahead of them being blown to bits. And looking from above, there was a decided pattern to the rushing soldiers. I focused and saw a distinct bright blue raider charge through a hail of gunfire, disappear in an explosion, and collapse into a crater. Twenty seconds later, the same blue raider appeared at the edge of the light, charged, and collapsed into the same crater.

I gaped at the nearest alicorn. The green winked at me and smiled. "One of the blues was an Applewood special effects manager for the Ministry of Image. We actually planned on using this trick against Red Eye when he turned against us." Her smile faded a little. "Never expected one pony would break us."

"But you're not mad at Litt... the Lightbringer?" I asked. Her expression turned wistful.

"Some are. It's complicated. Mother helped many of us with the confusion. Some are angry, while others wish to replace the Goddess. But I see it as a second chance. And I have my sister to help me." The other green alicorn smiled as well, rolling her eyes with a snort. "Even if she's not as fond of the unchanged as I."

"I'm not your sister. I was a seventy-nine-year-old granny looking to retire in a week," she grumbled. "You're an intern who shouldn't have even been at Maripony that day."

"I was trying to score points with Gestalt for my M.A.S. application. I didn't know it was going to turn me into this, big sis," she said with a teasing grin, earning a sour snort from the other green alicorn.

"Greens," the purple alicorn said with a little roll of her eyes. She received a simultaneous sticking out of tongues in return, followed by the 'older' green glaring in annoyance at the 'younger', sheepishly grinning green.

Fascinating as alicornosity was post-Goddess, I tried to focus on the fight way way way below while trying to ignore the fact the ground was way way way below. While the air was thin and chilly, I didn't feel as if I was going to pass out. Definitely didn't want to stay up here for hours, though. "So if those are all illusions, where are the real fighters?" I asked.

Suddenly, the ground at the edge of the concrete exploded in a half dozen places, and sand dogs and earth pony Reapers raced out. Two actually emerged behind the Brood lines, and they tore into their flanks with glee. In the gaps between illusions, invisibility spells were dropped, and the attackers fanned out in a swarm to hit the Brood as they whirled to deal with the threat on both sides. The tanks disappeared behind cloaks of continuously exploding fireworks. If they were dazzling up here, I wondered how the tank crews fared. From higher up but further away, two Raptors appeared as if by magic, the massed invisibility spells on them torn away by the power of outgoing disintegration cannon fire.

If we got through this, I intended to send a bottle of Wild Pegasus to every alicorn I could. Without their magic, we simply couldn't have done this.

"Okay! Take us in!" I said. Cognitum wouldn't wait long before launching with a full-on attack going on.

There was flash and a sense just short of smashing every atom in my body against a stone wall. "Ow..." The purple shuddered. "I'm afraid we cannot."

"Can't? What do you mean can't? Is there a F.A.D.E. shield in the way?" I asked.

"No. Something magical is disrupting the spell," the purple said, pained. Probably some zebra trick, I guessed, or nasty Starkatteri magic. She looked to Glory. "Plan C?" Wait? What's this? Glory gave a solemn nod.

"Wait? What's plan Ceeeeeeeeeeeeee!" I screamed as the telekinetic field holding us disappeared.

"Good luck!" the younger green yelled down after us. Then the three disappeared in a flash. Not that I was particularly paying attention to them at that point; I was a bit preoccupied by how very, very quickly the dark rooftop of the Luna Space Center was getting bigger. The rockets looked like spikes. I could see the hard ground and I could imagine myself falling faster and faster till I transformed into thin paste and...

I heard laughter and glanced over at Scotch Tape waving her hooves out at her sides. "I'm a pegasus!" she shrieked, barely audible over the rushing wind in my hair. I saw P-21 smiling too, and Boo seeming also at ease. There was only one explanation: my friends were all insane!

Then Glory reached behind me and pulled a cord. The backpack flipped open, a little cloth coming out, catching the air, and then dragging out a giant pink chute. It unfolded and expanded into a round parachute with Pinkie Pie's grinning face emblazoned across it. P-21's chute popped open, then Scotch Tape's, and finally Boo's. Together, we slowed, drifting towards the great building. Glory gave me a sympathetic smile as my eyes bulged, my pulse raced, and my mane and tail stood out in every direction.

"Nice! They all worked," Glory said as she drifted down next to me. "I was afraid I was going to have to catch you."

"Why didn't you tell me this was plan C?" I asked.

"Because you would have insisted on plan D, which would have probably have involved either some horrible attempt to parley our way in, intruding through some horrible muck-filled pipes, or attempting to charge the lines."

"Because those are all sane plans!" I countered as we drifted down. Finally, though, my panic abated to the point of rational thought. "...Okay. Seriously, this was genius, but I really would have loved trying to talk my way in at gunpoint."

"I know," she said.

We continued our slow descent in silence; fortunately, everyone seemed to be too busy to notice and shoot us. "Keep your knees unlocked and roll as you land," Glory warned as we approached the rooftop. It wasn't completely abandoned; there were Brood squads firing down from the elevated edge. She darted down to the closest one and, just as one of the cyberzebras noticed something and started to turn, opened up with Pew-Pew. Beams of energy transformed the first three zebras into glittering heaps of blue, green, and red dust. She'd come a long way from the mare I'd found hiding under a floor.

Up close, it was clear that Luna Space Center had been hit by some heavy firepower in the past. The top was cratered, and in some places the blast had overwhelmed the fortification and torn great holes through to lower levels. This building was just as tough as Maripony, designed to take a beating from within and without, but parts of it were every bit as ruined as the rest of the Wasteland. Glory had wafted

us towards a large intact section of roof rather than a hole filled with rubble and jagged rebar, for which I was grateful. This was going to be hard enough already, especially if I couldn't teleport.

I landed more or less in a heap, which wasn't surprising given that I had no practice with the 'unlock your knees and roll' thing. With the battle raging around the building, I hoped our own melee here would go unnoticed a little longer. I tried to get to my hooves, levitate up the Ironpony -- I needed a damned name for the thing! All badass guns had special names! -- and give Glory some support, but the gun was tangled in the parachute canopy, my legs got hung up on the strings, and I fell on my face with a yelp on the rough concrete.

"This is not how I wanted to start this morning," I muttered.

Boo charged forward as well, and a frisson shot up my spine. What was she doing? She didn't have a gun or barding! One of the Brood turned his guns towards her, and I shouted a warning, about to fire a magic bullet. Then the Brood's magazine inexplicably ejected as the automatic rifle jammed. Boo dropped and rolled like a log, tripping the Brood and sending it sprawling on its face. How... Then Scotch Tape leapt out from behind some vent ducts and bashed it in the head with her wrench once, then again.

"I got one!" she said proudly, not noticing the two other Brood turning their weapons on her. The ground beneath them suddenly exploded, the grenade raising the cyberzebras off the ground with the force of the blast. She whirled as P-21 stepped out from... well, wherever he usually came from... and grinned sheepishly. "Oopsie."

"Tally up when the fighting's done. That one's getting up again," he told her with a slightly tense smile. The cyberzebra she'd clubbed began to stir, and she pulled out a small baton and jammed it into the base of the Brood's skull. There was a pop and sizzle and a flash of sparks, and it went still. "Now you can count it." Soon the remaining Brood in this area of the roof were eliminated by Glory's beam gun, Scotch's little shock prod, Boo's utterly baffling little kicks and trips, and two more judicious grenades.

"Nice job, Boo," Scotch Tape told her. "Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

"Not fightin'. Playin'. Discord showed me how." Little statements like that got the oddest looks, but now wasn't the time for elaboration.

Glory trotted up to where I was still tangled up in the lines. She looked down at me with a patient, almost maternal smile. "Blackjack. I broke up with you, remember? Stop trying to tempt me."

I grinned up at her. "Hey. I'm nothing if not persistent."

She sighed, glancing over at P-21. He wore a composed mask that barely hid his annoyance. She shook her head. "Talk to me about that tomorrow, Blackjack. Let's just get through today."

"You bet," I said, certain that with enough time I'd work something out. Maybe... visitation? P-21 during the weekdays and Glory on the weekends? I could teleport from Star House to the Citadel or Skyport. If that wasn't reason to live, I couldn't think of one better. And if we couldn't work it out, it wouldn't be for lack of trying. Tomorrow. "Now... um... untangle me?"

Soon as I was free, we all moved to the inner edge of the roof, looking down at the launch area embraced by the building. I didn't know much about rocket stuff, but it seemed like a clever place to launch from; the high, thick building was a formidable defense against anything smaller than a balefire bomb or megaspell. Even a Raptor would have to get almost directly above the space center to make an effective attack on the launchpads. The gap was the only breach in the defense, and it was most heavily protected with a tank in front of it and Brood guarding the tips of the opening.

In the middle was the pentagonal arrangement of launchpads with their rockets. The largest and grandest stood on the sixth pad in the center of the pentagon, a wonder of arcane science and technomagical art. The white metal of its skin bore the tarnish of two centuries of neglect, but, seeing it here so close and in person, bathed in the glow of floodlights and standing next to a tower of girders, pipes, and catwalks, it was still an awesome sight. Unlike the rockets I'd seen in memories and pictures, it had no separate boosters; the hull flowed smoothly down from the pointed nose to the broad base. The other rockets were smaller, the less advanced but still elegant models with their four aerodynamic boosters and launch towers that surrounded and embraced them instead of just standing alongside, wreathed in frigid mist and bearing more signs of slapdash repair. I also had a clearer view of the two destroyed pads; one looked as if the rocket and its support tower had exploded and partially melted into single shards of tortured metal. The other was covered in frost, shattered corpses scattered around its base. Clearly, Goldenblood hadn't been mistaken about the risk of hasty fueling.

"But where is Cognitum?" I asked, trying to pick her out from all the activity. Then I glanced over at Scotch Tape peering through a pair of binoculars. I pursed my lips at her remembering to bring something I'd forgotten, then snagged them from her, ignoring her protest of annoyance. I swept the field with the glasses. If she was down there at all, she had to be near the biggest rocket.

"Oh," I murmured as I spotted her.

"Oh what?" Glory asked. I passed her the binoculars and pointed my hoof. She peered through, and a second later: "Oh. My." She passed them to the side, flushing. P-21 took them next, and both his eyebrows arched in surprise, then furrowed. He passed them limply back to Scotch Tape, but Boo intercepted them and looked as well... at the wrong place, but still, she was trying.

"Let me see!" Scotch Tape demanded. "I'm the one who remembered to bring them!" Boo returned them to her, and she stared around the field. Then her jaw dropped. "Whoa. Wicked," she whispered as she passed them back to me.

"Yeah, wicked," I said as I looked again. What had she done to my body? The black armor, based on Shadowbolt power armor, now had a more sleek and smooth appearance to it, as if the metal limbs were actual flesh, sinews of cable visible where the metallic... *skin* parted. What actual armor plates remained appeared intricately wrought and ornate, tipped with spikes. The black metal now had a faint purplish coloration to it, and there was no attempt to maintain my old cutie mark engraving or that of the Crusaders' filly or 'Security'. In place of mane and tail, red and black striped magic blew, snapping like flame behind her. A crown of burnished silver and rubies rested atop her head. She appeared the perfect amalgamation of magic, machine, and mare. And also very, *very* evil.

A small escort of diminutive black and red gun robots flitted about her on levitation talismans, on constant vigil for something to shoot. Suddenly, I had to wonder if just a spark grenade would be enough to take her out. My earlier plan seemed to be quite shaky at this point.

Next to her, the Legate seemed positively ordinary. He still had his hooves wrapped in the glyph-marked cloths and wore the skull, but those now seemed almost amusing in comparison to Cognitum. I could see Cognitum's lips moving... what were they saying?

"Give me a minute," I said as I pulled out the Perceptitron and jammed it on my head. I entered my old PipBuck tag and let the world swirl away.

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Not only did she appear different, but she felt... odd. This was my old body, and yet not. I could feel the strange, smooth metal limbs far more intimately than I had the old ones, which had been more like phantom limbs. There was a pulse, but it was a pulse of energy. Everything felt tight and

oversensitive. I could now feel the pressure of my baby as a constant sensation punctuated by slight movements and tiny discomforts.

"...foals have shown their faces at last," the Legate was saying. "They don't realize how their factions are already falling apart. The Steel Rangers in Stable 99 are now reinforcing your Harbingers, as are certain Reapers and gangs. Their attack is a desperate gamble." She stared down at the smaller zebra stallion. "When you return, the Hoof, then all the Wasteland, will kneel to you."

"Be that as it may, we should have gotten word from Steel Rain by now. I dislike that I have so little direct control at this point. Before, when I wanted to act, I simply *did*. Now, I must give orders. It is frightfully limiting," Cognitum said in a voice that sounded odd. She sat and stroked a metal hoof idly over her belly. "I do not like it, but if this is how I must rule again, so be it."

"Are you still determined to keep those lumps of tissue inside you?" the Legate asked, lip curling.

"Do not bring that up again! You serve me, remember?" she snapped. "These babies... my babies... I did not get to have one before. My children will love me. I will raise them, and in time, all of Equestria will be theirs! All the world!"

I wished I could see his face behind that skull. "Well, good luck with that," he said dryly. "You should depart soon. Before the Raptors get close enough to target the rockets."

"I will leave when I am good and ready. Do not presume to tell me otherwise," Cognitum snapped, turning to regard the rockets. "I will go to the moon once more, alter the trajectory, and the Core shall be reborn. Greater than any ever imagined!" she proclaimed. "My Harbingers will put down these rebellious subjects and your puppets." She purred softly. "I look forward to seeing their faces when I catch this fraud they're calling Blackjack and tear her to pieces before their eyes."

"Of course, o Goddess of Equestria," he said with a bow of his head. "And then I shall be rewarded," he said with a chuckle. "We shall all get precisely what we deserve."

"Oh yes," she replied, smiling beatifically at him. She turned and flew easily up to the open hatch at the top of the rocket, her drones following, where a Harbinger awaited in combat armor. "As soon as we go, kill him. Then direct my people to stamp out the Brood and Remnant for good. Hoarfrost and Afterburner have their instructions to assist in the elimination. I'll not have him in place with his minions." The Harbinger saluted and trotted back down the steps. She hissed in annoyance. "What is Steel Rain up to? He should have checked in on these disturbances in the Core hours ago."

She stepped into a small chamber with a dozen reclining seats spaced around the edges, two rings of six each. In the center of the room, two seats surrounded by controls and screens stood by a narrow spiral staircase leading down. Instead of pilots, a cobbled-together assembly of computer hardware was strapped and taped into them with wires running into gaping access panels on the consoles. A battered ghoulish unicorn in a torn and faded flight suit worked frantically on the jury-rigged system, unscrewing another access panel as I watched. "Are the flight controls ready?"

"Soon. Soon! Fifteen, twenty minutes tops. But is very risky. These computers ran flight simulations, not actual rockets," he rasped. No surprise that Cognitum would trust a machine pilot over a pony.

"Well, they'd better work. If they don't, I'll teleport to safety, and then I'll come down here and squish the rest of you into undead jam, do you understand?" Cognitum asked him sharply, the hovering gun pods all orienting on him.

"Yes. Yes. They'll work! They'll work!" the ghou squawked, going back to furiously wiring the machines. "Once they're active, we can signal control room to start launch."

"Good. If I have to launch these things manually, I'll start them with you," she replied dismissively as the ghou worked his mouth silently, clearly trying to work out the threat. She took a seat, sitting back and rubbing her shiny black tummy. "I'll save the world for you, my babies. For all my subjects. For everyone." Then she caught the ghou staring at her. "Work!" she snapped furiously.

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I severed the connection. "We have fifteen or twenty minutes," I said, trying to stem my rage from her talking about 'her' babies. Cognitum was a crazy program with a dead Princess's soul jammed inside her. It was my body and my baby. Babies! More than one! Was my happiness doubled, or my fear? Both. "The... baby is okay," I said to P-21 as I packed the Perceptitron away.

A relieved smile spread across his face. "What's the plan?"

"Get to the middle rocket. Get her stunned. Swap me in for her. Go to the moon and stop Horizons. Easy." I then looked at the dozens, if not hundreds, of Brood and Harbinger soldiers all over the launch field. "Okay... Maybe not quite easy." I took a risk and tried to tele-

"Blackjack? Are you okay?" Scotch Tape asked as I blinked up at my friends. Small wonder the purple alicorn hadn't been able to teleport down here.

"No. Just... teleporting is out." I glanced at Glory and P-21. "Any ideas?"

Both of them shook their heads, but Scotch Tape said, "Emergency releases." Suddenly all eyes were on her, and she balked. "Well, they had to make safeties for the fueling. If they had to dump the fuel for a fire or an attack or something, they'd need a way to do so remotely and quickly. If it doesn't have any fuel, it can't launch." She gestured out towards the large gap in the crescent. "Probably vents way out there."

"Scotch, you're a genius!" I said as I grinned at the rocket. "If we can vent some of the fuel, they'll have to stop and refill it. Cognitum's not going to risk getting stuck on the moon. And if it does vent way out there, I think it'll provide a heck of a distraction when it all goes up." I was imagining a great geyser of flamer fuel raining down on the Brood forces. "We vent the fuel, get inside the rocket amidst all the confusion, take her out with a well-placed spark grenade or that prod of yours, and then let them refill the rocket and go!"

"Anypony else seeing the great big gaping holes in that plan?" Glory asked with a smile.

"Sure," P-21 replied, "but when has that ever stopped us before?"

"Nothin' stops Bwackjack!" Boo agreed.

"Where would these emergency releases be?" I asked Scotch Tape.

"I dunno, but if it were me, I'd want at least one in their main control room and another right by the launch pad," the olive filly replied. "I mean, I don't know exactly where, but normally safeties are marked with great big orange and yellow signs, you know?"

"Plus, if we control the control room, that should buy us more time," Glory pointed out.

We moved out as one, running along the roof to the nearest intact stairwell. P-21 made short work of the lock, and we scampered down. "Keep an eye out for generators and guards," I said quietly.

“They’re going to need power to run these systems. The more noise, the better the odds are that’s where we need to be.”

Unfortunately, this was an absolutely gargantuan building. It would probably take an hour at *least* to walk all the way around it. Most of it was simply uninhabited, and I could feel the tick tick ticking of time. Any minute... any second... we’d hear the roar of the rockets launching, and then that would be it. Maybe we could somehow, some way, get the Elements of Harmony to banish me to the moon... but I doubted it.

I kept feeling the temptation to sing ‘I am your enemy, come and kill me’ so that we’d at least have some idea as to a direction. In one large boardroom, we encountered heaps of rotting ghouls, some of them still twitching; presumably, these were the other inhabitants of what I assumed had been ‘Rocket Town’ before Cognitum arrived. There were disabled turret defenses and melted robots here and there, showing signs of the violent takeover.

Then we walked right into the Brood.

There were six of them, and soon as I stepped around the corner, they opened up at us. Glory cried out as several rounds struck her dragonhide flight jacket, and I felt the familiar thud of impacts absorbed by my operative barding. I didn’t have time to wait for an explosive from P-21; I simply levitated up the Ironpony, flicked a switch, and pulled the trigger.

The half-dozen Brood were separated into metal and blood, the former falling in sparking, smoking heaps and the latter splattering the wall behind them as it was utterly resurfaced by lead. My shooting was shit; I just didn’t have the LittlePip levels of telekinesis needed to control the damned thing, and the most I could do was try to keep it aimed ‘that way’. And I hit ‘that way’. In the space of a second, everything in that hall had been obliterated. Six meaty mounds of scrap where they’d stood, and two dozen shell casings littered the floor around me.

My barding’s helmet protected my hearing well enough, but my friends wiggled their hooves in their ears, trying to get theirs back. I stared at the casings and the bloody lumps, smoke rising from the barrel. I felt the heat radiating against my face. I lifted the gun before me. “Okay...” I said breathlessly. “I hereby dub thee... Sexy!”

“Sexy,” P-21 said flatly. “Really.”

“What? Did you expect something more profound?” Glory asked with a smile.

“Hey. I can do profound,” I said as I pouted at her. “And ‘Sexy’ is profound. It fucks the target over and leaves them a complete wreck afterwards.”

“In that case, shouldn’t you name it ‘Blackjack’?” Scotch Tape asked. Suddenly I, P-21, and Glory were all varying degrees of embarrassed, and she snickered. “I win.” Somefilly should have been left at Chapel...

I coughed, trying desperately to regain some dignity. “Okay. Full auto is excessive. Good to know.” I swapped out the drum magazine and reloaded the first; Sexy was one hell of an ammo hog. The Brood had been so torn up by the barrage that P-21 didn’t even try and search them for valuables. He’d need a sieve.

Much of the space center building seemed to be devoted to the public. We trotted through a large museum hall that put the building’s foundation at the start of the war. No wonder it was located in one of the worst spots in Equestria. Then again, if you were going to repurpose rockets into ballistic missiles, maybe it wasn’t so poorly placed. I ran past pictures of ponies testing model rockets on a field,

then larger 'liquid fuel' rockets using alcohol and oxygen. Then rockets twice or three times the height of a pony.

Another hall seemed to be dedicated to rockets themselves rather than just the history of them, but it was mostly empty. Only models had been left behind, and a huge hole in the ceiling suggested that some of the rockets on the field had once occupied this hall. I felt a rising surge of panic in my throat. There should have been some kind of massive sign that read 'control room'! Or maybe a map with a convenient 'you are here' label. I was going to fail simply because I was lost.

"Boo!" I whirled on the white mare. "Which way do you think we should go?" She blinked her pale eyes in bafflement.

"Blackjack?" P-21 asked, just as perplexed.

"Just trust me on this!" I told him as I stared into her eyes. "Just pick which way."

She rubbed her chin and started counting. "Eenie, menie, miney, moe, catch a pony by its... that way," she said abruptly, pointing down a side hall that read 'Planetarium'.

"Blackjack? Are you sure?" Glory asked.

"Shh! Don't doubt the Boo!" I warned as I turned and raced in the direction she'd pointed. I burst through the double doors into a familiarly round room dominated by a complex projector in the middle. It was almost identical to the one at the Collegiate, though perhaps a little bit bigger. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I spotted an even smaller and more unassuming door with a large sign saying 'Warning: No unauthorized civilians allowed in Operations areas.'

"Excellent," I said, patting her on the head as we passed her, the mare suddenly halted, seeming uncertain. I looked back at her. "Everything okay?"

"It's the right way," she said as she stared up at the shadows of the great vault. "Just feels... spooky."

"Just keep an eye out for trouble, okay?" I said, keeping my eyes open as we moved through. I understood what she said, my eyes squinting into the dark pools between emergency lights. Damn, for the first time, I really missed not having glowy night vision eyes. "P-21, work your magic."

We crossed the round room to the far side, and P-21 knelt, starting to work on the lock when the double doors we'd entered suddenly slammed shut with a resounding boom, sealing Boo outside the planetarium. One by one the emergency lights went dark. Almost as one, we clicked on our PipBuck lamps, producing four little pools of wan amber light. Then there was a crackle from the center of the room, and one by one the projector lights popped on, the lights reflecting off the overhead dome in a sickly array of light.

"Ashur," a mare whispered in the dark.

"Dagon," hissed a second mare.

"Namtar," moaned a third.

"Nibiru," said a final, lighter voice.

In the pale light, four cloaked figures stood on the periphery of the room. Three adults and a foal, going by size. Given that they wore cloaks and spoke the names of freaky stars that made my mane crawl, I lifted Sexy to the closest of the four. It swung its hoof, and a pale blue streak of dust crossed the

distance, coating the weapon. An instant later, an inch of ice flashed into being around it, transforming it from a firearm into an icy doorstep.

"The black star Ashur's cold embrace overcomes your weak technology," the mare said as she drew back her hood. The old zebra's mane, stripes, and eyes were almost faded to nothing. Elsewhere in the line, the smallest of the four took out a piece of paper and dangled a crystal over it.

Glory snapped her gun down at the old zebra, but one of the others tossed a hoofful of crimson dust into the air. The cloud twisted and formed flaming serpents that streaked towards Glory and chased her around the projector. "Did you think we'd overlook your plans, little pretender? The stars warned us of your attempt," she said as she pulled back her hood, showing a mare whose face was a mask of smooth burn keloid on which circular tattoos stood out as clear as day. "Dagon shall consume you!"

"I don't have time for this!" I shouted as I pointed my horn at the cold zebra and fired a volley of S.A.T.S.-guided magic bullets at her head.

The filly let out a yell of alarm. "Block!"

Another hoofful of blue dust slashed through the air a moment before the volley hit, as if she'd been expecting it, and a thick wall of ice deflected each of my shots away. I stared at it, then at the filly, who gave a little smirk that said 'what are you going to do about it?'

"We have eternity and more," intoned a third, then looked at the filly. "Where is he?" she said in a voice like tar. The filly, not taking her face off the paper before her, pointed her free hoof over to the left. The elder mare snapped her hoof, and green dust whipped out like a comet, coalesced into an orb of energy, and exploded with a bright rainbow-green flash, revealing P-21 with a grenade in his hoof. All our PipBucks began to crackle madly at the radiation. The ghastly illumination showed a mare's features which appeared distorted like soft wax. "The stars rot for eons, and you shall join them. Namtar demands it."

As my horn recharged, I tried to close the gap with the old zebra, but her funky blue dust kept stymying me. She turned the floor under me to slippery ice, sending me sprawling on my face, and dropped jagged frozen spurs the size of my hooves down at me. Fortunately, my telekinesis deflected them; LittlePip would have just rammed them right up the zebra's ass. Glory was still busy dodging the seeking snakes while the green one calmly kept trying to blow up P-21.

Scotch Tape blinked at the three adult zebras, then charged the only one her size. Without looking up from the paper, she jerked it aside at the last minute and left Scotch Tape sliding through empty air. "Hey, you! Fight me!" Scotch demanded. "Ain't ya got spooky star stuff to spout at me?"

"Yeah yeah. Nibiru curse you. Whatever," the zebra said, pulling back her hood enough to reveal a filly the same age. I was taken by how pretty she was for her age, despite the arcane markings on her delicate face. Even Scotch Tape gaped for a second. "Busy now."

"D-Don't you ignore me!" Scotch Tape yelled, her cheeks flaming, diving at her. Once again without looking up, the filly kicked back, planting her hoof upside Scotch's head. Scotch fell back, holding her head in her hooves, bit down on her wrench, and dove once more, swinging wildly. The little zebra thrust out her rear legs and braced herself against Scotch's head, holding the olive filly at bay as her mouth swung and her forehooves thrashed the air. "Gonna... beat you..."

"Told you. Busy now," she said, then looked at the old zebra. "Atropos, the signs don't make any sense. This may not be the Maiden, but Nibiru is going nuts here! I don't know who she is, but she's not a nopony." She shoved Scotch Tape away, her cloak flipping up around her shoulders. "And this one isn't helping!" she snapped as she kept scrying the paper. "...and stop staring at my butt!"

"Focus on the later, not the now, Pythia," the old zebra rasped.

"Finally! We will be ascendant after ten thousand years!" the scarred mare laughed as she tossed more incendiary powder up after Glory. With the flames seeking Glory under their own enchantments, the burned zebra was free to dance away from any of Pew-Pew's beams that happened to get near her. "We shall rule this world as is our right!"

The exploding green dust kept P-21 moving around the perimeter of the room. If he got much closer to us, he could have risked us being caught in the baleful green explosions. Worse, the one time he moved closer to the old zebra with the ice, the filly snapped out a warning, and the old zebra whirled and covered him with a layer of hoarfrost while the mutated zebra nearly blasted me off my hooves.

"Kill them," she said as she flung another hoofful of green dust. "I'll feel better when the Maiden of the Stars is gone forever." P-21 launched a grenade at her, but she detonated it in midair with more of that damned magic dust! I focused on the icy old zebra.

"Forever? That rocket is coming back, you know!" I yelled at them.

"And a balefire missile stands ready to greet her the instant she lands," the one flinging red dust cackled. "One specially treated with our magics to disrupt any pitiful pony shield talismans she might try to defend herself with! She'll be vaporized before she even realizes she was used! We shall rule forever!" the scarred zebra crowed.

"Shut up, Eurydale!" snapped the mutated balefire dust zebra. "Stop playing around. You're making basic mistakes."

But what the burned mare had said nearly halted me in my hooves. The Legate had a balefire missile? But of course he did; Xanthe had told me about the warhead, and he had the remaining missiles from Grimhoof. It made sense, too. Once Cognitum had fixed Tom's trajectory, why risk combat with her? Let her come back triumphant and be vaporized as soon as she landed. Not even a cyberpony could survive that!

"And so who's going to rule? Which of you gets to call the shots?" Glory called out.

"Why, all of us, together," the old zebra chuckled. "Of course, the Legate will sit on the throne, and we will be the ones that actually get things done... and reap the benefits. Isn't that the way it's always been with powerful males?"

The littlest one kept struggling to focus on the paper and keep Scotch Tape at bay. It'd be impressive if we weren't so pressed for time. She never took her eyes off the sheet before her nor dropped the dangling pendant, even as she dodged, sidestepped, backflipped, and pirouetted around Scotch's wild charges. "This isn't right, Scylla! I'm seeing shadows all over the future! Something is wrong." Scotch Tape tried to get her hooves around one of the filly's hindlegs, and the filly barely yanked it away in time. "And would someone get her off me? It's hard enough to scry in the middle of a battle without this one distracting me!" She kicked back and nailed Scotch Tape in the face again, sending her staggering back across the floor to trip and smack her head against the base of the projector.

"Fine," the mutated Scylla said, then turned towards Scotch and lifted a hoofful of powder. "I'll remove the distraction then."

P-21, who already had a glowing ball of star magic sailing towards him, suddenly turned and launched himself at it. He rolled tight in a ball and hit the glowing dust as it started to flare, scattering it and forcing it to reform a second later behind him. The blast launched him straight into Scylla like a cannonball, smashing them both to the ground.

"Hah! Now who's making rookie mistakes?" Eurydale crowed, and then she threw an enormous wad of the red powder into the air. The heat had set her mane on fire, but she didn't seem to notice as she laughed, the airborne dust igniting in the shape of a dragon, growing larger and larger and filling the ceiling. "Fly! Fly! Fast as you can! There's nowhere to run when all is aflame!" She laughed madly. The billowing fire caught Glory, and she covered her head as she tumbled towards the ground, feathers and tail aflame.

A moment later, there was pop and then a hiss as water poured down from ceiling sprinklers. The dragon roared in agony before melting away, and Eurydale shrieked as her glowing red powder suddenly became so much dull red mud. "No! No!" she cried as Glory rose to her hooves, beam gun clenched in her jaws. The zebra flung globs of the soaked powder at Glory as she approached. "Dagon! Dagon, burn her! Burn them all!" She teared up as she stared at the red goop running down her hooves. "Dagon, why have you forsaken me?"

Glory gave the burned mare a shooty look, and I wondered if this was going to be it: was she going to become an executioner? Eurydale pouted, scooping up balls of red muck and watching them dribble away. She sat in a red puddle. "Go away! Dagon will burn and consume you! He shall burn all the world to ash for daring his wra—"

Glory's gray feathers were blackened and bent, her mane scorched, and her face distinctly ready to dust the zebra. Then she lunged and smashed her hooves against Eurydale's head twice. "Shut! Up!" she snapped.

"Atropos!" the filly wailed. "I can't see anything but shadows now! The stars won't show me anything!"

The old mare said something in a voice that chilled me to my bones, and blue light struck the floor, a ring of frost flashing out from her. It ran up the walls and across the ceiling, covering everything in ice. My friends and I were glued to the floor. "Enough," she growled. "This is over." Overhead, four long spears of ice started to form.

"I can tell you why you can't see the future," I said simply.

"Doubtful," she said grimly.

"The Legate is going to resurrect the Eater of Souls," I informed her.

There's nothing quite so funny as seeing an old person surprised. "Let me guess. The Starkatteri were going to rule the world, right? Brood. Core. Making pony and zebra alike bend their hooves to you?" Goddesses, it was Cognitum's routine, just to a different audience. "He's not. He's going to resurrect the Eater of Souls, and everything is going to die. You. Me. But not him. He can't die, right?"

Atropos scowled thoughtfully, those lances of ice growing longer and longer. "You know nothing of what you speak. The ritual to do so would require hundreds of my tribe. We are all that remain, we five. We could never call down a star, nor would we be foolish enough to try a second time."

"You don't have to," I countered. "The Eater of Souls got a pony to bind a star to the stone that Cognitum is sending straight to the Core."

Again, that satisfying expression of shock... though it wasn't as funny the second time around. "Atropos", the small one said, "I'm seeing a gap in the shadows... but I don't know why." She stared at me. "Who are you?"

"Hush, Pythia," she growled, regarding me. At least the icy spears had stopped growing. "My people have never loved the Eater of Souls. We sought to use him for our own empowerment, for he is a vast source of power. We summoned a star once at his direction, and the reaction nearly broke the world in two. At the last moment, my ancestors broke the ritual, letting the star escape. But the devastation was complete enough to eradicate our empire from the earth. We are born with this brand as a reminder of that folly." She gestured at the orbital markings on her face.

"The Legate is lying to you. Maybe there is some way to restore the Core without setting the Eater free. I can't say it's impossible. But I can tell you that he's not interested in anyone ruling anything." I pointed at the filly. "She can see the future, right? Well, can she see a future, any future, where all of you get exactly what he promised?"

Now that all eyes were on her, the filly stammered, "There are shadows. Always shadows. Just because I haven't seen it doesn't mean it's not there... maybe..." She faltered. She looked down at the paper, which, now that I was frozen in place, I saw was a map of the night sky. She dangled the crystal, the gem making tiny pinpricks of light on the map. "It has to be here somewhere, right, Atropos?"

Atropos narrowed her eyes at me. "You. You're not a copy, are you? You're her. Actually her. The Gambler." She smiled a little. "You're supposed to be dead."

"Yeah. I'm really bad at that," I replied. "Has Amadi said anything about what you're actually going to be doing in this glorious future? Made any real plans past 'restoring the Core'? Anything besides promises?"

Atropos was quiet for so long, staring at me contemplatively, that I could have screamed. I had a deadline here! "No. I suppose not."

She stomped a hoof once, the old mare suddenly seeming a lot more tired and haggard. The ice shattered into snow. Scotch Tape gave the filly a dirty look as she walked a trifle unsteadily to where P-21 had landed. "It would have been nice to not see my tribe go extinct," the old mare said quietly, turning away from us. "Eurydale. Scylla. Pythia. Let's go."

"Wait!" I said as I shook the frost off my barding. "You need to tell the other zebras."

"Tell them? I'm not sure if you noticed, but our tribe is cursed, stupid po—" Eurydale said with a sneer, then saw Glory's angry glare and shrank back. Her mane, tail, and feathers were badly scorched, but the jacket seemed to have protected the rest of her.

"Lancer, Sekashi, and Majina are trying to convince the tribe that the Legate is a Starkatteri. You have to help them," I begged. Okay, I wasn't exactly sure *how* that was supposed to work, but still! Help was good! They wanted to show everyone they were good, right?

Atropos regarded me coolly. "We will... think about it. And if Pythia sees our glorious future, we will come back for you. But for now, we shall withdraw and consult the stars."

"One thing," P-21 asked as he pulled himself to his hooves, with a pained expression. "Why does the Eater of Souls draw in pony souls but not eat them? That's never made sense to me."

Atropos regarded him with surprise, and I had to admit that I did too. After all, as long as we weren't dealing with slavers or the like, P-21 never really seemed interested in who we were fighting or why. "The Eater eats the souls of Stars. It collects the souls of lesser beings to sing its praises for all of eternity. And when the Eater has consumed all the light that remains, the souls of all life will exist for nothing but aggrandizement of its own ego. Naturally, any sane," and here she eyed the scarred and charred Eurydale, who was intently poking a ball of mud and whispering loudly 'Dagon will burn you!' with

every jab, and heaved a sigh, “and many not-so-sane zebras, Starkatterer or not, know such a fate is punishment without end.”

“Right,” I said. “Well, if you want to avoid that, try and help us. We need everyone. Even you.”

The comment seemed to give the old zebra pause. “Interesting. You are... unsettling. I see why he fears you so. As I said. We shall consider it.” She turned and led the other three towards the exit.

“Wait!” the filly ran up to us holding scraps of paper with some numbers scribbled on them. “Here. The Brood guard patrols. Just take cover at these times and they should miss you.” She gave a little smile and ran after the others. “Wait for me!”

“I’ve never been so humiliated,” Scotch Tape groaned, rubbing one of the many black and blue hoof marks that now covered her face. “She spent the entire time staring at that map, and I didn’t lay a hoof on her!” She stared in the direction that the filly had gone.

“Especially not her rear,” I added with a smirk.

Scotch Tape glowered at me as she replied in icy tones, “Yes. Especially not that.” She stared at the door. “Enemies aren’t allowed to be cute like that!”

“Zebras are just like that sometimes,” I said, trying not to think of Lancer atop me. I tried my broadcaster but got only static. Apparently, magical jamming wasn’t the only source of interference here, though. I trotted to the entrance and kicked the doors open, looking for Boo. Nothing. I spotted her PipBuck tag on the other side of the room and frowned, trotting to the small access door.

Boo appeared in the doorway as soon as I’d gotten it open. She rushed forward, hugging me tightly. “I’m sorry! I shoulda known something bad was there.”

“It’s okay,” I said as I patted her mane. “How’d you get over on this side, though?” I asked with a frown.

“Oh! Well, doors was locked, so I found the right way!” She beamed up at me. “Ready ta go?”

We only paused long enough for everypony to share a round of healing potions, and I was glad to see the plumage on Glory’s wings grow back. P-21 also drank heavy doses of RadAway; Scylla’s powder’s explosions had been like mini balefire eggs. For all I knew, that green powder was what balefire eggs were made from!

We’d fallen behind in the fight, but with Boo leading the way and Pythia’s little scraps of times, we were able to take cover seconds before Brood came trotting into view. Not that we couldn’t take them. I’d thawed out my gun and checked it, and the rugged thing seemed to have come through okay. It was a little unsettling, though. Every time the moment came close, we’d take cover with no sign of the Brood. Then they’d come around a corner or out a door and just miss us.

Note to self: seeing the future is useful against your enemies!

The Operations section of the building was relatively small, but given the enormity of the building it was in, it still took us far longer than I was comfortable with to get past the many Brood patrols. A wave of relief swept through me when I spotted the door marked ‘Launch Control’ ahead. Sexy roared out two hammering storms of buckshot, staggering the Brood guards long enough for P-21 and Glory to finish them off. I looked at all the shells scattered on the floor around me. Even on burst instead of full auto... “Someone’s a cartridge hog,” I chided the weapon affectionately, then stormed through the door.

The control room was much, much smaller than I’d anticipated. I’d expected a cavernous space with tiers of hundreds of terminals and maybe a massive holographic display floating in the middle. The

somewhat underwhelming reality: a dozen terminals on ordinary desks looking out at a window angled down and curved to give a slightly distorted view of the entire launch field. A number of little displays above it showed the various rockets. A half dozen zebra technicians sat at various terminals with two Brood unicorns standing guard. At the sight of me bursting in, the former scrambled under or behind their desks and the latter opened up with bolts of lightning from their dark metal horns. I jumped back into the cover behind the doorframe, electricity sizzling past me.

P-21 drew a shock grenade, but I shook my head. I had no idea what those controls did. I didn't want to launch the rockets by accident. "We require reinforcements," I heard one of the two Brood mares say in a robotic monotone of Silver Stripe's voice.

"What?! You talk?!" I gasped. "Brood can't talk."

"Oral communication fallback protocols enabled," they replied dryly in unison. One of the zebra technicians began to creep towards an intercom panel on the wall, looking quite hesitant to do so. "Expedite," they urged, not taking their eyes off the door as their horns glowed.

I could almost feel our time slipping away. Then Glory launched herself out of cover and through the doorway, her beam pistol already spitting rainbow light. The Brood were turned into sparkling dust, but not before one of them hit her hard enough with a bolt of lightning to send her slamming against the hallway wall. I rushed to her as P-21 and Scotch Tape swept into the room, shouting at the technicians. The filly tackled the zebra at the intercom, throwing her forelegs around his neck and chomping on his ear.

I practically shoved a healing potion down Glory's throat, then unzipped the jacket and pressed my ear to her chest. "Don't be dead. Don't be dead. Don't be dead," I whispered over and over again.

I heard the beat of her heart. "Don't you have a world to save?" she muttered. I lifted my head and saw her sad smile. "You know you're better off with him," she said quietly.

"Let me decide that. We're all getting through this. And then I'm going to work things out if it kills me," I promised, as I stroked her cheek. "I still haven't given up plans on making it all work between the three of us."

"You never give up," she murmured with a shake of her head, then zipped the jacket back up. "Tomorrow," she promised. Then we heard the rapid approach of more Brood, and I ran into the launch control room.

Boo peeked down the hall and suddenly threw herself against the wall as a burst of gunfire spat at her. She rolled across the floor back into the room. "There's a whole lot of them comin'! Zebras and ponies too!"

"P-21," I said quickly. "Persuade them to take their time. Scotch, see if you can lock that door or something." I looked at the haggard, terrified zebras. "Propoli?" I asked, startling them and getting wary nods. I clasped my hooves together. "Okay. Time is short, and I don't want anyone to die. First off, I need to delay the launch. Is there somezebra here who can help me with that? Maybe do an emergency venting of the fuel?"

"Are you trying to blow us all up?" one zebra in huge blue glasses asked. "That's a terrible idea!"

"Congratulations. You're the leader," I said as I trotted over to him, trying to ignore the explosions in the hall behind us. "Listen. I need to get out there. I need to get on that big, fancy rocket. Tell me how to do that," I said as I stared into his eyes with a casual smile. He kept gaping from the window to me. "What's your name?" I asked.

"Cerynitis," he said unsteadily.

"Cerynitis? I'm Blackjack," I said as I politely patted his shoulder. "I've told you what I need. You tell me how you can help me make it happen. Can you just delay the launch here? Wait till I've got everything taken care of and then send me off?" When he didn't answer, I pointed my gun at the terminals. "If not, I'll have to see if just breaking things works, or try that emergency fuel dump idea."

He swallowed and adjusted his glasses. "Please don't. This facility... it's a miracle it's held up as well as it has. If it wasn't for the ghouls that used to live here, planning to escape to the moon or somesuch, I doubt it would have at all. Still, it's in rough shape. Most of these rockets are barely-restored literal museum pieces; I doubt half of them will make it to the moon even if they launch successfully. If you start venting the fuel and oxidizer, there's a good chance the systems to channel it safely away won't work. The loading systems are probably leaking some as we speak, but so many of the sensors aren't working that I can't even be sure of that." He ran his hooves through his bristly, erect mane, then waved over his head. "I tried to explain to them that this was reckless, but they wouldn't listen to me! Rocketry is supposed to be a calm, focused, deliberate use of technology. Not slapping things together, filling them with explosives, and just hoping they'll work!"

"Eh." I gave a minimalist shrug. "Then help me out here. How can I slow things down?" I spotted Glory examining a nearby terminal.

"We can keep the other three rockets from launching," he said, pointing at clocks which were frozen at 1 minute. "Even if they overrode our control and manually got the launch towers down, they don't have the time or the training to fire the boosters locally without destroying the rocket. But there's nothing we can do about the one in the center. That's an ESS-A1, the only one ever built before Equestria's space program lost funding for any new ships. It uses the finest MTRpg engines ever designed, with a TWR of—"

"I am a technological moron, Cerynitis," I said as I smiled at him. "Just tell me how to stop it from launching." His mouth worked silently a moment as if trying to figure out how much to dumb this information down. "Really."

Finally, he said, "...Sorry. You can't. The erector has already been locally disengaged, and the launch tower isn't sturdy enough to be a problem for the rocket even if it stays in place. It's mostly just to make cargo and passenger transfer easier; the ESS-A1 can launch and land pretty much anywhere with flat ground it won't sink into." That was not what I wanted to hear right now.

The doors shut, and there was a thump against them. P-21 stepped back, bobby pin in his mouth, from the door. "Okay," Scotch Tape said. "Daddy locked it, and I think I got it jammed. It still won't take them long to get in, though. For all I know, they can chew through it."

"Not unless they can get it in their mouths," I replied with a smile, then turned back to Cerynitis. "Well then, keep the other rockets here. If I can't stop her, I'll need a rocket to follow her."

"Be careful. There are magical fields that activate prior to launch. If you get stuck inside when the rocket goes up and don't reach a bunker, you'll be cooked," he warned. "You'll only have ten seconds between the fields going up and the engines firing, and that's if everything's working properly."

"Plenty of time." If I were able to teleport, damn it! Now, for the last challenge... "How do I get out there?" If he said I couldn't, that big window was going to have a date with Sexy on full auto with grenade chaperones!

Thankfully, he pointed a hoof at a hatch set in the room's exterior wall. I rushed over, twisted the handle, and yanked it open; behind was a six-foot-long hall ending in what looked like a sturdy exterior door.

"I should stay here," Glory said.

I rounded on her. "What have we learned about splitting up?" I told her. "No. I want all of you with me. No one gets left behind."

"Somepony should stay," P-21 said, examining the door. "That won't keep Brood out forever. I could do it."

"No. You couldn't get back in time," Glory said with a shake of her head. "I've got a strong enough weapon to stop them. Plus, if you do need to launch one of the other rockets, someone is going to have to push the button and fly to you before it goes up." She patted my mane. "Don't worry, Blackjack. I might not be Dash anymore, but I can reach you in a minute."

How did I not like this? Let me count the ways. "Blackjack," P-21 said gravely behind me.

"I'll be fine," she said as she stroked my mane. "Hurry. You don't want to miss your flight."

I closed my eyes, feeling her hoof as it brushed my cheek. "Tomorrow," I murmured.

"Tomorrow. Till then, do what you do best. Go," she said, her hoof lingering a moment longer, and then she pulled away.

I didn't trust myself to wait any longer. I turned stepped into the hallway and told Cerynitis over my shoulder to show her how to make the rockets launch, and then Glory closed the inner door behind us.

The outer door opened to a stairway that ran down along the inside wall of the crescent. "Sorry my plan didn't work like I thought it would, Blackjack," Scotch Tape apologized from her father's back as we hurried down.

"Hey. No sweat. If you could guess the inner workings of rockets a few months after getting your cutie mark, I'd feel really gypped." They touched the ground between the concrete pads with faded stenciled signs reading '5' and '1', closer to 5 than 1. Large grates covered dark pits that I guessed were for redirected rocket exhaust. A ring of talismans gleamed around the each of the pads. 'Arcane Bulwark. Do not stand on line.' was written repeatedly around them, and in several places in each ring of talismans were pits with stairs leading into them and signs reading 'Emergency Shelter'. The pits seemed nearly full of water, but I couldn't make out more than that.

At the bottom of the stairs, I looked around at the others and then put a hoof around Boo. "Boo, I have a super special mission for you." She blinked at me. "Do you feel up to it?"

Boo's face grew more serious. "You need to find Big Daddy or Lancer and tell them that there's a balefire missile aimed at this place. They need to ready to pull back quickly as they can. We're here. At this point, I'm not sure how much good they can do with their attack."

"Yer sending me away again," she said with a pout.

"Because you're the only pony who can make it. I know you're lucky, and smart, and quiet." I gave her a kiss on her forehead. "Get to them quick." I reached down and manipulated her PipBuck, typing out a brief message. 'Balefire bomb targeting space center. Get out. Do better. Blackjack.' If they didn't think I'd sent her... well... there wasn't much I could do about that.

Boo moved away, paused to gaze longingly back at us, and then sped out into the shadows around the side of the building. The rest of us quickly made our way past the smaller pads towards the center. Cognitum's rocket was a shining white tower curving gracefully up to a point high above us, reaching for the stars, a scaffold tower rising next to it to allow access and looking quite utilitarian in comparison to its neighbor.

"Get your spark grenades ready," I said as we approached the base of the scaffold, where a stairway and several cargo and passenger elevators stood empty alongside large wheels that must have been for moving the tower away from the rocket. "Cognitum!" I roared up at where I knew the control room hatch was. "I'm calling you out! Get down here and give me my body back!"

She'd do it. She was arrogant enough to do it. She'd want to squash me personally. But then a worried thought struck me. "You can hear me, right?" I hollered up at her. "Hey! Hey!" I started jumping up and down, waving my hooves in the air. "Get down here!" I really did not want to fight a flying me on a scaffold ten stories in the air.

And the Brood were coming. While most of them were occupied fighting our allies assaulting the facility from the outside, there were still plenty left to deal with us. I looked around and spotted a box marked 'Intercom 6' by the base of the launch tower stairway, rushed to it, and mashed my hoof against the button. "Cognitum!"

There was silence, and then her voice crackled over the intercom. "Who is this?"

"You know who. You took my body and my baby. I want them back!" I snapped.

"Your baby?" Cognitum murred. Then her voice took on a purr that nearly made me bite the box. "It is you, isn't it? How... interesting," she said with a note of delight.

"I want my body back and I want my baby back."

"And how is it to want? I wanted a body and my kingdom back for two hundred years. I dare say I'm handling it much better than you are now. And, let's be honest, I am going to be a much better mother to my babies than you ever will be." There was a pause. "Did you just bite the intercom?"

I wasn't going to answer that, no matter how much my teeth hurt. "I'm going to stop Horizons," I said as I saw the Brood coming closer. "Face me!"

"Face you? Dear Blackjack, I have a world to save. I don't have time to indulge you," she said silkily. "However, I will make you this offer. If I return and the Legate is dead, I'll pardon you and your friends. I'll allow you a quiet life elsewhere in the world."

"The Legate has fooled you!" I shouted. "There's a star spirit bound to Tom. The Legate is planning on feeding it to the Eater and resurrecting it! You're playing right into his hooves!"

"You are deranged," Cognitum said disdainfully. "The Tokomare will be restored and the Core rebuilt, and we shall proceed into a glorious future. Too bad you are so mired in the past."

Suddenly klaxons were blaring, red lights flashing on the scaffold tower as it started pulling away from the rocket with the grind of protesting machinery. "Clear Pad Six immediately. Launch sequence initiated," a recorded voice began announcing as the ring of bulwark talismans grew brighter and a hiss began to build in the darkness beneath the rocket. "Clear Pad Six immediately..."

"Rampage! Stop her, Rampage! I know who you are! She's never going to help you!" I screamed into the intercom over the noise, having to trot to keep up with the moving tower. "Dealer! I

know you can hear me! You owe me, Dealer!" Still no response. In my rage, I lifted my gun and pointed it at the rocket's thick base.

P-21 tackled me, breaking my focus. "No, Blackjack! If you get through the hull at all, you could blow us all up! Come on!"

"No! Damn it!" I shouted as he shoved me towards the line of bright talismans. I'd been so sure she'd face me personally. That I'd do it and get it back. "No!" I yelled as we crossed the bulwark. He held me back, and then a shimmery field rose up, flickered, and solidified, smaller ones rising around each of the trio of exhaust grates. I pushed past him, hammering on it with my hooves, the magic flashing as I beat something the consistency of thick rubber.

Then the ground leapt under my hooves, shaking so much that we nearly bounced across it. The flames under the rocket were tiny, pale things, with barely-visible columns of exhaust with an odd diamond pattern in them, but the *sound* that managed to escape the fields was deafening. From the exhaust grates blasted huge columns of steam, jetting out into clouds at the tops of the exhaust bulwarks. They didn't beat the rocket by much as it shot upward, its own bulwark taller but still low enough that, when it finally cleared the top of it, the building noise nearly ruptured my eardrums and the hurricane blast of suffocatingly hot gas that escaped around the sides of the field picked me up from the still-vibrating ground and sent me skidding past the other waiting rockets and towards the wall of the space center. When I came to rest, I was surrounded by a stinging-hot fog, the roar of the rocket's engines growing quieter and quieter and making my ears ring from the relative silence. I lay on my back and stared up at the now-hidden sky, my ears trying to track the rocket and my eyes desperately trying to see it. The noise faded and faded, and then was gone.

"No..." I whispered into the quiet as the vapor began to thin.

"Oh yes," a stallion said confidently, and I looked up at the wall of Brood, Harbingers, and Remnant surrounding us, guns motionlessly pointed at me. Looking down at me sat the Legate, his eyes narrowed in mirth. "Time to die."

Then his chest exploded. The Harbingers opened up on him, the Brood, and the Remnant with full automatic spray. Indeed, only the flesh wall of the Brood kept the three of us from being wiped out. The Legate jerked and danced in the air as if he were being electrocuted, but he did not fall. Bullets sparked off the skull helmet. The Remnant, the smallest in number of the three, fell back, and from around us came more sounds of gunfire as the Harbingers attacked the Legate's forces all across the field. From above, the energy blasts from the *Blizzard's* secondary weapons lanced down, careful not to hit the remaining three rockets, as the *Sirocco* exchanged fire with the *Rampage* and *Cyclone*.

Fierce as the Harbingers were, though, the Brood still turned to face them. They didn't register pain. Couldn't feel fear. Only a headshot or blasting them to pieces would really stop them. And now the ones on the field had a particularly nasty weapon: the rifles they employed fired glowing blue bullets that reminded me of Atropos's freezing powder. The enchanted rounds coated the Harbingers' barding with thick ice, froze their hooves to the ground, and, more than once, made huge chunks of flesh shatter off like meaty popsicles.

And the Legate didn't stop either. The gory nightmare rushed right up to the first Harbinger to shoot him and hooked his forelegs around the stallion's neck. The blood-streaked Legate twisted and pulled, the stallion's body gave a crack, and then his entire head came off. Again the Legate lunged, at the next and the next, killing them all with crushing blows that shattered ribs and burst blood vessels. Bullets tumbled out of his body seconds after they entered. Bits shot off returned to rejoin his body.

The field erupted into incomprehensible chaos as the three of us collapsed into one of the shelter pits. Really, I didn't see why it was full of shoulder deep cold water, whether that was intentional or not,

but after the baking we'd just received, it was quite refreshing. Rusty breathing apparatuses hung on hooks. There was a button for an emergency hatch, but, despite mashing my hoof against it repeatedly, it wouldn't close. The shooting went on for several seconds, and I poked my head up.

The Legate stood on a field of carnage. Most of the Brood and all of the Harbingers that had been within his reach had died. The Remnant were beginning to emerge from gaps and cover, though most of them looked as if they wanted to be anywhere else but here. I couldn't blame them as the Legate stood in the middle of all that gore. He then turned back to us in the shelter pit. "Come on out, little fraud. Don't make me come in there after you."

Okay. Here's hoping he was in a talky mood. I whispered instructions to P-21 and Scotch Tape, then climbed from the pit, water streaming from me as I faced him. "Starkatteri," I said, and instantly his eyes narrowed.

"Oh? An educated fraud. Or perhaps proof that my treasonous mate is working with the damned city?" he said loudly, pointing a bloody hoof at me. "Well, no matter. Soon the city will be destroyed and the world purged of pony evil. I have sent the Maiden back to the moon, and there she will remain, forever. Should she return, I will annihilate her."

Why was he talking? He should just be killing me. But he'd been the same way earlier too. He had phenomenal power to kill with his own hooves, and it wasn't enough. "You missed your calling, Amadi. You should have been an actor." Slowly I walked to the left, all eyes on me, and none on the filly and stallion rushing away to the other side.

He froze, his eyes wide behind the skull. "You heard me, Amadi. You've been playing roles for centuries now. You used the war as cover for your schemes. Used the pony and zebra hate to play one against the other. You've been doing it for years now." I narrowed my eyes and grinned at him as Scotch and P-21 went to work next to a heap of bodies behind him. "I was wrong. Not an actor. You're a politician!"

His eyes narrowed this time. "Who do you think you are? A mare with a dyed mane that thinks to rally this pitiful resistance?!" he said as he gestured with a hoof at the gap to the west. "You think you know me? You know nothing!"

"I know it was you at Littlehorn," I said as I stood there, a perfect target, keeping a distance between me and him as Scotch and P-21 frantically smeared bloody streaks across the flight deck. "You brought the Pink Cloud talisman. Wired it with starmetal to boost it. The more that died, the more it killed. Pretty effective," I said with as much contempt in my voice as I could muster. "I know you grabbed Goldenblood and fell to the ground floor, then unleashed the talisman. You killed so many. And, of course, afterward both sides blamed the other."

His lips quivered behind the dragon's teeth. I had a guess that he was like Goldenblood, that he had a desperate need to vent all his accomplishments. Then his mouth split in a wide grin. "It went marvelously, didn't it? Better than I could have ever planned. Then the fire in Hoofington? I wanted to torch Ponyville, personally, but there were too many soldiers in the way." He laughed sharply, an echo of wonder two centuries old in his voice as he went on, "But Celestia abdicating her throne and *Luna* taking it? I couldn't have planned that in ten thousand years!"

The other zebras looked on, muttering to each other as the Legate continued to stare at me. "But it's been hard," I continued. "You almost had the Tokomare activated, didn't you? So close to Luna turning it on. Let me guess, the next plan was to raise it to the surface? Get the moonstone to it then?"

His smile began to fade. "How..." And his pupils started to constrict. "No..." he hissed at me.

"The bombs falling really did ruin everything for you, didn't it? Let me guess. You planned on Luna winning, and then you'd use her dream of a strong, futuristic Equestria to cover what you were doing. You'd keep up your exploits in the shadows till you could achieve your goal. But everything fell apart." I grinned at him. "Ashur probably didn't like that, did he?"

"That's impossible. No..." he said as he stared at me.

"All that hard work wasted, but you're nothing if not persistent. Use the Wasteland. Use the Hoof. Use the Remnant. Use Cognitum. And then, when I stepped out with EC-1101, everything started moving again. Horizons got ready to fire. Cognitum started to move. And you had your golden opportunity."

The Legate took a step back from me. "That's impossible! You can't be! You're a fake! You're nothing! You're dead!"

"Dead?" I threw back my head and laughed. "I've died three times, and it hasn't stuck yet. I've destroyed Goddesses and purged abominations from the land. I've broken the skies and cast down the towers. I've stood in the mouth of the Eater of Souls and walked out again." I pointed my hoof at him and cried out, "I am the Maiden of the Stars, Amadi. Say my name!" His eyes bulged, as if he were in a grip of a magic spell. "Say it!" I ordered.

"Blackjack?" he whispered as if fighting to assimilate the idea, but then his eyes narrowed and he shook his head, never taking his eyes off me. "No... No! It can't be! It's impossible!" he said, his voice tightening in horror. He pointed his hoof at me. "Kill her! Now!" But not a one moved against me. I saw more bars turn yellow than stay red.

"Shoot me and be forever cursed!" I warned, watching more bars turn yellow.

"You're not the Maiden! She's gone to the moon!" His eyes dug into me.

"Not yet, I haven't," I countered. I raised my hoof as I saw P-21 finish painting and signal me with a hoof wave. I swallowed, glad he couldn't see me sweat. If this didn't work... and there were so many ways it could fail... he'd stop talking and start trying to take me apart. I raised my hoof over my head. "Now, as Maiden of the Stars, I call on the skies to strike you down and smite you." I paused, swallowing. "Right now!" His shock melted away into a smoldering rage. "Any second..." I said as I glared upwards. "Now, damn it!"

"Idiot," he said in disgust as he turned from me. I watched those yellow bars turning back to red as he said contemptuously, "Kill her." Then he froze as he stared at the ground behind him, and the letters L, E, G, A, T, and E written ten feet tall inside a crimson arrow pointing right at him.

There was a resounding 'CHOOM', and he disappeared in a blinding beam of light. I fell hard on my ass, wondering which airship had taken the shot. I'd kiss them all if we made it through this. Even Afterburner and Hoarfrost. I blinked repeatedly to try and clear the line burned in my vision. Where was the Legate? I saw a blackened form in the middle of the burned patch twenty feet away.

Then I heard the scream. The inarticulate scream rising higher and higher as the body reared on its hindlegs in a scorched circle, a blackened silhouette of charred meat pulling itself back together. An accretion disk of dust swirled around him, drawing back into his body, and everyone watched in horror as the charred carcass was wrapped in muscle and organs, then blood, then skin. The blackened skull tumbled from his head and bounced around his hooves.

When it ended, the Legate stood there, his black stripes now vivid, blood red. His face covered in the satellite pattern of the Starkatteri for all to see. Smoke rose all around him as he turned and stared

right at me with all the malice in the world in his gaze. "It's true," muttered one of the Remnant soldiers. "Starkatteri." Almost unanimously, the remaining red bars turned yellow.

"True? True?" He gaped at the Remnant as they turned from him. He gestured to me. "She is our enemy! She will destroy all we have worked to achieve! Kill her!" he ordered.

I stared at him in bafflement. Why the heck wasn't he popping my head off personally like he had the others? Then it struck me. "You're afraid to fight me," I said, a smile creeping across my face. "That's it, isn't it?" I stepped towards him and watched as he took a step back. "It's not just Xanthe and Lancer, is it? You're afraid of me too. You're afraid I'm the real thing, even if you thought you'd made the prophecy up, and even though you're an immortal beast, you're afraid I can stop you!" I said as I advanced, watching him fall back. "And best of all, if you're afraid I can... then there's a way."

More and more Remnant were emerging, and baffled, battered Harbingers were showing themselves as well, the ponies looking around as if not sure what they should do now. Had they finally gotten the same message that Nails had given the other Harbinger groups, or were they simply realizing that they were in over their heads?

"Kill her!" he screamed, and there was a long pause, and then, as one, the Remnant raised their weapons.

At him.

"It's over, Father," Lancer said from one of the clumps. He stepped out with his sniper rifle. Sekashi and Majina were at his flank, the filly repeating him silently to her mother. "Surrender."

"Over?" He seemed to mull the world in his head. "Give up just like that, and be left with nothing?" He gave a little smile and shook his head. "No. I've pursued this for thousands of years. I will never surrender."

"Give up, Amadi. She has your name. It is foolish to continue," Sekashi said flatly. "A thousand years of folly weighs heavy, but redemption starts with a single choice."

He licked his lips, his red eyes desperate as he looked at me, then the zebras and Harbingers around him. For several seconds he stared at me, and I tried to will him to give it up. Do better. Find a good way. "It would be wonderful, wouldn't it? No more plotting. No more desperation. No more fear. Peace."

I approached him. "It can still be that way." He seemed to relax and gave a little nod and for an instant I smiled too and extended a hoof toward him. Then his arms snapped out and seized it, and his eyes locked with mine. For a second, I thought there might be a chance, some shred of equinity that I could appeal to... and I realized that I'd finally dared to forgive too far. Thousands of years of hatred, war, blood, and more thundering behind his eyes in an unending storm. He twisted the limb almost completely around, and fire bloomed as I heard bones snapping and joints popping.

"Fool," he spat at me as I fell. Lancer shot his father, the Legate's speed nearly carrying him clear of the bullet but the blow still ripping away half his head and spinning him away from me. The blood and bone spray slowed and returned as P-21 and Scotch Tape dragged me away from the mad zebra.

As his eye regenerated and head reassembled, he proclaimed, "I still have the Brood, and it is a mighty army! Greater than all of you together. As we speak, that fool is travelling to the moon. She carries the soul of the true Maiden within her, and without that, you cannot defeat the Eater of Souls. This world is done!"

P-21 pulled me to Sekashi and Majina. My leg was twisted around, the pain so sharp and real that I almost wished I had my old body back. More and more zebras and ponies tried to shoot the Legate, but their bullets couldn't begin to seriously inconvenience him as he reassembled himself again and again.

"Ow. Ow. Ow. Ow," I repeated over and over. Sekashi didn't waste any time. She grabbed my hoof and twisted it the opposite way. Once again, the leg let out a number of pops, grinds, and snaps that nearly knocked me completely out. Then she jammed a bright purple potion in my mouth, and I chugged for all I was worth. Majina was giving Scotch Tape loads of the precious little purple bottles. I had a sick certainty that I'd need them.

"Brood! Destroy them all! Kill everything! Kill it all!" he cried out. "And destroy those rockets!"

From the bodies on the ground came a rasp as they began to rise. The large doors set in the walls cracked open, and out came a surge of Brood fliers and cyber zebras. The defenders in the gap suddenly reversed, turning inward and rushing forward. There were only three rockets left on the pads. If they took out all three...

"Crap," I muttered as I rose to my hooves. "He really doesn't like the Maiden, does he?" I said to Sekashi, trying to sprint to the nearest launchpads.

"You are not the Maiden," she said. "You are the Fool."

"Gee, thanks," I said with a roll of my eyes, tears running down my cheek as my leg still zinged. I drank another healing potion.

"It is not an insult. The Fool terrifies because not even the Fool knows what they can do! They gamble against odds no others would dare. They dance on the edge of the precipice because they can. They overcome where all other sensibility would fail. Tyrants have always feared the Fool, for they bring disaster and suffering for their plans. They are heroes without parallel and monsters without equal, because they do what they will, and damn the plans of others." We started moving towards the closest rocket.

"That Starkatteri mare called me the Gambler, though," I said with a little bafflement.

She gave a smile. "They are one and the other. The Fool plays at odds no wise person would dare. They are minions of chance, agents of chaos, and tools of discord."

"Then what is the Maiden?" I asked, making sure she could see my lips.

"Hope for some and despair for others," she replied. "She breaks bonds and ruins fortunes. She challenges and overcomes, and breaks her enemies. She is, like the stars themselves, a catalyst. Keep her at rest, for should she act, it will mean joy for some and terror for others, and none can say which for whom," she said gravely. "I have many stories about both, but I fear that there is no time for them now, Blackjack." She sighed and looked around. "It is a bad day when there is no time for stories."

"Yeah, I know the feeling," I replied. Then I caught her gaze again. "The Legate has a balefire missile aimed at this place. You need to get the Remnant out. As far from here as you can."

"We will see you on your way first," she said, and then she turned and started to speak in rapid fire tongues to the other zebras.

I stood and looked up at the nearest rocket. "Gambler and Fool, huh? That suits me just fine. Ante up."

There were Brood between me and my rocket, but I had a squad of zebra commandos at my flank. Together, we charged in. The cyberzebras were trying to duct tape explosives to the booster, but precision snipers were blowing holes in their heads before they could. I made it as far as the base of the launch tower steps when there was a loud ping and a fwoosh, a short jetting puff of white vapor shooting from the side of the rocket. Alarms began to sound as more bullets punched more holes, vapor jetting from some, liquid dripping from others. Dozens. Hundreds. Eventually ones were punched too large or jagged to seal shut on their own. Brood rushed in, grenades gripped in their mouths as they continued to fire. I grabbed P-21 and Scotch Tape, and we fled. The bulwark fields rose up just before one of the boosters tore itself into a storm of shrapnel and fire that disintegrated any Brood caught inside and called the other three boosters to join it. The bulwark protected us from the devastation and the fireball rising into the night, but the twisted wreck hidden by the smoke wouldn't be flying again.

One down. Two left. I didn't waste any time. The emergency field died within a few minutes, spilling flaming fuel across its flight pad. Most of it had gone up, but there was still plenty of fire. "Don't let the Brood take this one out!" I yelled as we pelted towards the next-nearest launchpad. The snipers opened up and picked off the Brood racing us. We made it to the launch tower without a problem, and I sprinted up the stairs. "Up! Up! Up! Up!" I shouted as P-21 and Scotch Tape climbed after me.

"Blackjack, look out!" Boo shouted from below. I stared down at where the blank mare stared up at me. "Tank!" she shouted, pointing her hoof to the side.

I leaned out and spotted the tank that had been in the gap rolling around the wreckage of a rocket, thankfully one of the ones that had already been ruined when we arrived, and swiveling its cannons towards us. "Down! Down! Down! Down!" I shouted as we all but fell down the stairs in our haste. There wasn't any way we'd get across the bulwark before it fired. Then blue dust whirled around it, coating it in a glowing blizzard of magic. Ice began to form, and I stopped. Maybe... maybe... I looked back up at the rocket hatch.

Then the tank fired, the shockwave shattering the ice on its front. The shells gouged deep lines in the flight pad. "Down! Definitely down!" I screamed as the frost-rimmed turrets began to elevate. The magic might be slowing it down, but I didn't doubt that it would fire. We hit the flight deck and ran for our lives. The tank fired again, and the base of the rocket blossomed in flame. I jumped, rolling across the talismans moments before the bulwark rose... mostly.

When the tank shell had torn the pad, it had crossed the circle of talismans. The thin, dim field across the gap held for a split second, then yielded. A river of fire, hotter and wider than the breath of a dozen dragons, poured out and washed over the tank. Even on this side of the rocket, I could feel the cyclone-like gush of blazing heat. The tank didn't stand a chance. It exploded like a firecracker in a flamethrower's scream. Then the entire fire-fused mass of the rocket and launch structure gave a whine and slowly keeled over. It hit the weakened side of the bulwark, and the field began to fade. "Running! Keep running!" I yelled. The bulwark collapsed, and the entire flaming wreck tipped over on the tank. The explosion sent flaming bits all over the pad, and our PipBucks were clicking like mad as the rad rate doubled, and doubled again! What next?! Remnant and Harbinger alike fled from the rain of flaming debris.

"I am already tired of this day," I groaned. Boo rushed up to me, throwing her hooves around me. "Hi, Boo," I said lightly. "How are you doing?"

She blinked at me a moment. "I'm fine. I found a Reaper pony with a thingy and he said he'd tell everyone to get the fuck away." She made a scrunchy face as she glowered towards the gap. "Reapers are really rude."

I nuzzled her ear and pulled myself to my hooves. "Well, glad you're back."

I struggled to see the last rocket through the heat and haze and steam. Sweat soaked my barding through as I wiped the droplets from my eyes. It rested on its pad, our last hope to getting to Cognitum. There were fiery bits all around it and burning on the launch tower. "Come on," I said as I rose to my hooves and started towards it, trying to get past the burning pools of fuel that were now spattered all around the flight deck. Here and there, ruptured fuel lines spilled gouts of fire into the air. The emergency shutoffs must not have been working too well. Of course *they'd* be the things that'd fail...

We crossed the central pad, one of the few places that wasn't on fire, Boo scooping Scotch onto her back after seeing the smaller mare struggling to keep up as we made our way to the base of the gantry. I stepped in something that looked like steaming water only to have ice immediately form on my barding's hoofboot. When I staggered back, too close to a burning chunk of metal, the whole leg burst into flame for a few seconds before I could slap out the barding.

Funny, I never imagined that there was a place worse than Hightower. Fire. Explosions. Building radiation. All it was missing was smooze.

We'd lost our zebra escorts in the second explosion, but it looked like the Brood were dwindling. He might have an endless supply of them, but that didn't mean he had all of them here. Between the Harbingers, the Remnant, and their self-destructive attacks, it was abundantly clear that even they weren't lasting long. That was just out here, though. I looked up at the window of the control room and saw flashes of gunfire and energy beams.

We had to get in the rocket and get her out of there. Why had we separated? Why hadn't I stayed behind to guard the command center? But I was only one mare... I couldn't do it all myself. Nopony could.

The third and last rocket was still intact, and I thought for a moment that I'd finally beaten the odds. But as I got close, I heard the strangest humming, and when I put my hooves on the metal steps, I could feel them vibrating beneath me. I stared up the stairs and spotted the Legate halfway up. His forehooves were a blur as he pounded them against the thick steel beams of the tower. A normal pony would be beating their hooves to nubs under that pounding, but of course his regenerating body would never succumb to injury. Nor would he tire. But what was he do—

There was a sharp ping, and a rivet near the bottom of the gantry popped out. As I watched, the bolts were turning slowly in their sockets as the vibration only grew more and more intense. I remembered how the Legate fought, his blows disturbing the energy in a body. This gantry was just one enormous body, and he was adding more and more energy to it, resonating it at the perfect frequency to shake it apart.

"Go!" I shouted as I tried to rush up the stairs. My hooves were sliding and humming under me as I struggled up to where he pummeled the metal. Welds cracked, and one step fell away under my hoof as I put my weight on it. The humming reminded me of the monotone note of Enervation. I felt an ominous swaying start as we made it to him.

I didn't even hesitate; I readied Sexy and charged him, if only to break his rhythm. Only then did I really realize how infuriated Scotch Tape must have felt fighting Pythia as his rear hoof deftly flicked my gun aside and smashed my temple, the blow sending me to the vibrating deck.

P-21 lifted Persuasion, did something to the grenade in the breach, and then fired it at the Legate. The grenade struck him like a solid iron hoofball, knocking him into the girder he'd been pummeling. The grenade, however, didn't detonate, simply bounced and rattled to the catwalk floor. He loaded a second, took aim once more, and fired again. This time, the Legate kicked out, the limb folding like snapped wood as it deflected the shot, only to pop back out again. The red-striped zebra sneered at P-21. "Futile."

"Flashbang," he replied. The Legate immediately covered his face. I wasn't going to waste this opportunity! Two three-round bursts sent him flipping out over the railing. One hoof grabbed the gantry, but a third burst blew the limb off at his shoulder. As he fell, I glanced down at the grenade.

"Dud?" I asked with a frown.

"No. I just trusted him to know more about flashbangs than you," P-21 replied as he carefully picked up the grenade and tossed it over the edge. For a brief moment, I wondered if I'd been insulted or not, but I really didn't have time to ponder the issue.

"Scotch! Is it going to stay up?" I asked, feeling the still-humming gantry. "Shhh! Shhh! Please stay up!" I said, as if trying to hush the humming, swaying structure. There were still pops and pings, and now groans too. I became aware that the whole immense structure was starting to lean sideways.

"I don't think so, Blackjack!" Scotch Tape shouted as the rocket began to make metallic groans of protestation. "Run!"

"No! We can't! It's the last one!" I shouted, starting for the steps up.

P-21 grabbed me and pulled me back. "And that won't mean anything if we die when the tower collapses!"

I stared up at the inviting hatch for several seconds, the boarding catwalk already slowly scraping away from it across the rocket's skin, then turned and followed Boo down the stairs. The tower leaned further and further over, and we finally had to leap the last ten feet. Don't lock legs; roll with the landing. Good lessons. I looked up and back to see the tower fall sideways, away from the rocket... maybe it would still work... and then the tower hit one of the launch clamp supports, and I saw that the opposite one was already lying in pieces on the launchpad. The support twisted under the weight of the tower, the clamp still attached to the rocket pulled it away from the other two, and the great ship crumpled in the middle and toppled, smashing into pieces and a great pool of steaming liquid on the ground. "Maybe we can fix it?" I muttered as we backed away.

Then the puddles exploded, the bulwark going up and slicing the rocket in two just in time to save us from frying. I looked at the still-open, now deformed hatch in the rocket's upper half as we hastened away from the flames, just in case the bulwark had been damaged by the fall. The last rocket... the last chance to stop Cognitum...

The entire world had grown oddly silent. I staggered away, reached an intercom box on some machine I couldn't identify, and sat down hard. With no way to stop Cognitum... and no Folly... there was no way I could win. I pressed my head to the warm metal, trying to abate the throbbing in my head.

"What now?" P-21 asked.

"Now... I dunno," I answered, unable to look at him.

There was a crackle on the intercom. "Blackjack," Glory said with the sound of gunshots behind her. Apparently there were still Brood that hadn't gotten the memo they'd won.

"Get out of there, Glory. It's over." Maybe LittlePip could park the S.P.P. hub in the path of Tom. Was that possible?

"No. It's not. Get to pad one." I frowned and looked across at the pad next to the stairs. It was one of the rockets I assumed had been destroyed in the fueling, the one covered in ice. But now... it was covered in zebras... "Cerynitis and the other Propoli are getting it ready to fly. They've already fixed the

problem that stopped it last time; you just have to keep the Legate from attacking it long enough for them to get the oxygen tanks filled. They're doing it now."

Hope, terrible and wonderful hope, stirred in me. "Keep him busy..." I said as I rose to my hooves. "Yeah. I can do that." I could see a sole remaining red bar on my E.F.S., out in the middle of the launchpads. I made sure my magazines were topped off, put on my helmet, and started walking.

The Legate stood in the middle of the circle of rockets as the flames danced around the launchpad. His blood-red stripes seemed to glow with a light that outshone the roaring glare and chaos that reigned around him. Brood against Harbingers. Remnant versus Brood. And in the eye of the madness, in the center of the grated hole of the ESS-A1's launchpad, thin warm steam rising around him, was the striped stallion.

And he was laughing.

It was a joyous laugh. A rolling, ragged, elated laugh finally free of the constraints of discipline, like a slurry of madness and hateful delight was pouring out of him, and he spread his hooves wide and whirled. Head thrown back, mane snapping in the wild winds tearing around the launch pad, he shrieked in glee, reveling in the slaughter all around him. He wasn't killing a single pony or zebra himself; he celebrated like a child who'd successfully destroyed a deep friendship out of petty spite because he had no such solace.

I stepped onto the grate with him, the wind whipping my black and red mane as I stood there, facing him. "Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked, his back to me. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting for this day."

I was done with witty repartee. Sardonic retorts. I answered him with a storm of lead. His spiritually-fortified body jerked and spasmed in a dance of bloody spray and meaty chunks as the slugs tore him to pieces. Yet again, the bloody bits reversed direction in the air and returned to his body as soon as they were separated. The red-streaked hide reassembled it before my eyes, facing me, his smirk rematerializing before me.

So I smashed the gun across his face. He whirled around, but this time I reversed my swing immediately, keeping the metal between him and me, and he slammed his foreleg against the stout barrel. I was rewarded with the sight of his foreleg bending like clay around the metal with a crackling noise like snapping plywood, but even more satisfying was the look of shock on his face. Pity that that expression disappeared an instant later as I blasted away his face.

"Futile," he rasped from a shattered, reforming throat. But I didn't stop. Even without eyes, he had an uncanny ability to strike back at me, his left hindhoof pistoning into my face. I staggered back, the blow making my head throb and vision blur for several seconds. But I didn't let myself delay, pushing through the pain to spray a full auto fan of lead in his direction. Most missed, but the hail of rounds took his hooves out from under him and gave me a second to refocus. I made like a zebra: shouldered the gun, braced it with a hoof, and bathed him in fiery lead. His head and torso liquefied under the barrage, and then the drum went dry.

I looked down into the bloody ruin of his chest cavity and saw his heart. It reminded me of the phoenix talisman, but carved from a dark stone. Spiral runes and zebra glyphs decorated its surface. Attached to it was what looked vaguely like a PipBuck broadcaster made of starmetal, red and green lights flashing on it, with spikes wired directly into the stone.

I slapped in the other drum and unloaded a burst right into the accursed rock.

The shots bounced off wildly, scraping tissue off the heart's surface but no faster than it was regenerated. One ricochet even slammed back into my barding. Finally, I reached in with a hoof and tried to pry the starmetal device from the smooth stone, but not only did I fail, the reassembling gore threatened to trap my hoof in his chest! I yanked by leg free, crimson streaming behind it, and pulled back. Of *course* it had to be a soul jar...

Flesh surged back into the hole I'd left, reattaching and reassembling itself around the silvery box and stone. "Glory is going to die," he glurbled through a face ripped in two by my firepower. "Right now, I am sending every Brood I have to blast her to pieces. I might have them play with her a little. Initiate her into your and P-21's little club." He face reformed enough to make a leer.

I did the only sensible thing I could in that situation. I reloaded.

"Blackjack!" P-21 snapped as he emerged from the smoke and haze, holding me and stopping me from turning the Legate into paint again. "He's stalling you!"

"I don't care!" I snapped, aiming at him once more as a sooty Scotch Tape and Boo emerged as well.

"Oh, but you do! You care!" the Legate hissed at me as he sprang casually to his hooves and we started to circle. "Shoot me. Shoot me all you can. Maybe you'll find a way, false hero. Some way to end me. Some trick. Some gamble. That is what you are, after all. Dice thrown by higher powers in a desperate attempt to change a future that is immutable and irrefutable. You care so much it causes you pain."

Then the Legate exploded, the lump of rock and gore bouncing across the grate. "He talks too much," P-21 said as he lowered Persuasion, then turned to me. "Blackjack, he's stalling you. He knows we're trying to stop Horizons. Fighting him is doing what he wants." I blinked at him, then over at the reconstituting lump of pure, unadulterated bastard. "You can't shoot evil to death, Blackjack. You just have to do better."

"Let's go, Bwackjack," Boo nodded.

"We've got bigger things to do," Scotch Tape agreed. I slowly approached and stared down at him. His spine appeared fused to the pieces pulling themselves back together again. His eyes reformed, glittering with malicious spite.

I couldn't just walk away from him. Not after all he'd done. Not after all he'd hurt. I knelt down, seeing where his body was trying to reform through the launchpad grate. I stared right into his eyes and said the one word I was sure would get him like no other. "Discord." My lips curved in a smile.

The mirth and malice disappeared as he stared at me. I rose, delighting in the opportunity to see my foe in mental anguish. It was a heady drug. "No," he said. "No, you can't. He didn't... you can't be. You were broken!" he spat as his pupils shrank. "The stars never lie!"

"So? Not the first time I've been put back together," I said coolly. "And now I'm going to stop her, stop Tom, and stop you. Because Discord convinced Cognitum to take my soul and put it in this blank."

"No! That's impossible!" he roared up at me, all mirth gone. "You're trapped here."

"Discord could do it. Uncle Discord saved Blackjack," Boo said with a fond smile. "Even if he had to die, he did it." Funny how much love one mare's eyes could have for one of Equestria's 'villains'. I couldn't say I didn't feel the same.

"Blackjack," P-21 warned.

Still, I couldn't help myself. "See that rocket? That frosty one? Turns out it still works." I checked Sexy's magazine coolly, then slapped it back into place. "I'm going to get my body back, and not you, not Cognitum, not even the *stars* will stop me."

I started to turn away when a thought occurred to me. "Hey, Amadi. When I put my mind back into my old body, I guess I really will be the Maiden of the Stars. Least for a little while. Funny, huh? That the 'prophecy' you made up will actually come true?" And I turned and started away, a satisfied smile on my face. Gloating might be a terrible habit, but damn it felt good!

Then he screamed. It wasn't a scream like one a pony could make, or any beast's. It was more the harrowed howl of a feral ghoul, devoid of any sanity, ripping from a throat indifferent to injury. An expression of such rage and fury that it encompassed every aspect of the note. If that scream could be weaponized, it would have rivaled a balefire bomb for its fury.

"You're dead! All of you! Everything! Dead! Dead! Dead!" he ranted as he struggled. For several seconds he went on like that, and then suddenly he went silent. I froze, turning to see him watching me. His eyes were wide, wild. But a smile rested on his face. A look of triumph. "Dead," he stated, low and certain.

But what could he do? He was just making idle threats. The idle threats of a trapped lunatic. He probably really had lost his mind. And yet... yet... what could he do? I didn't see any Brood charging the field. He was stuck. So what... what...

That device... that thing he had wired to his heart! That had to be how he controlled the Brood. And maybe much more. Our eyes locked, and I saw such malice it stunned me. He'd use anything to kill me. Anything at all...

Oh shit. "You're going to launch the missile," I whispered. His eyes narrowed as his smile widened. Time seemed to slow as our eyes met and that moment of clarity and understanding joined us. The noise, the battle, the Legate suddenly didn't matter. "We have to go! Now! Right now!"

We raced towards pad number one. The rocket was a dingy little sliver of gray, sheets of ice still dangling from its sides and the girders of its support structures. It was half the size of any other, but now it was my last, best hope. A dozen zebras worked to attach hoses and bang off the ice. From behind me, I heard the moan of bending metal and the wet rip of rending meat. I dared to glance back and saw in horror the muscles in the Legate's forelegs bulging as he pushed himself out of the grate, the bars tearing lengthening rips in his body even as the force of his flesh trying to regenerate bent them.

Cerynitis met us at the foot of the tower. "You made it," he said as he brushed the frost off his brow. He waved a hoof at the rocket. "There was a catastrophic failure of the LOX hoses and the pump safeties on the first loading. We wrote the rocket off, given that it's the oldest model we have we could make work at all. First generation. The fuel is loaded; we'd nearly finished that last time, and there's nothing wrong with that system."

I nodded. "Listen, the Legate has a balefire missile, right?" Cerynitis gulped. "He's fired it."

"...Fired it?" He gaped at me, looking around wildly. "We have to go. Now! Right now." That wasn't the response I wanted.

"How long?" I asked him.

"I don't know. With the missiles we had... if the crews back at Dawn Bay are slacking, fifteen minutes? Much more if they have to fuel first. But if the missile is ready to fly... five? Less? And how long ago did he fire?"

I swallowed and looked up at the rocket. "Okay. Soon as you can, get out of here. I don't want any of you dying if I can help it." I looked up at the window of the control center, but it was dark. "It's a minute between starting the launch sequence and taking off, right?"

"About that." He nodded in agreement, then turned and started shouting things to the zebras working on the rocket. From the urgency in his voice, I had little doubt they knew this was coming down to the wire.

"Boo!" I called as I turned to them. I had to trust her luck. "You have to find Big Daddy and Lancer. Tell them that the missile is on its way now!"

"But I wanna go with you!" Boo wailed. "I just got back!"

"If you don't, hundreds are going to die!" I said as I turned and faced her. "I need you to do it. You're the only one lucky enough to pull it off!" I pulled her close and gave her a fierce hug. "You're a big girl, Boo. I'm so proud of you. Now find them. Get them out of here as fast as you can."

Boo hugged me back and sniffed, "Come back quick, Mama. Come back safe." And then she was gone, running back as quickly as she could.

"Scotch Tape! Get in the cockpit. Do your best to figure out what we need to do when this takes off." She gaped at me. "I know. You don't have a missile cutie mark, but there's got to be an instruction manual or something."

"Blackjack! I can't read a manual for a rocketship in three minutes!" she protested.

I tapped her PipBuck. "Use S.A.T.S. That should buy you a little extra time." She made more faintly strangled noises. "I know you can do this, Scotch. And hey, if you mess up, no one's going to be able to tell you that you did. So get it right. P-21, they installed some kind of terminal in these to make them fly. Make sure it's working."

"What are you going to do?" P-21 asked.

There was a thud as the Legate landed next to us. His back was a grisly jumble of steel and flesh. "Buy you time," I said. "Hurry."

"You have no time to buy," the Legate shouted as my friends ran, and then he launched himself at me once more, just as fast as before but now filled with a dreadful urgency. He went into his usual blinding flourishes of kicks and stomps, spinning this way and that, but I'd seen his technique... felt it, too... and knew it was all about circles and momentum. I refused him any momentum. I used Sexy like a shield, holding it vertically in my magic for him to break his hooves against... and his bent hoof, bones jutting from the limb, pulled the weapon aside so he could smash his face against mine.

It didn't matter how my horn gouged him; he had everything to lose if he didn't kill me or stop that rocket. The impact nearly broke my horn, sending an icepick of pain right into my skull and making my eyes water, my vision blur. I'd taken three steps back when his rear hoof swept mine out from under me, dropping me hard on my back before leaping down and smashing my gut and ribs with his extended hind legs.

I managed to snag his leg and roll, knocking him on his back beside me as I struggled to suck in a single breath, but he sprang back up to his hooves the moment he touched down. I pushed through the burning feedback in my horn and blasted him in the face with three S.A.T.S.-guided magic bullets. As he staggered away I chugged two healing potions at once, feeling my ribs popping back into place beneath

my barding. Before his face could fully regenerate, I smashed the bottles between my hooves and telekinetically flung the shards into it.

I figured glass inside regenerating eyeballs had to count for something, and it did. His blows were now off by inches. I now simply focused on not getting hit. He whirled, his leg whistling as it almost took off my head more than once. I gave ground and did all I could not to block. Then he switched from the spinning kicks and punches to a forward lunge, grabbing my face and headbutting again. I felt skull grinding against the tip of my horn right before I was knocked on my back yet again.

He arched up with a jagged spur of metal, and as little P-21s danced in my vision, I watched him rip the eyes from his sockets and mash them between his hooves. A second later a bloody slurry swept back up and reformed them. He tossed the bits of broken glass at my hooves as I stared up at him. "Even without augmentations, you fight well," he said as his eyes narrowed. Then he turned his head and looked right at the Propoli trying to get the rocket ready to fly. "They don't."

He raced towards the rocket as I rolled to my hooves. If only I could teleport! Instead, I slipped into S.A.T.S. and targeted one of his hindlegs. Two magic bullets blasted it off halfway, but the stallion barely broke stride. I grabbed the dismembered leg with my magic as it slowly started to return, wrapping my hooves around the length and letting it drag me after him. As the leg reattached itself, I pressed Sexy to his pelvis and fired a full auto spray of buckshot straight into his torso.

The Legate exploded, again.

I rolled twice, then ran to the base of the rocket. "Hurry!" I exhorted them as the Legate rose to his hooves.

If that balefire missile was on its way, I was already dead. That rocket was my only hope, and he was charging straight at it. I got in his way, unable to dodge and keep him back at the same time, and tried to block one swinging forehoof with Sexy's reinforced barrel. I succeeded, but he gripped the gun, and his hind leg swung back, striking me in the head so hard I heard something crack and suddenly saw three of him. Then he dove past me at some hoses marked 'LOX' dangling from one of the launch structures. I didn't dare shoot, so I did the only thing I could: I bit down hard on his tail, lifting my forelegs to block the double kick to my face. Bones in my forelegs cracked at the impact. Still, I kept my grip, struggling to pull him back from the rocket.

The Propoli were now fleeing for their lives, moving down into maintenance spaces at the base of the wall. Cerynitis ran to the intercom and shouted into it, "Miss Glory, is everything green?"

"Yes. Pad one is green." More gunshots over the intercom. "You need to hurry," she said.

"Wheel, lever, and wedge, Miss Glory," he said, as if the words were a benediction of some sort, and then he turned and left as well. It was now between me and the Legate.

He might have been extremely strong, but even he couldn't tear off his own tail, no matter that I tasted blood in my mouth. My feet skidded as he pulled me closer to the hoses. My horn glowed as I swung the barrel sideways and knocked his feet out from under him.

"Blackjack," came Glory's voice over the loudspeakers. If I hadn't been dragging the Legate back, I would have cheered to hear her voice. Instead, I battered him with my shotgun as I tried to pull him away from the remaining rocket. "I see you on the monitor. There's a missile coming!" Rapidfire gunshots tore out of my PipBuck, and she cried out in pain. "Please! Hurry!"

His rear hoof hammered back, smashing my forelegs again, and I felt bones snapping. I needed a healing potion before he crippled me; I took a chance, released his tail, and gulped two down. Battering him with Sexy, I pulled out two more, barely able to hold them with my fractured hooves. I had them half

drained when his hoof flashed out and shattered them against my teeth. I screamed then as my mouth tried to expel bloody glass while healing at the same time. My magic focus was lost, and I grabbed Sexy in my hooves to keep him down with the swings.

The Legate grabbed my gun, and as I lifted it, it pulled him up enough that he slammed his hooves against my horn, breaking my focus. Then he swung one of his forehooves across, tearing open my scalp under my compact spire. Blood dripped into my eyes as I finally released his tail and raised my forelegs to try and block him, but, now free, he dropped down and punched me hard in the gut. I vomited noisily onto the concrete and fell back, barely able to breathe.

He raced straight for the rocket, reaching over his shoulder and ripping out a long strip of bloody shrapnel from his back. It dragged along the ground beside him, and my heart froze as I made out tiny goutts of flame flashing from the fuel soaked into the poured stone. All it needed was to ignite a large enough volume, and we'd all go up!

Then a blue cannonball landed right on his back, knocking them both to the ground and making him drop the metal bar. P-21 wasn't a fighter, he wasn't even all that big for a stallion, but he slammed his hooves into the Legate's head again and again till finally the zebra was forced to fight him off. With a wild toss, P-21 went flying, landing next to one of the hoses.

"Enough of this!" the Legate shouted, "No more! No more plotting. No more scheming. No more fighting. No more wasting my time with this annoying, futile hope! I am the chosen one! Supreme! Invincible!" He then snatched up the bar, the sharp, jagged edge glinting in the floodlights, hooking it in his hooves and raising it for a downward swing on one of the hoses.

I struggled to put together enough focus to try a magic bullet. For all I knew, it would ignite everything anyway.

Then P-21 grabbed one of the hoses near where it joined a pipe on the tower and pulled with all his might. The old tube, coated in frost, gave a ripping noise and suddenly popped free in a cloud of white. He turned and pointed it right at the red-striped zebra, bathing him in a stream of evaporating fluid. Some safety had to exist, because after several seconds, the flow cut off. The Legate stood there, bar overhead, a rime of frost covering him from head to hoof.

I had to drink a healing potion just to see clearly, wiping the blood out of my eyes and spitting out a shard of glass stuck in my tongue, then approached the Legate. Some of the freezing fluid was still dribbling down his body, and I could hear little creaks and pops. "Invincible this," I said, and swung the bar with all my strength. The Legate's limbs shattered, falling into the puddle of freezing fluids, breaking like a delicate figurine upon the ground.

I rushed up to P-21, trying to pull the hose away as it drooled cold-steaming liquid... It took a great deal of his fur with it... and other things that I'd need healing potions for. He shivered horribly against me. "He talks too much," P-21 muttered, ice dangling off his mane.

"Come on," I said, not knowing how long we had before the Legate thawed or we all fried. Levitating my gun, I put him on my back, carrying him up the spiral gantry in the rocket's launch tower. "Glory? Are you there?" I asked into my PipBuck as we reached the open hatch at the top. "Soon as you can, you need to start the launch sequence and get back here." I reached the hatch. "Glory?"

"Got it," she said a little lighter than I liked.

"Are you okay?" Magical interference be damned, if the answer was no, I was going to break the laws of physics and magic to bring her back safely.

"I'm fine, Blackjack," Glory said. "Hurry. You don't have long." More gunshots sounded from the PipBuck. "I've started the pre-launch countdown already. It's all automated."

"Good. Come straight away, okay?" I asked as I tried to ignore the sounds of shooting over the radio. I got P-21 inside the much snuggier interior of our rocket. There were just four passenger seats, the fifth with the controls occupied by a cobbled-together terminal machine like the ones in Cognitum's rocket. I set him down in one and started buckling him in. Four small portholes along the wall and in the door let me see out.

"...I'll try," Glory said quietly. That set alarms off in my head. More gunshots sounded, now from both my foreleg and a speaker in the capsule. I spotted a terminal showing the control room. Heaps of dust, dead zebras, and slain Brood littered the place. Glory looked up from a terminal and smiled at the camera. Almost instantly, a unicorn Brood teleported into the room. Glory immediately whirled at the flash, the beams from her gun lancing out and biting deep into it. Magic bullets slammed into her as her beams cut down the machine, the jacket absorbing many of the hits... but not all. Her wings and haunches wept with dozens of wounds.

I rose to my hooves as Scotch Tape strapped herself in as well. "Hang tight. I'll be right there!" I said as I started towards the door.

It swung shut in my face. There was the sound of bolts being driven into the hatch with whirring noise.

I slammed my hooves against the metal. "What's going on?" I shouted, slamming my hooves against it, looking around for the doorknob as I heard the bolts thunk shut. "Glory!"

I looked out the window in the door, which pointed right at the large window to the control room. I could see flashes of light from inside. "I can't leave, Blackjack. I don't know how to disable the controls. If I leave, they could abort the launch," she said, my ears straining to catch her words over the rattle of gunfire. I rushed back to the terminal, watching as she hunkered behind the terminal, blasting again and again.

Back to the hatch, back to trying to figure out how the damn thing opened. "Get out of there, Glory! We'll leave! Find another way," I yelled as I beat my hooves against the metal. There had to be some way. "Open this thing, Scotch!" I said, looking at all the knobs and levers. I whipped my head around and screamed, "Open it right now! I have to get to her!"

Scotch Tape stared at me. Tears streaked her cheeks as she stared from me to the shivering P-21. "Do it!" I screamed at her.

"No," P-21 said through his chattering teeth.

"I'd do it for you!" I yelled at him. "I'd do it for you, Scotch!" I snapped at the stricken filly.

"And she is doing it for you," he answered, tears streaking the lingering frost on his cheeks. "Just like we would do it for you."

No. No no no! "I don't want anyone to die for me!" I said as I slammed my shoulder against the hatch. Where was the 'emergency open'? Something! "Glory!" I sobbed.

"Blackjack, the missile will impact in a minute," Glory said calmly, glancing over at a display. "I can see it here." There was a thunk, and a hiss, whine, and rattle sounded in the guts of the rocket. "I've checked the flight path. You're going to get to the Lunar Palace a little behind Cognitum." My view of the

control room was briefly blocked by a moving beam as the launch tower swung down and away to the sound of klaxons.

"Please, Glory... Please..." I tried to teleport, and hit the wall... tried again... hit it again. Whatever zebra talisman kept me back refused to yield. I levitated out the gun, pointing it at the hatch.

"Don't! You'll kill all of us!" Scotch yelled.

"Blackjack," P-21 said in tones intended to help me accept the unacceptable.

"No!" I shouted, my hooves beating against the metal.

"All systems nominal. Launch tower disengaged," the heartless computer stated coolly. "Starting core stage engines."

I wanted to slay the damned machine, but it was the only thing that would get me to my destination. I bit my lip so hard trying not to scream that I tasted blood. "We can't just leave her."

He reached out and put a hoof on my shoulder as the bulwark field activated around our rocket and the hiss beneath us turned into a roar.

"Core stage engine thrust stable. Booster ignition in ten, nine, eight..."

"No, Blackjack. It's that... I'm sorry," he told me in tones that couldn't begin to console me, with words that couldn't begin to make this right. He was also the only thread of sanity keeping me together. What was one life to that of the whole world?

Everything.

It was a price to be paid. I could accept that. What I could not accept was another person paying it. I sobbed, looking out at Glory as she rose and turned to face out the window. Despite the distance that separated us, I could still make out her smile as she stared back at me. I saw her lips move, but the words were stolen by the dull roar bursting into a cacophonous thunder. The computer said something I didn't catch. Glory and the space center were gone from the window, and I staggered over to the communications terminal against crushing pressure and the shaking of the world.

I stretched a hoof towards the monitor as I saw her slump. There was blood in the corner of her mouth, one wing shot clean through and dangling beside her as if about to fall off. Out the window behind her, I could see a column of magical fields vanishing as steam drifted over an empty launchpad. I collapsed to the floor, reaching towards her, straining my hoof to touch the screen. She placed hers over mine, two ponies separated by a pane of cold glass. I stared, willing the glass to dissolve, for her to come tumbling through, tears streaking down my face.

"Blackjack," she murmured, smiling as she wept. "Tomorrow."

Outside the windows, the world grew light, a sunrise from below. The monitor went dark. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Glory beneath the floor. Glory meeting me in the shower. Glory's tears in the rain. Glory hovering beneath me, hoof outstretched, aglow. The feel of Glory holding me. Glory saving Scotch Tape. Glory throwing me across the room as Dash. Glory dancing with me in her stunning dress. Glory flying through the skies with me. Glory giving her speech to Thunderhead. Glory walking away. Glory giving me a sad smile.

I threw back my head as I was crushed to the floor, crying out her name for the whole universe to hear, lost in the roar as her sacrifice carried me into the heavens.

(Author's notes: Horrible chapter. Just horrible. Horrible to write. Horrible to edit. I think this chapter has taken more time and effort than any chapter before. I'm sorry for the wait and I hope that everyone who's read continues to do so. I want to thank my editors for extreme frustration and exhaustion many of them have faced. Many of them suffered major sleep deprivation for this chapter. I hope to get the next chapter out because... hell of a place to leave things.

I'd like to thank Kkat for writing FoE. It's really amazing to think we're so close to being done after so long. I'd like to give special thanks to Hinds for his... expansive knowledge of rockets, Heartshine for her expansive knowledge of crazy people, Swicked for his expansive knowledge of knowing when a fight just ain't good enough, and Bro for actually knowing great synonyms for 'Look'.

I also want to thank everyone for reading as long as they have. Right now work is bad, given that I'm losing 500 dollars this month and 1000 dollars in december. No sub work over holidays. So I hope folks will help though Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Gifts are so needed and appreciated. Feedback... sigh... yes, I hope to hear from everyone. Just know that I'm sorry.

Music I was imagining for the final scene.)

(Hinds: ...Well now. That was... quite the ending. As you probably can understand (particularly if you know who my favorite character in PH i-- was), I'm feeling slightly emotionally dazed at the moment. I wrote the release note before reading this end scene, and I'll probably have recovered by the time it's time to post the chapter (hopefully) tomorrow (later edit: We're now going to be trying for next Saturday.). Well, technically later today, since I'm typing this timestamp at 010220. Yeah.

...Well, I'm not sure what more there really is I can say about that ending. And my writing isn't at its best at the moment. So... on with the note I planned before I even knew that this chapter would have a big ending, much less what it was. Ahem. Regarding the aesthetics of the rockets, I imagine that the ESS-A1 looks rather N1ish and the older ships have some similarities to the R-7 family. There are of course differences; sizes vary, and the ESS-A1 is a single stage while even the most primitive of the older ships is two stage, core and boosters, among other things, but I like to think that the general *looks* of the ships have commonalities. For those of you curious about the propulsion systems, the idea is that both the ESS-A1 and the older rocket core stages use Magical Thermal Rockets (propellant generating), with similarities to NTRs (including having an onboard magical reactor for power) but using magical heating on propellant generating by hydrogen talismans (as introduced in the original FoE for airships and here also powered by the reactor). Both the ESS-A1 and the older rockets therefore have effectively unlimited Delta-V in space as long as nothing breaks and the reactors have power, but they have differences in available acceleration. Most impactfully, the ESS-A1 has enough thrust to take off and land on Equus as a full SSTO. The older rockets do not; when tail-landing at the ends of their missions, they run their engines in LAMTRpg mode. Since they don't have oxygen talismans, though, they have to run that on an internal LOX tank, and the designers decided that it would be prohibitively difficult to make this large enough for both takeoffs and landings. Launches are therefore performed with the assistance of four conventional chemical RP-1/LOX boosters. (The boosters originally were LH2/LOX, but then it turned out that Somber wanted burning pools of fuel scattered around the place; please let me know if we've missed any places that still suggest LH2, which now probably isn't on the launch field at all.)

(2015-08-27 correction: Bother. Equestria *did* have oxygen talismans. In my defense, they were only mentioned only three times in PH and not at all in the original, but still, I ought to have remembered to check even if I didn't remember the fact. I am very greatly sorry for this error I have made. Okay, the rockets are still salvageable, though. Oxygen talismans take power. Furthermore oxygen atoms are

heavier, which may mean that each oxygen atom takes more power to produce than each hydrogen atom. A reactor small and light enough to fit in a rocket can only provide so much power. If the reactor cannot fuel enough biprop production to accelerate the rocket at more than 1g, the ship still can't SSTO or definitely safely make a powered descent. A LOX tank is less versatile, but this was to be a temporary design before moving on to better rockets; it was also intended, I assume, to only make planned trips to Equus orbit and the moon. A cooling talisman for the LOX tank is presumably much cheaper in terms of energy. And might lead to the overall system being cheaper in cost (during wartime) than building ships with powerful enough reactors using the technology of the day, if that was possible at all. That's a... somewhat iffy support, but I think/hope that it's good enough.

edit: Unfortunately, my tiredness and haste when composing the above correction lead to it itself containing a grievous error, which has now been corrected along with several typos. I extend further great apologies for this error.)

...And now I'm sad again, because it occurred to me that Glory would probably enjoy this little educational interlude...

...Which reminds me of a bit more education, at least: Blackjack really ought to have been able to find a way to get that hatch open, and pretty quickly and easily, too. Sadly, Apollo 1 provides us with ample evidence that hatches poorly designed for emergency opening are not unrealistic. Of course, if Blackjack *had* gotten that hatch open, it may well have doomed the planet, but... Sigh...

There wouldn't really have been a another way for Glory to make the launch unstoppable, under the circumstances, other than sabotage, though, and that she didn't know how to do. With all the technicians dead, she'd be more likely to either do nothing or stop the launch herself.

...And I think I'm just kind of rambling now. Well, goodnight, everyone!

And welcome to the endgame of Project Horizons. It is going to be a bumpy ride.)

(swicked: I like zebra ^_^

Also: it is truly tragic you guys will never have the pleasure of hearing the enthusiasm in Hinds' voice when he describes his rocket erections.)

(Hinds: ...You know full well I'm talking about raising rockets from their horizontal transportation positions to their vertical launch positions. :))

(Heartshine: this chapter came in a time when life was really kicking everyone's butts. Also the line "It was a price to be paid. I could accept that. What I could not accept was another person paying it." hit me a lot harder than I thought it would when Somber and I talked about it a few months ago. Ulg... Not envious of BJ and would totally have been tempted to blow the damned door open. Somber and I have had long conversations on the meaning of sacrifice, and it's always interesting to hear other people's points of view on it. All I know is that I'm used to being the one who *makes* sacrifices, at least with my job. So when put into spots where I *can't* make that sacrifice, things tend to end emotionally about as well for me as they did for Blackjack. Anyways, no one probably cares, but goddesses if this chapter didn't hit hard.)

(Bronode: "No one probably cares" Ծ_Ծ

So yes, rocket erections. I believe we have it on good authority that horsecock-shaped rockets would be "aerodynamically unsound" Three guesses where that came from.)

(swicked: Only if they're uncut.)

(Bronode: [Broken at the behest of Swicked's purile sense of humour... and horse circumcision is an ongoing area of investigation - look for the conclusions in your favourite pone-dong-related, peer-reviewed journal soon!] I wish I could remember more, but I kind of... *overdid it* on the sauce this chapter in anticipation of *my* favourite character getting scrubbed. To be honest, Glory going out like that kind of came out of left field for me. I actually sat down hard later and said "Glory can't just be gone. She's too boring to go out like that." Three years, I've spent with that character. I was the one who gave her her AER-14. She wasn't my favourite, not by a long shot, but still. And there's at least another four chapters of this to go. Seems Somber's not gonna be happy unless I end up with cirrhosis.)