

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 74: Call

"I have to find a way... To make this all okay... I can't believe this small mistake... Could've caused so much heartache..."

There was a certain point somewhere in my life where reality and my expectations of it diverged sharply and never really realigned after. Maybe it was being trapped underground, watching my friend's wing fall off. Perhaps it was back when I woke up with more metal in my body than any living mare – any living creature, come to that – should have. Or it might have been when I found out I was related to one of the most famous Ministry Mares. A goddess hijacking my body to kill a friend counted pretty high on the list, too, but just a little underneath getting my mind trapped in a machine. Or course, deaths one, two, or three might count.

So when I stared up at a giant glowing alicorn-shaped figure within the moonstone, the only thing I could reply with was a neutral, "Huh." It was pretty darn high on the wierdometer, sure, but didn't even make the top five. Well, its name was Tom... maybe number five? "Look, Tom, I hate to tell you, but we're a little occupied right now. I'm trying to save my world from your moonstone annihilating the Eater. Sorry." I turned back to Echo. "So, are you going to help us or not?"

His unfocused eyes were fixated on the huge, glowing form. "Huh?" he asked, seemingly unable to tear his gaze from it.

YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND. THE EATER MUST BE DESTROYED. the voice boomed, the volume a little below stroke-inducing.

"Right. Unfortunately, I don't want every single person I know to die," I said, glaring up at it. "And I don't have time to argue this."

AH! EASILY REMEDIED! The glowing blue eyes flared brightly.

I lifted my hooves in alarm. "No! Wait!" But the world swirled away.

When it coalesced, I found myself alone, wearing my old security barding, in Stable 99's atrium. It was definitely cleaner than I'd ever known it to be. It felt so very wrong to see it pristine and utterly deserted. I sat at one of the long dining tables set out in the atrium. "Hello, Blackjack," a stallion said calmly. I turned and looked at an oddly familiar unicorn sitting with his hooves clasped on the table in front of him. Not Goldenblood, thank goodness. A pale white unicorn stallion with a candy cane mane smiled at me. "This should be a little easier."

P-21, Scotch Tape, and Rampage appeared at the table. They looked around, equally baffled, till their eyes landed on the strange stallion. "Charity?" Scotch said. "What are you doing here?"

"Charity?" Rampage asked with a frown. "That's Big Daddy!"

I sighed and rubbed my face with my hooves. "This is all in our heads," I groaned, then regarded Tom flatly. He appeared far too comfortable with this little trick. "We're all seeing someone different. For me he's some strange stallion from my stable."

Rampage clutched her head and groaned. "Unicorns... flipping unicorns... Unicorns living their weird unicorn lives..."

"So, this isn't Chapel?" Scotch Tape asked as she stared around, in wide-eyed wonder. "But it looks just like it!" Then she frowned a little. "A little too clean though. And we haven't even started on the windmills yet!"

"That's because it's coming from your head," I said, then glared at Tom. "You built what we're seeing from our memories, didn't you?" He nodded once, and I grunted sourly. Mind games were getting old... but he'd also made sure it was clear this wasn't actually *real*, unlike Happyhorn. I grudgingly gave Tom a point for that. Tom smiled, folding his hooves patiently as he waited. I looked over at P-21, who seemed a little troubled. "Who do you see?"

He looked over at Scotch Tape, then at Tom. "Somepony... who helped me..."

I stared at Tom a moment. "So you're appearing as somepony who can help, but not ponies we love. And I bet this isn't happening in normal time, right?" I asked, thinking back to being trapped in the Happyhorn simulation. He gave another shake of his head.

"But why are we here?" Scotch Tape asked. "I mean," she continued, pointing a hoof at me, "weird stuff happening to Blackjack is normal. I'd freak out if she went a month with nothing strange happening."

"Gee, thanks." I snorted and rolled my eyes. Still, I had to admit, I was curious too.

Tom smiled and spread his hooves. "Who can say? I intended this to be a party of one, but it seems the moonstone she rolled in and her affinity for all of you has pulled you in as well. I can only speculate that the malfunction of the divinatory device resulted in this gestalt." He arched a brow at me. "Or did you do this intentionally?"

Rampage burst out laughing and snorting. "Blackjack! Doing something like this? On purpose? Hah!" The three of us stared at her flatly as her laughter faded. "What? I'm just saying you usually do cool stuff on accident and mess up if you..." She trailed off, then said sulkily, "Well, I thought it was funny."

I sighed, closing my eyes and wishing there was one more person here who could have made sense of this mess. I could imagine Glory sitting beside me, willing me to be smart enough to figure all this out. I thought about it a moment and took a deep breath, then met Tom's eyes. "Okay. You brought us here for a reason." I remembered what it had boomed out at me. "You want us to let Horizons fire so that you can destroy the Eater." He nodded again, his eyes turning sympathetic. "Even though it will kill everything in the Wasteland."

"Not everything," he replied. And suddenly the walls around me were torn away in an enormous explosion. The blast whipped at my mane, and I lifted my hooves to protect my eyes from the blinding light. Of course, it wasn't a real explosion, and the gale of dust and smoke soon died, leaving the table undisturbed as it floated in the air over an immense bay of flat water. The sky was the color of Flux, and the mountains appeared as if they'd been shoved up and scoured by colossal claws. Millions of tiny motes of light swirled around us like an animated luminescent blizzard. The ocean seemed thicker than normal water, as if it had clotted, congealed, and set.

We drifted in midair over Hoofington Bay, heading west towards shattered mountains. At least, I thought it was west. The sun and moon were huge orbs in the rainbow-hued sky. "No..." Scotch Tape whimpered, and P-21 put his hooves around her. I could have used a hug as well.

"What is the point of this?" Rampage roared at him, sweeping her hoof over the devastated, ravaged landscape. I thought I saw Spike's mountain as a shattered pile of rubble. There were no ruins. Trees. Even rivers. Nothing. It was as if a great hoof had scraped the land bare in all directions, melting and burning everything in its path. A few shattered ruins remained further away, smashed beyond recognition. I spotted the enormous shell of the S.P.P. in the distance, crushed like an egg against the

side of a mountain. As another coast came into view ahead of us, I saw what might have been Manhattan, looking as if all buildings had been stacked on their sides and crushed into the earth. The sky was filled with countless motes drifting around us like snow. "Showing us... this?"

The table set down on a rocky boulder surrounded by a heap of gravel and mud. "That," Tom said as he looked at the muck. As we watched, the pebbles stirred, then tumbled down as something green poked its way out into the open. It was some of the puniest, sickliest grass I'd ever seen, but it was alive.

"That?" Rampage scoffed. "That's it?"

"Wait," Tom said, and the sun and moon began to move faster and faster through the sky above us till both became solid, flickering bands, one golden and one silver. The glowing motes began settling to the ground, disappearing into the earth. Rain fell, washing the blasted land, then snow. Then blankets of white appeared and disappeared again and again, and with every disappearance, that green, sickly patch darkened and spread. It crept like fingers along cracks in the rock and around the edges of muddy puddles. It seemed to appear by magic. The grass deepened and elongated, died and regrew as years whirled past our eyes. Bushes sprang up, followed by thin trees. The remains of the old world rusted away and disappeared under a verdant carpet of life.

And it wasn't just plant life, either. Insects crawled amongst the sprouts. Fish splashed in the clear creeks. Frogs jumped along the bank. Birds reappeared in the sky. Then more animals, some I knew and others I didn't. The millions of motes in the sky had now dwindled to just a few, disappearing ever faster into the trees and land. The table lifted off the earth, and I saw that the life wasn't just here in Equestria. It was everywhere. The oceans became a deeper and more vibrant blue, fading to green nearer to the coasts. The clouds were cleaner. The megaspells I'd seen ravaging the far world were gone, and the scars they'd left were fading with the passage of time.

We floated over an Equus so transformed that it was impossible to imagine it ever being any other way. And in the dark, there were lights. Small ones, perhaps nothing more than scattered campfires... but lights. The first guttering sparks of civilization. "It's beautiful," Scotch Tape said in awe as we floated between the planet and the moon.

"That is why Horizons must fire and the Eater must die," Tom said simply, his hooves still clasped before him and a sad smile on his face.

"And all of us, too," I pointed out, hoping the unacceptability of that was clear in my tone. "LittlePip. Her friends. Everypony I know who is fighting for survival. They all have to die as well?"

"Yes," he answered, and I was glad he wasn't smiling when he said it. "And they will not be the only ones."

"Well, screw that!" Rampage said, standing and slamming her hooves onto the tabletop. "That's... that's... like the Angel. The only way to peace is through death? No. Hell no!" I could have hugged her.

"There was a way for more life to be saved, but sadly, it was undone," he said, his eyes landing on me. The urge to snap at him warred with the desire to kick myself for taking the Redoubt out of the shadow world. "Death is not an ending," he continued. "It is a transition. The matter of our bodies is only rented from the universe." Scotch Tape gaped at Tom, her mouth moving slowly and the side of her face screwing up. "We borrow it for a time, gaining a chance to change the world for the better. We take from our surroundings to survive, and when we die, what we take is returned. It is then reassembled into different forms. The carbon in your body today might have been a tree a million years ago, and it might be a diamond ten million years from now. And you, free of your body once more, will continue the song

you began far before you could ever remember, on into the future further than you could ever grasp. The song you sing even now, though you cannot always hear it.”

Then we heard the singing of the stars. One note, then a second. A third. A dozen. A hundred. A thousand. Countless voices and melodies resonating from the universe around us. The familiarity and beauty tugged at my heart and drew tears to my eyes. Bright and piping symphonies. Low and deep somber voices. Some sang fast, others slow, some loud, and others softly. As the harmony surrounded us, filling my ears, I could hear a stirring within myself. A song so familiar it felt as natural as breathing, and I looked around as songs rose from within my friends as well. And Equus sang with us, in a voice more beautiful and wondrous than any before. Because it was our world. Our life. Our song.

We all had tears in our eyes, but it was P-21 who broke the reverie. “And if Horizons doesn’t go off? Or if Horizons doesn’t destroy the Eater?”

Tom closed his eyes, the beautiful melody of the stars suddenly quieted, and in the near silence the table plunged to the now-poisoned world below. The song of Equus, sickened and dissonant, fell softer and softer. We hovered above the Core. There was no fighting. Everything was still and quiet. Time accelerated again, but now on the ground came the opposite of the explosion of life we’d seen before. What meager greenery there was in the Wasteland dwindled, the valley turning grayer and stiller. We rose again and saw the Wasteland struggling to recover. Even with the skies cleared, life labored and ponies with it. It was as if life itself was being leached from the land they struggled to make flourish. I had no idea how many generations passed, but soon the entire world had entered a stagnant stasis.

As the planet turned below us, we watched the seas assume the color of lead, and lands even on the far side of the world grayed and browned, withering. The seas seemed to dwindle away, the air thinning. The ground shrunk and wrinkled, canyons and gaps spreading as the planet shriveled. The moon and sun drifted closer and closer to the rock, the former crashing in a momentary firework of light and energy, then darkening to nothing. Finally the sun itself smashed into the world in one last flaming burst of defiance. Sucked dry, the rock itself withered to dust, then to nothing, and all that remained was a shriveled shell, floating like a dark, frozen rock in a dimmer, emptier universe.

“That...” I started to say, but words failed me.

“That’s fucked up,” Rampage murmured.

“You’re saying that what the Lightbringer did was worthless?” P-21 asked with a scowl.

Tom shook his head. “No. Certainly not! In fact, the Lightbringer bought time and hope for your world. Had she not helped, this demise would have come far sooner and surer. The Lightbringer broke the slow slide of entropy and decay. She snapped countless people out of complacency. Even if Red Eye had survived and the Enclave remained in the skies, they still would have fallen within a generation. And neither would have seen their enemy. The Eater is a parasite within your world, claiming whatever life it can. By the time that it woke from the trauma of its fall, Equus had recovered, and for eons after, the generation of new life far exceeded what it could consume. But the cataclysm that struck your world destroyed that. Now more life is eaten than is renewed, and with each year, the gap grows as the cycle is impoverished. Exhaustion will take centuries, millennia, perhaps... but it is inevitable.”

“Bullshit,” Rampage said sharply. “What if we just periodically drop little bits of moonstone on it? Not enough to obliterate the world, just wear the Eater away.”

Tom regarded me as if asking if I wanted to answer. I sighed and did. “It won’t work. The Eater can convert moonstone to starmetal before it explodes. We’d be doing what Cognitum wants to do, just in slower amounts.”

"Indeed," Tom said gravely. "It claims the spiritual energy within the stone and makes it its own. Horizons's mass and speed, and my presence, are necessary to prevent the Eater from simply transforming the moonstone to starmetal."

"But why didn't the Eater turn the moonstone pendants to starmetal?" Scotch Tape asked.

"With enough time in proximity, it would have. You already know that moonstone protects from Enervation, but you don't know why," Tom replied. "More important than the stone itself is the soul it contains. The Eater's arrival on Equus extinguished incalculable life, and that life was condensed in the moon. The souls in pieces of moonstone protect the souls of the living."

"That singing noise is a soul?" P-21 asked as he looked out at the distant stars.

"Yes. Inside the moonstone, a soul is protected, though not completely, from the pull of the Eater's own nature. The Eater seeks to make all like it and destroy that which is not," Tom said soberly. "One song. One voice. One note."

"So... it consumes them?" Scotch asked in horror.

Anger flashed in Tom's eyes. "No. That would be merciful. It tortures them eternally until they choose to join it in singing its praises." And the scream filled the air. The scream I'd learned so well since coming out of my stable. It was blessedly short-lived, but it still sent a shiver along my spine.

"But what if what Cognitum said was true, and she can control it? Wouldn't that let everypony live?" Rampage asked, anguish on her face.

"Even if she could control the Eater like a machine with EC-1101, she gave up the only kind of body that could have resisted the Eater's influence; she would be controlled in turn," Tom said soberly. The dawn broke, and around us was the Core, alive and bright. It was the promise I'd seen while I'd been trapped in the city. Thousands, millions of people living in the massive metropolis. Ponies, zebras, griffins, sand dogs... even dragons... all augmented and living in unity. All distinctness blurred together, differences squashed under the combined pressure of millions of connected minds.

"Why... why is everyone augmented?" Scotch Tape asked with a small frown, shying away from the sight of augmented fillies and colts trotting along in perfect unison. "And... why is it so quiet?"

"They're wired together," I said, then narrowed my eyes at Tom, an idea niggling at my head. "This isn't just a coincidence, is it?"

Tom beamed his approval. "Indeed. The Eater encourages technology that leads to replacing flesh with machinery, merging minds, and greater strife." The scene abruptly changed to a strange, exotic land, a battered city of cracked and patched minarets surrounded by a sandy desert. Row after row of augmented alicorns and pegasi flew in precise formation, strafing the equine defenders on the wall, while dark earth pony and hellhound phalanxes marched in neat regiments below, approaching with relentless might from all directions.

We drifted away over the sand, leaving the imminent carnage behind us. An image of me appeared above the table. My legs were replaced. Then 'upgraded'. Then my body. Wings were installed. Finally, Cognitum's changes.

"But why?" Scotch Tape asked. "I mean, I get why it'd want more war, but why augmentation?"

"Because augmented ponies are easier to predict, and connected consciousness blunts the chaotic mix of individuality," Tom said, and the image split in two, one with my original body and one as Cognitum. "Living organisms are inherently more chaotic and unpredictable than non-living organisms. One day you eat Sugar Apple Bombs. The next day you feel peckish for carrot chips. The constant slurry

of chemical reactions, hormones, and metabolic shifts creates a more dynamic individual. As more and more organic systems are replaced by predictable, regulated systems, the individual becomes an ever simpler equation.” He leveled his eyes at me, smiling paternally. “You may note that I’m having this conversation with you four and not with Cognitum herself. It would be futile.”

“So, you think we’re going to let Horizons fire?” I said, rising up and slamming my hooves on the front table. “No! Never! I refuse to give up!” I swept a hoof out, pointing below me, and the desert was replaced by the battle at Chapel. “I won’t just write them off while they’re fighting for their lives!”

Tom closed his eyes. “This isn’t about them, or you. This is about the universe. Equus could... should... be a contributor to the great song. Your lives are temporary. You’d be giving them to better the universe.”

“Begging your pardon,” Scotch Tape interrupted, “but if this is such a big deal, why doesn’t the universe give us some help?”

Tom gave her a wry smile. “What do you think I’m here for?”

P-21 stared at him a moment. “You’re going to die to stop the Eater, aren’t you?”

Tom closed his eyes and gave a little nod. “It is likely. Almost certain, actually.”

“But... didn’t the Eater trick Goldenblood into using the blanks to bind you?” I asked.

Tom smiled. “Yes. It was quite helpful. The Eater needs a star spirit. I will be that spirit. But I have not weakened myself by struggling against my restraints. I’ve waited, patiently. And when we meet, he will not have a spirit enfeebled by exhaustion to devour, but a star of equal might. And even if it costs my existence, it is a price I must pay.” His smile vanished, and his eyes turned hard. “The Eater is one of my kind, one who should have returned its essence to the cycle long ago. My passing is a small, inadequate recompense for the harm it has perpetrated.”

We all stared at him in silence. “Aren’t stars supposed to live... forever?” Scotch asked in a tiny voice.

He closed his eyes, lips in a stern frown. “Nothing does. Nothing should. Our lives are rented time, every moment precious.” He opened his eyes, and rage twisted his placid features. “The Eater, through fear or hubris, cheats that rule. One of our own. Our own! It will not be allowed!” The force with which he barked that made us all share an uneasy glance. He closed his eyes again, but his smile did not return.

“What... what if... what if the Legate is right?” I asked in a whisper. There was no reaction. “He’s got a plan... a way to use magic shields to catch you and feed you to the Eater. What would happen then?”

He didn’t answer at once. I didn’t know if it was because he was unsure, or sure and too harrowed by that certainty to respond. “It doesn’t matter,” he said at last. “You must stop Cognitum from altering the trajectory of entry and then still allow Horizons to fire. The alternative... no...” He shook his head.

“And what happens to us?” Rampage asked. “We just... live on the moon?”

“Yes, if you like, though the detonation of the Flux below us would be more than sufficient to vaporize your talisman,” Tom informed her.

Rampage froze, eyes wide. “Really? It would kill me? For certain?”

"The chaotic energies unleashed would shred the necromantic enchantments like tissue paper, and the souls within would be released," Tom answered. I was about to snap at him before he went on, "If you stayed, though, in a generation or two the surface should be ripe for resettlement. Other races have taken their own steps to survive catastrophe. You could start anew."

"Yeah, that sounds great," I pressed, "but what if the Eater catches you in its trap?" He fell silent again, swallowing. I looked at my friends, then back at him. "Well?" He still didn't respond. I grit my teeth in frustration, then snapped, "Tell me!"

Tom didn't answer, but we suddenly relocated far in the sky between the clouds. Behind us, I thought I could see Ponyville. Then a white light appeared in the sky above us. The brilliant bolt illuminated everything like a new sun as it plunged down towards the Core. Suddenly, a ghostly funnel rose from the ground, and Tom was caught as it streaked down, shedding great plumes of blue-white fire as it scraped against the magical fields and slowed in its plunge. As it reached the base of the funnel, a second pillar of glowing light appeared, surrounding the enormous flaring moonstone and holding it in place. The fields pulsed as the blue light flared and blazed inside them.

Then the Enervation scream began, a howl of agony so absolute and all-consuming that it would have shattered my flesh had it been real. From that horrid nexus of light, a green luminescence began to spread across the land. Tiny motes of light winked into life, hovering like tiny stars before sweeping towards that green nightmare. Mountains seemed to decay and split as the tiny souls merged into rivers of light streaming towards Tom's dwindling blue glow. The clouds around it were swept up in a great whirlwind, a hurricane of annihilative magic whirling under my hooves. In the distance, I saw the S.P.P. hub burst like an egg, one immense soul ripped into the storm and followed a half second later by another tiny mote. Rivers of souls surged from across the sea as well, pouring through silver rings spread centuries ago and now fulfilling their horrible purpose.

The scream built and rose, and with it the blue glow disappeared entirely, and a thing... a horrible silvery thing bathed in a green aura... rose from the earth. I didn't know if it was flesh or metal or some horrible alloy of the two, and I didn't want to know. I just knew that it was wrong, and the very existence of such a thing ripped at my sanity. I could only pray that Tom wasn't giving this vivid a vision to my friends. Scotch Tape had clenched her eyes shut, and P-21 closed his as well as he embraced her. Rampage looked on, but her face was a mask of horror.

Then darkness. Merciful darkness. Then we found ourselves hovering over the moon again. I dared look at Equus, but it had burst open like the S.P.P. hub. Massive boulders were slowly spreading out from where I imagined Equestria and the Core had been. Thankfully, from here, the Eater was just a baleful green star. "That," Tom said in a harrowed voice, "is why the Eater must die, even if it costs all of you your lives. I'm sorry. Cognitum must be stopped, and Horizons must fire."

"Shit," Rampage muttered, rubbing her face. "Seeing something like that... Horizons almost makes sense."

P-21 and Scotch Tape didn't answer. The filly just sobbed into her father's neck. I wished Glory were here. I wished she'd seen everything I had. I knew... I just knew... if she were here, then she could figure out some solution. Find some way to make it all make sense! It was too big. Too much. Too much for anypony. I wanted her here. Wanted her to hold me.

I felt a pair of hooves around my shoulders, and a pair of soft wings encircled me. Purple mane fell on my cheek, and her lips nuzzled the back of my neck. I turned, gazing up at her gentle smile, then at Tom. The stallion just gave me a sad smile, and I held the hooves embracing me, closing my eyes and pressing back against her. "Please tell me this is real, and not just in my head," I murmured to her.

Glory just smiled, then leaned in and kissed my lips for an eternity far too short. Then she faded away before me. I wanted to weep again, but I knew what she'd want. I took a deep breath and looked

Tom straight into the eye. He'd given me some clear choices, and it was obvious which the best to take was. He met my gaze, his eyes understanding but also pitying.

There was only one answer to give.

"No."

I didn't imagine many brain-invading star spirits wore expressions of shocked surprise like the one I saw on his face. The poor stallion appeared as if he'd been shot. "Blackjack... You must not understand..."

"I understand plenty," I countered, startling him again and earning a worried frown. "We might just be ponies, but we get it. I understand that you think this is the only thing we can do. I get the stakes. I get them plenty. But you are insane if you think I am going to help murder everyone that I love and care for." I looked at my friends, one after the next, and saw matching resolution in their eyes. "We'll stop Horizons, and Cognitum, and deal with the Eater without everyone dying."

Tom stared at me, his mouth working. Suddenly, a laugh broke out from the air, echoing all around us. "Told you," a familiar voice purred in wicked glee. Then a translucent, ghostly form, slinky and with mismatched limbs, appeared hovering next to Tom. Extending a paw towards the stallion, it continued, laughter still in its voice, "Ten bits. Pay up."

"Discord?" we gasped, almost in unison. "But you're dead!" I added the obvious.

"As a doornail," Discord replied. "But I'd hardly let a little detail like that keep me from this moment." He grinned at a disgruntled Tom. "I *told* you she wouldn't take your offer. Ponies are so delightfully entertaining!"

"She should. It's irrational for her to pass it up," Tom argued.

"Of course it's irrational!" Discord said with another laugh. "Since when have rationality and reason triumphed over whims and needs?" He lounged in the air over Tom's head, pulling out a pair of square wire framed glasses and a small chalkboard with way more numbers and diagrams than any decent person needed and explained in a pedantic voice, "You can present her with all the possible futures you want, with exact probabilities of every result and a clear explanation of what you think the future should be..." Discord tossed the glasses away, bouncing them off Tom's head, drew a smiley face over the diagrams, grinned, and continued, "and she... or any of them really!... can tell you to shove it where the sun doesn't shine!" A devious glint sparkled in Discord's eye as he leered at Tom. "And considering you *are* a sun, that's something I'd *really* like to see." And he tossed the board over his shoulder where it exploded like a grenade with a pink mushroom cloud.

"But her actions may doom the planet!" Tom snapped, gesturing at me.

"So what?" Discord countered flatly, crossing his arms. "The point of choice is not knowing the future. You and Eaterpants are so dreadfully all-knowing that the only choice you can imagine being right is the one you think should be done. It's all too easy to fall into that trap. Look at Cognidumb. Moldy Goldy. Twilight... Twilight..." He hesitated and screwed up his face. "Spike was right... eh." He shrugged and went on. "Even Mopelestia and Lunatic. All certain that what they did had to be done. But Blackjack doesn't know what the future will bring. She does what she feels is right, even when it's the wrong thing to do. She learns from her mistakes, sure, but she never thinks she knows the only way." Then he looked past me at my friends. "And it's not just her, either."

P-21 held Scotch Tape to his chest protectively. "If you think I'm ever going to just let my daughter die, then you're deluded at best and evil at worst. I don't care if we do get to spend eternity

floating as souls or spirits or whatever. I want that chance to be a father. To have a family. And I won't rob thousands of others in the Wasteland of that chance, either."

Tom gaped. "But... how can you be so selfish? If the Eater is allowed to remain, or worse, be reborn, then you are dooming millions upon millions of years of thriving life! You will be robbing the universe of the songs he has taken, yours likely among them! The loss is nigh unthinkable!"

"And what about our lives now?" Scotch countered. "Don't they matter as much as that life millions of years from now? I don't know what my future will be. I don't know if I'll settle down in Chapel and help out the Hoof or go wandering around like Blackjack trying to make bad places better. Maybe I'll have a coltfriend, or a marefriend, or both. Maybe my own babies. Don't I get a chance to have that life and find out?"

The stallion stared at her in worry. "But... but the lives of billions... trillions... numbers beyond your reckoning are at risk! Your life, and your own babies... the lives of the few cannot equal the lives of so many."

"Bullshit!" Rampage shouted, thrusting a hoof at Tom. "You can't say that those lives in the future are worth any more than ours today just because there are more of them! You can't guarantee they're going to be better people, or even that they'll exist at all! Some other catastrophe could come along and ruin things for them too." She looked at all of us and then added, "Now, I wouldn't have a problem dying myself and getting a fresh spin on the spiritual wheel or whatever, but there're thousands of ponies I know who do deserve their chance at life."

"Yes, they do! They will! Just not... I..." Tom stared at her, then looked helplessly at the translucent draconequus.

"I told you," Discord sang teasingly.

"Here's an idea," P-21 said as he rose. "Instead of any of us dying, why don't you get a couple more stars, and we can pry the Eater out once and for all? And once we do, since Equus means so much to all of you, you can help us fix the Wasteland and do all kind of snazzy, helpful things." Tom bowed his head, a solemn expression on his face. It appeared almost as if he were ashamed. "What? Too busy shining?" Discord, to his credit, also didn't smile. In fact, he seemed to pity the star.

"They don't care about Equus," Tom murmured. We stared at him for several long seconds. "You are... very small... so weak already." He shook his head. "Most of us have our own concerns. Others would just as soon annihilate both the Eater and Equus at once." And like that, we were whisked away from the planet to a distant star that glowed a cold, blazing blue. We followed it as it drifted past Equus, and then with three puffs of flame it consumed the moon, sun, and planet without even stopping. The universe rotated around us, and another star, surrounded by a disk of whirling gasses, shone a brilliant beam of energy focused on the reappeared planet. The beam liquefied the surface and left it a glowing sphere of dead black glass. This spun away to be replaced by another Equus that hovered in place for several seconds before a small brilliant pebble of a star smashed the planet like an egg, blasting the moon and sun away in opposite directions. As the rubble whizzed out of sight, another Equus shone in the night. Then a ripple of something unseen and massive passed by, and the entire set of spheres disappeared with three brief, tiny flickers, gone as if they'd never been.

So many ways our world could be destroyed from without. Yet, despite that, I still wasn't about to just let Horizons happen.

One last turn and we were back over Equus again. Tom lifted his eyes. "Those that do care, and we do... please believe me... we do... they have their own trials and problems keeping them from acting. Other threats, some not entirely unlike the Eater. Some far, far worse. I lost my world long ago. The Eater's detonation tore it to pieces. I will give all I can to stop him and to make up for my failure."

Discord sighed and flashed from above Tom's head to the ground next to him, hooking an arm around the stallion's neck in a smarmy hug. "Dear me, things are getting maudlin." He patted Tom's head, getting an annoyed glare from the star spirit. "It's very nice that you're willing to do that. However, that doesn't change that this is their world, Tommy. You're asking them to give up their lives, and while it's grand to say that they'll be reborn, that doesn't make *these* lives any less precious."

"For that matter," P-21 went on, "it'd basically shit on the lives and sacrifices of everyone else who's died to make the Wasteland better. To make anything better in the whole of our history! I don't care if our souls or spirits live on after we die. Life matters. Ours. Yours. Everyone's. If we die giving it our best shot, then I can accept that, but I can't accept that our best shot is the one that kills everyone even if it works." He rapped his hoof twice on the table and locked his eyes with Tom's as he repeated, "Life matters."

I couldn't restrain myself. I threw my hooves around him and kissed him as hard as I could. I didn't even try to restrain myself when he said those two words. I only stopped when I heard music. Rampage had an accordion apparently glued to her hooves while lit candles occupied the tabletop, and Scotch Tape and Discord both wore strange little hats atop their heads. Discord, smoking a cigarette and sporting a T-shirt with broad stripes running horizontally across it, sighed deeply. "Ah. C'est l'amour..."

"Must you?" Tom asked him with a long-suffering look at the ghost.

"Since you asked, yes, I must," Discord said, pulling the shirt, cigarette, and funny hats off with a single sweep of his paw. "Chaos is infinitely superior to annihilation, as I've told you again and again. It's brought us here. It opens up fascinating new possibilities."

"Such as defeat," Tom pointed out.

Discord blew a raspberry. "Oh please. It's no fun if there's not some terrible risk of losing. I've lost multiple times, but I never let that stop me."

"Not even when you're dead," I pointed out, and jabbed a hoof at him. "How are you here at all?"

"Well, I could guess that I'm just a subconscious projection of your desire to defy authority and establish your own control over your own destiny, or maybe it's simply because you're trotting around in a body made of reprocessed me. None of us are truly *here* at all. This is, after all, in your head," Discord said as he reached over and opened a square hole in midair like a door. He poked his head inside only to immediately pull it back out, blushing furiously, the sound of slapping flanks and my moaning drifting through the opening. He slammed the door shut, manifested some planks, and hammered them over the thin air. "Oh my... Well, I think that that's enough exploration of your mind, thank you very much. Twilight's fantasies were so much more... literary. And much less sticky."

"Can we *please* get back to stopping Cognitum?" Rampage asked plaintively.

"Right..." I said as I looked at Tom and then down at the world below us. "I'm sorry, Tom. I think you're okay, for a star. You want to make Equus a better place. I'm all for that. But I'm not taking any option that kills everyone I care about. I don't care if they do get another shot in an afterlife. Every one of them is fighting for their survival. I can't just end that. I have to do something else."

Tom didn't reply for several long minutes. "How?" Tom asked, cocking his head curiously.

"I don't know!" I admitted, "but we'll do it! We'll find a way."

And once again we hovered above Chapel, but this time there were ponies working with zebras to entomb the city. Deus and the Raptors leveled the towers of the Core and all the tantalizing treasures that lingered within. The rubble was buried beneath the earth, and then Gardens spread an immense rainboom of magic that swept over the world. Ponies worked hard planting crops and healing the poison

and scars of the land. They gathered up the silver rings wherever they could be found, returning them to the Core to be entombed with the Eater. With every one, more life bloomed and thrived, and ponies and zebras lived again, wiser and aware of the threat the Eater posed.

Tom stared at me as the Hoof, a great green bowl of life and civilization, spread out beneath us. It would happen. I was certain of it. As certain as a super smart star spirit from space. We'd live with the Eater, deny it whatever we could, and perhaps someday find some way to deal with it safely. We could do it. Ponies and zebras and griffins and... everyone. We could make the world better.

Tom started to laugh and shook his head. "How... unexpected." I expected a patronizing reply, but he simply smiled at the four of us.

"I told you," Discord said with a grin. "Sometimes these 'mere mortals' can accomplish truly staggering feats. They would even have redeemed me if those haybrains had stuck to the script!"

Tom nodded and sighed, then turned to us. "It seems that I must place my fate in your hooves. It's your world. If you have the maturity to make such a decision, then I will respect it. I only hope that you are right."

"Trottenheimer's Folly!" P-21 said, looking at Rampage, then me. "It can destroy Tom, right? And Cognitum has it, doesn't she?" Rampage snapped out of a daze and nodded a little in response. "Then you just have to get it from her and blast the rock. Heck, you might just be able to wreck Horizons's infrastructure with a lucky shot or two!"

"But... what would that do to the star spirit... *thingy*?" Scotch Tape asked, and we all glanced at her. She flushed and snapped, "What? It's not like Blackjack has a monopoly on the word!"

"I would pass on. To what, or where, I do not know. Perhaps I would return to the beyond to shine again, or remain within this sphere, or proceed to some other destiny." He gave her a gentle smile. "Do not fear for me, young one," he continued with a wave of his hoof. "One way or another, I will endure."

"If not as a spirit, we live on as memory," Discord said with a nod.

"Right," I said, my mind racing a mile a minute. I could do this. I could! I just had to neutralize Cogs and... I stood and smacked my hoof against the table. "Right. Let's do this. One last game, with the whole damn world in the pot."

"I think you are making a mistake," Tom said with that calm smile, "but I will abide. I made peace with this long ago. The falling of one of our own shall be rectified one way or another. I have faith that you mortals will make it so."

"Alright," I said as I looked at each of my friends. "We can do this. We've come so far. We'll finish this once and for all."

"There're still a few mooks to wipe up," Rampage pointed out. "That bitch with the missile launcher is being more annoying than your typical unicorn." I arched a brow at her coolly, and she grinned back. "Present company included."

I sighed and bowed my head, but gave a smirk in reply. "Okay. I'll work on Echo. We're going to need him if there's any way to get Cognitum out of my old body. P-21, keep stalling the launch. Scotch, make sure Snipey keeps her head down and doesn't tag him again. Rampage... just do what you do best."

"Sweet! I'll finally have the chance to stun them all with my interpretive dance!" she said as she jumped to her hind legs and struck a funny pose, one foreleg stuck off to the side. We all stared at her for

a second before she waved her hoof dismissively. "Oh, you mean the whole slaughter thing. Yeah, I can do that too."

"Oh, I like her!" Discord said with a grin. "Like the pink one with half the giggles but twice the mayhem!" He swept Rampage up and planted a deep kiss on her lips, pulling away with a pop.

Rampage blinked back at him and slammed her hoof across his face, twisting his head around like a corkscrew. "I'm a filly, you pervert!"

"Everything gets weirder every minute," Scotch Tape remarked, shaking her head. Rampage stuck her tongue out at her. Tom frowned from Scotch Tape to Rampage, pointing a hoof from one to the other, and then shook his head, muttering about needing more notes on these mortals.

I looked at each of them in turn, taking in P-21's certain smile, Rampage's eager grin, and Scotch Tape's nervous smirk. I wished Glory were here, if not to help in the fight, then to think of a solution for if... no. Nothing was going to go wrong. We were going to do this! "Okay. Let's go."

The world faded to white as we all stepped away from the table. Distantly, I heard Discord say, "Double or nothing?"

When the chamber under the Lunar Palace returned, I heard my friends as a chatter of thoughts. Echo blinked at the enormous rock at my back, then at me. "What... there was a voice in my head... telling me... telling me not to do what I was doing. We'd all be machines like her if it worked, and dead if it didn't..." He shook his head. "What did you do, Blackjack?"

"Do? I don't have to *do* things to have weird shit happen to me. I can trigger it just by standing around," I replied as I put a hoof around his shoulders. "You were with me for *how* long and never figured that out?"

He dropped his eyes. "You can't beat her," he muttered. "She's going to rule us all. She should..."

"Can't beat her? Yeah. Just like I couldn't beat Deus. Or blow up a battleship. Or take on the Enclave. Or go to the frigging moon," I said as I jerked him around and stared into his eyes. "But I need you if I'm going to do it. I need you to back me up, just like you used to back up Big Macintosh. You've got to trust me, Echo. Do that, and you can go on with your life not feeling ashamed for the mistakes you've made. Okay?"

Echo stared at me for too many long seconds. *How can she trust me after all I've done to her? So like him...* Finally, he gave a shaky nod. "What do you need me to do?" I kept the gaze. *I'll do it right... for once...* At that, I smiled.

"I need you to delay Horizons's firing. If you can find a trick to shut it down completely, that'd be even better," I said as I looked high above. Cognitum was nearly at the throne. "Will any of those Harbingers help us?"

"Maybe. She's convinced most of them that she's unstoppable, though," he replied. "Or she's promised them riches. Or they really hate you. Or all three." He bit his lip. "Cognitum didn't even put kill implants in them. She doesn't seem to think she needs them."

'Cause she had my 'victoryness' working for her. "Right." I nodded and concentrated on my friends. *Echo is going to take over stalling Horizons. Mop up the rest of her muscle as fast as you can. Then we're going to have to get her attention.* I turned and stared at Echo. *Can you hear me?*

He glanced over from the terminal. "What are you staring at me like that for?"

Urk. I really wished I had more time to figure this telepathy shit out. “Nothing. Just buy us time.”

I trotted over to where I had a better view of Cognitum way up above me. I couldn’t risk teleporting; I might end up stuck in somepony else for time I couldn’t spare. I couldn’t shout that far... not over the dwindling gunfire and occasional missile or grenade detonation on the far side of Tom. But... I did have one thing she might hear.

“Hey, Princess Fuckslut! I’m still alive down here!” I shouted into my broadcaster, transmitting on as many frequencies as I could. She froze in midstep and I grinned. “You know, for being a unicorn Princess, you’re pretty lousy at killing me and my friends. I thought Princesses were supposed to... you know... be able to accomplish shit.”

“Blackjack,” my broadcaster crackled. “Your impudence is pathetic. Your obscenities betray your utter futility. Do you really think I’ll succumb to petty insults when I’m so close to my triumph?”

“Why not?” I replied. “You’re not exactly the most advanced artificial intelligence I’ve bumped into. They didn’t have half your glitches, Cognitum. Then again, I guess you don’t need cutting-edge programming to get fucked by a horny Horse, do you, Sweetie Butt?”

“It has always been the purview of fools to insult their betters. You will see, Blackjack. I will make sure you survive to see it,” Cognitum countered haughtily. “I am Princess Luna. I will restore my realm and rule it as my people deserve. They will enjoy a second golden age!”

“Oh, get off it. You’re not Princess Luna any more than you’re me. I don’t see Princess Luna using incineration spells. That doesn’t exactly scream ‘moon themed’ to me. You’re nothing more than a computer glitch pretending you’re actually a person. A bad copy in a fragmented memory that snatched a body she can’t handle and a soul that you pretend makes you Princess Luna.” I stared up at her as she froze, right at the edge of the throne.

“I’ve changed my mind,” she stated primly. “About you surviving, that is. Get down there and kill her. Now.” Two ponies appeared at the edge and immediately started to leap down from girder to girder towards me. “Now, it’s time to alter the stone’s trajectory.” She sat on the throne and reached up for the mesh with her hooves.

The first of the two was a unicorn stallion in a black longcoat and shades levitating two automatic pistols. The other was an earth pony mare with a strange long, slim, single-edged sword gripped in her jaws and her mane tied in a topknot. “Go ahead. Pull that mesh down. Soon as you do, I’ll teleport right next to you and pull your plug.”

She froze, then lowered her hooves. “Perhaps it would be amusing to watch you finally silenced for good, Blackjack,” she said as she sat imperiously on the throne. If she wasn’t actually a Princess, she could pull off the look pretty damn well.

Pistols jumped onto the ring that encircled Tom, followed a second later by the blue-gray earth pony mare with the sword. The sickly white unicorn took a moment to shake a cigarette out of a pack and slip it between his lips... as the swordsmare charged in much much faster than I expected! She ran like a pegasus, closing the distance between us with astonishing speed. I unloaded with Sexy, but the moment before I fired, she leapt into the air. The unicorn, farther back from the spread, hit the deck, covering his head.

The mare came down, her head twisting like a zebra’s to bring the blade down in a vertical slash. I rolled onto my side, interposing Sexy’s thick barrel between me and the blade. Despite the thick steel barrel, the edge bit into the metal. I bit down on Vigilance’s grip and slipped into S.A.T.S... twenty percent chance to hit? Only five for her head? And even in the spell, the mare slowly moved back from me! Was she on chems or something?

I tried four shots, but all four missed the swordsmare, cutting through the air inches from her body as she leapt to the side. *Shinde, yariman.* Wha... what the heck did that mean? I kicked my legs and spun around to keep facing her. The mare moved as fast as any zebra, keeping ahead of me. I rolled to my hooves, slowed by Sexy's weight. Damn it! Why couldn't I be strong enough to manage it like an earth pony?

Then I yipped as a pistol round bit into my rump. Mr. Pistols had lit his cigarette and had two matte black IF-21 automatics with dual laser sights, silencers, and extended magazines. I quite approved of his taste in hardware. *Hold still, darlin'. We'll end this nice and neat. Easy paycheck.* He advanced slowly, cautiously, but not fearfully, maintaining excellent trigger control and aim. Worse, he was on one side of me and swordsmare was on the other. I'd have to turn my back on one to deal with the other.

I need help. I tried to maneuver to put the swordsporny between me and Mr. Pistols. I failed in that, getting a slice right across my snout that filled my nose and mouth with blood. Now I just concentrated on moving, shielding myself with my forelegs and Sexy's bulk as best I could. From where he worked behind the terminal, I saw doubt in Echo's eyes.

I'm coming! P-21 thought at me. *One minute!* A moment later came the thoughts. *I'll save all of you like you saved me. I won't let you die.*

Touching thought, but I didn't have a minute. I couldn't use any magic beyond levitation. And if Echo thought I was going to lose... If I did lose...

No.

I turned my back on the swordsmare and stared right at Mr. Pistols's sunglasses-covered eyes. Now there was fear. I knew that the swordsmare was coming for my head. One slice to finish me off for good. But I was going to kill Pistols first, and he knew it. Everypony knew it.

So I ducked.

The blade passed right over my head, scraping off the top of my helmet as its wielder flew in front of me. Her eyes were wide as she looked back over her shoulder at me, and I entered S.A.T.S. as she landed. I saw every muscle tense as she prepared to leap away to safety. A part of me noted she had one fine ass. Not as sweet as a pegasus's, but still... *Dame!* she thought desperately. I toggled one burst, the spell not yet having recharged enough energy for more, and fired.

It was enough.

Her body shattered into bloody rags and dropped to the floor as so much twitching, writhing, gasping meat, her broken sword skittering away across the metal. She didn't have a fine ass anymore. She didn't have *any* ass anymore. She crawled her way towards the broken hilt of her sword as she bled out, her entrails slowly spooling out behind her. *Watashi wa... meiyō nashi de... shinu koto ga... dekinai...* She stretched one bloody hoof towards the hilt. *Uso megami-sama...gomen na-* Then she went still, and her red bar winked out.

Then I got shot in the head.

It must have been a hollow-point, because thank goodness for the combat helmet that deflected most of the shot, but it still felt like a hammer against my skull. *Take her down quick! Get my fucking money! Never look at the fucking moon again! Fuck this place!* Mr. Pistols thought desperately as he unloaded as rapidly as he could into me, moving to keep the curve of Tom to give him cover while levitating his guns out and into the clear. Even without a direct line of sight, he had phenomenal aim, and I was forced to shift to the side to try and buy myself cover. It didn't work, and my appreciation for earth pony annoyance with unicorn magic grew in leaps and bounds.

"You know, Blackjack, I'm wondering..." Cognitum purred over my PipBuck. Not now, damn it! I leapt to the side to try and catch the black-longcoated unicorn in the open, but he nimbly jumped off the circular catwalk and onto the girders. Sexy roared my frustration as he took cover behind a vertical beam, and then a second later his guns appeared to either side of the beam and fired back at me with way more precision and luck than any blind-firing unicorn deserved. I was bleeding from rounds that had managed to penetrate the combat barding, and the impacts that hadn't penetrated made me feel like somepony had been using me as their piñata. "Is there something amiss with your magic?"

"I'll teleport up there in a second, and you'll find out!" I shouted back over the broadcaster connection, moving to the side. Something apple-shaped was levitated out from behind the pillar on the right and flung at me. He jumped out to the left, rolling along the metal beam with impressive grace and rising to a crouch to aim both weapons at me. I countered by shooting the grenade as it was halfway through the air, the spheroid exploding in a cloud of shrapnel while the remainder of my fire sent him behind the cover of another girder. The grenade shrapnel still cut into my chest and forelegs, though, and I was reminded of an adage about horseshoes and hoofgrenades.

Wheezing and bleeding, I fished out a healing potion and found that I only had two left. What, had I been drinking them like... oh, yeah. I had, hadn't it? I gulped one down, thankful for the sweet relief the healing magic provided.

Meanwhile, Cognitum purred, "No, I don't think you will. I think you can stay down there and witness my victory. I am Princess Luna, reborn!"

She reached up for the mesh, grabbed it with her hooves, and, as if she were coronating herself, lowered it onto her head. Now would be a great time for that computer to short her brain out! Taking the legs off her was still an option in my book! And I had a momentary stab of hope when her whole body went stiff. Then, suddenly, hundreds of talismans along the walls flared to life, and the entire chamber gave a great rumble.

Then, when I was distracted, Mr. Pistols of course took the opportunity to lob another grenade at me. The metal pinged once off the deck beside me, and all I could think of was to kick it away from me before it went off. Luckily, my kick sent it over the edge of the platform a second before it detonated. The underside of the platform rattled like a hoofful of bolts had been flung against it. Of course, while I was dealing with that, I took two more rounds in the barding. *Wear her down. Take her apart bit by bit.* Mr. Pistols's thoughts were a whole lot more cool and composed than mine were. *Then get the fuck out of here and spend the first million caps on booze and whores to forget this fucking place.* Well, mostly.

Two more minutes, Blackjack. P-21 promised. Soon as I can get Sniper to step on a mine, I'll be there.

There was another distant explosion. *Run out of fucking missiles, damn it!* Rampage snarled in my mind.

Owwie! She shot my leg! What kind of pony shoots a kid? Scotch Tape cried out. *I'm okay, but I won't be able to get to you, Blackjack.*

There was nothing for it. I scrambled off the circular walkway and into the girders. Mr. Pistols was somewhere in here with me. I checked Sexy; the swordsmare had really cut part of it good, but it just had to get me through today. There was a red bar ahead of me. I had no idea if he had an E.F.S. or not, but he was a lot more mobile than me. I had only one edge. I'd have to make the most of it.

Where is she? Cognitum said she'd be easy. That thing needs to look up the fucking definition. Must be in the girders. She'll have an E.F.S. Just need to get above her. She'll come to me. Above us, there were the sounds of screaming, and through the girders I could see flashes of energy. And here I

was, dealing with a pony who was apparently doing all this for money! I moved slowly forward, keeping my eyes up. My boots clanked on the metal. *There. I hear her. That's it. Come towards the red bar.*

If he could hear my hoofsteps. "I don't want to kill you, you know. I just want to stop Cognitum and go home. I think we all want to go home." I concentrated, trying to tune in to his thoughts like a radio. *Bingo. Just like that freak said. Trying to get me to give up and change sides. Just keep talking while I move over you.* I sighed as I saw a bit of movement in the shadows above me. Was it his longcoat?

I sat down and sighed. "I'm so tired of fighting. I don't know who you are, but I'm ready for a change. I don't know what Cognitum told you. How much money she's agreed to pay you. What threats she's made. I just want this to be over. I want to go home. Start a new life. A real life." I levitated Vigilance under the platform behind me where I figured he'd be most likely to drop down, and suddenly I heard the chatter of gunfire and ghostly screams, of Calamity screaming for Homage and of Velvet begging someone to stop. Focus... Focus on Mr. Pistols.

Get behind her. She's apparently survived headshots, but nopony survives without a brainstem. Fuck, but she's a talker. What the hell is she talking about? Change? Nothing changes. Everything gets worse. Everything dies. That's the one promise of life: it ends. What matters is how much booze and money you get from beginning to end. I felt the girder I was on tremble slightly as something landed behind me.

I turned and saw him crouched, pistols raised. I could have turned out like him. If I hadn't had EC-1101 to give me direction and friends to keep me good, I could have ended up just like him: fixated on enjoyment and my own wants, screw everypony else. I was pretty self-centered at times. "I don't want to kill you," I said as I kept Vigilance levitated. "I just want to go home. If you help us stop Cognitum, you can come with us."

My turn seemed to unnerve his shaky sneer. *How the hell did she hear me?* "Damn. Here I thought I was being quiet. But that Princess Whatever promised me all the money, and paid me a million up front. A million. If she can just throw that cash around, she sure can take care of me after we're back. Unless you can beat her offer." *I really should put a bullet in her head, but maybe she can.*

"You bet I can. Easily," I countered. "Your life."

That made him chuckle. *Fuck, how original.* "I got two hollowpoints aimed at your head. You can't turn that cannon towards me fast enough to finish me off." *Shit. She's got me talking. Time to--* He paused when I levitated Vigilance from underneath the platform next to him, out of his view, and pressed it against his temple. *Fuck. "Fuck."*

"I don't want to kill you, but I will. I want to stop her. I need help. Echo has switched sides. You can too. You can do the right thing, right now, when it matters most... or I can blow your brains out. I should do that anyway," I said as I glared at my own reflection. "But honestly, the biggest difference between me and her is I'm giving you a chance to do the right thing."

She can't be serious. Fuck. I knew a shipping container of caps was too good to be true. He didn't twitch a muscle. I should have pulled the trigger. If he thought faster than I, he'd take me out. But I'd been given a chance to do better. I had to give that chance to others.

He lowered his guns. "Shoulda known better. Any job that has you going to the moon is no good." *I should blow her brains out when she turns away... but... fuck. I'm in over my head here. I'll never get back to Dise at this rate.* "Couldn't say no to that much money though." *If it looks like Cogs is gonna win, I can just take her out and say it was all a ploy--*

I smacked him with the barrel of the gun, nearly knocking his glasses off. “No. Help me or run away and hide.” There was another rumble and a scream of rage from above. “There is no taking me out. No ploys.” He stared at me with bafflement, then horror.

...Oh, you have got to be kidding me. She can read minds? I would have doubled my fee if I'd known that. “I’m not a hero, Security. I kill ponies. But I try and do the job I’m paid for.” *Fuck! If anyone finds out I broke a contract, ugggh! Not worth dying for. Can’t pussy out either. Fuck.* “I fucking hate today,” he muttered.

I smirked and rolled my eyes. “Please. My ‘today’ has lasted for months,” I countered, then thought at my friends. *Don’t kill the one with pistols and the longcoat. He’s agreed to help us too.* “Head on back to the ring.” He seemed to get the hint that I wasn’t going to tempt him with my back and headed back.

Too bad. Wish you could have convinced this sniper. She died praising Luna after stepping on a mine. P-21 thought. *How’d you do it?*

I gave him a chance. I thought back. Hopefully it was a chance to spend his pay and not a chance to stab me in the back. *Meet at Echo. We need to find out what’s going on. Rampage?* I thought as we started back towards the ring platform around Tom.

I still haven’t gotten her. I think she’s down to her last missile, though. I’ve gone through way too many legs with this cunt. Rampage paused. *What do you mean you hope I give her a choice to give up! That’s your bag, Blackjack. I got four ponies in me telling me she’s going down!*

I didn’t think it! Did I? Ok, if I did, I didn’t intend too. Just do what you have to and meet up. I looked at the stallion as he jumped onto the platform. “Okay. Don’t kill Cognitum right away. I’m trying to get my body back.” The blank look I received for that comment could have told me his thoughts without mind reading. “Look, can you kill the gun pods first?”

Thirty seconds and I’m already regretting this. “Yeah. Sure.” He shook out another cigarette and lit it with a brass lighter, snapping it closed with his magic. *Fucking doomed. Again.* “No problem.”

Scotch Tape limped as P-21 helped her over to us. I took a second to look around and up, and...

Okay. This wasn’t good.

Cognitum contorted and twisted in the seat as lightning arced along the cables connecting her to the throne. All around us, even more milky white talismans were coming to life. The Flux was starting to send up geysers that slowly twisted the girders into increasingly warped shapes. Parts of the entire girder lattice were starting to bend and groan as they began to collapse. The whole plate above began to sag and tear in places. Magical fields along the periphery of the structure sprang to life, and enormous runed symbols of magic filled the air, some lining the walls and others around the throne.

Okay. This was getting a little ridiculous. I ran to where Echo worked furiously, his eyes staring at the terminal screen as he juggled a dozen little tasks at once. “What’s happening to her?”

“She altered the trajectory. Then this happened,” Echo said, tapping a button.

“You are a tyrant,” Goldenblood hissed over the speakers. “A monster unrepentant. You could have spared Equus the nightmare I wrought. Instead, you’ve demonstrated that you are unworthy of rulership. I will correct the mistake I made, Your Majesty!”

Echo killed the voiceover. "It's been repeating versions of that ever since she made the alteration," he said as he resumed his furious typing. "She's been locked in ever since. Her gun pods tried to scrap the computer, but it's shielded."

"Are you sure about that?" P-21 asked as he peered up from under the brim of his hat. "I think she's doing something."

I stared as well. It was hard to make out, but it looked like she was manipulating something small and shiny. Something like a large pistol of some kind. Something familiar...

Folly.

"Oh shit! Hold on!" I screamed as a blinding bar of light exploded above us. Cognitum's aim had been off, and the beam hit the field of magic to the left of the throne. The magic interacted, and instead of one beam blasting clear through the roof, a hundred smaller refracted beams lanced out in a fan that then ricocheted wildly off a second magic field behind the first. Beams of blinding white light ripped through the cavernous Lunar Palace, as the plate and platforms came apart.

Once again, I consulted the list of magic spells I wished I could cast right now but couldn't and moved a shield spell to the top. The plate ripped and tore, coming to rest like an immense spiral staircase around us, the platforms a twisted helix rising up to where the throne, inexplicably held up by a single support, remained. Beams and rebar punched right through the plate decking, and something caused the entire thing to lunge up and hang at an angle. Cables dangled and sparked. The F.A.D.E. talismans remained where they were, suspended in midair by their active enchantment.

On the plus side, none of my friends were dead, the dome hadn't been breached, and my body hadn't been vaporized.

On the minus side, Cognitum was free. The mesh dangled from the throne.

"How dare he?!" Cognitum roared as she loaded a second silver bullet into Folly. "How dare he think he can trap the Goddess of the Night like vermin?!"

Go to the moon. Become fantastically rich. Why did I think coming to the Hoof was a good idea? "Tell me you're taking point," Mr. Pistols said. *If you think I am... shit, mind reader... um... you're fucking crazy.*

"Who *are* you?" Scotch Tape asked, a bit suspiciously.

"Bastard," the grayish white unicorn said simply.

"Seriously?" Scotch Tape clearly wasn't impressed.

"It's what everyone calls me. The Bastard. You Bastard. Mister Bastard." *What is it with mouthy fillies these days? Honestly...*

"Are you still connected?" I asked Echo, who had clutched the terminal for dear life when the platform we'd been on had lunged up and was now hanging with it at a sharp angle above Tom.

He tapped the keys. "I am. The subsystems must be embedded in the walls. I think the computer's using mechasprites to keep things working till Horizons goes off." He glanced down at the surging and bubbling sea of Flux and rapidly touched several keys. "I'll try and keep things together. Cognitum is your problem now."

Yeah. It was time. I considered each of my friends, and they each gave a nod.

"Die, traitors to the goddess!" screamed a mare from the wreckage of the scaffolding slightly above us, about a hundred feet away. The bloody and battered yellow unicorn pointed her missile launcher right at us. Then something was flung from above, striking her in the head. A dismembered hoof. "Ow!" she cried out, rubbing her horn as she picked up the foot. "Why aren't you dead yet?" she screamed as she swung the missile launcher up at the descending Rampage.

Unfortunately for her, Rampage landed atop her. She'd lost most of her spiked armor from who knew how many detonations, but she still retained enough weight to crush the petite unicorn under her. Then she reared back her head and smashed her forehead into the unicorn's until, on the third impact, the unicorn's horn broke off. Perhaps that would have been an ideal time for Rampage to stop, as the unicorn shrieked and her magic disappeared, sending her missile launcher clattering down into the wreckage below. Rampage wasn't one for stopping though, and she repeated the head butts a dozen more times till the unicorn's face was a concave bowl.

Rampage hopped easily over to us, scowling. "Damn it. I had a half dozen retorts I could have made, but I was too busy smashing her face in. Now she's dead." Rampage scowled at me, her face a mask of gore, but then she shrugged. "Eh. Oh well. Maybe I'll get lucky and Cognitum'll vaporize me with one of those shots, eh?" She grinned and tapped my side with her hoof.

"You still want to die?" P-21 asked with a frown.

"I just smashed a mare to death with my face. What do you think?" Rampage said, then looked up at Cognitum. "Oh, hey, she reloaded!" Rampage started to jump up and down and wave her hooves in the air. "Here! Coggerhead! Me! Shoot me!"

Shit! I was running, and it didn't matter where. The collapsed plates had made two incredibly steep, broken ramps that I could make my way up, but it wasn't easy. I had to reach her, make her stop using up all my shots of Folly. My hooves struggled for any crossbrace or twisted bit of metal that I could use for purchase as I tried to close the distance. Behind me came another brilliant pillar of light. It punched a perfect hole down through the wreckage and into the Flux, which seemed to suck it up as if hungry. The mass of metal and fluid gave an almost tectonic rumble. Only the talismans and magical fields were keeping it up, though a cloud of mechasprites worked to reinforce things as best they could. From below me came Rampage's plaintive wail of "Oh come on! Hit me already!"

The gun pods swept out to either side of Cognitum as I scrambled up the shuddering ruin of the Lunar Palace. She stood imperiously above us all, a condescending smirk twisting her lips. *Pitiful. Pathetic. Presumptuous. She actually thinks she can win.* Her horn began to glow. *Just like Twilight. Well, I won't make the same mistake twice. This time, her friends die, starting with her sex stallion.* I glanced back, spotting P-21 exposed for a moment as he struggled to maneuver past a twisted loop of girder.

Look out! P-21 raised his head in time to spot the flare of red light atop her horn. The crimson beam sliced through the air, and he jumped aside, springing nimbly and keeping his head low as he avoided the beam. It left a glowing, molten line where it passed, singeing the corner of his hat. He met my eyes and sent back a wave of gratitude.

Annoying gnats! The two gun pods dropped towards me as I reached the second half of the fallen platform, halfway up to her. Then two more moved around from behind the throne and followed the first pair; apparently she'd been keeping spares in reserve. The two pods on the attack sprayed me with crimson beams, and I screamed as I felt myself burned by their salvos. *Yes! Burn, you insufferable fool!* The damned things jinked far too quickly for me to even attempt to hit them with Sexy, even with S.A.T.S. I drew Vigilance, loaded armor piercing rounds, and slipped into the magic to hit one of them three times, but aside from breaking a targeting talisman, I did little to disable the hovering weapons.

Then a grenade wrapped in a glowing teal nimbus launched up from below me and streaked like a guided missile straight at one of the quartet. The explosion peppered me with shrapnel but tore the front off the drone, which whirled wildly, firing blindly in all directions as it spiraled down towards the Flux. I glanced down and saw Bastard, taking cover behind a broken fold of steel, send another grenade aloft, but a beam from Cognitum detonated the apple before it reached the remaining drones. Then another. When Cognitum blew the third out of the air, he snapped, "Damn it! Those are a hundred caps each!"

However, Cognitum couldn't block Scotch Tape's wild fire with the disintegration rifle, a torrent of green bolts spewing up at the pods, the cybermare, and me. Cognitum's crimson shield absorbed the fire, but the gun pods had to scatter to avoid it. I pressed myself to the floor and struggled to down my last healing potion. One of the pods took that opportunity to nip in, grab one of my hindhooves with a claw on a tendril, and lift me into the air, hauling me over the really... incredibly... ridiculously high drop. It pulled me up towards Cognitum, her horn blazing in triumph.

Don't worry; I got you! Rampage thought as I twisted around, trying my best to shoot Cognitum and not look down as I wondered how Rampage of all ponies was going to help me all the way up here. And then an enormous wagon-sized chunk of metal scrap came flying through the air straight at us. The gun pod only managed a feeble volley of red beams at the metal block before being smashed aside, and Cognitum's eyes widened in shock as the block continued towards her unimpeded. She reared up, folding her wings in front of her, and as the block impacted with her shield, her wings flared out, slicing burning lines of fire in the metal and sending the shrapnel raining back down.

I didn't quite have the best view of this, however, because the impact with the gun pod had sent it whirling in midair, and when the claw released my hoof, I went flying up above Cognitum and her throne. *I shall break these upstarts! I shall show them the futility of their opposition! I cannot be defeated!* her mind roared at me as I reached the apex of my fling and... hey! The gravity talismans clearly weren't working up here!

I flailed my hooves around as I struggled to stabilize myself, finally taking a page from LittlePip's book. I used my magic to grab myself within my own telekinetic field. If I hadn't been on the moon, no doubt it would have been futile. Here, I managed to stop my spin and orient Sexy towards Cognitum below me.

Unfortunately, using magic sent my perceptions wandering. I was Rainbow Dash standing in the midst of a scene of carnage. Dead Brood choked what looked like a hallway in an S.P.P. tower. "Is he dead?" Rainbow Dash asked tersely.

"Yeah," Silver said. "Even we die when our heads get cut off." The augmented mare was missing a foreleg, and both her wings were shattered. "Damn it..." she said as she regarded the two dead Enclave cyberponies she'd formed a trio with. "I was going to try and get that Morningstar guy to grow him a new penis... or a new body... or something."

"Later," Rainbow Dash said as she turned and went into the room where Homage tended to an injured Windsheer. "Is he going to make it?" Rainbow asked as he breathed heavily, blood dripping from a nostril and out the corner of his mouth. He gave an annoyed twist of his lips, pushing her away with a hoof.

"He needs a healing potion. We're out," Homage said, leaving him and turning her attention to a terminal next to him. The room was an absolute mess of wires, equipment, cables, and corpses. "Also, they must have gotten an interface into one of the sealed compartments. Probably with a teleporter. They're probably working to bypass our bypass."

"What's going on?" Rainbow asked as she looked at monitors. Several showed tons of ponies streaming into the Core, overwhelming the few trying to keep them out. Two others showed the Skyport

with a tornado in the midst of it. A tornado with a face. Three Raptors were battling the swirling wind. "What's happening at our command?!"

"I don't know. It's all falling apart. We should have gotten an alicorn resupply an hour ago. Something bad happened," Homage said as she typed furiously on the keyboard, tears running down her cheeks. "Damn it! I can't do anything but watch!"

Wait... why was I suddenly getting hot? I cut the magic, the room faded away, and I found myself being bathed by crimson light projected from Cognitum's horn, the cone of energy focusing into an incinerating beam. There was nothing for it. I had Sexy pointed in the right direction, so I let her rip. The full automatic stream of slugs pounded into her shield like a river of hammers. One by itself might not have been a problem, but twenty within three seconds were enough to make her focus on defense once more. It also had the added effect of launching me away from that incinerating magic and towards one of the shimmering magical fields.

Contact with the surface of it was like standing on tingling ice. I spread all four of my legs apart to keep from falling on my face and kept Sexy focused on her. With the real Luna's soul empowering her, she might not need to chow down on gems constantly, but she still had to manage her power. The gunfire kept pushing me against the F.A.D.E. shield and not plunging down to a messy end. From below, Scotch Tape and Bastard kept up a withering fire on Cognitum. P-21 fired a grenade of his own which went right past the two remaining gun pods and detonated against Cognitum's shield with a crackling sphere of lightning. She screamed not just in frustration and rage but in pain as well. Parts of her shield flickered away.

Suddenly she curled up, and for a brief moment I thought maybe this might be an opening. But then she launched herself into the air between the throne and maneframe, and when she flung her wings wide, a sphere of fiery energy blasted out from around her. It smashed me like a bug against the F.A.D.E. shield as she roared, "How dare you? How dare you! I am Princess Luna reborn! How dare you stand against me? Me!"

"You're a nut!" Scotch Tape screamed up at her. "Luna doesn't mean fire, you ditz! You can't even get her powers right!" I could have cheered, but I was too busy sliding downwards along the crackling surface of the shield.

A massive slab of steel ripped out of the wreckage. "I will not suffer the insolence of foals!" And the skywagon-sized chunk streaked down at Scotch, her eyes wide... only to halt just before impact, the girders under the filly groaning. The slab of metal, still glowing with Cognitum's magic, shifted to the side, and I saw Rampage's striped form standing over Scotch, her legs straining against the impossible weight she held as only an earth pony could.

"No you don't!" Rampage shouted up at Cognitum. "You owe me a death, and you don't get to kill anypony else till you do me! You hear me? I'm not dying last! I'm dying next!" With a great heave, she shoved the block to the side and then grinned savagely up at Cognitum. "So take your best shot!"

"I should have deactivated your talisman when I had the chance," Cognitum snarled as she hovered in the air. "I'll not make that mistake again!" she said as her magic reached out, grabbed all five of us, and pulled us into the air.

"Fuck! I hate this job!" Bastard shouted as he was hauled up.

"Daddy!" Scotch Tape screamed as we were clustered together before the cybermare. The remaining pair of gun pods rose up behind us, covering any possibility of getting away. Something in the vast void below us gave great rumble, and through the wreckage came a throbbing pulse of sound. I only hoped Echo was still alive and keeping Horizons from going off.

Cognitum drew Folly and slipped a silver bullet inside. "Enough. You will either bow and submit, or you will die. I am through indulging you foals in your delusional fantasy of resistance!"

"Never," P-21 declared evenly, his eyes drilling into Cognitum's glowing eye plates. "It doesn't matter what power you have. You're a tyrant, no better than our Overmare. It doesn't matter how much power you have. Eventually, people will resist, if only out of spite. Killing us won't change a thing. You'll never be a Princess."

Cognitum stared at him. *I can't kill them instantly. They must suffer. They must despair! I must prove them wrong. I must break them!* "Give it up, Cognitum," I retorted. "After all we've been through, all of us, do you really think we'll break now? Ever? You can't defeat us. All you can do is kill us."

Then Cognitum smiled as she drew me closer. Her magic pulled Sexy from me and, with a flare, scrapped the weapon. *Oh, come on*, I thought plaintively. "Oh really. Nothing?" she said, grinning maliciously. And from her flowed a deluge of hatred like a waterfall of flamer fuel. She hated my interference. My stubbornness. My pride. My organicness. My naïve optimism. My friends... oh, how she hated my friends! And then her head turned to regard them one by one.

"No," I whispered in horror.

"Oh, yes," Cognitum purred. I opened my mouth again to scream at her, but her magic muzzled me. "Now, which one first?" Rampage brightened and raised her hoof but the crushing magical grip silenced her as well. "Not. You," Cognitum declared firmly. "If I have anything to say about it, you'll live out the rest of time wandering lost and blind on this wretched ball of rock. And not the other traitor, either. Though I am gravely disappointed with him, he'll be able to make up for it in servitude to me for the rest of his days. That leaves..." She pulled Scotch Tape and P-21 in front of the rest of us. Her horn pointed from one to the other as she said in my own voice, "Eenie. Meenie. Miney. Moe..."

I was barely able to open my mouth as tears ran unbidden down my cheeks. "Please. No. Kill me if you have to."

Scotch Tape struggled as her plasma rifle was torn away and melted. The tiny purple unicorn in me wondered why Cognitum's magic was so different from Luna's. Was it her desire to destroy, her hatred, that corrupted Luna's old gentle nature? Was that fiery magic something my old body was capable of, now amplified immensely due to the Princess's soul that imbued it? I thought these things because it helped me ignore the telepathic scream of panic coming from the struggling Scotch Tape. I couldn't begin to break through to her as she sobbed frantically over and over again.

But I looked over at P-21 next to me.

Calm. Complete calm. He even wore a small smile. I didn't know if it was the telepathy or just that we'd gone through so much together, but I knew... just knew... it would be alright. *It's not always about you, Blackjack.*

Cognitum caught my look to him, and he was pulled away from our line towards her. "You. Yes. You'll do. Then the filly. Blackjack last. Rampage can be entombed alive here, and the traitors can return with me as witnesses that I am the greatest Princess of all time!"

She levitated him to her and for a moment hesitated, lips pursed, turning him this way and that. His utter composure left her nonplussed. As with Scotch and myself, Persuasion was yanked away, bent like a nail, and tossed aside. "You likely have some bomb hidden in your tail, don't you?" she sneered, and the shadow of a grimace flickered across his gorgeous features as her magic ripped out great big chunks of his mane and tail, casting them into the void below. Half a dozen grenades he'd secreted tumbled after them. He clutched the black duster hat to his chest as he was divested of his armament. *Stupid, sentimental stallion.* Cognitum's mind worked furiously as she studied him, bilious rage pouring from her. *How to make this hurt Blackjack the most? Burn him alive now? He was her little fuck pet,*

rutting her every second they could. So obscene! Her lips curled. "Any last words for your friends?" she asked as she turned him to face us.

He nodded, then bowed his head. "Yeah," he said, then lowered his face into the cowpony hat. For a moment his face was completely hidden inside it. Then he withdrew it and smirked at us.

And dangling from his lips were a half dozen metal stems.

The detonation was like a lightning storm as six spark grenades went off in unison. I felt my mane stand on end and tasted batteries as the crackling disruptive magic washed over us. Even for me, in an entirely organic body, it was disorienting this close.

And Cognitum was much closer.

The cyberpony screamed as magical will vied with her technological nature. Then the talismans adorning her body flickered and struggled. Finally, they died. The five of us fell. Scotch Tape luckily landed on the stairs right next to the walkway leading up to the throne, where Cognitum collapsed with a crash of metal. Rampage bounced and skidded halfway back down to Tom. The rest of us landed scattered across the wreckage. I hit a beam so hard the wind was knocked from my lungs and I was left coughing and aching. Better a beam up here than a beam way, way down there, though.

I struggled up onto the span and crawled over to the broken walkway. "Where's P-21?" I shouted and thought at once. Then I grew more alarmed as I looked around and didn't see him. I struggled for several seconds, before looking over the edge and trying to find a tiny blue form. Again, nothing. Then I spotted P-21's black hat dangling from a broken spur of metal. I picked my way over to it, the structure groaning under my hooves as I made my way to it and scooped it up in my hooves. "P-21! Where are you?" I projected and shouted.

"Daddy!" Scotch Tape cried out.

"I got him!" Bastard shouted, the longcoat-wearing hitpony levitating P-21 from over the edge.

I limped over to him. His eyes fluttered open, and with a pained smile, he croaked out a weak "Hey." He looked a mess, his body battered and abused but intact. Huge bloody clumps had been torn from his hide, and he looked as if he'd been tossed in a thresher.

I hugged him gingerly. "Anypony got a healing potion?" I asked, mostly looking at Bastard.

"You don't know a healing spell? What kind of unicorn are you?" he replied skeptically, trotting over to P-21 and setting his horn alight. It wasn't as impressive as a medical pony could have done, but it stopped the bleeding and repaired most of the scratches and holes.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You know, once upon a time, unicorns only had a few spells related to their magic talent."

"Yeah, and once upon a time, ponies banged each other with swords and clubs while rolling around in shit all day. Then we invented guns," he drawled, finishing the spell and drawing a cigarette. "Best I can do," he said as he lit it and took a drag, then looked at Cognitum slumped against the throne. "Can't believe you beat her."

"We haven't. Not yet," I said, realizing we were running out of time. "P-21, go down and swap places with Echo. I'll need him for the mind transfer. He's as close as we're going to get to a specialist. Rampage, haul my body onto the throne and hold it there. Scotch Tape, help me take her legs and wings off. Bastard, if you can lower P-21 down and lift Echo up, it'd speed things up a lot."

"Sure. Why not? I always wanted a career as an elevator," he drawled. His magic lifted P-21 off his hooves and over to the edge, sending him down in a controlled fall.

I joined Rampage and Scotch Tape up at the throne, the filly already busy removing my old legs and wings. "Her design is all strange. I mean, it's mechanical, but it's... like... warped," she said as she pulled off one wing. "Still, joints are joints. I just hope I don't put your wings back on backwards."

As we worked, the swarms of mechasprites were rebuilding and restoring the structure, gobbling up wreckage and spitting it out properly formed. Only the material that had been obliterated by Folly was gone for good, apparently. From the steady rumbling below, it felt like we were working in a volcano on the verge of erupting. I popped open the back of the throne, trying to find a... there it was! I yanked out the plug and tugged out enough cable to reach the data port in my old temple. I plugged it home as Echo was lifted up to the platform.

"How long till it goes off?" I asked the sallow yellow stallion.

"I have no idea! Your fight has thrown every sensor in this place for a loop," he shouted. "If we could keep it up for fifteen minutes or so, it might miss the Core completely. Be a bad day in the Highlands, but..." he shrugged and then rushed to where Scotch was taking off my left foreleg. "Wait! Leave it connected. I can use her PipBuck to help in the transfer." He twisted it and started typing. "Okay. Gotta compress the files..."

Suddenly, my old body went rigid, and Cognitum's eyes flared. "No! No! I will not be defeated! I will not be a thing!" she shrieked, her horn blazing with overglow. Rampage lunged against her, pinning her to the throne. "I am a Princess! You can't do this to me!"

I bit a spur of scrap and smashed her across the horn again and again, making her scream in rage and frustration. "Can't you just delete the cunt and be done with it?" Rampage asked, struggling with her.

"Sure. Do you want to run the risk of residual Cognitum inside Blackjack? Blackjack's had neural contamination already. I doubt she wants more." I thought of what Lacunae's memories had done to me and shook my head hard. "Just give me a few more seconds," he continued. "I'm compressing the Cognitum kernel, and then I'll transfer it into a buffer and download the Blackjack kernel."

I kept smacking Cognitum with the bar while Rampage, Bastard, and Scotch kept her thrashing, half-disassembled body pinned in place. "You'll die! All of you will die! Die die die! I hate you all! Hate hate hate!"

"You really need a software patch or two," I told her. She got out a crimson beam, slashing it across us. Scotch Tape fell back, crying out, but the rest of us kept working. I shoved her face to the side, pressing it with my hooves and keeping her reinforced horn away. She tried to telekinetically fling us off but got a bar across the face for it. "Echo?!" I cried out as a red glow began to build around all of us.

"Got it!" And he lunged up, grabbed the mesh, and jammed it on my head. "Two more seconds!"

"No! No!" Cognitum screamed. "Forbidden operation! Kernel panic!!"

The world swirled away.

I was in the black void place again. From somewhere near me came a white light... no. I was the light. And I was going to a place. Ahead of me was a thing. It was a pony on fire. A pony made of faces. A hundred screaming, enraged faces that belched fire and wept blood. A thing that should not be. It charged straight at me, hooves exploding like balefire bombs as it loomed larger and larger. It swelled to the size of an alicorn. A giant. A titanic behemoth.

It didn't matter. I would not deviate, falter, or surrender. I didn't know how. I smashed into its massive, contorted chest with a flash of light like a nova, and the massive flaming monstrosity was sent flying away off to the side, wailing and screaming into the darkness as I continued to my destination. It opened before me like a flower of light, and...

I screamed.

I was in a place that was not meant for me. This body, once my own, was as cold and merciless as the surface of the moon. It was as hostile as the Core. As callous and cruel as I had been in my wanton slaughter at Yellow River. It was wrong. Anathema. Twisted. Perverted. Corrupted.

This was the body of Nightmare Moon. Oh, it might have originally been mine. Carried a few scraps of my original DNA. But it was no more mine than the raw ore hammered into an executioner's axe belonged to the mountain. It had been changed on a fundamental level, and I did not belong here any longer. My mind was a square peg trying to fit into a round soul. But I didn't know how to leave. I couldn't, even if I did. Too much was on the line. My friends. Everyone in the Hoof. Everyone in the world. How could anyone give up with all that on the line?

There was another flare of white light, like with Tom, only when it faded I was in a dark place filled with cold and hateful stars. We stood on a space rock of some sort, the surface studded with craters and spurs of black ice. Broken and half-finished features of gothic architecture rose around us. Heavy black chains anchored my hooves to the ground before an obsidian throne. Sitting upon it, tall, cold, and regal, was Nightmare Moon in all her terrible glory. A swirling nebula circled behind her like a halo of blue, green, and purple. And unlike before with Tom, I was completely alone.

"So. We meet again," Nightmare Moon said coldly as she sat upon her dark throne.

"Yeah. I guess we do," I said, tugging at the chains and finding them far less cozy than Tom's table. "Last time, though, you were a lot less... this..." I pointed out, gesturing at her with a hoof. Her draconic eyes narrowed coldly. "Princess Luna."

"Princess Luna?" Nightmare Moon laughed. "Oh dear. How wretchedly pathetic. You maintain your incapacity to grasp the patent truth, even now." She rose from her throne and spread her wings wide. "I have always been Nightmare Moon!" Lightning flared and flashed all around us, and she laughed riotously.

Once upon a time, I would have soiled myself at this. But I'd been in too many minds, experienced too many weird dreams, and faced too many terrors to be impressed. I sighed and bowed my head. "Okay. Look... I know you're trying to be impressive and terrifying and stuff, but stop. It's just not going to work."

There were a few moments I wanted to treasure forever. The startled, wide-eyed expression on her face was one of them. "You... you mock... me?"

"If it were any other day than today, yeah. I'd probably take you a lot more seriously, but I was in a very impressive dreamscape like five minutes ago! And he did a better job than starry spooky blackness! I mean, really... I've seen worse." And because this was a dream, and I was so tired of today, I took a step forward, despite the chains. I made them shatter with my refusal to acknowledge their physicality. "And you're not Nightmare Moon. You're Princess Luna."

Her eyelid twitched a moment before she narrowed her eyes and blasted me with a stream of dark magic from her horn. It actually hurt... maybe she could erase me here and leave my friends outside with two drooling, mindless bodies. "You dare presume to tell me who I am? I am the Queen of the Night! I am a monster beyond your reckoning!"

I picked myself up, trying to 'wish away' the pain like I had the chains. Wasn't working. "Actually, I've faced quite a few monsters. I've *been* a few monsters. So I can reckon pretty well. You're right around the same level as Deus... pre-tank. Dangerous, capable of hurting me? Yes. But like smoke and mirrors, deep down you're actually... kinda disappointing. Almost pathetic." I frowned up at her, trying to think of the best way to handle this.

"Dis... disappointing?" She actually stammered. "I... you... how dare you..."

"Stop," I said firmly. "I need my body back. You're in it. That means I need you. Which means we need to knock this off right now, Princess Luna. Can I call you, Luna?" From the eye twitch, I guessed another— Yep! Black lightning slashed at me. I imagined an alicorn shield like a white bubble blocking it... but there was no escaping the fact that I was out of my weight class. The blast sent me sliding away from the throne, and for an instant, my body flickered, as if it was in danger of disappearing completely. And, of course, it hurt more. "Ow..."

"I will not suffer such impudence," she said coldly. "I am Nightmare Moon! You *shall* respect me!"

I sucked in my breath and then sat up. "Right. Okay. Why do you think you're Nightmare Moon and not Luna?" I asked as I pulled myself to my hooves.

"Do you not realize how many ponies I have killed?" And the rock in space became a parade ground across which marched a legion of zombie soldiers, all mutilated and dripping gore. I spotted at least one of each Ministry Mare and a half dozen Big Macintoshes. The legion multiplied and multiplied till millions of dead marched before us.

"I'm going to guess... lots," I countered, and the parade of soldiers became a parade of raiders, Steel Rangers, stable ponies, pegasi, Harbingers, and zebras. "I've done it too. And unlike you, I actually killed them all personally." I frowned at my own gory crowd and realized something was missing. Oh yeah... a few dozen dead foals joined the ghastly display. "I killed children too." She gaped at me as I stared into her eyes. "Believe it or not, killing people... even ordering them to their death... doesn't make you Nightmare Moon. It just really sucks." We locked gazes for several seconds, and I added, "Or did you like it?"

"Like it?" she asked, with another little eye twitch that made me tense. "Of course I didn't *like* it. But could any of you understand the depths of my manipulation? What I created?" From behind her erupted six ministry hub buildings... well, they were great big buildings, so I supposed they represented the ministries. "The ministries were my tools and weapons! My means to control the population while—"

"While escaping any accountability or responsibility," I finished flatly. "We've had this conversation before, remember?" Nightmare Moon stared at me for several seconds in bafflement, and a question snuck into my mind. "You don't remember, do you?"

"I am Nightmare Moon! I have perfect memory of all my great works and terrible crimes!" she declared, the ministries crumbling into rubble behind her. "I have orchestrated disaster! I alone am responsible for all the ruin we suffered."

"Oh stop!" I shouted back at her. "What about the zebra Caesar? What about your sister? What about those nobles and businessponies who said war was the only option?" And as I spoke, a shadowy zebra loomed to my left, an adumbral Princess Celestia on my right, and a horde of faceless ponies in fancy dresses and business suits in a semicircle around me, facing her. "You made bad calls. Do you think you were the very first?" I stared at her and let the shadows fade away. "You really *don't* remember talking to me earlier, do you?"

"I am eternal. I am the night! I am forever!" she declared imperiously, and redundantly.

Of course she didn't remember. She wasn't a mind. She was a soul. The final summation of all her experiences personified. Only I refused to believe that the summation was this... thing! How could it be? I stared at her for what felt like the longest time, then slowly approached her. There was only one thing I could think of to break through to her. "Why? Why did you create the ministries?"

"Fool! Did you not hear what I said? To deceive. To control. I wished to dominate all the world! You cannot understand the burdens of such a choice!" she declared boldly, but I could smell a whiff of bullshit coming from her. Monsters never talked about their crimes or burdens.

"Oh, yeah? I had to decide who'd rule the Society. Who to put on top and hope that it'd work out okay. I've had to make big calls before." This wasn't her. It couldn't be. And then I reached out with my hooves and grabbed her helmet. Her eyes widened in shock, and green lighting raked me as I felt something like a pulpy blanket tear away. The haughty and cold facade ripped away, and the world around me reassembled into a royal throne room. The shadows now became blinding, glaring lights that bathed the real Princess Luna from every angle. She sat upon a throne decorated with suns, staring at a mob of ponies shouting questions and muttering angrily about the war.

Luna bowed her head on the throne. "I was... ill prepared to take the throne. A month... one month... that was all the preparation I was given. And even then..." The crowd and mob faded away from the room, and Luna gazed at the despairing posture of her sister, slumped in a chair, her face contorted with grief. "Celestia was inconsolable after Littlehorn. Truly, she'd suffered an injury more grievous than any I'd inflicted on her as Nightmare Moon."

"You didn't have a choice, Luna," I said, putting a foreleg around her shoulder.

"Yes, I did," she said, closing her eyes. The throne room returned, only this time she was in the back of the room. On the throne sat Twilight Sparkle, surrounded by her friends. "I could have stepped aside. I wanted to. I had no experience with ruling or even a desire to rule anymore. I once went to Ponyville for a festival and ended up insulted and abusive to ponies simply because I didn't understand what had changed in my absence." Then she looked at the six, and her eyes hardened. "But I was her sister. I was a Princess. I had to rule. I had to make up for the mistakes I'd made... the betrayal I'd committed when I'd become Nightmare Moon."

"But you couldn't rule as Celestia," I said, and the world morphed into Goldenblood's hospital room.

Luna stared down at the broken, dying stallion. "I remembered him from the school. Such a conundrum, not fitting into Canterlot society. The historian with a fondness for rocks and sculpture. So strange. But wise. I thought he was going to die... all the doctors thought he would... Even if he was, I felt he could help me come up with some way to rule without feeling like I was going to wet myself. And he did. He gave me everything I ever wanted, and more." She closed her eyes and gave a sniff. "And everything I wanted went wrong!"

Suddenly she hardened, and Nightmare Moon returned. "No! It all went horribly right!" She laughed, turning her head and blasting me with more lightning, sending me flying away from her. "I had my army! My ministries to hide and obscure my evil plots! My secret projects... oh so many secret projects! I was drowning in secrets!" A cybernetic alicorn army soared overhead in perfect formation while Steel Ranger and Enclave power-armored ponies marched in two columns past her. Above all of us were the shadowy shapes of Thunderheads and Raptors. "I did nothing to stop it! Nothing to rein it in!" She threw back her head with a blast of lightning from the skies. "I reveled in my war!"

Shadowbolt Tower erupted into the sky behind me. "Bull!" I shouted. "If you had really wanted a slaughter, you would have used those megaspells soon as you got them." The immense shadowy structure imploded, sucking into itself and raining down debris. "Maybe you didn't wave a magic wand and end the war, but I know how hard it is to keep peace!" As the monolith crumbled behind me,

shadowy Reapers loomed up facing equally imposing Steel Rangers. Above me, phantasmal Enclave ponies slammed into spectral cyberponies. I stared her in the eyes, willing her not to lapse into that stupid evil for evil's sake mindset. "And I remember way back when the war started. You weren't calling for the zebras' heads on sticks. And when she offered you the country, you turned it down. You weren't Nightmare Moon then. You never wanted to rule." I stared into her stunned eyes. "So why *did* you take the throne?"

The noise and chaos faded away as she stared into my eyes, stricken. The Nightmare faded with them, and tears streaked her dusky cheeks. "... I had no choice. I had to. Celestia couldn't... she wouldn't..." Beside both of us, a scene of a bedroom with Celestia lying on a bed faded in; at first, I thought she was dead. Her eyes stared out, tears running down her cheeks. Through a doorway, I could make out a dozen vague ponies in uniforms waiting and talking silently like puppets. "Celestia blamed herself for Littlehorn. It had been her idea to place it there. Her joke." Luna sniffed, raising her head as tears ran down her cheek. "I think she gave the school to me to keep me as far from the fighting as possible. Like how she tried to protect Twilight and her friends."

She shook her head. "But I could have said no! But how could I have said no?" she begged as she stared at me, anguish marring her face. "I was the next in line. The little sister. It was my chance to show everypony I could rule just as Celestia did. To make up for what I did as Nightmare Moon. I was going to be as good as Celestia! But I could have stepped aside." And the image of the bedroom became the one of Twilight Sparkle sitting on the throne, flanked by her friends. Luna and I now watched from a shadowed doorway to the side. "I could have done other things, and left the responsibility to Twilight. To Cadance. To anypony else."

I reached up and embraced her, staring into her eyes as the images faded away. "When Deus invaded my home, I didn't want to go running out into the Wasteland. I could have just given EC-1101 over, or worked out a deal, or something. Something smart. But I stepped up when I had to, and even when it was rough, I kept with it. Just like you." I stared into her eyes. "I know you're a good pony, Luna. Even if you don't think you are." Visions of Psalm in the orphanage appeared beside us, like silent films. Of Goldenblood lying in his hospital bed. Of Luna helping foals with their nightmares.

Luna smiled and wiped her tears away. "And I know you're a good pony too, Blackjack." And now on our other side were images of me saving Scotch Tape from 99, fighting to protect Chapel from Dawn and Deus, and fighting Cognitum in the Lunar Palace. "Even if you don't think you are." She sighed, and all the images and shadows faded away. The ground around us began to glow as if we were standing in a pool of starry moonlight. "So... what do we do now?" We touched horns and brows, and both of us gave sad smiles to the other.

In unison, we said softly, "We do everything we can to make up for it, knowing that we'll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. We devote ourselves to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And we pray with every single good act we do that somehow, when our lives are over, that our lifetimes will come close to making up for the wrong we committed."

And the light grew and grew until the darkness was no more. It flowed through us, and when sensation returned, I found myself levitated before the others, who stared on in awe. The limbs that had been removed were returning to my frame and changing as if sculpted by invisible hooves. My wings spread wide, and the black metal vanes transformed into snowy white feathers. The flaming mane softened into gently shimmering fields of red and dark purple, like the colors of a sunset right before dusk as I felt the magic run through me. I felt my body whole, not strictly biological anymore but not mangled and pieced back together either. My synthetic limbs now resembled the dark purple armor the batponies wore, though mine was far more stylized with delicate engravings of moons and stars. It ran from my rump all the way up my spine to my shoulders, where a crescent moon decorated the chestpiece. Atop my head sat a simple crown. And then...

I blinked.

Lifting my hooves, fingers slid smoothly from the ends with perfect articulation, and I stroked my face. Nose. Mouth. Eyelids. I'd gotten my face back! And I looked over, and down, at all of my friends. The corner of my lip curled in an awkward smile. "H...hey. It worked."

And best of all. Most wonderful of all... I could feel that sensation of life inside me. Maybe like this, I could have my babies. I could have... everything.

"Blackjack? Is that... are you in there?" Scotch Tape asked, as if afraid.

"She's got feathers. Does that mean... what does that mean?" Rampage asked as she scowled at my wings. "Damn it, Blackjack, you're not allowed to get any weirder! You've exceeded your maximum allotment of weirdness!"

"Whoa," Bastard muttered.

"Are you... okay?" P-21 asked as he stared at me with the closest thing to awe I'd ever seen.

"I... think so?" I replied, not one hundred percent certain myself. "Don't ask me to wiggle the moon around just yet... but yeah..." I finally smiled. "I think I am okay."

I looked down at the blank me lying on her side next to Echo, who was working on my old PipBuck with a small, worried frown. The blank body stared absently out, a little bit of drool starting to drip from the corner of her mouth. She wasn't even ambulatory like Boo or the other blanks. Just a puppet with her strings cut. "Cognitum's not in there, right?" I tensed as I suddenly expected my own eyes to turn and look at me, my old body to grin with malice.

Echo smiled as he worked my old PipBuck. "No. She's not. I made damn sure she couldn't double back." Then he frowned. "Though the buffer I set up is full of junk data now. Just need to pick her out of it." A low buzzing resonance began to fill the room. Something going on with Horizons? With Cognitum? Damn it. I needed to get my friends and myself out of this place!

"Find her. I need to make sure she can't cause any more trouble." Maybe not delete her. There might be some way Virgo or somepony could debug her and give her a second... I suddenly had an image of jars holding captured ponies. Okay. She better not be in my head... Regardless, there was no time to waste. I took my weapons, ammo, figurines, and supplies from my old body and then walked to where Folly had fallen.

"It's been a while," I said as I lifted the weapon, turning it over with my magic, holding it in my hooves. I cracked it open. A silver bullet rested inside. I snapped it closed. That buzzing noise grew as I walked to the edge of the platform. "P-21, get clear!" I shouted out as I aimed the weapon down at Tom nestled in the heart of the wreckage. From Cognitum's second shot, I hoped it would just punch a hole clean through Tom. He could go back to being a star spirit, and I'd go home and work on trying to rehabilitate Equus while building the world's biggest 'Do Not Dig Here' sign over the Core. And there was the issue of families. Maybe a wedding. How did you even *do* weddings?

I couldn't wait to find out. I leveled the gun right at Tom's sparkling heart. I saw P-21 wave from a pile of rubble, carrying a terminal on his back. Goddesses, I loved him.

"Where is she?" Echo said in worry. "I've scanned the buffer twice. She's not in here!"

I paused. "Well, she's not in my other body, right? And I don't think she's in this body. So where else could she..." That buzzing, growling noise grew louder and clearer. It was three words, chanted from a billion tiny mouths rising from all around us.

"HATE! HATE! HATE!"

"KILL! KILL! KILL!"

"DIE! DIE! DIE!"

My eyes snapped up above us. The computer at the apex of the dome now seethed with crimson light as millions of mechasprites, eyes glowing red, altered and transformed its surface into a mockery of a living organ. Maybe, while being in my body, Cognitum had developed something like a soul, twisted and wretched but enduring past any normal program. I had no idea what those machines were doing as they cannibalized the covering, exposing the technomagical guts of the maneframe, rewiring it before my eyes.

"Oh you have got to be fucking kidding!" Bastard shouted as he reloaded his guns. "No payday is worth this shit!"

The mechasprites swooped in towards us, and from my horn erupted a dozen magical bullets that streaked out and exploded in the midst of the swarm. Thousands swept around the detonations, swirling like guided shrapnel towards us. "I can stop her!" Echo said as he worked furiously on my old PipBuck. "Just give me five seconds!"

That was four seconds more than we had.

The swarm flowed around me and straight at the yellow stallion. I tried to throw up a shield like I'd seen everypony else with a horn do and actually succeeded; the mechasprites slammed into it like a pile driver. It held but did nothing to prevent two other clouds of machines from swooping in from above and below. "They only eat metal!" Echo shrieked as he tried to sweep them off his body. "They're only supposed to eat metal!" he screamed as he disappeared beneath the swarm.

Three second later, only a puddle of blood remained where he'd stood.

Scotch Tape cried out as the mechasprites swept in at her next. "Oh fuck no!" Rampage shouted, curling herself protectively around the filly and slashing her tail though the air. She stomped and snapped, crushing the machines in her jaws. The holes bitten in her flesh were regenerated almost instantly, but the mechasprites consumed her armor bite by bite. Then Scotch Tape started to scream in pain; Rampage gave a shout of "Hold on!" as she grabbed her and leapt away to a lower level with a stream of mechasprites following.

Bastard flung a barrage of grenades with his magic at the swarm coming for him but exhausted his supply after a dozen detonations. He raced away from the throne as well. "Sorry girls, but it's time for bottomless magazines," he snapped at his guns, and his horn flashed. The magazines in each of his automatics glowed, and, biting down on his cigarette, he unloaded a stream of bullets far in excess of the ten each magazine usually carried. Astonishingly, he kept one swarm at bay with bullets alone. It wouldn't do anything for the two others sweeping in at his flanks, though.

I raised a new shield around myself, and the swarms of mechasprites coalesced into an enormous red-glowing steel alicorn. Her hooves ripped down the throne, flinging the debris to the side. I levitated my old body onto my back, almost by instinct. Even if it was just an empty shell now, it was still me. I flew into the space between Cognitum and Tom as those enormous hooves smashed against my shield. I poured my magic into it, hoping it would hold. I didn't know the spell, exactly; I was just copying what I imagined every alicorn did. Unfortunately, even when it was holding, every impact rattled me to my core, and if my shield failed now, I'd die. We'd all die.

My eyes turned upward towards the throbbing mechanical thing, the aborted child of the Eater. I peered down at Tom below me. I saw Rampage running, Scotch Tape clinging to her back as she screamed for Daddy. I watched Bastard desperately trying to keep the sprites away from himself with his

guns, the barrels growing red with all the shots he'd fired. I peered at P-21 pounding away at the terminal, keeping Horizons from killing us all. I looked up, past the technological grotesquery, at the ailing blue-green sphere that was the home of millions of people who needed me to do the right thing.

Three lives... plus Bastard... versus the world. It was an easy choice.

But then, I'm not a clever pony.

I pointed Folly straight up at that twisted, tortured, tormented spawn of technology, entered S.A.T.S., and fired. My will was so sure. So set. It didn't even ask me if I was sure. My shield dropped, and an instant later a brilliant white beam emerged, streaking up towards the apex of the dome. The mechasprite mare let out a scream as the beam punched straight through the top of the dome and out into space. The tempest that followed blasted the mechasprites out after her, scattering the machines as the wrecked Lunar Palace trembled, the debris shifting and grinding. Pieces of scrap went flying as the pressure shifted, and for a few horrifying seconds, I had a good idea what it was like living in a blender. Then a piece of flooring, caught in the gust like a kite, smashed up against the hole in the ceiling. There was a whistling shriek for several seconds, then silence.

I hovered there in the air, my old body hugged to me. I checked my inventory. No more silver bullets. For all I knew, there weren't any more left in the world. I stared down at Tom, still glistening and held in place by magic. I put Folly back in my saddlebags in the tiny hope that I'd find one more silver bullet in time. "Is everypony alright?" I called out.

"I hate the moon!" Bastard shouted from somewhere below.

"Oh please," Rampage said as she emerged from underneath a smashed Ultra-Sentinel. "We've had lots worse than this, right kiddo?"

"No, I think this tops it," Scotch said as she followed, picking her way carefully along the twisted metal and broken girders.

"Oh, come on! The megaspell was way worse than this," Rampage replied. "I'd say this was number three on the list. The space center and Maripony were tied for number two." I dropped down to them.

But Scotch wasn't listening. "Daddy? Where are you?" she called out as she stared at the jumbled mess. Apprehension prickled at me as I moved towards where I'd spotted him last.

To my relief, he called out, "I'm over here."

I swooped ahead of everypony else towards the folded girders whence the call had come, a smile on my face. I set my blank body down as I spotted him lying out on his stomach, hooves still working the terminal, leaning against a half-dozen slim metal shafts. "I think... I think I have a problem," he rasped, not taking his eyes off the screen. I slowed as I looked beyond him lying there to the shafts and... no... no no...

They weren't against him. They were impaled through him. From the middle of his back to his haunches, the rods pinned him to the floor like a butterfly to a mat. He didn't take his eyes from me. "It's bad, isn't it?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's bad," I whispered in horror.

"Figured it must be. I can't feel anything below my shoulders." He glanced over at me and gave a tiny half smile. "You look good, Blackjack."

No no no. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right! "Rampage, keep Scotch back!" I yelled. "Bastard. I need you!"

"Keep me back from what?" Scotch Tape shrieked, then screamed, "No! Let me go! What's wrong?!"

Bastard stepped into view, and he tugged his glasses down, teal eyes widening in horror. "Shit..."

"You can do healing magic, right? I'm going to pull the rods out, and you heal the holes," I said, adamantly.

"I... This is way beyond a healing spell. How the hell is he not dead yet?"

"Shut up," I said, glaring imperiously at him. "I am going to pull, you are going to heal, and P-21 is going to keep living and keeping Horizons from going off. Understood?" He swallowed and nodded as I seized the first slim rod and gave it a tug.

The metal above us let out an immense groan as the rod moved a few inches up and started to shift. "Hold on!" Rampage shouted, rushing to the hollow we were in and shoving up against it. With her immense earth pony strength, she was able to stabilize it.

Unfortunately, that meant she wasn't able to hold on to Scotch Tape. The filly darted in around her and froze, staring at the sight. "Oh no. No no no no." She rushed to him and hugged him around the neck. "Daddy. Hold on, Daddy. Just hold on."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said with a smile as he nuzzled her, then tapped the flickering terminal again.

"Do something!" Scotch Tape pled to me, tears streaking her cheeks. "Anything! You're a Princess now or something, aren't you?"

I swallowed as I dug into my repertoire of magic. A pair of magical scissors appeared, doubly reinforced with hydraulics. I put them to one of the rods, but as they started to shear through, the rod started to twist. Blood spurted from where it pierced his body as he cried out. "Stop!" Bastard yelled, and I relaxed the scissors, the flexing rod returning to its original position. P-21 gasped for breath, then typed the commands again with shaking hooves. Bastard frowned up at me. "By the time you get one rod out, he'll bleed out."

"Shut up!" Scotch snapped. "Do something else!"

But what else could I do? I doubted a mustache would help much. I focused my imagination and tried to imagine the burning beam cutting through all the rods at once. Instantly, a jet of flame flowed out across the metal, but the rods, instead of instantly vaporizing it, turned red, and P-21 started to grunt as he fought the pain. My wings fanned the rods before they could burn him any more. A giant glowing grinding disk appeared and started to work through one of the rods. If I was lucky, I'd get through one in five minutes... but there were six... Finally, I tried to use my magic to shift the immense bulk of weight above me, but Rampage cried out, and her legs trembled as she pushed back. "Stop!" she cried in alarm. "This whole thing is ready to come down like a house of cards." I stopped my magic, and she relaxed.

If I'd had a few hours, I could have extracted him. I didn't. And if I rushed, I could kill us all. Damn it. Why couldn't I have brought LittlePip with me?

P-21 took a hoof off the keyboard to caress Scotch Tape's cheek. "You have to go. I can't delay it much longer. Cognitum tweaked the targeting talismans before you blasted her. It'll go right to the

Core now. You have to get out of here and survive to do something about it.” The ground under us rumbled, and he grimaced in pain before he tapped the terminal keys again.

“No. No, we can’t leave you!” Scotch Tape begged. “Please, Blackjack! Do something!”

I wanted to do something. Anything. Anything to undo this. To come up here alone, and... but no. If I had, I wouldn’t have made it. It was always because of my friends that I’d been able to do anything at all. Could I teleport him out through the bars? Then he’d have a half dozen holes he’d immediately bleed out through. How many magic bullets would it take to blast through? We didn’t have Scotch’s rifle or my sword... he was way too close to use a grenade, even if we had one left. The ground rumbled again, and he tapped the keys once more, silencing it.

“Please,” he murmured at he looked up at me, smiling with tears streaking his cheeks. “Remember what I said...”

I swallowed sickly. He was right, but then again, he’d always been the smarter pony. “I’m sorry, Scotch.” I wanted to be sick. It wasn’t fair. I’d gotten my body back. Our babies back. Why couldn’t I have gotten a chance to be with him? For him to see Scotch Tape grow up into a strong and happy mare? To help him raise his babies? My babies? Why couldn’t the universe just give me a clean win for once?!

I looked over at Tom’s sparkling form. “Please,” I prayed. “Please save him.”

I cannot. I am bound until I face the Eater. I am sorry, Blackjack.

I bowed my head as Scotch Tape embraced him, tears running down my face. I could cry again. Damn him. Damn all the stars. What good were they if they couldn’t save a single pony’s life when we needed them to? What good was everything that had happened to me if I couldn’t save him? Security saves ponies. Princesses protect their subjects from harm.

There was only one thing to do. I met his eyes, gave a little nod, and received a little smile in return.

“I love you, Scotch Tape,” P-21 said, nuzzling her. He pulled his battered black hat off his head and placed it atop hers. “I’m so proud of you. I know you’re going to do great things. Build great things. Grow up strong and beautiful and... I wish I could be there to see it all. Wish I could hold you when you need me to and just... be a real father...” He punched in the keys again.

“You were a real father, Daddy. You were the best daddy any pony could ever want,” Scotch Tape sobbed into his mane.

He smiled, twisted his hoof to hold her close, turned, and kissed her ear. “I love you, Scotch.” He closed his eyes. “Goodbye, my little filly.”

“No... no no no...” Scotch Tape sobbed, shaking her head. “Just a little longer...” I tugged at her. I walked to Bastard and gave him some instructions, a promise, and a number. He nodded, pushed his glasses back up, lit a new cigarette, and then levitated Scotch Tape with his magic.

“Come on,” he said as he pulled her away. “We have to go. This place is going to blow up, and you’ve got to live.”

“No! No!” she screamed, flailing her hooves wildly as she was pulled away from him. Bastard lifted my blank body with a grunt, setting it across his back, and pulled both of them out of the space. “No! Please, Blackjack, no! Don’t do this! No!” she screamed, tearing at me with her cries. “Daddy! No! Let me go, you bastard!”

When she'd gone, I broke down, crying and sniffing too. "It's not fair. It's not right."

"No. It's not," he replied. "But that's life. Thanks to you, I got to have a few more months. Got to see incredible things. Meet good people and make friends. Be a father. A lover. A person. You showed me that I could be so much more than a number. You gave me that chance. I wouldn't give it up for anything, even if it ends like this." His warm smile faded. "You have to get back to Equus. You can't give up, Blackjack. Find a way to beat this. To win. You can. I know you can."

How could I speak after that? I wanted to tell him that I couldn't do this without him. That I wanted him beside me. And in his eyes I saw understanding that I knew I wanted to say all that. Of course he did. So why waste these last moments with arguing? I sniffed and leaned down, kissing him on the lips for one horribly too short moment. "I love you," I whispered into his ear as he gave one barely muted sniff.

"I know," he answered, just as quietly. When we parted, he entered the suppression command again. He lowered his eyes, then murmured, "Before you go, though... my cutie mark..." He looked pained and gave a small half smile. "It's not a penis, is it?"

My throat produced something between a hiccup, a laugh, and a sob. I leaned over and brushed my hoof over his flank. The last flakes of blue came off completely. The male symbol and twenty-one dots were gone. In their place was a bold red heart bursting through a ring of chain encircling it. My throat seized up, and it took me several seconds before I could croak, "No. It's not a penis."

He nodded. "Good. That's all I wanted to know." He gave a little chuckle. "Silly." He entered in the command on the terminal again. "You should go. You don't want to miss your flight."

Tearing myself from his side was like tearing my heart in two. But I had to go, no matter how much it hurt. Since I had to go... I did. I always did what I had to... even if I couldn't save the ponies who mattered most to me.

Then I turned and saw Rampage holding up all that metal. A somewhat sheepish smile crossed her face. "Yeah. I just realized it too. I move, and there's a good chance he gets squished and Horizons goes off with you in it. Go get going, Blackjack. He can't stall this thing forever."

"No..." I muttered. "No... not... no!"

"Yes," Rampage contradicted me. "Look. This is the best for everypony. You get to live to stop the Eater. I get to die saving your life. And I get to die for good." Her pink eyes softened. "This is what I want, Blackjack. I might be Peppermint, but... I don't want to be the last one to die. Tom said this place going off can take me out, so... yeah. This is where I need to be."

P-21 frowned. "It seems stable enough. I'm not going to be wiggling around down here." He gave a cough, looking pale. He had to be bleeding out slowly around those shafts. "Go, Rampage. Help Scotch Tape. She'll need you. Blackjack needs you."

"Go," Rampage told me. "At least this way, neither one of us has to die alone."

I was so riven by grief, I couldn't argue. P-21 couldn't delay forever. If I tried to fight Rampage, I would likely cause the collapse she was trying to prevent. So the only thing I could think of... the only response... was to walk away in the direction of Scotch's sobs.

"Hey," Rampage called after me, and I looked back. Rampage stared at me from over her shoulder. "It was fun." She smiled, her eyes streaked with tears.

"Yeah," I answered weakly, with my own, tiny, half smile. "It was."

What more was there to say after that? I flew to where Bastard struggled with Scotch Tape near the tram hatch that was marked 'To Terminal' and levitated them through, flying behind them. When we were all inside, I pressed the button, the doors closed, and the tram began to roll, heading up the steep track. Bastard looked at me as he set my blank body on a couch. "Where's Rampage?" he asked.

"She's not coming," I answered hollowly. Scotch Tape curled up in a tighter ball, the young mare shaking in her grief, her tears exhausted.

This must have been a shorter route than to the Astrostable. I looked back at the cracked dome of the Lunar Palace as the minutes passed by. I wanted to see them both, one more time. But the link... the special link we'd all shared... it was broken.

Wasn't it?

I walked to my blank body and regarded it for a moment, then reached down and touched my horn to my own brow. The space within was empty, except for a number of tiny windows like monitor screens. There, I saw Rainbow Dash arguing with an injured Storm Chaser. There, Velvet Remedy riding a wing of alicorns through a howling storm. There, Charity and the defenders of Chapel were in a terrible firefight with an unrelenting mass of Brood advancing towards them. There, Xanthe and her team were lost in the rubble of the bunker.

And there was P-21 typing on a terminal. As I focused on that window, I could hear his voice coming from the image. The terminal screen was showing a diagram with all kinds of red and white flashing symbols that I couldn't begin to understand. *Hurts... glad I lied that it didn't. They would have given me Med-X. I'd rather die tha... heh... that's funny... no. Got to stay focused. Discharge the stabilization talismans. Almost missed it that time. Getting lightheaded.*

She'll be okay. Blackjack will take care of her. Blackjack will move the world if she has to. She won't give up. I know it. Refresh. Discharge. Crap! Discharge! Focus, P-21. Focus. Recharge. Refresh. Discharge. Focus... Why does that 'calculated force' number get bigger every time I refresh? Nevermind. Recharge. Refresh. Discharge... I couldn't look away as minutes crept by, and again and again he entered the commands that delayed the inevitable. I didn't hear Rampage. Perhaps there wasn't anything for them to say to each other. I should have looked earlier. Maybe come up with a better name. Like Blackjack. Recharge. Refresh. Discharge. Eh... if only she had been a stallion. If only Priest... if only... Recharge. Refresh. Discharge. I hope she makes it. She will. Just made... a... mistake. Not her first... Refresh. Discharge. Error? Wait...

The screen was now flashing all white. "Damn..." he whispered hoarsely as the white light grew brighter and brighter. "Sorry, Blackjack. Hope it was eno--"

The window winked out, and I snapped my horn away. The tram was shaking as it crested the ridge of the massive chasm. Then, suddenly, the dome exploded, Tom shooting out faster than I could see amidst a detonation that not only ripped roof off the Lunar Palace but blasted the very foundation of the building out into space. The floor of the crater erupted in a massive cascade of rock and debris, tons of dust and glowing crystal vomiting out. The magical fields lasted just long enough to stop any of the high-speed ejecta from impacting the chasm walls or the Astrostable, but we still felt the vibrations through the floor. Maybe the Hoof wasn't the only place that was going to be hit... but really... I couldn't care. My heart felt as if it had been ripped in two. I wanted the synthetic pump back. I wanted the old, corpselike body that hadn't felt. That had been more like a machine.

Then the tram stopped and went dark. "What's going on?" Bastard asked in alarm. "Why'd it stop?"

"It was powered from the Lunar Palace," Scotch Tape said dully. "That, or something broke in the track."

I rose to my feet. The terminal was just a few dozen feet ahead now. I could see the two rockets sitting on the pad. "This is ridiculous," I said as my horn glowed and I tried to propel the tram down the track manually. It didn't budge. "Come on! Move!" I tried to lift the vehicle, but something groaned dangerously underneath us.

"The brakes probably engaged when the power was cut," Scotch Tape pointed out. "After all, they wouldn't want the tram to slide all the way back down that slope."

Suddenly, there was a reverberation through the ground as a boulder twice the size of the tram car thudded down only a hundred feet from us. Then another. Then another. The entire tram lurched as something banged into the ceiling, and several of the windows cracked. "Okay. Everypony get close," I said as I gathered them all up around me, Bastard on the left, Scotch Tape floating on my right, and my blank body across my back. I closed my eyes, imagined a Blackjack-shaped hole in my mind between here and the terminal, and pushed my way through.

There was a pop, and I opened my eyes to see the dimly-lit terminal around me, all the window shutters closed but otherwise with no more signs of damage than there'd been when I left. "Yes!" I shouted as I felt my blank body across my shoulders.

And just the blank body.

I looked to either side of me, set the blank down, and teleported back to the tram.

"Where did you go?" Bastard demanded as I reappeared. A rain of hoof-sized gravel was starting to patter down. "Why did you leave us?"

"I've always had problems with teleporting others. If you know how to do it right, by all means, you can send yourself back to the terminal!" I grabbed Scotch Tape, focused with all my might, and teleported again.

Alone.

I screamed in the terminal, my voice echoing as the floor shook. There was some kind of thunderous crash overhead. I teleported back to the tram and saw that the old rocket now lay on its side across the roof, a boulder lodged in its nosecone.

I tried to teleport them both again. And again. And again. Every time I did, I only took myself. I tried to focus on just teleporting Scotch Tape. On just teleporting Bastard. But every time I did, I sent myself through that mental hole alone.

Back in the tram, it was getting cold and a little hard to breathe. I panted, sweating, as more and more rocks rained down, now covering the roof. If only Lacunae were here, teaching me how to do the spell right step by step. If only I were a little more talented. A little more powerful. A little more...

Scotch Tape hugged my hoof, and I jerked my head, looking down at her tear-streaked face as she smiled. "Just go, Blackjack."

"What?" I muttered dumbly.

"Just get into the rocket, and go," the young mare said in a tiny little voice.

I couldn't answer. The thought... no. Not after Glory. P-21. Rampage. No... "It's okay," Scotch Tape promised with that tiny little smile. "I'll be with Daddy again. You can save everyone. Like my brother... or sister... or whatever."

"Fuck that!" Bastard snapped. "Between Cogs and what you promised me, I'll not only be able to pay off those assholes in Dise, but retire. In Tenpony! With a frigging harem! Of solid gold alicorns!"

Scotch Tape regarded him flatly. "Oh boo hoo hoo." She looked back up at me. "Just go. Before the other rocket gets hit by a boulder too." As she spoke, there were shards of jagged crystal falling to the ground around us like javelins. "It's okay... go."

"No!" I shouted. "I'm not leaving anypony anymore! Not anymore! Lacunae... she died to save others. Glory... P-21... they died to save me. Rampage... she... at least she got what she wanted!" I sputtered as I walked back and forth in the tram, trying to think of some way I could break it free of the track without snapping it like an egg. If only there were more time! More time. "I'm not leaving anypony to die anymore! Not anypony!"

Suddenly there was another thud, but this one was from the rear of the tram. And it was accompanied by a shriek of metal from where the tram was locked to the rail. I rushed to the rear windows and looked down.

Rampage shoved again. The mare, her eyes boiled shut and her ears caked in blood, heaved her body against the tram, pushing and straining hard. Every few seconds, her body regenerated and then began to die again. But she pushed and shoved as gravel showered down upon her. The brakes screamed in agony and motors ground as the car was violently projected forward by the striped mare.

She came back. She came back. She chose to live rather than to die.

The tram shuddered as it connected with the terminal. The doors parted enough to let Scotch Tape and Bastard out. Then I realized...

There was no way to get her inside.

"Rampage!" I beat my hoof against the window, looking down at her. "Rampage! You have to find a way in!" But did she know one? If I peeled one of the window shutters open for her, would it still come back down? If it didn't, we were all dead. "Rampage!"

Her face healed enough that she could look at me through her desiccating eyes, and she pointed a moonstone-encrusted hoof up at Cognitum's rocket. Her lips moved silently, but there was no mistaking the word on her lips.

Go.

I shook my head again. "No. No no no! I can't leave you here like this! You can't die here!" I yelled at her. Of course, it was futile. She couldn't hear me, could barely see me. "Rampage!"

She pointed at the rocket again, then staggered back. Being exposed to vacuum, even with her regeneration, had to be agony. It was everything she'd ever feared.

"Rampage!" I yelled at her, half out of my mind now. "I forgive you! I forgive you! I'll come back for you, Rampage! I promise! I'll come back for you!"

But if she could read my lips or not, I couldn't tell. She just smiled. Smiled... as if she was a happy filly going for a walk on the moon, then staggered to the side, slowly walking away amidst the blizzard of pebbles and stones and dust now raining down on her. "Rampage!" I shouted after her, wishing I could send her the thoughts. Let her know that somehow, some way, I forgave her.

Bastard threw his forelegs around my neck and pulled me away from the window. Away from the sight of my friend disappearing into the dust of the moon. "We've got to go! Come on! The terminal is losing air!"

"Let go of me, you bastard," I snapped, ready to kill him.

"You want it all to be for nothing!?" he roared in my face. "Then die here! You want to make it mean something, then get your fat, melodramatic ass in that rocket now!"

I gave one last look at the dim outline of my friend as she wandered, blind, deaf, and immortal into that void, then tore myself away. The terminal was filled with a whistling noise as air leaked out around a spear of moonstone piercing the room completely through. We struggled to breathe as we made our way up the gantry tower connected to Cognitum's rocket. Through the tower's windows, I could see some of the sides of the chasm sliding in to fill the void. I couldn't see the Astrostable though. Maybe it was lying in the bottom as well?

We pushed into the rocket and sealed the hatch. "Launch it, Vodka," Bastard said to Scotch Tape, who was examining the makeshift artificial pilot in the center couches.

"My name is Scotch, asshole," she replied, sharply.

"Got it. Glad to see you're moving to anger. Now, will you launch this damn thing?" he asked as he threw himself into a seat. She hit something and took another couch, and the rocket rumbled. I lay down too, and the rocket surged towards the stars. It passed through the rain of tumbling rocks. Several enormous ones were spinning right towards us, but I reached out with my magic and pushed them away. Soon we were clear of even the spinning arcs of dust. The rocket curved, and I tiredly struggled to reach a window.

It had to be my imagination, but I thought I saw a lone bump at the end of a scratch moving away from the terminal. The hole that had once held Nightmare Moon was now a half-collapsed depression rapidly filling with rubble.

And above us, Tom glowed, trailing a stream of dust like a tail after him. On his way to where the Eater waited, ready to ensnare and devour him. I turned my eyes to the stars, but where once they had offered solace and wonder, now they only seemed cold and indifferent. Did you think it would be easy? Did you think it wouldn't hurt?

I pressed my cheek to the cold glass. Pain was the price of living, and I hurt worse than I ever imagined. I fumbled for something to fill the silence. Scotch Tape lay on her side, face pressed to the fabric of the couch. Bastard... I didn't really want to talk to. So I opened my Delta PipBuck and found something to take solace in. I found it in a song I'd picked up sometime ages ago, back when I'd been younger... more innocent... more... me.

The music started to play, long and slow guitar, and a gravelly old stallion's voice, a dead ringer for the Dealer long ago, began to sing.

I hurt myself today... To see if I still feel...

I focus on the pain... The only thing that's real...

The needle tears a hole... The old familiar sting...

Try to kill it all away... But I remember everything...

The guitar built up louder as I thought of that angry blue stallion telling me he'd shoot me if I gave him a gun. Telling me he'd end me if I ever killed another through my stupidity. Him wiring a tyrant up with bombs and killing him. And as I thought, hot tears ran down my cheeks. How I'd stopped him from hanging himself. How I'd helped him face his addiction. He'd hurt so much, and now... now...

What have I become... My sweetest friend?

Everyone I know... goes away... In the end...

And you could have it all... My empire of dirt...

I will let you down... I will make you hurt...

I'd let Rampage down. Denied her the one thing she'd wanted more than anything. I hadn't been wrong in my selfish wish, but I hadn't respected her. Not as she'd deserved. From the moment she'd leapt upon Leo Zodiac's back, to her smiling up at me through those drifting clouds, I'd done everything I could to keep her alive. I'd driven her away, to my enemy, because I hadn't been able to end her pain. Not till it was too late. Too late... the music softened and slowed as the old stallion sang on with the Dealer's voice...

I wear this crown of thorns... Upon my liar's chair...

Full of broken thoughts... I cannot repair...

Beneath the stains of time... The feelings disappear...

You are someone else... I am still right here...

The music built as I remembered us all together in Star House. Lacunae. Rampage. Scotch Tape. P-21. Glory. Laughing. Happy. Broken ponies taking solace in each other. A piano began to hammer a note louder and louder as the music built.

What have I become... My sweetest friend?

Everyone I know... goes away... In the end...

And you could have it all... My empire of dirt...

I will let you down... I will make you hurt...

I sobbed, and I wasn't alone. I should have stopped the music then, but I couldn't. I could bear to think as the old stallion went on, singing of the pain that burned inside me as I imagined a life with five friends, together... free... happy...

If I could start again... A million miles away...

I would keep myself...

I would find a way...

(Author's notes: the [song](#) is Johnny Cash's version of Hurt. This chapter is too painful to talk about too much. Sorry.)

(Heartshine: I agree. I argued for Superior's "Polaroid Millenium". But I'm also tired of trying to type through tears.)

(Bronode: Fuck it. Just... fuck everything. A high blood alcohol level usually just provides adequate editorial performance. This time, it's the only reason I made it through.)