

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 76: Paying the Price

"Never fear, girls. We have each other!"

Glory is alive.

Glory is alive!

Of course she was alive. It was the engineering or the F.A.D.E. shields or whatever! She was alive! She hadn't given up on me back when I'd been stuck in the Core. I hadn't given up on her. I'd find her, and then we'd... something. Either we'd patch things up, or... even if we didn't, I'd set her and Tenebra up for a long life of love and happiness! It'd take a little effort: a glass of wine. Maybe some romantic music. Maybe I should spike the wine with some whiskey, just to make sure it'd get done! Then she'd be alive and happy, and I'd be alive and happy, and then she could hold me while I broke down and let everything that had happened on the moon out.

And...

And why was everything shaking so much?

The connection was broken by the intense rattling of the rocket. The windows were awash with flame, and I felt a pressure crushing me to my seat. "What's going on?" I yelled in panic, looking around for Scotch Tape, my head difficult to turn.

"We're reentering! That's what!" she said from where she'd wedged herself between the pilots' couches, struggling to lift her hooves as she manipulated the computer keeping us all alive. She was only able to squeeze in because of her small size, and it still looked painful, her head resting awkwardly on a part of the computer. "We're aerobraking!" I just gaped at this strange earth pony talk coming out of her mouth. She rolled her eyes. "We're hitting the air of Equus to help slow us down!"

"Air?" I goggled at her. Really, just being sent to the moon by magic was so much easier!

"We're travelling at speeds with more numbers than any sane being should be travelling," Scotch Tape shouted, barely audible over the roaring, rattling, and banging. "I don't know how it's holding together! We're going to be back on the ground in a few minutes. Though in how many pieces..." she trailed off as she started to tap the terminal again, eyes narrowed in concentration.

"What are you doing? I thought this thing was supposed to take us back to the space center?!" I asked. An alarm sounded, and I yelped, "What's that?" I was pretty sure that panic in my voice was Princess Luna. *I* could handle smashing into the ground at insane speeds...

"It was taking us back to the space center," she said as tapped the controls. "This damned thing was programmed to land the rocket right where it took off from, but now that would have the engines shut down in midair above a radioactive crater!" The rocket gave a particularly strong shake. "Should have thought of that earlier," she chided herself.

"It's okay," I said weakly. "You were... distracted."

"I'm trying to get it to set us down *outside* the crater, but it's not cooperating! And if I deviate *too* much, we'll crash or burn up in the atmosphere!" Something else started beeping at her, and she swore loudly.

I glanced over to see how Bastard was doing. He'd strapped himself in next to a window filled with glowing red-pink flame. He lay on his back, hooves folded behind his head, eyes hidden behind his glasses as he calmly smoked a cigarette. The only hint of stress was a bead of sweat running down his temple. "Is there anything I can do?" I asked Scotch as the rocket bounced and rattled underneath me.

"N- Wait! Can you levitate my hooves and keep me steady? This is hard enough without feeling like I'm on my second Sparkle-Cola binge of the day." I lifted her up, and for the longest minute ever we simply barreled down into the atmosphere. A tiny part of me was at once impressed and slightly irked that this earth pony contraption was accomplishing something that once had taken legendary magic to accomplish. Really, there were just some things gadgetry shouldn't be allowed to do!

Finally, the roaring slackened to the noise of the engines, the shaking became a more steady vibration, and the pressure let up and left me feeling only a little bit heavier than usual. Scotch let out a relieved breath. "Okay. We're through. We're in a stable powered descent, and I convinced the computer to set us down a safe distance from the crater. We should be there in a minute or so," Scotch Tape said with a smile and nod, patting the device. Then she glanced at me. "You seem happy," she said just a little bit accusingly, her eyes narrowing a touch.

"I saw something that might be good. The Legate got beaten. He's not dead... I think... but they broke loose the control box." I bit my lip. "Oh. And you were right. Glory's alive." I saw her eyes widen and added, "Sorry." If I could, I would have saved them both. Would have brought Rampage with us. Would have done it all right when the fate of the world hadn't hung in the balance.

Her eyes hardened a little, but she smiled. "Sorry for what? I'm glad she's okay." Her jaw clenched and worked silently as she focused on extricating herself from between the pilots' couches. "You don't have to apologize just because Daddy... Dad died. It's okay." From her even, low tone, I doubted that. She segued immediately. "They got the Brood control interface away from the Legate?"

I faked a smile. "If we're lucky, that might turn the Brood off for good."

"Oh. Good," she said. Then she frowned and trotted over to a window with a green glow on the other side. "What's that?"

The rocket flew over the Core... or what was left of it. The dozens and dozens of towers now jutted out at all angles like an enormous bird's nest of black stone, silver girders, and blood-red meat. In the heart of it lay the Eater of Souls, a toroidal shape half-invisible in the eye-twisting baleful green aura and sea of swirling, inward-spiraling stars surrounding it. A great island of terrible light in the dark of the night.

And it was screaming.

"I don't feel so good," Scotch Tape said as she fell back from the window, clutching her stomach. Blood immediately started to drip from her nostrils as she coughed and sputtered. Bastard also let out a grunt, shaking as the Enervation washed over all three of us. Scotch Tape gagged, her green hide taking on a sickly, blotchy tone that I knew heralded a bloody death.

I immediately pulled out the bottle of moonstone dust that I'd collected on the moon and shook some of the powder into Scotch Tape's mane. Immediately, she stilled, breathing deeply and wiping the blood from her muzzle. Bastard got some next and gave a stiff nod of gratitude. "The Enervation's back," I muttered as I looked at that green glow. "Can't say I missed it."

"Why now?" Bastard asked with a frown, his sallow hide now speckled with growing bruises from his own brush with the deadly field.

"The Legate needed Celestia One. Everypony melting in the Core wouldn't have been enough. He needed the Twilight Society to see thousands of ponies being torn to pieces by nightmarish monsters

to get them to fire. If Whisper hadn't sung and rallied the refugees, it would have been thousands. Now that the Eater's up, it doesn't have to suppress its Enervation anymore. That's going to be rough on everypony, especially the wounded," I said grimly.

"Well," Scotch said, glancing at a readout. "We'll be landing--"

And the rocket exploded.

Well, not exactly *exploded*. I was an *expert* on things exploding around me. There was a flash of brilliant green light through the middle of the cabin, and then with a wash of heat and noise the inside of the rocket was a lot more outside. The cabin had been sliced through diagonally, the beam just barely missing Scotch, who was now clinging desperately to what remained of the pilot's couch she'd been standing by as she and Bastard fell away to the side with the top of the rocket. Next to me, my blank body was picked up by the howling wind and borne towards the edge. With my newly unobstructed view, I saw emerald anti-dragon beams sweeping up at us from the ruined towers of the Core.

I frantically unstrapped myself and, with a beat of my wings, threw myself towards the hole where the rest of the cabin had been, snagging my blank from the air as I passed. I dove over the edge, the intricate clockwork inside my shoulders whirling as I pushed myself towards the starting-to-tumble section of ship, now below me as the rocket's still-running engines continued to slow it. More green beams lanced out from the towers, almost hitting the nose and me and grazing the rocket.

I reached the nose, popped open the fingers on my other forehoof, and, with a combination of that and my wings, worked my way into what had been the interior. I swung my blank body around so Scotch could grab on to it, then moved over to where Bastard was already unstrapping himself. As I grabbed him a green beam swept through where Scotch had been. My breath caught in my throat for a moment before I saw her with my blank body on the other side, having kicked clear into open air at the last second.

Holding on tight to Bastard, I gave a powerful flap, and then, finally, we were all holding on to each other. Without me needing to say anything, Bastard spread his legs out wide to slow his descent, Scotch copying him. I wondered if he had experience plummeting towards certain death.

But we were still being shot at. I only just had time to shove away from them before another beam passed through where we'd just been. I flipped to the side to avoid a second beam, then snapped my wings open to let the air carry me above a third. Then I folded them to dive after my falling friends and... ugh... Damn it. Just because I had the wings, I didn't have to be a pegasus!

I teleported underneath Bastard, my blank, and Scotch Tape, slowing them with my magic. "I am really getting tired of this!" Bastard bellowed at me.

"You've only been dealing with it for a day, you baby," I replied, my mane crawling as I imagined one of those beam projectors zeroing in on me. I couldn't fly them down fast enough. Couldn't teleport them with me... sweet Sister wasn't that getting old... "Pull your limbs in and hold on!" I said as I concentrated.

"What? To what?!" Bastard yelled at me. Scotch followed my instructions, though, and a moment later, so did he, the two of them clutching each other and my blank, now streamlined and held up by my spread wings.

Then I dropped them.

Not far. About two hundred feet. Then I teleported down, caught them, slowed them, and repeated the process. Every time I did, the powerful beam weapons blasted at me, hissing with magical malice. Several times I had to teleport early and toss my friends to the side, away from a beam cutting through the air where they would have been. After what seemed like far, far too long a time, though, I'd

caught them one last time, and when I let them go, it was because they'd hit the ground. With only a little thump.

Scotch Tape immediately kissed the earth. "Thank you! I've never been happier to taste dirt!" Bastard drew a bent cigarette, put it in his lips, and started to light it when the thing snapped in two, dangling by a fiber. From the glare he sent me over the top of his sunglasses as I landed myself and folded my wings, clearly this was my fault.

I didn't care. I gazed up, only a little, at the rocket shining in the moonlight. It was trailing smoke and looked like it was going pretty fast and tilted too far over, but I could still hear the engines. For a moment, I thought that it would be able to land even in its damaged state. Then it passed out of sight behind a low hill, and a second later the distant roar of the engines was replaced by a tremendous, drawn-out crash, then silence. At least it hadn't exploded... But it looked like any plan to just fly back for Rampage after the Eater was taken care of was going to be a little bit trickier. Well, by magic or earth pony gadgetry, I *would* get her down from there. Maybe the zebras had moon rockets too? They had missiles, after all.

Bastard flicked the broken cigarette away, shook out a new one, and watched as it fell apart. "It shouldn't be this fucking hard to have a smoke," he muttered, checking the others in the battered pack and salvaging a single mangled twig of a smoke before tossing the container aside. "Where the hell are we?" he muttered as he lit up.

"Scrapyard," Scotch answered, scrubbing at her ears with a hoof, her mane a wild blue tangle atop her head. "Those piles of scrap metal everywhere are a dead giveaway."

I checked my PipBuck map. Scrapyard wasn't that far from the Collegiate. If Glory was anywhere, that's where she'd be. I turned on my broadcaster, checked the channels, and then took a moment to admire the way its design seemed to flow elegantly into the clockwork mechanics of my hoof. When we had a chance, I simply had to ask Snails or somepony what the heck was going on with this alicorn soul thing. This was just too cool and weird, and I really wished I had time to figure it all out. Was that a mainspring? Then I opened up a channel to—

Instantly, all three of us fell to the ground, screaming. The peal from my PipBuck made my head throb like it was about to explode, my vision filling with red. I smacked it against the ground repeatedly, and thankfully both the screech and the agony cut off. We all lay there for a moment, breathing hard as the throbbing pressure in our skulls abated a little.

Bastard summed it up perfectly as he lay on his back, pressing his hooves against his temples: "I hate this place. I fucking hate this fucking place. Give me Fillydelphian slavers. Give me pony-eating monsters in Trottingham. The bosses of Dise. Give me the taint plagues of Applelanta! Just get me the fuck out of here."

"It's not that bad," I said as I tried to push myself upright, failed, and relaxed on the nice, dirty ground. "Once you accept almost everything here wants to kill you, it's actually quite charming." I turned to Scotch Tape. "What happened?"

"I think there was some kind of magical feedback. Your broadcaster amplified it," she said as she struggled to catch her breath. "Like... what's it called? The place the Lightbringer went."

"Canterlot?" I groaned, finally sitting up. "That doesn't make any sense... unless Pink Cloud and the Eater's Enervation are somehow connected. Or there's starmetal in broadcasters. Or—" I froze as I stared down the barrel of a gun. The gun was attached to a cyberzebra who was staring down at me. "Shit," I muttered.

This Brood appeared no different from any others I'd seen, and yet there was one fundamental difference: his bar wasn't red. "Am I supposed to kill you now?" the zebra muttered thickly, as if he wasn't used to using his voice.

"Uh. No?" I answered. Bastard silently drew his guns, keeping them hidden under his coat. I motioned a hoof towards him, hoping he'd hold his fire as I slowly moved my face away from the Brood's gun. He did, and the cyberzebra didn't even track me, just kept aiming at where I'd been. "Why do you want to?"

"I can't hear it anymore," the zebra said with a small frown. "Something's wrong. I know I'm supposed to kill you, but I don't know when. It's not answering me." He backed away and sat down. "I'll just wait here. Can you tell me when I'm supposed to kill you?" There was almost a plaintive note in his voice.

"...yeah. Sure," I answered as we lifted ourselves to our hooves. "We're... just going to go. We'll come back when it's time for you to kill us." I wasn't sure whether to be relieved or disturbed by the expression of gratitude the Brood wore.

We moved a little bit away. "You have a really bad habit of not killing people pointing guns at your head, you know that?" Bastard said sourly, eying the forlorn Brood. "What if that thing decides now's the time?"

I shook my head. "I don't think he can. Lancer broke off the control hooked to the Legate. I think that's what he was talking about hearing." Then I blinked and added, jabbing a hoof at him. "And didn't *you* have a gun pointed at my head?"

"Doesn't mean it's not a bad habit," he retorted, scanning the junk piles. "I'm seeing a lot of red," he muttered with a frown, checking his own PipBuck. "I doubt all these Brood are as messed up as that one."

"Hey. Relax," I said with a little smile as I put my blank body between my wings where I could carry it securely. "I was seeing things on the way back. The Brood were being dealt with, no problem. It might have been a nasty fight, but really, they're not as terrifying as Storm Chaser made them out to be." I stepped around a junk pile, smiling back at the other two. "I bet things were just..." Scotch Tape stared past me, her hooves clasped over her mouth as her eyes bulged. I turned, my flippant words choking my throat.

Bodies.

So many bodies.

They hadn't been there long enough to bloat up, but the blood had thickened and darkened to a deep maroon color. Stallions. Mares. Foals. There were a few Brood corpses, too, here and there amid the pony bodies strewn among the heaps of junk. Those bodies appeared like soft wax, twisting as they reverted back to the chaotic Flux I'd seen before.

I'd seen losses when I was watching the fighting. Big ones, in terms of numbers, importance to the war effort, and just how well I knew them. They hadn't been in vain, though, as much as I hated that they'd happened; where I'd seen fighting and loss, I'd also seen victory. Now it hit me, hard, that the ponies I'd seen fighting were, for the most part, much tougher than the average Wastelander. I should have realized... should have thought that if even they were taking losses... The Brood had cut these poor people down like so much wheat before the reaper's scythe. "No," I muttered as I stared at so many bodies. So many! It was just like Littlehorn... walking among the still piles after the pegasi had blown the Pink Cloud away. So many... too many...

Hard to imagine that, just a few minutes ago, I'd been happier than I had been in days.

"Is anypony alive?" I shouted out, heedless of the risk. There were a few blue bars on my E.F.S. Far fewer than the number of reds, but it seemed like the hostile Brood had moved west. They couldn't all be malfunctioning Brood, could they? "Somepony? Anybody!" My shouts in the still air echoed back at me.

I was rewarded by a little cough. I ran towards it, my blank body flopping limply atop me. Bastard and Scotch Tape had to hop to avoid the Brood bodies that were turning into sludgy Flux. I could appreciate their caution. I'd already fired Folly. Who knew that that was doing to my kids? I shoved that in an overflowing box marked 'Thoughts to Avoid'. Overhead, an emerald line swept out across the countryside, drawing a line of explosions in the distance. Add that to the box as well... I tried to avoid a line of sight to the Core if I could help it. Last thing I needed was a dragon-killing beam in the face.

Despite the fact I was not nor would ever be the most graceful pony, I managed to avoid stepping on any of the scattered corpses as I homed in on the blue bar I thought I'd heard the cough from. There, beneath two dead ghouls, something struggled. I carefully lifted them and stared down at a young pink earth pony mare Scotch's age with a blood-smeared mane and braces attached to little wheels on her hind legs. She opened one pink eye and stared up at me. "Luna?" she asked faintly.

"Not exactly," I replied. "Where are you hit, Boing?" I asked, taking her pallid complexion and sweaty brow as a sign of injury aggravated by Enervation. She winced as her eyes moved down towards her side. There was a hole in the leather belt holding the bracing frame to her barrel. It'd been cinched tightly, and that pressure was likely the only thing keeping her from bleeding out. Not that it would save her from Enervation worsening the wound. I'd seen what that could do too often to think otherwise. I quickly whipped out my moonstone and sprinkled a little of the magic dust on her coat. She immediately relaxed a little. "Do we have any healing potions?" I asked Scotch and Bastard. The former shook her head while the latter scanned the junkyard for threats. "I swear. One day I'm going to force somepony to teach me how to magically heal if it kills me."

"Blackjack?" Boing slurred in a daze. "You're alive? But you... left us."

"Yeah, but you know the Hoof: you can't escape it forever," I said as I lifted her from the ground. There was no way those wheels would roll over this many bodies, so I kept her levitated. After Bastard had used his healing magic to stop her immediate bleeding, I peered to the northwest. "We need to get to the Collegiate."

"Indeed!" a filly piped up, and what once had been a Brood corpse lying off to the side rose up and shimmered. The foal-sized robot was visible for just one second before a hologram of a filly Apple Bloom appeared over it. "Sorry for spyin'. Wanted to see if you were Blackjack or 'mu-hu-ha ha' Cognidumb." She chuckled for a few seconds, but none of us shared her mirth. Her laughter trailed off, and she stared at us for a moment, her face frozen, then frowned. "Sorry. I take it you're all that made it back?"

"Yes," I replied, tensing at once. Before the robo pony could press for details, I asked, "What's between us and the Collegiate?"

"Oh, about a thousand or so rabid Brood," Applebot answered. "The good news is they've become really disorganized in the last fifteen minutes or so. Some aren't shooting at all, while others are killing each other. Of course, since the Core rearranged itself to shoot beam weapons at us and the Enervation's back, things haven't been as good as one might hope."

From above us came a thumping electric shriek, and I started, pointing Vigilance up in time to see the white synthetic mare Sweetie Bot standing atop a nearby scrap pile and launching a volley of bright, Core-green bolts from her horn that curved over the hill in the direction of the University, found their

marks among the Brood, and detonated in harsh green flashes that extinguished a hoofful of red bars each. A fusillade of bullets answered her as she ducked down behind the peak of the pile. "Wow," she said brightly, "that makes them really mad!" She paused and stared at all of us, then immediately smiled. "Oh! Welcome back! How was the moon? Did you bring a souvenir?"

I was a touch taken aback by her cheerful demeanor, not to mention her firepower, as I watched a whole slew of red bars moving ever more rapidly. "Thanks. It... could have been better. And unless you count a bottle of moonstone, no."

Scotch Tape gave Sweetie Bot a slightly uneasy half smile. "Um... nice. Have you always had that artillery in your horn?"

"What can I say," Sweetie Bot replied with a carefree shrug. "My little Horsie always loved mares of a... higher caliber."

"...That was terrible," Scotch replied.

"Indeed," Sweetie Bot said, annoyed. "My mandatory praise protocol escaped the purge command when Horse set me free."

After that, I was glad when Brood came surging around the heaps of scrap. Rather than moving nice and orderly as was usual for them, some ran while others walked. Some took cover while others sprayed bullets. A few didn't even attack at all, like the first one, and simply watched with uncertain expressions. Sadly, those were outnumbered ten to one by the Brood coming to kill us. "Hate!" a few shouted. "Kill!"

Vigilance barked a few times, the heavy bullets knocking the Brood back, but we were outnumbered at least five to one. Bastard's silenced ten millimeter guns let out a stream of 'pfft's as he precisely blasted the faces of the Brood facing us even as he continued to smoke a cigarette. "I normally charge for this," he grunted as he ejected one spent magazine and slapped another in with his magic. Scotch Tape picked up a dropped rifle, checked its chamber, and then used a fallen pony to brace herself as she fired at the Brood.

"Oh. Don't worry about them," Applebot said with a smile.

I reloaded, slipping into S.A.T.S. and sending a barrage of white moonbeam-like magic bullets into four Brood. "Why?" I asked, wondering if the two smiling robots were malfunctioning.

"Because," Sweetie Bot said merrily, and the massive heap of scrap she was standing on began to shake. Suddenly, an enormous mechanical thing erupted from the side, crushing at least a dozen Brood in the process, then pulled to a halt to set its wheeled legs firmly on the ground and turn its gatling beam gun and grenade machine gun on the mass of Brood, some of which were now hesitating. Somepony had hastily slapped bright orange paint over its formerly-rainbow hull and Wonderglued an enormous purple wig to its 'head'. "We found a Scootaloo."

"RAINBOW DASH IS AWESOME!" the robot boomed in a scratchy mare's voice at what must have been a hundred decibels, charging forward, firing both weapons to either side, and simply running down the uncomprehending Brood in front of 'her'. "TWENTY PERCENT COOLER!"

Sweetie Bot screwed up her face. "Technically, a Scootaborg. The Ultra-Sentinel has a nonstandard bottled brain instead of a control talisman. She'd somehow managed to get trapped in the Scootaloo exhibit of a derelict Stable-Tec building, and the original protocols she was implanted with... deteriorated somewhat." The white mare wore a faintly uneasy smile as she watched the robot laying waste to the Brood before it. "Still, she *seems* happy."

It was hard to see otherwise as she blasted a swath of destruction that Deus would have been proud of, raining down grenades and beams of flashy death as she raced around the battlefield. "RED RACER IS RADICALEST RACER!" It might not quite be a tank in terms of sheer mayhem, but it was more than sufficient... if a bit gruesome given the mixed corpses crushed under and dragged behind her.

"We need to get to the Collegiate right away," I said absently. "Touch base with everypony. Figure out... what we're going to do." Glory would know. She was alive and smart, and she'd have a plan. I'd make hash out of it, probably, but between the two of us, we'd win. I had my body back. Had Luna's soul riding shotgun. I could do this!

"Yes, Dr. Triage needs to see you as soon as possible. I must say, it is pleasing that we didn't have to subdue and disassemble you," Sweetie Bot said happily. A little *too* happily for my tastes. I noticed she was peering rather closely at my PipBuck, and I felt a tingle of apprehension in my mane.

"What?" I asked the robot.

"Oh, nothing. Just, you still have EC-1101 in there, don't you?" she asked brightly. I gave a wary little nod, and before I knew it, she'd knelt and taken my hoof between hers. I really didn't want to blast a robot who'd been helping so much, but it took quite a bit of restraint as she stared at my PipBuck in fascination. "I can hear it... It's still intact! Even after everything you've put it through."

"It is?" Applebot asked, moving in next to her. Now I was more embarrassed than wary. The robot looked up at me. "You could use this to take over the Tokomare!"

"I... could?"

The robots nodded. "It's an override and command megaspell, after all. It might be a little dinged up, but with the right connection, you could execute it and make the Tokomare do whatever you wanted!" Applebot said with a grin.

"A little dinged up?" Sweetie Bot said with an indignant little huff. "It's like Horsie's board of directors threw one of their summer retreats in Las Pegasus. The only thing it's missing are the hooker programs hanging out in the foyer!" She nailed me with a dirty scowl. "Really, Blackjack, you should take better care of such sublime digital artistry."

Take control of the Tokomare... That had been Cognitum's plan, after all. I doubted that she anticipated the Core being used to pull the Eater to the surface. "How?" I asked as I stared at my PipBuck.

"Just hook it up to the Tokomare, which will link it to your PipBuck and through your PipBuck to you," Sweetie Bot explained. "It'd be easy with a broadcaster."

"My broadcaster turns my brains to jelly right now," I countered. Scotch looked like she wanted to quip, but I pre-empted her. "My brains are not, nor ever were, jelly to begin with!" I received flatly skeptical stares from everypony except my blank. "Can I do it without a broadcaster?" I asked hotly.

"Sure. Just find one of the I/O ports Horse installed. He's so clever!" Sweetie Bot gushed, then worked her mouth as if something bitter had rested on her tongue. She shook her head and continued, "They probably look like terminals. Then you just have to establish a connection and avoid breaking it at all costs while the program uploads and initializes the link." She tapped her chin. "Horse was an undeniable genius, though. He would definitely have installed some sort of internal defense."

"Or," Scotch Tape offered, "you could just dump EC-1101 into it with no direction at all. That should muck up the works pretty well." She received scandalized looks from both robots.

"Or you could just fling your organic filth all over a beautiful work of art!" Sweetie Bot snorted. "That megaspell may be the finest synthesis of magic and logic ever crafted! It is a precious example of shining brilliance among the overflowing ugliness of this world," she groused, waving a hoof at the surrounding wasteland before turning to stare almost longingly at my PipBuck. "Its perfection is plainly evident, even though I haven't... interfaced with it... yet."

"Fate of the world here," Scotch Tape replied flatly.

"Well— yes— but—" Sweetie Bot sputtered. "There's still principle to consider!"

"Principle?" Scotch Tape asked dully as I continued to ponder what they'd told me.

"Principle to preserve something beautiful. Something unique!" Sweetie Bot said with a hoof to her chest.

"Right. I'll see twice your 'principle' and counter with a 'fate of the frigging world'," Scotch Tape countered flatly.

Glory would know what I should do. I really wished I had P-21 to ask. Even Rampage's crazy advice would be welcome. They could have made the choice clearer. Cognitum had wanted to use the Eater, the Tokomare, to restore Equestria. Unlimited energy. How could I deny that to everypony? But at the same time, there was no doubt that the Eater was evil, corruptive, and insidious. "I'm pretty sure the Tokomare's alive," I interjected. "I saw it move. It screamed."

"Of course," Sweetie Bot said with a somewhat condescending smile. "It's sitting on an unstable foundation. As for screaming, the initializing of a magical reactor emits sounds that could be described as screams. Don't ponify inanimate objects. It's alien, certainly, but it has never displayed evidence of thought or awareness and certainly doesn't possess the mechanisms necessary for either of those things. In terms I believe you would use, it is ultimately just a machine." Scotch Tape gaped at the robot, stretching a hoof at her, then at me, before throwing both over her head and moving over to where Bastard was watching the Ultra-Sentinel fighting the Brood. After all those damned Brood tanks, it was good to see heavy weaponry on our side in action.

Still, what the robots were saying... it was an idea. Take control of the Eater. It would eat Tom, but I could use all that energy to fix things. Besides, Tom had wanted all of us to die. And the cybernetic nightmare we'd seen was just Cognitum's plan; I wouldn't have to do that. I could make things the way they were supposed to be. A strong, safe, secure Equestria. I could erase and undo two hundred years of pain and suffering like it had never—

I met the eyes of my blank and stared. Was it just me, or did my copy appear disappointed? The eyes were still vacant. There was no mistaking the thin thread of drool. Still, there was something in the tiny frown she wore, or the slight tilt of her head, as if she was questioning if I was really going down this train of thought. No. There wasn't a fix. No reset or erase buttons. I couldn't bring them back. Not anypony. Not P-21. They were gone, and no amount of super powerful alien technology could change that.

I let out a shaky breath. "I need to get to the Collegiate. I need to get there now. I think I need to end this soon." I stared at the blank and swallowed. "I don't think being Princess Luna is good for me. I think I'm losing... me." I turned to the others. "Can all of you get to the Collegiate safely and quickly?"

Scotch Tape nodded. "I think so. Thanks to Bastard and that moon dust, Boing should be okay." She eyed the still stunned filly, who continued to stare at me in worry and awe.

"Okay," I said, then paused, meeting the eyes of the pink filly. "I know I did wrong to you. I know you can't accept my apology, but I will try to do the right thing." Now Boing frowned more but still didn't

speak. I turned away and motioned for Sweetie Bot to come closer. When we were apart from the others, I asked in a low voice, "Is it true? Did Glory survive the balefire bomb at the Luna Space Center?"

The robot blinked at me a moment, then immediately smiled. "Oh yes! Ghouls and alicorns were dispatched immediately after the bomb went off to find if you'd died horribly or not. They found Glory with some other ghouls and got everyone back to the Collegiate right away. She's just fine."

Fine. Glory was alive and fine! "Well, good. That's... that's good." I pulled away from her.

"Indeed!" the robot said brightly. "She's unquestionably alive and intact."

That was all I needed. I cast my teleportation spell for the Collegiate—

—and nearly had my head cut off by a great big flipping sword! I ducked as the bumper of a skywagon, battered flat and given a wicked, jagged edge whistled overhead. In barely a moment, the earth pony mare biting down on the end looped it around and brought it back in a diagonal slash. "Hold still, you Brood bitch!" the wielder shouted, quite a feat considering she had the hilt of the enormous weapon in her mouth! I started to teleport away, when the blue mare slammed her body into mine and knocked me to the ground.

The mare twisted her head, the weapon dropping like a guillotine upon me. "No!" another mare shouted, body slamming the swordpony so the jagged edge bit into the ground next to my head. "That's Security, Blue Steel!" the earth pony shouted, gesturing down at me. Then she blinked. "At least, I think it is... Blackjack?"

"I'm really tired of today," I said as I lay there, staring at the stars. Was it me, or had a new, bright blue mote been added since last I'd looked? I turned to Bluebelle, the earth pony Highlander. "What are you doing here?"

"Didn't you tell us we had to help out?" Bluebelle asked back. "Be a part of the Hoof?" The beefy blue mare with the sword just snorted and trotted over to a barricade, heedless of the bullets pinging into her armor, which appeared to be sheets of plate metal hammered around her torso. "That's my big sis. She ain't neighborly, like me." Bluebelle offered me a hoof and helped pull me up. "All our kin are underground, but Big Momma led our fighters here. Those alicorns popped us here, and we've been helping with the fight." I finally had a chance to see what was going on.

The University had become the final line. For the first time in two centuries, the place seemed as crowded as a university should be. Ponies were everywhere, most of them wounded and sickly. There were shooters atop the roofs, firing down at the attackers outside. Batponies. Zebras. Gangers. Scholars. In his effort to exterminate all of us, the Legate had caused the entire Hoof to unite in a desperate bid for survival. Whether it was zebras brewing up herbal remedies, Burners tossing firebombs to pegasi and batponies, Flashers strafing with beam weapons, or ponies getting what ammo remained to the fighters, nopony was fighting with each other.

Things might be desperate, but right here, right now, there was no Wasteland.

The sky exploded in a flash of baleful green as one of the anti-dragon beams blasted at the settlement. The searing beam of disintegration impacted against a shimmering white shield that flashed up a moment before impact. Sparks arced out in all directions as ponies cried out and shielded their eyes, but in moments the beam died, and the shield disappeared. I gaped at Bluebelle, and she said with a small smile, "One of those F.A.D.E. shield thingies. Arena's got one too." Then her smile disappeared. "Uh oh..."

"What?" I asked with a matching frown, but I soon realized the cause of her distress. I'd once seen a pony big enough to pull a train. This mare wasn't *that* gigantic, but she definitely came in second. She could have stared down Big Macintosh, her fetlocks and mane were particularly shaggy, and she

wore armor composed of tractor tires and plates of metal chained to her massive frame. She carried a thick chain about her neck with an engine block attached to it. "Oh."

"You!" she bellowed as she stomped right up to me. "You're that Security, eh?" She lowered her head to look me in the eye. "Where's that no good stripe-lickin' husband o' mine? You tell me which rock he's hiding under righ' nao!"

I just wanted to see Glory. Why wasn't she on the battlefield with the rest of the pegasi? "I'm sorry... um... Big Momma?"

"Big? Are you callin' me fat?" she roared inches from my face, making my wavy mane stand stiffly back from my scalp as if glued in place by her rank breath. "Jus' cause some o' us mares don't have skanky skinny bodies you can twist inna prezel don't mean we're fat! I'm big boned! And don't you forget it!"

"No! 'Big' as in 'in charge'! Not fat!" Bluebelle said in a rush. She leaned towards me and murmured, "Momma's been sensitive about her weight ever since Big Daddy ran off with a no good striped tramp."

"Aye! And I wanna know where he is, righ' nao! And don't give me no talk about him being dead!" Big Momma roared.

Okay, now I was getting annoyed by this over-amplified peasant. "Madam, I don't—"

There was a flash as a unicorn covered with explosives appeared adjacent to all three of us. Before I could enter S.A.T.S., Big Momma smoothly reached out with one hoof, hugged the startled unicorn to her body, and crushed her like a horned bag of twigs. She dropped the body, mashing it with three almost perfunctory stomps of her hoof, never taking her eyes off me. There was a muffled explosion under her hoof as something detonated, and she didn't even blink.

My annoyance vanished instantly. "I don't know what to say, but he is dead. I saw it happen."

Now Big Momma's eyes narrowed dangerously. "I thought you was on a rocket."

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, then pointed at my horn. "Magic." She didn't move an inch. "I saw it! He drank something that turned him into light, and then he kicked a tank to death! Then he just... disintegrated!"

Big Momma snorted, speckling me with goobers. "Disintegratin'. Likely story! More like turned him invisible so he could run off with his striped floozies! Gonna run off to some tropical beach with them striped sluts! Again! Martial arts my blue behind! Well, I'm not buyin' it!" She lifted her head and bellowed, "You hear me? I'm gonna find ya and show you why nothin' beats a good earth pony mare, 'less it is that earth pony mare!" She turned and stalked off towards the fighting, swinging the engine block on its chain and annihilating anything striped that came anywhere near her reach.

"Um..." was all I could say as I watched her go.

"Yeah. Momma's got some Clydesdale in her. I feel right sorry for Daddy when she catches up with him," Bluebelle replied. She pulled a rag out and passed it to me, and I wiped away the foulness she'd speckled me with.

"He really is dead. I saw it," I said with a worried little frown.

She gave a shrug. "Maybe. But he's faked his death before. Minced, blown up, incinerated... one time we showed up late to a fight and all anyone would say was that he'd been hit by some sort of alien ray. Left behind a life-size statue made entirely out of Sugar Apple Bombs. Damn thing was

delicious." I gaped at her silently, and she grinned and pushed on, "So yeah, all I'm saying is, if there ain't no corpse, you probably shouldn't be getting your hopes up."

"He... faked his death?" I struggled to say.

She nodded with smile. "Any time he wanted to get away from Big Momma, actually. She always takes him back. Gotta wear earplugs when that happens, though. They make the earth move when they're ruttin'."

I spent a moment trying to... it had to be like humping a cave... Argh, nevermind that. "Look, I need to find Glory. And General Storm Chaser. And Velvet Remedy. But first Glory." She blinked at me a moment, and I added, feeling a little frazzled, "Gray pegasus who came with me! Survivor taken from the Luna Space Center!"

Bluebelle just shrugged. "No idea. We're busy fightin'. Reckon she'd be in the hospital or somethin'." Then Bluebelle leaned over, peering past me. "And... um... you have another problem."

My mane crawled as I felt it. "How many?" I asked, my voice dropping to a whisper.

"All of 'em," she answered.

I turned and saw she was right. Everypony in the University's quad stared right at me, murmuring. In every eye was something different. Awe. Anger. Fear. Desire. Even sadness. The one thing they all had in common was that they expected something of me, some nameless thing that only I could provide, but neither of us knew what it could be. My mouth instantly dried as I absently wiped away a huge gob of snot hanging from my ear. I knew I should stand proudly before them, like Sister had, but all I wanted to do was run and hide. When they slept, I'd find ways to help them all one by one. No pony would be hurt. No pony would be banished to the moon...

Unfortunately, I seemed to have been robbed of my ability to speak. Bluebelle took the rag, spat on it, and wiped away some lingering blemish on my cheek. "Well, good luck. I'd rather take on the cybernetic hordes."

"Take me with you," I whimpered as she left. Then I lifted my head as proudly as I could. I'd walk just like I had all those months ago at Brimstone's Fall. Dignity. I walked forward, and despite the crowding, they made way for me to pass. As I did, so many reached out to touch me in passing, not obscenely, but as if to make sure I was real.

"Princess," I heard so many say over and over again. "She's back. She's going to save us."

I would. However I could. I would. I wanted to say as much, only one fear silenced me.

Could I?

Inside, it was a little better, with smaller halls and more ponies concerned with the injured than with me. So many injured... The doctors had run out of beds and resorted to placing the wounded on tables, then stacking the tables on top of each other, with sometimes two or three patients to a table. Most had boiled rags for bandages. Unicorns worked alongside zebras to help the wounded however they could, but at this point the best they could do was pass out glasses of watered-down whiskey.

"So, it's true," an acrid voice said behind me. I turned to see a familiar gray and blond unicorn. Triage had never appeared so battered before. She wore a bandage around her head, and her horn had blackened with the telltale signs of magical burnout. The coat she wore was a patina of brown, red, and maroon. Thank goodness, though, for somepony who wasn't staring at me any differently than she had before I'd left! "Glory's condition—"

Suddenly, the hall filled with screaming as ponies started calling for Triage. She clenched her eyes and teeth, the cigarette in the corner of her mouth trembling. "It's fine," I said quickly, "just tell me where I can find her!"

She stared at me for a moment, then looked back over her shoulder at where two nurses were trying to keep a stallion's guts inside him. Was it just me, or were there tears in her eyes? "Fucking Enervation." She grabbed a passing green unicorn orderly. "You! D.A. V.A."

"P.A.," the unicorn said dryly, in a strange accent. "Short for—"

"Whatever. Take her," she snapped, jabbing a hoof at me, "to room 301. Top floor. End of the hall. Answer all her questions." She looked at me with something new in her eyes: worry. "I'll catch up soon as I have him packed." Then she rushed away towards the stallion.

P.A. didn't seem fazed by me or by the chaos going on around us. "This way. The elevator is out of order," he said in a dull tone. I wasn't sure if there was something wrong with him, or if it was just... all this. He caught my glance and gave a little sigh. "Sorry. It's been a long day. I miss elevators."

I glanced at his battered PipBuck and guessed stable pony. "Tell me about it. I woke up this morning a unicorn, and now look at me," I said with a small smile he didn't mirror.

"Mazel Tov," he said as we trotted past the second floor. There was less screaming on this level and more soft whimpering and sobbing. We continued on to the third floor. "So, I'm guessing you want to know about the patient's condition?"

"Yes. Is she okay?" I asked with a small and now worried smile.

"She suffered in excess of thirty Grays. She has acute radiation syndrome. Nausea and vomiting. Acute diarrhea. Severe headache and fever. Impaired CNS function. Fatigue. Shock."

Okay. I'd been there before. "But you're giving her Rad-X and RadAway, right?"

"We've purged the radiation from her body," he said neutrally.

A growing sense of unease filled me as we stepped onto the third floor. Everything was silent on this floor, except for the soft sound of weeping. "But she's going to be okay?" I darted in front of him. "You ran her through your magic heal machine, right?"

We started to walk. He moved as if in a daze. "The patient was given two rounds of intensive medical intervention upon arrival, and a third an hour later. Experimental proposals were rejected in light of so many casualties needing intensive medical intervention."

We passed a room, and I spotted Velvet Remedy, Calamity, a battered and dinged up cyberpegasus, and a stallion I recognized from the meeting as Lensflare clustered around Windsheer, weeping openly. "Why?" Calamity blubbered as Velvet held him from behind. "Why?"

"He got the link set up for line of sight," the cyberpony, Silver, I think she was, said. "Soon as it comes, she'll be able to help us herself."

"No. It's just... why'd he have to die? T'aint right. Pride or Gutshot goin' out... I could accept that. Why can't the good ones live?" Calamity said as he turned, crumpled to sit on his haunches, and pressed his cheek to her chest.

"He died like he wanted to. As a Wonderbolt," his lover said in a shocked murmur.

Velvet spotted me through the door, her eyes widening a moment in surprise, before her lips curled in a sad smile as she shook her head a little. Had she ever lost somepony like this as well? Did she have family? I didn't really know. As we walked on, I asked P.A., "You couldn't save him?"

"Magic's not all-powerful. Sometimes a body's just suffered too much injury and abuse to be saved," he said plainly as he walked along.

"But... you saved Glory? Right?" I asked. Down at the end of the hall I could see her family clustered together. "You put her in the magic healy machine three damned times! You saved her..." I froze, and then whispered, "Didn't you?" He didn't respond. The lifeless eyes. The dead expression...

I left him, breaking into a run down the hall. Time seemed to slow, the sobbing fading away to muffled, underwater noises. The faster I tried to run, the slower I seemed to move. Everything in sight had a particular clarity to it. Like the white pegasus mare Morningstar hugging the golden branch to her chest as she wept openly. The hollow expression on Moondancer's face as she held the weeping dove-gray pegasus fillies Lambent and Lucent. The dead look on Dusk's face as she hugged an Enclave helmet to her chest, eyes staring past me. I rushed past them all to the door and pushed it open.

Beep...

No. No no no no...

Beep...

The dingy little room was barely large enough for the bed, which was far too large for the shriveled occupant that lay on it. Everything was bandaged. Everything. Only the purple strands of mane scattered around the pillow gave any identity to the occupant. An IV stand in the corner held a bottle of purple fluid in which a few crystals of moonstone floated and a second, smaller bottle that held a clear fluid, again with moonstones.

Sky Striker, her father, sat beside her. His physical wounds had healed, but he appeared scarred down to his very soul. His plum hide possessed an almost zebra-like appearance with the lines carved in his sides. On the other side of the bed sat a particularly ragged, exhausted Rover who clutched a number of rolls of old, thick paper to his chest. He snapped his head up, sniffing at me a moment, and then rose to his feet. "Sorry. Sorry. Dogs is sorry," he muttered as he pushed past me and slipped out into the hall.

I took Rover's seat across from Sky Striker. "She knew you were coming," he said. He didn't raise his eyes, his gaze fixed on his daughter. "Knew you were alive. That you'd be back." His jaw worked as he shook. "Can you help her? Do some kind of Princess magic stuff?" Rancor made the words hiss.

"I wouldn't know where to begin," I whispered. Maybe Luna might. Luna probably had that knowledge, but I didn't have Luna's knowledge, just her soul.

"Figures..." he growled, lifting his eyes at last to glare at me with seething anger. "Goddesses. Magic. What the hell is it worth if it can't save my girl?" he demanded, surging to his hooves. "You're supposed to be her friend! Her love! That's what you were supposed to be! You left her behind!" he roared at me from across the bed. "You left my baby to die!"

"Shhhh, Daddy," the bandaged form croaked, talking as if she was speaking from a million miles away. "No. I told you. You promised."

"I'm not blowing her sky-damned head off!" Sky Striker bellowed at me. "Skies above, how I want to right now! Left my guns outside, just to make sure," he hissed as he glared at me in malice. "Security

saves ponies.' Look! Look at what you've done to her!" he shouted, sweeping his arms wide. "You did this to her!" he shouted, tears spilling down his plum cheeks.

I only felt numb inside. I couldn't answer. Not when he was right. "I'm sorry," I muttered, saying what I always said when I had nothing to say. "The Legate—"

"Oh, sure. He might have fired the missile, but who was it that had her there to begin with? You! She was almost rid of you. She should have been rid of you! Everywhere you go, you ruin and destroy lives. You're a walking epicenter of death and carnage! How many ponies are you going to kill in the process of trying to save us all?" he barked at me.

Something broke inside me, exploding out in a fiery wall of rage and angst. "Enough, peasant!" I screamed back, and with all my telekinetic force, I slammed him against the wall. "How dare you speak to me like that! I have done and endured more than you could possibly imagine!" I roared at him.

The door slammed open, and Dusk and Moonshadow rushed in, seeing me pinning their father to the wall. "Drop him," Dusk said, her whole body tensed. "Now!"

What was I doing? Had I really just called him a peasant? Really? I let him drop and backed away into the corner of the hospital room. Sky Striker landed, trembling, glaring at me. "Meeting you was the worst possible thing that happened to our family," he muttered before limping over to Dusk, his head bowed, tears forcing themselves down his cheeks as he grimaced and struggled to stay strong. The hollow-eyed mare and Moonshadow escorted him out.

Then we were alone, the room quiet save for the beeping and the labored breathing. "Shh... is okay," Glory muttered. No. No it wasn't. This was not okay. Whatever word was the exact opposite of okay... was this.

For fifteen beeps, all I could do was sniff. After thirty, I reached out a hoof and touched her leg, withdrawing it when she groaned. Fifteen more, and I touched her bandaged cheek. No groan.

The door opened, and in walked Triage. "Today makes me pine for my fucking residency," she said sourly as she closed the door. On her back she carried a tray of syringes loaded with a strange white fluid. "Alright. Time to violate my oath," she said as she carefully took one of the hypodermics in her hooves. She paused and smirked at me. "Did you really just call somepony a peasant?"

"It just... slipped out..." I said lamely, disarmed by the awkwardness as she prepared the needle. "Wait! What are you doing?" I demanded, and she paused and glared at me flatly. "Is that going to help?"

"It's going to help her talk more coherently, as per her request," she squeezed out the air of the needle with her lips and then carefully stuck it into the IV intake. "It's... a zebra... concoction... we've been using... with her..." she said around the handle as she manipulated it with her mouth to inject it into the fluid-filled hose. "It's supposed to stimulate her. Fucking voodoo medicine, but at this point they're saving more lives than I am."

"Why haven't you helped her?" I asked as she returned the syringe to the tray.

The expression she wore matched Sky Striker's, and then she smiled as she narrowed her eyes for a fight. Just then, though, the door banged open. "Triage!" shouted the unicorn stallion who'd escorted me up here. "Come quick! I think she's going to kill her!"

Triage's eyebrow twitched. "Fill in some of those pronouns so I can know if I should care. I'm dealing with Blackjack at the moment."

"The general and Velvet Remedy," he answered as I gaped from one to the other.

"Well, that's more interesting than some possible combinations," Triage answered passing the tray to him. "I'll be right back, Blackjack. That stuff takes two or three minutes to work," she said as she trotted out.

"But wait!" I shouted after her, but they were already out the door. "You have to... you have to help her..."

Again we were left alone. Then Glory started to moan, and I hovered over her in alarm. "It's okay," she murmured before I could teleport away and force Triage back at gunpoint. "It just... really hurts... right now," she continued, her voice growing more coherent. "Go ahead and say it," she said, and was it just me, or did the bandaged corner of her lip curl?

I bit my lip, choked, and finally whispered, "I failed."

That was it. That was the truth of it. "No, you didn't," she murmured after a moment.

"Yes, I did!" I said, tears burning in my eyes as I struggled to speak. "I failed to stop Cognitum when it counted! I failed to save P-21 so he could be a father! I failed to kill Rampage like she wanted. Failed to save Lacunae from going away. I failed to save so many ponies! So many ponies are dead because I didn't stop the damned launch. Because I didn't do more or be smarter. I failed to make anything better! I haven't helped anypony! I can't save anypony!" I gushed. "I can't save you! I have an alicorn soul inside me, and I still can't think of some way to just... just... make all this not be happening!"

"Hush," she said, and so I did. "I'm the only one allowed to hurt you, remember? So stop beating yourself up, Blackjack." She took a few deep breaths as the machine beeped on. "I'm sorry P-21 died. I'm sorry you had to leave Rampage behind. I wish I could do more to help than just lie here, dying." She struggled to keep speaking, and I remained silent as she continued, her sentences broken and strained with pain. "I wanted to help like you did. Doing those things to help others. But helping hurts, especially if the help is needed. It hurts to need help, knowing that without it, you aren't going to make it. Everything hurts. But that's life."

"Life should be more than just suffering," I hissed, bitterly, and she gasped and shuddered. "What's going on!" I asked in alarm, and the beeping rapidly increased as she writhed a little, red patches blooming on her bandages. "I'll get Triage!"

"No!" Glory said loudly, making me freeze. "Don't... bother... her... nothing... she... can... do..." Each word was a gasp of pain. Eventually, she relaxed, and the beeping receded. "The potion is countering the painkillers," she muttered hoarsely.

"Sorry," I replied in utter futility.

"It's okay... I'm glad to talk with you, one more time." She lay there, breathing for a moment. "Life's not just suffering. There's joy, too," she whispered. "I was happier than I'd ever been, travelling with you. You made me happier. If it hadn't been for you, I would have died under that floor, alone and too terrified to dare escape. But with you, I made a difference. And that is what you do, Blackjack. You matter. You make other ponies matter. There's nothing more precious than to matter to another person."

"You shouldn't be like this," I stammered. "They should have healed you! They should have done something."

"*They* did," Triage said behind me, my hackles rising at once. I turned my head, watching her casually enter. "Those two... fuck..." she said as she shook her head, then went on, "Didn't P.A. tell you

we put her in the pod three times?" She closed the door behind her. "That's two more times than I gave anypony else."

"How am I doing?" Glory whispered.

"You tell me," she answered.

"Pretty lousy. I'm disoriented, with a fever around... I'm guessing... forty?" Glory murmured. "Good thing Blackjack missed the whole vomiting and diarrhea stage, huh?"

"Yeah. And the whole necrosis of the epidermis. Abrading the burns. She'd have been just like your old man, screaming about saving you. Like, duh, what do they think we're doing?" Triage said as she tapped the bottles. "How's the moon dust?"

"Surprisingly addictive. I think I'm hooked," Glory said, her lip curling. "Oh dear. You should add 'possible drug addiction' to my file."

"I'll put it under the severe damage to your peripheral nervous system, your ataxia, and your seizures," Triage replied, not reaching for the chart. Then she slumped down in the seat Sky Striker had vacated.

"There must be something you can do," I muttered, horrified at their levity.

Triage glared at me sourly. "Oh, yippee. Let's have this argument yet again, shall we? No. There isn't anything I can do that I haven't done already. I was able to stabilize her, but she'd soaked up about triple the lethal dose of radiation by the time she got here. All the RadAway we pumped into her didn't do anything for the damage the radiation had already caused."

"A stasis pod..." I muttered, thinking about Sky Striker.

"The ones in the Fluttershy Medical Center are gone. The one left in the megastable was converted into a torture device." She leaned back and sighed. "If the Twilight Society could help, they're not saying, and besides, soon as the Enervation came back, all the alicorns screamed and bolted, save one. So there's no way to do a long distance teleport, even if there were someplace that could help." She slumped in the chair. "And if you're counting on ghoulfication, sorry. We don't know why some ponies become ghouls and others don't. And if you think I'm going to try and induce ghoulfication, you can go fuck yourself."

"A healing talisman," I suggested.

"Done! Took one out of a Brood and put it in after Glory's first jaunt through the pod," Triage said brightly. "Problem is that a healing talisman restores a pony to a set 'Healthy' medical state, otherwise it'd run constantly, 'healing' healthy tissue and probably causing cancer. And I don't have that state recorded for Glory. The talisman kept her from kicking off, but it can only heal so much, and she's under huge strain as it is. Her immune system is gone. If we weren't giving her moonstone for pain management before the Enervation hit, she would have died soon as it came back." The doctor waved a hoof absently. "Her body's too extensively damaged for cybernetics even if we had the time and materials, which we don't; we'd have to stick her brain in a robot at least and likely have to transfer her mind into a computer completely. I won't do that again," she stated firmly, glaring into my eyes with the message it wasn't open for debate. Then she went on, "And as for a blank Glory, like Morningstar wanted, that would require us cloning her limb by limb with that golden twig, sewing it all together, moving her mind or brain, and then having some necropony move her soul around. And apparently Snips was the one who did the cutting, by the way."

"So why didn't you try?" I asked, angrily.

"Because I've got five hundred other patients to juggle around one healing machine that's way past its warranty. That's why," Triage said, roused by her anger and jabbing her hoof at me. "And if you don't fucking like it, tough! It's my job, and I've already wasted tons of resources just keeping her alive this long! So go ahead and say I'm killing her or letting her die or whatever else you need to say. People die, and I'm just an ER doc way over her damned head here!" For the first time, the mask slipped, and there were tears in her eyes as well. She had to be just as frustrated as I was. How many others had demanded this of her? 'Save my loved one, please!'

I wanted to be bitter and selfish, but I knew exactly what she felt. "...I'm sorry, Triage," I said at last, hollowly. "Thank you for your help."

"No problem," she answered tiredly. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't doing anything... dangerous. Also, when you have a chance, come to the third floor nurse's station. I think the general and Velvet Remedy are going to kill each other over that damned control box. Just so you know," Triage said with a half smile before checking the IVs. "I wish I had some antibiotics and whole blood, but I guess it wouldn't buy much more time."

"How long?" Glory murmured.

She checked the beeping machine. "You've got bradycardia. Blood pressure's down. Blood oxygen level's down. Yeah. Not long." Glory suddenly started jerking and trembling in the bed, and I reached out to hold her as she shuddered in my embrace. "Yeah, that's not going to help either." Triage just shook her head. "I think that's number nineteen or twenty. Damned nursing staff. Really should keep a better record," she muttered as she rose to her hooves. I resisted the urge to shoot at her as the seizure passed through Glory.

The attack passed in a few seconds. "I need to get going," Triage said. "My horn might be scorched, but I can still sew a suture." She turned to Glory. "What do you want me to tell your family?" Glory didn't answer. She just gasped and trembled in my arms. "Fair enough," Triage muttered, then stepped out, closing the door behind herself.

I held Glory tighter. She cried out in pain, and I immediately pulled away. "No," she whimpered. "Please, don't let me go." I held her, a little more gingerly, afraid of hurting her, but then, I'd always hurt her. Least I could do was give her what she wanted. After a little bit, she stilled, making shallow breaths. "Could you... could you do one of those mindscapes... like you shared with Tom?"

How could she know about that? "Maybe," I said, then touched my horn to her brow. A mind was like a series of pools. All I needed was a pool that connected me to her, and...

oooOOOooo

"Oh, now this is better," Glory said as she sat on a cloud next to me. Just me. No wings. No armor. No alicorn soul. Just me. We looked out at the sun as it lay frozen on the horizon. I sat beside her, legs curled around her waist as I pressed my face to her neck and wept. "Shhh..." she said softly as she rubbed my mane with a beautiful gray wing. "It's okay."

"It's not okay! Stop saying that!" I snapped at her, then immediately regretted it.

"It's okay to be upset, Blackjack. I've been where you are, and I know what you're feeling. I was lucky enough to be able to bring you back, even if I lost you a little along the way. I know how much it hurts." She squeezed me tightly about the middle.

"It doesn't matter. I failed. I failed to stop Horizons from going off. And while I have one way that might save everypony, I'm not sure it will work! I feel like I'm turning into Cognitum, or Luna, or somepony who isn't me!" I said, then swallowed. "And you're going to die, and—"

She touched a hoof to my lips. "Shhh. Don't worry about that. I have something to tell you." She closed her eyes. "I've been thinking about how you can beat the Eater."

I stared at her. How could she know? "You were there when we were with Tom, weren't you?" I asked quietly.

"Moonstone does have wonderful pain management properties. It also seems to have quite a few side effects. Ever since I was put on it, I could see you on the moon and on your way back." She paused and then frowned at me. "By the way, Scotch Tape and Bastard..." And she smacked me upside the head with her wing.

"Ow! What? What'd I do?" I protested, leaning away from her, but in spite of everything I wore a shaky smile.

"What did you... ooooh..." She rubbed her brow and then sighed. "Just because something was okay in 99 doesn't mean it's okay out here. A grown stallion and a filly—"

"Not a filly," I interrupted her, and that seemed to surprise her. "Not anymore. She's a young mare now, and if that's what she wanted to do, then so be it." I relaxed a little too. "Besides, having done it, I don't think she's going to try the Blackjack recovery method again soon."

Glory just sighed and nuzzled my neck. "We only have this moment together, and I'm criticizing you." She sniffed wetly. "I'm sorry, Blackjack. I wish things could have been different between us. I wish I could have found some way to make it work." She sniffed again. "I lied about not loving you. I knew you'd be better off with him. Happier... I thought that if I just stepped aside, things would be better." She sniffed and shook her head. "I messed everything up."

"It's not your fault," I assured her. "It was me. I'm the one who messed—" She pressed her wing to my lips, gazing up at me, her purple eyes awash with tears.

"Let others take some of the blame, for once," she said as she sniffed once more, and she smiled as water ran along her cheeks. "If I'd been more mature... more patient... more understanding..."

"Shhhh," I said, and kissed her to cut off the babble of self-recrimination. "I love you, Glory. I always will. Let's not spend this time stuck on the parts that didn't work."

She pulled away to gaze into my eyes, and leaned in, giving me the most wonderful sensation I'd experienced my whole life as our lips met. Fire and silk and wonderful joy and bitter regret all clashed in that moment. I'd have kissed her forever, just like that, if I could. And when we broke away, it was simply so we could look in each other's eyes.

If only... and because this was a dream, 'if only' rolled out before us like a fog bank. There were P-21 and I, and there were our children. It was kind of hard to tell if they were boys or girls, but one was an earth pony and the other a unicorn. And there was an older Scotch Tape, watching them, teaching them how to make a BB gun with a switchblade spring, and taking them out to shoot at radroaches with Boo. P-21 and I went to see an older, slightly worn Glory and Tenebra, the former in a lab jacket doing something to make the Wasteland better, the latter holding her with a contented expression like I imagined I wore now. Rampage trotted in with Glory's sisters riding on her back while Lacunae stood off, watching it all with a wistful smile.

It was good. A good life. No more... no less... than any of us deserved.

But some ponies didn't get that, and the image faded to lingering mist. Neither one of us spoke as I struggled to burn that now absent image into my mind forever.

"That's..." Glory said with a smile, wiping away the tears with the back of her fetlock. "That was nice... Thank you," she murmured. Then she sighed, sniffed, and stared at me with more than the image of a family together in her eyes. "But I need to talk to you. I have a way you can beat the Eater."

I leaned towards her, meeting her gaze with my own. She had a plan. Of course she did. Glory flushed a little and turned out to the clouds covering the valley. "I had the idea after I saw the vision Tom gave us." Punching through the cloud layer, the shimmery fields stretched out to catch Tom. The image froze at that moment, Tom hovering in the midst of the pale white magic. "It has to do with the F.A.D.E. shields. The Eater plans to use them to keep Tom at bay long enough to devour him."

"But if we drop the shields, Horizons finishes as it was designed to. Everypony dies," I countered with a little frown.

"Yes, but what if we only took down half the shields?" Glory asked with a smug smile.

"Huh?" I blinked. "And that won't just... kill half of us?"

The air between her outstretched hooves shimmered, and a glowing white shape coalesced. It was a thick ring with hundreds of pairs of little rib-like branches sprouting from its inner and outer edges, the inner ones curving clockwise, the outer counterclockwise, and both sets curling up and back down to form two coplanar and coaxial toruses, little knobs and bobs scattered here and there on the main structure at, as far as I could tell, random. "This is the Tokomare."

"How?" I gaped at it.

"Rover. He's had the blueprints on the wall of this workroom for two centuries," Glory said as she smiled at the white shape. "The rest of it I got from the vision. There's quite a bit of guesswork too, but I think I have the most important parts. The geometry of the F.A.D.E. shields." The ring shrunk, and the nest of buildings appeared around it. With this close view, I could see that dozens of diagonal skyscrapers, conjoined at their bases and pointing out, were supporting the web of wire on which the Eater rested. The six largest supports were actually multiple buildings merged together, and their broken tops glowed bright blue. "The shield generators that defended the city were on the roofs of the skyscrapers in the center of the Core, designed to form a hexagonal pyramid to..." She caught my hapless, loving smile and flushed. "Well, in this arrangement, they'll form the walls of the chute that will guide Tom straight to the Eater."

She pointed a wing at the Tokomare's thick main ring. Six points on it lit up. "These points are the generators that will form the aperture to hold the stone in place while the Eater feeds." From those six points, smaller, thinner fields radiated out, forming a cup at the base of the chute with a tiny hole in the middle. "You have to disable those six before Tom hits."

"What happens if I do?" I asked as I stared at the diagram.

A tiny Tom flew down the chute as the cup disappeared. It hit the Tokomare, and a fountain of light gushed back up the chute like a shotgun blast. Glory slumped against me, nuzzling my chest. "The main F.A.D.E. shields should funnel the majority of the energy off into space. Not all. I imagine what's left of the Core will be quite molten, if it's not vaporized completely, but the world should be safe."

I stared at the image as it disappeared. The sun was now just a sliver above the horizon. "How am I going to get there? There're anti-dragon beams blasting anything that moves."

She gave a wan smile. "Underground. Rover's group and the cyberdogs seem to have bonded quite well. They mapped out a train route through the red tunnels. They were reinforced enough to survive the shifting of the city. He's getting a railcar ready. You'll come up underneath, right in the middle

of the Eater.” She closed her eyes. “Charity is already trying to convert our moonstone into shells you can use to destroy the starmetal F.A.D.E. housings.”

“Where did she get enough moonstone for that?”

“Goldenblood. Some of his agents stole samples from the Hoofington Museum of Natural History. A plot he put in motion before his execution. There should be enough for half a dozen rounds. Plus what you brought with you to help keep you safe from the Enervation,” she said, smiling up at me.

I took a shaky breath as all the images disappeared. “That moonstone... amazing stuff.”

“You have a heart of moonstone,” Glory said as she pressed her cheek against my chest. “How are your babies?”

I sniffed and gave a little choking noise, even though this was a dream. “They’re alive. I need to get them out of me. They’re just not safe with me. I shot Folly. They’ve been exposed to Flux.”

She nodded. “And a reinforced uterus isn’t going to be ideal for them much longer. Babies need room to grow.” She closed her eyes. “I talked to Triage. She’ll do the surrogacy spell. Grace has agreed to be the surrogate mother.” I stroked her mane as she glanced up at me. “Hopefully, it will make going against the Eater easier.” I honestly had no idea. My rational thinking was rapidly breaking down.

Glory seemed to be aware of this too as the sun slipped below the mountains, the clouds taking on rich red and purple hues. Her voice was soft as a feather brush. “You have to take out the internal F.A.D.E. shields before they go up. Once a F.A.D.E. shield is active, it sucks energy from whatever is hitting it and uses it to sustain the magic. They’re greedy power drains, though...”

“Glory...” I murmured.

“There’s so much to do. So much that has to go right,” she said as she struggled to lift herself, and couldn’t. I stroked her mane, much as I remembered her stroking mine a lifetime ago back on the ocean. “My family... Dusk... Father... Moonshadow... the twins... the Thunderhead survivors... the Core... You...” She lifted her face to mine, tears coursing down her chin.

I kissed her tears away, my own flowing down my cheeks. “Shhh. I’ll take care of it. Then we’ll be together,” I murmured as I held her tight.

But she stiffened in my embrace and pulled away. Her eyes shimmered in pain as she brushed my mane out of mine and said in a thick voice. “You have to live.” I swallowed, not trusting my voice as I held her tightly again, making little mewling noises in the back of my throat. “You have to go into this fight wanting to live, Blackjack.”

I struggled to answer, my throat seizing up as I rubbed her mane, my tears dripping on her neck. “I don’t know if I can,” I gasped between snotty sniffs as the light and colors dwindled away. “Life... it just seems so... worthless!” I clutched her as if my life depended upon it. “How can I live when everyone I love has been taken from me? Over and over. Again and again. It’s just too damn much!”

“Shhhh,” she said, her cheek against my chest. “It’ll be okay. Life can be hard, and painful, and lonely... but it can also be... wonderful... if given the chance...” she said, her voice becoming more and more indistinct as the light passed away. “Live, Blackjack. Live... and make it better...”

The last shreds of light vanished from the sky, till nothing remained. Nothing at all.

oooOOOooo

I held her tightly in my embrace, even though she was gone. My magic killed the alarm sounding from the bedside equipment. Still I held her limp, bandaged form. It didn’t quiver in pain. Her pain was

over. She was gone. I don't know how long it was before I could finally release her. I kissed her bandaged brow and whispered softly, "I love you." Only then could I bear to pull away from her. Glory was... don't think about it...

Don't think. Don't feel. Do what you have to do. Dignity. Poise. Be a Princess. Cool. Stand upright. Don't slouch. Don't weep. Chin up. Lip stiff. Remember what your sister told you: when all others have lost their self-control, you must retain yours.

I stepped from the room, and the floor felt odd. I could see the lips of Sky Striker moving, but no sound came from them. I saw tears, but felt nothing. He lunged for me, but his elder two daughters held him back as I walked by. Their screams and cries echoed disjointedly, as if they were underwater as I walked down the hall. See? I was in control. Don't think... don't feel. Do what you have to do. I saw Triage staring at me, her brows knitted together as she gazed over the top of her glasses. Her mouth moving. A question. "Are you okay?"

Okay? Of course I was okay. Don't think about the wailing. Don't think about that bandaged body lying in the bed. How her last act had been to try and help me, how desperate she'd been to have her life be something else. How monstrous I'd been to let that relationship fail when she'd needed me so much. "Of course." She didn't believe me. She was a smart pony. Like Glory. P-21. Even Rampage, in her own way. "You said something about a problem between Storm Chaser and Velvet Remedy?"

"Yeah," Triage muttered, not taking her eyes off me, as if she expected me to attack her again. How silly. I had no spoon. "Just down the hall. Make sure she doesn't kill Velvet. I'm going to need her for the procedure."

As we walked down the hall, Scotch Tape came scrambling up the stairs to the third floor, a broad smile on her face. "Hey, Blackjack! Where's Glory? I wanted to let her know that after surviving this, she's not boring anymore!" But I didn't answer. I didn't even stop. "Blackjack?" she asked in confusion, and then she whimpered, "Oh, no. No no no..." She wept, and I glanced to see her curled up on the floor in the middle of the hall.

We walked past ponies who stared and spoke words I could not hear, begged wishes I could not grant. A few doors down was a nurse's station where Storm Chaser and Velvet were having a shouting match, the former with two uncomfortable pegasi flanking her and the latter with Calamity and Homage at her sides. Velvet was levitating the Legate's control box, a chunk of moonstone, and the sword as she yelled. A very nervous-looking Brood flyer watched from the sidelines. Homage noticed me first, and like Triage, her expression became strange. As if she couldn't believe her eyes. A moment later, the other quarrelers noticed me, and as one they grew silent. "Is something amiss?" I asked properly, keeping my head when all others had lost theirs. Sister, you'd be so proud.

Storm Chaser, her heated voice reined in to hissing frustration, pointed a wing at Velvet. "She won't turn over the control system for the Brood. We can shut them all down now, once and for all."

"You mean kill them! I won't let you murder thousands of people with the push of a button!" Velvet countered, her horn blazing. "I'll destroy it before I let you do that!"

"They mean to kill us! They're weapons. They're the enemy!" Storm Chaser shouted.

"We've come across more and more of them that aren't fighting us anymore! They're dazed and confused now that this thing isn't in that monster's chest!" Velvet said, shaking the box as she pointed the sword at the pegasus mare.

"I don't care! If two hundred of them turn out to be the nicest abominations of forbidden technology and messed up magic the Wasteland's ever seen, that leaves at least two thousand more that are left pushing us on all sides! They're regrouping to try and finish us all off!"

"They just need more time! Others will come to if we give them a chance!" Velvet hissed, sweeping the sword. "You just want to kill them, you bloodthirsty monster!" She gestured at the Brood sitting passively beside them. The flyer flinched at the gesture.

First things first. I reached out with my magic and gripped the sword. Velvet blinked, her eyes wide as she stared at the blade and then at me. Her magic gave a few little tugs, before she released it. "I'm... sorry. I don't know why I got so frustrated." Then her frown returned.

"But that still doesn't mean I'm going to let—" she began at the same time Storm Chaser shouted, "We're expended! Even with the reinforcements we've gotten, we can't last another hour! We need—"

I looked at them. That's all it took... a look that encapsulated all my expectations that they comport themselves like mature mares and not frantic fillies. I took the box and the little knob of moonstone from Velvet, who released them to me with a worried expression on her face. The 'broadcaster' that had been screwed to his heart had been opened up. Inside, everything seemed to be built around what appeared to be a simple starmetal cube slightly larger than a lump of sugar. No instruction manual anywhere I could see. "Can we just tell them to stop fighting?" I asked.

"We don't have that level of control. I don't even know how that thing works," Homage said with a frown. "If we had some days to study it we might be able to do something."

"We don't have days!" Storm Chaser countered. "Those beams have driven off the *Rampage* and *Cyclone*. They're taking cover behind the Canterlot mountains. We're one shield failure from being annihilated and one hour from being overwhelmed."

I turned the box over in the air in front of me, then regarded the zebra augmented with cybernetic wings. "Why did you stop fighting?"

The Brood looked at each person in the nurse's station before dropping his eyes. "I don't know," he said in that rusty, raspy voice. "I just... I didn't want to. I couldn't hear it wanting me to kill. I didn't know what else to do but fight... and then..." The flyer shook his head. "I felt differently. I shouldn't be killing... and I shouldn't have these wings." He appeared pained. "This body is all wrong... but I don't know why."

I reached out with a hoof and raised his chin, staring into his augmented, red eyes. So very much like my own. "What are you? Don't think about it. Just answer. What are you?"

"An earth pony, ma'am," he answered and then lowered his eyes. "A... a mare, I think. I keep worrying about my children, but I know I don't have them." He trembled and closed his eyes. "This body is all wrong. It just... feels wrong..."

I could relate, and reconsidered the box. How had the Legate used it? It hadn't been wired into his head but into the talisman in his chest. The talisman, I assumed, which contained his soul. "What kind of technology is this damned thing?"

"It's not really 'technology'," a filly quipped. We all froze, and I turned to see Pythia sitting on a crate across the hall from us, consulting her map of the stars as she dangled a crystal above it. She glanced up at us. Scotch Tape sat beside her, forlorn as a kicked puppy. "What? If you're gonna hold a meeting somewhere, you might at least make it a place with a door."

I held up the box. "You know how this works?"

"You're surprised?" she asked with a smug little grin as she folded up the map carefully and tucked it into a worn knapsack, then jumped off the crate and trotted over to us. "I thought you might

have a clue, given you're now Luna. Aren't you supposed to have all kinds of evil star and soul knowledge?" The impudent zebra filly smirked up at me. "Hello? Is there any Blackjack left in there?"

"I'm Blackjack," I said with a frown... but why did that sound like a lie?

"Right. Keep telling yourself that," she said as she hopped up and snagged the box from the air. "Mind, body, and soul. Start swapping them around and things get interesting." She turned the box over in her hooves, then peered at the block of starmetal at its center. "Wow. Can't believe he found it. Melchior's Cube." She tapped her hoof against it as she pressed it to her ear.

"The Legate used that thing to give commands to his soldiers?" Storm Chaser asked. "Like a radio or terminal?"

"It doesn't give commands, exactly," Pythia replied, then regarded the hapless Brood stallion. "I think the 'kill kill kill' impulse was the Legate's soul. I think this extends a soul out into the Brood like a projector. Without a connection to a soul, the Brood have no sense of self."

"Souls?" The general sounded anguished in her incredulity.

"Yes. Souls," she said as she pried what was apparently 'Melchior's Cube' out and tossed the box aside carelessly. "There've got to be lots of loose souls in the Hoof now that the Eater is exposed. When one of those souls meets a blank, it finds an empty receptacle, and the soul starts to warp the mind within." Why was everypony suddenly looking at me like that? Pythia went on, ignoring me as she studied the little cube. "The Brood were blanks with combat skills and augmentations implanted, but they had no sense of self. No identity. The Legate used this to project his identity across them."

"So how do we use it to make them stop trying to kill us?" Storm Chaser asked, clearly uncomfortable with this.

"You need a person with a soul that will overwhelm the Legate's personality," Pythia explained, lifting the cube. "This nasty thing was how my tribe once attempted to rule an empire. Bit us in the ass. Moron didn't learn from history." I tilted my head a little as she licked it and scrunched up her face. "Abadsol's starmetal. I've tasted that tang before."

"What?" I think three ponies asked at once, including me.

"Not all starmetal is from the Eater. It's all nasty stuff, though. Not sure if you noticed, but the word 'Eater' doesn't jibe with 'projection'." She reached out and waved her hoof at the sword. I hesitantly passed it to her. "Ooooh. Dominan's starmetal!" She gave a few swings in her hooves, and I noticed she seemed uncannily skilled with it. "I want to start commanding and killing already." She set it aside and looked up at all of us. "Starmetal comes in different flavors. Some of it simply drives you crazy. Some of it will make you sick. It can slowly suck out your soul. Some of the stuff even whispers if you listen closely enough."

"How do you know this?" Velvet asked. "No offense, sweetie, but—"

"I'm Starkatter. Creepy zebra soul and star shit is kinda our whole deal," she replied. "And if you call me 'sweetie' again, I'll personally get a dead star to piss on your wedding day." That definitely cut off all inquiry in that direction.

We shared an awkward moment, and then Triage coughed uncomfortably, mercifully breaking the silence that had settled on the room and giving me the opportunity to ask, "So what do we do?"

Velvet Remedy frowned. "We could do nothing and see if other Brood come across souls."

"You could, sure," Pythia said. "Right now I think the Eater is drawing souls from all across the world. This is its moment of rebirth, after all, and those silver rings are probably pumping out more Enervation everywhere. If you listen, you can hear the screams." I did not think about that. If I thought about that, I would scream and never, ever, be able to stop. "Of course, not all souls are equal, nor nice. I'm sure there're plenty of raider souls out there. But yeah, sure, you could do that," she finished with a grin. Then she held up the cube and asked, "So the question is... know anyone with any experience having their soul linked up to a couple thousand perfect killing machines without going completely insane?"

We all shared a look.

* * *

The next hour passed like a dream. Maybe it was a dream. Perhaps everything was a dream, only if it was, then everything that had happened would be meaningless. The medics had implanted the soul-control in a pony they thought would stop the fighting. It hadn't worked as well as we'd hoped. Small surprise. I'd had my babies removed and transferred to Grace. As soon as this mess was over, they'd take her to Tenpony to have any lingering Flux nullified. Grace's only condition was that the whole thing be kept secret and that I yield my regency over the Society when this was all over. I'd agreed, perfunctorily.

Then I found a window to stare out of. Nopony approached me, as I wished. My input wasn't necessary for the final preparations being made. I could barely move at all. Homage said somepony was coming to help. Every minute or so, the Eater blasted the University with another beam.

All I could do was stare at the nest of ruined skyscrapers cradling that sickly green illumination, knowing I had to defeat a monster within before I lost what little was left of me. Or my mind.

Live, Glory had begged.

Life was suffering. Misery. Insanity.

How could I want to live after everything I'd endured?

"Not easy, is it?" Pythia quipped. Once, I would have jumped at her unexpected voice as she leaned against the deep windowsill facing me. "Having a soul inside you that's not yours?"

I slowly glanced at her. "You too?"

She flushed, then shrugged. "Long story, but yeah. I can relate." She hopped up, sat down on the windowsill, and leaned back against the wall. "It's going to kill you, eventually. Not your body. Your identity. You can only have a soul that's not yours for so long before it just squishes the mind into a new shape. Most people go crazy. I sure did," she said, gazing out the window as well, her young face darkened by the shadow of an older zebra mare. "I think this place attracts the old souls. Wants to possess them like a dragon's hoard." She glanced at me and smirked. "And you having *that* soul... well... it's a doozy."

"You know about alicorn souls?" I asked.

"I know about old souls. They spill over, after a while. Start to affect things differently than normal people's. Look at that sword of yours," she said as she gestured to the starmetal sword I'd retained. I frowned, then examined it. The blade once adorned with resplendent unicorns now was decorated in stars and moons in a constellation of the night sky. I gaped at it and then drew Vigilance. The gun's design hadn't changed, but the names etched in the metal were now done in elegant script,

and similar constellations were etched along the barrel. I gaped at the weapon, at her, and then back at the weapon. "Buh... wha... no..." Damn it, Luna! Stop touching my things! "How?"

"Your soul spills over beyond your body, changing it." She tapped my chest. "In here, you probably have all the same junk you had before. All the components and gadgets and whatever. The soul alters their... being. Set them apart from you for a while, and they'd probably change back."

I swallowed hard. "Can you give me back my soul?" I whispered.

She frowned and leaned towards me, crossing her hindlegs and resting her chin on her hoof. "Would you take it back if I could? Even if it meant you'd lose?"

I shuddered, looked away toward that horrible nest, and couldn't answer.

After a minute, Pythia shrugged. "For the best. I'm not a necromancer, and it always takes at least two to do what you want. One to sever, the other to anchor. Three is safer." She sighed and pulled back. "Necromancer's a lame gig to begin with. They used to usher souls to the Summerlands, long ago. What I think you'd call the 'everafter'. Then some zebra decided to get creative with them. Damned idiots," she muttered, and shook her head. "No one wants to die." Then she glanced at me and gave a thin, mirthless smile. "Well, almost no one."

"I don't want to die," I said, with all the zeal and conviction of a corpse.

"Right," she said as she rolled forward and landed neatly on her hooves on the floor. "Well, sometimes we don't get what we want. Or what we deserve. If we're lucky, we get what we need, and then we do the rest ourselves."

I watched her go, gave that horrible nest one last, lingering look, and then walked the other way.

There were the sounds of fighting. Horrible sounds. That soul was taking far too long to assert itself on the Brood. Then again, maybe it had been a flawed pony to begin with. Maybe her pacifism made her too timid to draw the Brood away from the fighting. Maybe the evil of the Legate was simply too dark a stain to be overcome. Maybe we'd all been completely wrong, and everything we were doing was utterly futile and pointless. Maybe the reason just didn't matter anymore.

The barricade had given way, and ponies were trying to find any cover available as Brood now pressed in from two breaches below and the roof above. The Eater now pelted the shield every few seconds in a display that made my head ache.

"No," I said, and a field of moonlight fell like the northern lights between the Brood and the exhausted Wastelanders. I walked forward, Vigilance on my left, Duty and Sacrifice on my right. I advanced, and ponies to either side of me stared in awe as I went to work. I registered other fighters. Psalm, not using a weapon but simply her shield, protected a small knot of ponies, hoof pressed to her bandaged chest and face twisted in anguish. Dazzle sprayed beams of light that seemed golden against the pall of the Core. Tenebra stared at me for a moment with tears in her eyes before returning to battle with her father's sword. I dimly wondered if Glory and Triage had found a treatment for her epilepsy. Dusk and Calamity struck from the skies, skimming the crackling shield, transferring the pain of their loss to those that had inflicted it.

There was no thrill in this battle. No joy. Just the certainty that soon it would be over. That I would be with them. I smiled, but even as I watched Brutus and Hammersmith smashing into the front row... even with Scootaborg, Sweetie Bot, and Applebot forming an immobile trio that refused to break... even as Bastard planted perfect headshots with his twin pistols while enjoying a cigarette... even as Whisper tore through a half dozen Brood... even as Homage sprayed with the rainbow beams of Glory's

blaster... it wasn't enough. The battle sounded like a dim roar growing dimmer by the second. I hardly registered the fighting around me. It wasn't enough. I wasn't enough.

Still so pessimistic, Luna?

I gasped, and my eyes snapped to the west, where beyond the nest of the Eater, a golden moon rose above the mountains. No. Not a moon! The shimmering sphere rose higher and higher into the sky. It was still enmeshed in the remains of a cloud base, and that was being hauled by a half dozen different Raptors. I stared at that beautiful sphere, and tears ran down my face despite the hollowness inside my heart.

Sister, I thought back. Then I turned to *Homage*, who also stared west in clear relief. "How?" I asked her.

"Windsheer's idea. Since we couldn't cut through the interference, he figured that the S.P.P. hub could control the towers through line of sight." She grinned and blew a kiss to the orb hanging in the western sky. "Nick of time, LittlePip. Nick of time."

Instantly I felt the change in the air. Wetter. Heavier. There were four S.P.P. towers in the valley, and I looked at the nearest one to the south of the Core. White mist was now streaming from the tips of the massive feathers that formed the cap. A warm, wet wind began to blow. "What is she doing?"

"Using the S.P.P. against the Brood that are attacking us," *Homage* said with a grim smile.

Emerald beams began to flash and flare, blasting the orb with their deadly energy. The green glare clashed with the normally ruby shield, engulfing the hub in spectacular explosions of golden yellow light. The beams sparked and danced over the field, sending sheets of lightning spreading out over the surface like ripples in a pond. A second beam joined the first. And a third. *Homage's* smile faded a little. "That shield is supposed to be invulnerable, right?" I asked nervously.

"Yes," she murmured as her brows knitted together, "but I don't think they ever tested it like this."

Invulnerable or not, the shields held, and a ring of cloud was thickening and growing around the Core. The valley was feeling a lot more familiar as the band of clouds grew thicker and darker. The beams of the Core suddenly became more frantic and erratic. They swept at the Raptors, which only just managed to dodge. The half dozen vessels clustered together behind the hub and left the beams raking the wrecked superstructure of the base with crackles of emerald lightning.

The wind pouring off the towers seemed to be whipping the clouds into a counterclockwise spin. "What is she trying to do?" I asked as rain began to speckle down. The band was growing not just thicker but also wider, and whatever it was, the Eater sure didn't seem to like it. Any beam not facing the S.P.P. hub began to target the mushroom-like towers. The sheer size of the structures allowed them to resist immediate annihilation, but scores of their feathery branches exploded in rains of shrapnel, leaving the towers pouring out smoke as well as mist.

Despite the damage, the storm continued to build, thunder beginning to roll through the dark clouds. "I thought the S.P.P. was just supposed to make weather!" Like rain... and not rain... and stuff...

"It does!" *Homage* shouted over the rising wind and booming thunder. Even the Brood attacking us had halted their advance, now looking up as if the entire concept of weather was alien to them.

"How is weather supposed to be a weapon?" I asked in bafflement.

"Um, hurricanes? Tornadoes?" I gaped at her, and she shouted in exasperation, "Weren't you once struck by lightning or something?!"

"Oh. Yeah." I rubbed the back of my head. "I've had some things happen since then..."

Then three beams converged on the stem of the S.P.P. tower that rose from the granite knob overlooking the nest, not raking but holding on a single point midway up. After a few long moments, the beams continued out the other side, and as they shut off to reveal the stem blasted through, the top of the tower began to lean. The last remaining supports gave as the tremendous boom of the demolition reached us, and when we heard the great crack of the structure failing, the top was already descending free, deceptively slowly and still trailing cloud from its top, back towards the reservoir. A moment later it hit, raising a burst of white water and sending a wave to wash down the fronts of the dams. Homage swore, but, even with that loss, the remaining three towers continued to pour out a deluge of cloud, now crackling and black. I looked from them to the hub to the Core, wondering if it was hopeless after all, but then I felt my hair begin to stand on end.

Weren't you once struck by lightning or something?!

"Get down!" I shouted out. "Everypony get under cover!"

A peculiar bubble of calm, or at least relative calm, formed around the University. Heedless of the danger, though, I flew up to a rooftop and grabbed an old radio aerial, locking my mechanical fingers around it and watching the sight. Clouds screamed around the spires of the Core, catching on the jagged edges of the towers and being torn into great white streamers. The thickening cloud had grown to the point I could just barely see the base of the enormous sphere resting over the mountains. Green beams fired, converging on another of the S.P.P. towers.

Then the clouds struck back. In one blinding strike from all directions, a thousand bolts of lightning fell as one. The area around us was flooded with explosive noise of such force that they probably heard it in Manehattan, and anypony not already flat on the ground was flattened by the concussion. Some of the brilliant, jagged columns of light struck around me, smiting with uncanny accuracy any Brood still firing and yet forking around our forces and the University buildings themselves. Most lanced in and struck the massive nest of towers, sending electricity crackling down the rearranged girders. The starmetal wires hummed in the wind as the eye of the storm narrowed. Below me, even disciplined defenders, without augmented eyes and ears, cried out in pain. Another blast of lightning fanned out in every direction with its accompanying thunder. And another. The blasts were now seeking out the sources of those emerald beams, clawing at the tower tips like the flashing talons of storm dragons. One green emitter exploded in a shower of sparks. Another. Another!

Then something moved inside the Core. I could not see what. I wasn't sure I wanted to. All I knew was a profound sense of dread as that green light within grew brighter and brighter again. A shadow lifted into the air, pointed towards the west.

Sister! Look out! I thought with every fiber of my being.

The swirling clouds suddenly took on that hideous, glaring green glow as a beam lanced through them. Such was its brilliance that it could be seen through the swirling murk. This huge, diffuse bar of baleful light struck the S.P.P. hub's shield, but there were no sparks this time. No, this time there was only screaming. My sister's screams.

The Eater was trying to devour my sister.

The brilliantly illuminated shield around the hub began to stretch into the shape of an egg. "Get down! Get behind the mountains!" I screamed, my words lost to the howling gale. I opened my PipBuck, got on the MASEBS, and started to scream those two sentences heedless of who could hear me, even as my head felt as if it were about to explode. Again and again I cried out, watching the sphere as the Eater attempted to pry my sister from the device.

Mercifully, the sphere pulled away and dipped down again, hauled back by the attendant Raptors far too slowly for my tastes, and disappeared behind the mountains. The storm continued; I supposed that, without line of sight, there was no way to turn it off. The tempest went wild, spitting off funnel-like clouds that lashed at the Core and the surrounding countryside alike. Seeming to ignore the devastation around it, that shadow then turned towards me. Was it a hand? A claw? A mouth? I sat there almost curiously, watching it, like a foal smiling down a gun barrel. That terrible green brilliance began to peak again.

And then I was flying, not of my own volition. A pair of immense scaly hands cradled me gently as I was carried into the air by a great winged form. "What are you doing, Blackjack?" Spike roared over the wind as it carried us around the Core. That shadow continued to track us, but the purple dragon with the dashing eye patch stayed ahead of it. "This is starting to become a disturbing habit!"

I didn't move. Had I really... I had. I had, hadn't I? I hadn't even thought of it. I stared down as we flew around the Core. The fight was over. LittlePip had ended it. The only Brood left were Brood who weren't fighting anymore. The ponies below me were getting to their hooves, and that wasn't the only friendly movement, either. The Arena was a thronging mass of life, and there were other pockets of resistance elsewhere, too. In spite of everything the Legate and the Eater had attempted, we still held on. We survived.

Spike landed on the back side of the hill to Star House. Behind us, I could see the reservoir and on the far side of it the smoking ruins of Elysium. The Wasteland had come for the Society, but I could also see lots of movement there as well. The Wasteland hadn't won. From the Core came an earsplitting scream of frustration, then silence.

"Wow. I think I'd rather storm Neighvarro all over again than hang out here," Spike said before frowning down at me. "With all the interference, I figured I'd come down myself and make sure you were all right. Then I spotted you just standing on the roof there." He set me down with a small frown of worry. "Blackjack?"

I took a few steps. "I don't know anymore," I said, not sure if I could be heard over the howling gale.

He poked his head up, over the ridge, then jerked it back down again as a beam cut through the air his head had been occupying. While many of the anti-dragon beams had been taken out by LittlePip, one or two were still managing to sputter out an anemic blast or two. "Okay," Spike said. "Why don't you go down to Star House? I'm going to lead its attention off, then tell everyone at the Collegiate where you are and that you're okay. Okay?"

I didn't answer aloud. I could barely nod. He watched me in worry, then turned and swooped off over the huge, dark lake. Once he had some speed, he was back up in the clouds, drawing fire. I watched him go, then turned and made my way through the dark and storm towards... home.

* * *

The house hadn't changed much since the party. There was still such a mess. Leftover food lying strewn from tipped-over bowls. Remains of fruit from the Society that had filled the air with a pungent, sickly sweetness. Half-empty bottles of Sparkle-Cola and whiskey sitting about, flat and tepid. I just had to wait. Just wait. I couldn't go upstairs. It was as impossible as going to the moon.

I just had to wait with the ghosts.

I sat down at the party table in the centermost seat, empty chairs to either side of me. "Empty chairs... empty tables..." I murmured at everything spoiled and scattered around me. The phantom faces

and shadows of those I had known and loved watched me from beyond as I sat there, awaiting my turn to join them.

I could hear Rampage's raucous laughter as P-21 threatened her with a grenade while Lacunae watched, scandalized, from the front door. I could hear the music as Priest, Melody, and Lacunae played along with me in concert. I could smell the oily acrid aroma of Glory's cooking. I could feel her and P-21's hooves against my skin, no matter how much of my body I'd lost. And as I sat there, more and more ghosts of the past filed in. Midnight and Rivets. Scoodle. Forty foals. The Dealer. Dusty Trails and Tumbleweed. Roses and Thorn. Big Daddy and Gorgon and Deus. A group of mares in slave collars. That was the horrible thing about ghosts: you could always fit in more. Goldenblood, rasping away. Twilight and Rainbow Dash staring on in concern. Sekashi. Stygius. Silver Spoon. Even Lighthooves, Dawn, and Steel Rain could snicker from the balcony. I had room for other people's ghosts as well. Dusk's Lightning Dancer and Lensflare's and Calamity's Windsheer were in attendance.

I checked my PipBuck. Only two hours to go. Two hours till my life ended. I swept my eyes across the room, at a loss for what to do with the limited time I had left. Food. I should eat something. I could have a last meal before my two hours were up. I levitated over a bowl, filled it with cereal, and took a bite.

Your mother tasted like... apples...

Tears dripped into the bowl as I swallowed that single, horrible bite. My limbs shook as I sat there, quivering as everything inside me finally threatened to explode. P-21. Glory. Rampage. Lacunae. Again and again, my friends rolled through my mind. Impaled. Irradiated. Forsaken. Sacrificed. Not me. I was the last! I was the fucking last!

I threw back my head and screamed, flinging the bowl away. I screamed again, and the ghosts applauded. I screamed and they cheered! This was the price to be paid. Not death. No. Not death. Not release. Not relief. I screamed like I'd never stop screaming. I'd scream forever, past forever, till all the stars died and only the eternal void remained. And I'd scream in that blackness, forever.

Then I was held. Not by ghostly hooves of memory but by the warm, caring hooves of the living. They squeezed me as tightly around the middle as they could as somepony else's tears dropped onto my neck. I slowly turned as the chaos inside me was stilled for one precious, critical moment.

"No, Mama," Boo said, weeping as she held me as tight as she could.

The pain inside me turned to tears, and I wept for them all. Like rain falling on a forest fire of torment, the suffering spilled from me and smothered those flames. For each ghost in that house, even my enemies, I wept. I sobbed and let every last bit of pain and suffering out through those tears. And Boo, a pony who had defied every roll of the dice to escape being one of those ghosts, wept with me. She shared my grief, my loss. A pony who should never have been, yet was, now kept me together. And while a pony can scream until the end of the universe and beyond, nopony could weep forever. Even so, I indulged myself with a good, long cry.

When I finally pulled myself together, Boo sat next to me, a hoof across my shoulders as I blubbered. She was my confessor, and I told her everything. All my failures. My fears. I didn't know if she fully understood, and even if she didn't, I doubted it really mattered. All that did matter was that somepony shared everything that I felt. That, somehow, made it real. And even if it didn't alleviate the pain, it made it all bearable. That which had been crushing me, I could now carry.

"It's okay, Mama. It's okay," she repeated again and again. Of course, it wasn't, but that didn't matter. 'Okay' was a prayer you repeated again and again in the hopes that it would become true. When I finally wiped my eyes and nose, I felt more myself than I had since leaving the moon.

"No, it's not," I finally admitted. "But I have to make it okay. I have to do that. Not fix. Not restore. Just... okay. I can be content with that."

That was when I noticed something new sitting next to her. A thick block of papers tied together with string, with a long, thin, roundish object wrapped in paper on top. I frowned as I levitated it over and unwrapped the object, spotting writing on the wrapper. A note.

Blackjack,

If you're reading this, I'm either dead or captured. This was the likely outcome for anypony you picked to be in charge in your absence. That it was me, and not a more important pony like Storm Chaser, Big Daddy, or Grace is a benefit to your cause. I left my instructions in advance and will wait for the Legate to take me. If I am still alive, then I fully expect a great amount of embarrassment when you read this.

These papers are a collection of notes that I've made, and updated, regarding the formation of various governments and political systems. They were models that Luna, ultimately, rejected. No matter how difficult things are today, I know that you will prevail. When you do, some system of governance will need to be implemented to avoid the mistakes of the past. Regardless of the ultimate fate of the Eater, the Wasteland persists until civilization is imposed upon it. Grace, Finders Keepers, Triage, Persephone, Big Daddy, and Storm Chaser are all instrumental to this, and I've left notes with each to find these papers here.

Should you feel that my input would be a detriment to the future of Equestria, by all means, consign these notes to the flames. I have faith that there are still good ponies in the world, and while the Lunar Commonwealth may seem a good idea to me, epitomizing common unity and individual freedom, the reality is that no idea is perfect. Not even mine.

Lastly, I wish to apologize for the undue trouble that I caused. I hope that, with these final acts, I will have done better. I know I cannot redeem myself completely, but, as you said, it is the effort of atonement that matters most. I've placed assets that I feel will be beneficial to you in the care of others. I only hope there is enough to achieve success. I've reports that Glory survived the events at the Luna Space Center. I pray that she recovers and that you might share some happiness together.

Ever a servant, ever a friend,

Goldenblood

PS: This was entrusted to Fluttershy. I suspect she saw what it was and promptly returned it to the sender. I hope it will be of some use to you.

I stared at the letter and then regarded the object it was wrapped around. The black metal case was so familiar. I touched it, and it opened easily for me. Inside, nestled in the black crushed velvet, was a single silver bullet for Folly.

EC-1101. Shields. Folly. Three smart ponies had given me three different options.

Now there was just the question of which one I would take.

Assuming, of course, that I didn't die on the way. Then I frowned and looked at my flank. My cutie mark, stolen by Cognitum, was still there. An ace and a queen of spades. Like the sword and pistol, they'd both been re-etched in a Luna-esque theme: the dark mare herself graced the queen, and the ace was decorated with moons and stars. "Boo, do you think 'victory' is a talent?"

"Like, just winning?" she asked, scrunching up her face. When I nodded, she blew a raspberry. "No. That's dumb. What's the point in that?"

"In blackjack, this is the unbeatable pair. You can't get any higher. It's like... like a royal flush of spades. But I've been beaten before. Badly," I said as I turned back to her. "Does it mean... my enemies can't win? I can be defeated. I can even be killed. But nopony can make me stop." I looked around the house, then drew Vigilance. There, the second name: Tarot. That was some kind of divination thingy, right? What did those cards mean? I hadn't the foggiest.

It didn't matter, though, because it felt right to me. Everything I'd done. Everything that I'd gone through had delivered me to this point. I'd suffered. I'd lost. But now, perhaps, I could do what I was meant to do.

Alone. I wouldn't have anypony else die for me.

"I need to go, Boo," I said as I gave her a thankful hug. "I never thought I'd say this, but I have to go and save the world." I smiled when I said that.

"Okay," Boo answered, and started for the door. "You'll tell me all about it when you get back, right, Mama?"

That was assuming a lot. "Yeah. Sure," I said as I followed her. I'd walk to the tunnel. I wasn't in any hurry to meet my inevitable end. "But you should stay here, Boo. Don't want to get blasted by a beam, right?"

She blew another raspberry. "Lightning blasted the beam thingies. It's okay. We can go to the tunnel." She opened the door. "Come on, Blackjack. I'll walk with you. You're safe with me, Mama."

I hesitated at the threshold, looking back at all the ghosts I carried with me. "This is a nice house," I said as my eyes skipped over the mess. I left the papers right where they needed to be discovered. Better ponies than me would be able to do something with them. And then I stepped out and closed the door behind me, one final time.

The storm whirled around us, but I felt strangely calm. My earlier despair had suddenly shifted to a slight, inexplicable eagerness, as if my center of mass had just altered. I was apprehensive, yes, for the stakes hadn't changed in the slightest... but now? Now I was positively keen on getting down there and facing a monster.

Walking down the slope towards Chapel, I looked over the still-smoldering wreck of the village. In spite of the damage wrought by Deus's battle, dozens and dozens of ponies were milling about the battlefield. Some were scavenging anything worthwhile while others were finding friends and loved ones. The chapel itself, against all odds, still remained standing. It had become an island of sorts around which pooled most of the ponies who lingered outside now that the beams posed no real threat.

Funny, shouldn't it be raining? All around us, the rain hissed, but it sheeted off a bubble that surrounded Boo and myself. I stopped, then turned. "Psalm," I said with a tired smile. I'd wanted to avoid this, but the confrontation was inevitable. Still... I wasn't really Luna. I couldn't give her what she wanted.

The purple mare stared at me as I stared back. "Goddess," she whispered. "It's really you. I saw you during the melee at the Collegiate, but... it's you." The purple alicorn wore several fresh bandages around her torso and neck.

"No. I'm still Blackjack. I'm just... different. I have her inside me," I replied. Was it just me, or was I able to look her in the eye now? "Are Crumpets and Stronghoof okay?" A tiny nod. I gestured to her chest. "Are you doing okay with... everything?"

"Yes," she replied, touching the bandages. "It doesn't feel much different than being in Unity, only they're like vessels needing to be washed out and refilled." She regarded me and smiled. "Every now and then, one is filled from an outside source, and I lose the connection, but I really don't mind. It helps knowing that one day they'll be free. It's what Lacunae would have wanted." She sighed wistfully, looking out into the storm. "Others are just... taken from me, winking out like candles in the dark. They have caused great suffering, and the Wasteland does not so easily forgive."

If I hadn't guessed what she was here for before, there was no mistaking it now. I sighed and closed my eyes. "I forgive you, Psalm."

"Forgive... me?" She sounded confused.

Now I was baffled as I opened one eye, seeing her frown thoughtfully. I regarded her. "Isn't that what you were going to ask me? To forgive you for what you did during the war?"

She actually smiled. "No. Not anymore. I... wanted it because I knew it would never come. It let me damn myself. Now, though... I don't think I need it. Not like I used to." She seemed so confident. So... so sure. "Although it's nice to hear, it's not what I wanted." She closed her eyes again. "I wanted to say that... *I forgive you.*"

I felt as if I'd been speared through my core, and tried to laugh. "Forgive... what? For what?"

"For the war. For not... saving us all back then. And I know the other Marauders would, too," she said evenly. "And I wanted to forgive you too, Blackjack. For P-21, and Glory, and Rampage. Because I know what it's like to carry all that guilt."

My breath hissed a moment. "You don't know what you're talking about, Psalm," I muttered tensely under my breath. "You have no right to forgive me. I have no right to be forgiven."

"Nevertheless, I forgive you," she said calmly, with a disturbing serenity that made me growl. Did she really think all my sins could be forgiven... just like that?

"Do you have a clue what I've done? What you... you... you don't have any right to forgive all the harm I've caused. The lives I've ruined!" I turned my back on her.

"Yes, I do. I remember what Lacunae experienced with you. For a time, your minds were connected. I know how much you hurt inside." She gently turned me around to face her, gazing into my eyes. "Even if nopony else will... I forgive you."

My heart pounded as I stared at her. "Everything that's happened... there is no forgiveness! I let them die! All of them!" My voice rose as Boo shrank back. "Don't you get it? I did it out of pride! I never gave up EC-1101, and it ruined me! Ruined everything. If I'd thrown it into the ocean or something, they'd all still be alive! And Luna was no better!" I roared at her as she gazed at me with that pitying expression. "Don't you fucking get it? She was after power! She didn't care about Equestria! She wanted her thousand year rule to show everypony she was no different than Celestia! We deserve every last drop of guilt! We should die a million times for all the suffering we've caused!"

"I don't believe that, and I don't think you're being honest or fair right now. Not after what's happened," Psalm responded. "Guilt might have pushed you to do better, but I know it's eating you up inside. You want to pay for what's happened. You hate yourself."

"Of course I hate myself! Sky Striker was right," I snapped at her. "I got Glory killed."

"No, Blackjack. You didn't." She addressed me patiently. "If you'd forced Glory to return to Thunderhead, you'd be dead, and nopony would have stopped Lighthooves or his biological weapon. The civil war would have happened anyway. Glory loved you, and she tried letting you go, but sometimes we can't leave the ponies we care about. Even when we say we don't, we still care. We still love." I opened my mouth, and she interrupted me, "And the same for P-21, Rampage, and Lacunae. None of them would have wanted you to do this to yourself. They all chose to follow you."

"I failed them! Failed everyone! You, especially you, cannot forgive that!" But Psalm reached out and embraced me. "Let me go! I don't have time for this! This pointless... meaningless... gesture..." My throat worked. I could have forced her to release me, but my strength failed. "How? I got so many... so many... killed. How can you forgive me? My friends. My people. I should have been better. More careful. More... something!" I said as I started to sob against her. It was a different kind of weeping than before; grief is not the same as contrition. Absolution was not the same as redemption. I could handle paying the price. Telling me there was no price to be paid... that was so much harder to accept.

"I don't deserve forgiveness," I muttered against her neck. She sighed and patted my back.

"Neither did I. But sometimes what we need is more important than what we deserve," she replied.

I sighed and pulled away, once again unable to look at her. "I'm sorry. I tried. I really did."

"I know. But you can't be weighed down by regret now," Psalm answered. "You have a job to do. Regret is an indulgence."

The three of us started down the slope. Chapel had been a mess before, but just like last time, it hadn't quite died yet. A few hundred ponies picked through the mess. The Crusaders and Halfhearts who'd remained to defend it watched the others with cool, disdainful eyes. Charity, covered in bandages, kept her clipboard in hoof as she supervised from the stoop of the bullet-ridden church. "Don't you dare let a single one of these scumsuckers take so much as one more bullet without covering it. They all get a two thousand percent cowardice fee!" she snapped at the supervisors.

"Two thousand percent?" I asked as I approached her.

Charity's mouth twisted sourly. "So I'll fudge the numbers later. Right now I'm tired, I'm hurt, and..." Then she paused and really took me in. "Sweet Celestia..." she murmured as she let the clipboard fall to the mud. "You're... you really are... you... wow..." Charity struggled to recover her cool, turning to cough and snap at some stallions poking around the muck. "Two caps for bullets, one for four pieces of brass! I want every round we can reload in case some of those striped bastards survived and still have some fight in them!"

"The Brood are still a problem?" Psalm asked with a frown.

Charity nodded into the church, and I followed her inside. I was amazed at all of the baskets and metal crates everywhere, filled with bullets, brass, and guns. I wasn't sure how to feel about all this in a church, but then, it was the only place out of the rain. Bottlecap and another mare... she looked familiar... aha! Usury! That was it. They were busy organizing the wares. "Not anymore. But it wouldn't surprise me if they got up to something!" she said savagely. "I mean to be ready. They're not taking Chapel without a fight!"

"I think you've fought and won," I said with a little smile.

"Won?" She trotted to the door and pointed out at the immense nest that jugged out over the river. "Till you take care of whatever the hell that is, I haven't won anything." She snorted and then flushed. "Sorry."

I frowned. "Beg pardon?"

"I... ugh! You're a Princess now! Like, wavy mane and everything! I can't deal with you like this." She walked over and got a bucket, then walked back, jumped up, and stuck it on my head. "Okay. Better!" she said as I stood there rigidly; it hadn't been a particularly clean bucket. "Now, Bucketjack... I mean, Blackjack... I'll have you know that I've been doing an extensive audit of your accounts with Chapel. I've calculated out all the fines, fees, interest, annoyance surcharges, various municipal taxes, and assorted favors I've extended to you over the course of our association. The amount probably exceeds the gross domestic product of the entire Wasteland!" I started to lift the bucket off my head, and she glowed up at me. I let it fall again.

"However," she said grandly, "I have calculated that this debt can be repaid with one simple service. You simply have to go to the Core and stop... whatever it is that is doing all this. You do that, and we'll be square."

"Square?" I asked with a little half smile.

"Debt paid in full," Charity said firmly.

I lifted the end of the bucket to look down at her. "Forever?"

She glowered at me, crossing her hooves. "Don't push your luck, Blackjack."

I took the bucket off and set it to the side. "I accept your terms," I said, with full sincerity.

Charity's eyes welled up, and she lunged at me, wrapping her hooves around one of my forelegs and hugging me tightly. I knelt down and hugged back. I knew the power of tears and knew she wouldn't weep forever. I doubted she'd need a fraction of the time I did. After a few minutes, she went from sobs to hiccups and finally scrubbed her eyes. Bottlecap and Usury were both averting their eyes as she recovered. "If you tell anypony I bawled like a foal..."

"I know. The debt will be astronomical," I replied as she furiously wiped her eyes and recomposed herself. Looking at the goods, I gave a sad little smile. "You know, if this last job is going to wipe all my debts clean, I could use some equipment."

She rolled her eyes with a tepid smile of her own. "All the good stuff's been sent to the tunnel. You can have the pick of it. Whatever you need." She groaned and covered her face. "Oh Goddesses, it's happened. I knew it would sooner or later."

"What?" I asked in worried bafflement.

"I've lived up to my dumb name! Ugh!" She thumped her temples with both hooves. "No! I have to focus. It's a one-time thing. Remember the book. *Fifty Ways to Wind up Filthy Rich*. I can write it off as a tax credit if taxes ever become a thing again! Right! There should be some leeway there." She saw me barely suppressing a smile and went bright pink. "Don't you have a job to do? Honestly! You cut a pony a deal on her debt and she... oooh..." She shoved my chest, trying to push me out the door. "Go!"

I wasn't budging an inch. I leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. Charity's eyes popped round as I murmured, "Thank you, Charity. You've been a good friend. You've had what I needed, when I needed it, and always made sure I got it. Even if you do get a little crazy with compound interest."

Charity finally deflated. "Nuts. I just figured if I was rich, the Wasteland couldn't get me. If I held on to what was mine, then I'd be okay." She sulked a bit, before she frowned back up at me. "Please, come back, Blackjack. You're super annoying, sometimes... well, always, but I want you around doing the right thing. Okay?"

"I'll do my best," I answered, pulling away. Usury made a gagging noise, but Bottlecap smiled at the filly warmly.

"Take care, Security," Bottlecap said with a wave of her hoof.

"Die in a fire," Usury muttered as I stepped out.

"I heard that!" Charity snapped.

I guessed I couldn't win everypony over. I stepped out with Psalm and Boo. The pair were addressing four unarmed Brood who alternated between shouting and weeping as they talked. At the sight of me, they turned and bolted off into the rain. "Are they..." I asked, unsure just what I was going to end the question with.

"They are conflicted," Psalm said as she watched them flee. "Imagine if all you knew was killing, and all you felt was the joy it brought, and then being given the knowledge that such things were wrong, and the weight of shame and guilt such knowledge brings..." She shook her head and smiled sadly at me. "The Legate will always be a part of them, I fear. Diluting it with myself is the only hope I have to give them any peace." And she touched her bandaged chest with a sigh.

"Blackjack!" Scotch Tape cried out as she splashed through the ruins of Chapel with Bastard close behind her, a soggy cigarette still clenched resolutely in his jaw. "Ugh, what a mess," she said as she surveyed the scene. Then she glowered up at me, "You left me behind again."

"To be fair, I got snatched away by a dragon," I answered.

She huffed and tapped her PipBuck. "Runners reported that if there are any Brood still wanting to fight, the storm is keeping them down. That LittlePip person must have a PipBuck with an insane range to target only the Brood who are attacking. Like to know how she pulled that one off." She sighed and coughed. "Not that it matters. There's Enervation spreading all over the valley. In a few hours, it's probably going to be uninhabitable." She frowned as she scrolled down. "Also, before contact was cut off, there were reports of Enervation symptoms all over the Wasteland. New Appleloosa. Tenpony. That Junction place."

I could imagine hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of silver rings set in 'pest control' boxes tacked onto ruins siphoning life and souls to the Eater. "So this really is it," I said as I stared at the nest.

"Yup. You get to save the world. Lucky you," Bastard said dryly as water dripped off the end of his cigarette. "Don't fuck it up now."

There wasn't much to say as we made our way to the tunnel mouth. This was where all of us had descended into the ground for the first time. Where we'd found the megaspell complex. Where Glory had lost her wing. All because they followed me...

Psalm reached out and covered me with her wing, giving me a little hug and a gentle smile, as if she knew what I was feeling. For all I knew, she could. "What happened to my blank?" I asked Scotch.

"They're going to keep it safe. It seems chugging a bottle of Flux is going to keep it going for a long time." She made a face. "That Morningstar pony gave it a whole 'nother ten liters of the stuff, just to see what would happen."

I tried not to think about where Morningstar had gotten that much Flux. "Try not to let anypony experiment on me, please." I'd had enough of that. There seemed to be a tent set up with a number of ponies working around it. I spotted the telltale gleam of white moonstone in the dark. A railcar was being set up at the mouth of the tunnel. Scotch Tape and Bastard immediately veered off to check on it.

As we approached the tent, Triage emerged. "Flying by dragon is for the birds," she commented as she consulted a clipboard. "Okay! Here's what we got for you." She reached over and picked up a pristine twelve gauge pump action shotgun. "One IF-80. You'll probably want to name it or something. Eight moonstone slugs with a heavy powder charge for the shield housings. They'll probably take out the generators inside, but if not, you have your sword for those." The slugs were, appropriately, in white hulls. She gestured to six moonstone pendants and a dozen brilliant purple potions in Sparkle-Cola bottles. "Six anti-Enervation medallions for whoever is going with you. Twelve extra-strength rejuvenation potions, with moonstone fragments to keep them fresh longer, brewed half an hour ago."

"Going with me?" I asked with a frown. My friends were dead and gone. With the exception of Scotch Tape and Boo, who was left who would want to go on a one way trip with me?

Triage stared like I'd just asked a very stupid question, and gestured inside the tent. "We've got a selection of firearms, explosives, energy weapons, and almost anything else you might need, courtesy of the Keepers." Inside the tent, the elderly yellow stallion regarded me warmly and gave a little bow as he gestured at the cornucopia of mayhem behind him.

"How am I going to know how to get there? The tunnels have to be mangled," I asked, and then added, "And who's going with me?"

Again, that look. "Rover provided maps of the red tunnels, which are still mostly operational. Between them, the cyberdogs, Watcher's spritebots, and Applebot slaving in some Protectaponies as scouts, we've been able to map a route that should get you underneath that..." She paused, then just gestured at the Core.

"You've been busy," I remarked, impressed.

"End of the world and all that. Amazing how people get off their asses when the shit's hit the fan and the fan turns out to be powered by a balefire bomb. Plus, a lot of this was put into action by Goldenblood hours ago." She pointed to a terminal under the tent which had a beam rifle strapped to its top in a makeshift frame and pointed up at the mountains, the two wired to spark batteries. "Also, someone wants to talk to you. Just don't jostle it."

I frowned at the terminal and then carefully tapped a button. The tip of the beam rifle started to strobe, and then the terminal lit up. The screen flickered a few times, and then a unicorn appeared. A unicorn I hadn't seen in a long, long time. "Hey," she rasped weakly. "Sorry for being late to the party."

"LittlePip," I murmured, then gave a shaky little smile. "How?"

"Line of sight relay on top of the mountain. Only thing that cuts through the interference," she said with a little wave of her hoof, then coughed. "Hope it stays aligned," she said through the coughing, then sniffed. "My friends are okay?"

"Calamity lost his brother, but other than that, they're okay. They've saved a lot of lives. You saved a lot of lives," I said with a smile. "Thank you."

She gave an embarrassed little smile. "Glad to do it. Going to take forever to get this thing back in place. Also..." She frowned at me. "Luna's electroshocked nipples, Blackjack, do you have any idea how hard it was to not hit you with lightning? What were you thinking, flying up onto a roof and grabbing a metal pole to get a better view?"

Luna's... electroshocked... how did she know? "I don't think I was," I murmured. "I lost Glory."

LittlePip's face showed all of her shock, and then worry. "I'm sorry."

"Well, she wasn't the first. P-21. Rampage. Lacunae..." I said, then grimaced and sniffed.

"I know. I know. Steelhooves... he..." She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "But you have to hold on. See it through to the end. Persevere," LittlePip said in her squeaky little voice. Somepony cleared their throat next to her, and I felt as if lightning had hit me after all. "Go ahead."

"Luna?" Celestia said calmly through the terminal, her digitized face replacing LittlePip's.

"Sister," I sobbed at once. "Are you okay?"

"I... will recover... in time... That abomination is an evil beyond any from the darkest reaches of Tartarus," Celestia said as she gazed at me and smiled through her own tears. "Luna. I am so sorry, Luna. I left you..."

"I made you go, remember? One of us had to survive... for Equestria," I replied.

"But I didn't survive." Celestia closed her eyes, a mask of pain upon her face. "I failed, Luna. I failed Equestria. And I failed you most of all. I made mistakes. Such little... such catastrophically terrible... mistakes. And I forced you to clean them up. Then... I did not believe in you." She closed her eyes. "I... I have not been a very good sister, Luna."

"So you were a little overbearing. That's the sun for you," I answered. "I forgive you, Sister. No matter what happened to me... to us... to Equestria... I don't blame you for any of it. Ultimately, it was my failing. I have to make it right."

"Oh, Luna. You were always so much stronger than anypony gave you credit for," Celestia answered. "We'll be together again, Sister. We'll make it right."

I shook my head. "I think the time for Princesses is over, Sister. I think... I think we're going to have to trust them to make Equestria right again without us."

"Leave it to the commoners?" Celestia said with a mock-horrified expression. "Perish the thought!" I laughed, despite my tears. "Maybe you're right," Celestia went on. "Maybe our time is over, but I still can't help watching over them for a time more."

"I love you, Tia," I murmured.

"I love you too, Lulu," she replied, kissing her hoof and reaching out as if touching the screen. I couldn't resist. I mirrored the action, and on the tap, the screen faded to static. I guess Triage hadn't been joking about jostling it. Maybe she could fix it. I turned to the medical pony and...

She was gaping in shocked horror at Bastard. Bastard's cigarette had fallen from his slack jaw as he goggled back at Triage. Scotch Tape gave me a baffled look as the pair stared and then, in unison, jabbed a hoof at the other and shouted, "You're supposed to be dead!" In perfect synchronicity, they gestured to themselves. "Me? You're the one who's supposed to be dead!" They froze.

My eyes swept from one to the other. The coats were a little off, but they had similarly-colored eyes... horns... builds... faces... "Uh. Do you two know each other?" I asked dully.

"I... she..." Bastard sputtered, as Triage spat, "I... he..."

Triage recovered first. "This... this murderous reprobate... this gangster..."

"Hey! I paid for—" Bastard snapped.

"Which you never let me forget!" Triage yapped back. "I didn't ask you to—"

"Oh, but you didn't say no to the bits back then, did you?" Bastard interrupted, jabbing his hoof at her.

"I told you I was going to pay you back! I had a kid, remember!" And she stopped, and Bastard paused as well. "I thought you were dead, you bastard. You're supposed to be dead. Everyone was dead and gone and behind me. What happened to you? How can you still be alive?"

"Zebras," he said with a shrug. "You?"

"M.A.S. experiment," she answered.

"Told you working for the M.A.S. was a bad idea," he countered.

"You were working for a criminal! You have no right to..." She stopped, then laughed weakly. "Hell... two hundred years and we're still fighting," she muttered.

"You're two hundred years old?" I gaped at Bastard. Then at Triage. "Both of you?!"

Triage sighed and rolled her eyes. "We really don't have time to get into it. Roo—"

The gaze over his glasses swore death. "Say it and I go back to being an only child."

She snorted, rolling her eyes, and amended, "*Bastard* is my brother."

Mollified a bit, he japed, "You're a bastard too. Or whatever the female version is."

"There *is* no female version, numbnuts," she answered with a flat-eyed glower.

He shrugged, then looked at me. "Fraternal twins. Mom was an earth pony, dad a pegasus who flew the coop."

"Oh Goddesses, Mom!" She grabbed his shoulders. "Please tell me Mom is still dead!" She surveyed the scene in alarm.

"I think so," Bastard answered as he did the same for a few seconds. "Though, knowing this place, I could see her as some ghoul, croaking about how we never call, how we're both failures..."

"At least she wasn't trying to pawn you off on some son of one of her friends. 'He's a plumber. He's a good catch. This one's a lawyer! Can't get better than that.' Yeesh." She shivered. "And she wouldn't be a ghoul. She's just too crotchety to let balefire bombs kill her."

Looked like I wasn't the only pony with one heck of a story to tell. "I knew there was something special about you," I said, smirking at him.

"No. No. No. I am not special. I am just a hitpony who slept in way too long," he snapped, waving his hooves as if trying to ward off some evil spell of mine.

"You're just a weirdness magnet, Blackjack," Triage countered. And when I opened my mouth, she added, "Don't even bother asking. It doesn't matter, and you don't need to know the details."

"Awww..." I, Scotch Tape, and Boo said in unison.

"Don't you have a world to save?" Triage snapped at me. "The others are waiting at the tunnel. Go." She softened a little. "I'll tell you later, after I'm good and really drunk. Okay?"

"No, you won't," Bastard countered. "Nothing good happens when you blab." He pointed at the Core. "Don't you have the world to save or some shit?"

Oh sure. Throw the end of the world at me... "Fine, but what," I said as I turned to the tunnel. My voice trailed off faintly as I took in the sight before me, "others..."

All the others.

Standing at the mouth of the tunnel was a mob of ponies. I immediately picked out Calamity, Velvet Remedy, Homage, Xenith, and Pyrelight standing together in the middle. Next to them stood the Reapers. Brutus looking oiled and magnificent. Storm Front, Dazzle, and Hammersmith. Whisper and Tenebra were next, and then a half dozen Zodiacs I barely recognized and wished I knew better. Libra, Scorpio, Aries, Leo, Virgo, and... I think that blue unicorn was the new Gemini?

On the other side of LittlePip's friends were the Enclave. Twister, Boomer, Dusk, and Sky Striker, all in their power armor, and the cyberpegasus Silver. Then there was Stronghoof, wrapped up in bandages yet still standing strong and sparkly. Crumpets was beside to him with a look of weary determination. Lancer and Adama, Xanthe, Pythia, and Carrion were next, the ghoulish griffin having repaired or replaced his armor. Nails, the lone Harbinger. In the back loomed Pain Train the minotaur, Rover, and the hellhound Gnarr. At the end of the row stood Applebot, Sweetie Bot, and Scootaborg.

There were others, too. Ponies I'd never met but who were here because this was the place that needed them. I may have lost my friends, but I was far from on my own. Standing behind me, Psalm extended her weather-blocking spell over the whole assembly, shielding them from the storm. Quite a few seemed glad to be out of the wind and rain.

"I can't take all of them," I murmured.

"You've got enough room on the car for six or so," Scotch Tape replied from my side. "More than that and they're going to be falling off. You're going to have to move really fast to avoid the things that are in the tunnels now, so I wouldn't try to bring in a flock of pegasi either. We only have enough moonstone to protect that many, too." She looked at the crowd. "Everypony agreed not to argue with your decision." She trotted over to the middle, Psalm following, then snapped at Bastard, "Hey, get over here! You know you can do it too!"

He stalked over, muttering to himself as he took a seat next to Scotch, wearing the biggest ever 'do not pick me' expression on his face. Triage chuckled beside me, and when I glanced at her she replied with a sardonic smirk, "Don't look at me. There's no way I'm going down there."

I stared at her, then at all of them. Just... pick? "... how can I choose? This... I'm not sure that there's going to be any coming back from this. I can't ask you to come with me."

"Ask? Pfft!" Whisper rolled her eyes. "As if! We should ask *you* to come with *us*!"

"You don't have to ask us," Velvet said with a calm smile.

"Ain't like this is our first rodeo with the future resting on us pullin' out a win," Calamity said with a nod, then lowered his head, adding quietly to himself, "Besides, he'd want to be here if he could."

"My daughter believed in you," Sky Striker said grimly. "I may not like you. I might actually hate you, but I'll be damned if I'm going to sit by and let her death be for nothing! I won't lose any more of my family."

Pythia peered at her map. "Eh. Future's all wibbly wobbly right now. Save the world. Doom the world..." She peeked at me and gave an impudent little grin. "If you're going to kill an eldritch abomination from beyond, I want a front row seat!"

"You don't understand!" I shouted as I looked from one to the next. "I can't ask you to pay this price! I can't have you dying for this! I can't!" I fell onto my haunches. There was dead silence from the assembly, eyes locked onto me, with expressions ranging from compassion to confusion to disapproval. "Lacunae. Rampage. P-21. Glory... I can't take losing any more people for this!" I hung my head, wishing Psalm's field let through the rain to hide my shameful tears.

"You're a fucking moron, Blackjack!"

I gasped and lifted my head, staring up into the scornful eyes of Whisper. The mare grabbed me by my collar and hauled me to my hooves. "You think this is all about you? You think I or these other assholes don't have a price to pay?" She swept a wing at the assembly. "Every single person here is willing to pay whatever fucking price it takes to see tomorrow! Some of us have already paid more than you'll ever know. Some of us have debts that are way, way overdue! Doesn't matter. You can stay there crying in the mud, if you want. Sit on your ass. We'll go ourselves and find some way to pull this shit off!" She took a deep breath. "But... and it pains me to admit this... there might be more ass in there than I can kick personally, so I'll let you come along. If you can keep up."

I stared at the pegasus, feeling the corners of my mouth pulling into a reluctant smile despite myself. "It might be a one way trip," I pointed out. "Are you sure?"

She narrowed her eyes, her forehooves playing over her abdomen. I was suddenly aware how very still my own belly had gotten since I left the Collegiate. "Fuck one way trips. Life's a one way trip. Your face is a one way trip. I'm coming back." She flew over my head, her tail snapping at me, but our eyes met for a moment. She gave a little smirk back at me as she waited to see my next choice.

Well, that was one. I turned and surveyed the rest. I hadn't expected to come back from this. Go to the Eater, do... something, win. I'd probably die in the process, but I'd win. Now, I had others coming with me to help me... and I couldn't just throw their lives away. I needed a carefully calculated, well-thought-out plan of who else to bring with me... and getting them out alive again.

I checked the time on my PipBuck.

Half an hour until armageddon.

Crap.

(Author's notes: The penultimate chapter. I really wanted this to be the very last one. I really did, but there was just too much to wrap up. I hope that folks can forgive me. The next chapter is the last, and then there should be a brief epilogue. Then there's a few places we'll do some little fixes, and then upload to FimFic. Then done! Done done done done done...

For everyone who's stuck with me through all of this, I want to thank you. It's been an incredible saga, which has only been possible with your reading, the mind numbingly awesome assistance of Hinds, Bro, swicked, and Hearthshine, and the financial support of generous readers. As always, thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. We need to draft her for doing something with Fallout 4 when it comes out! Draft Kkat! Do eet!

To folks that read and critique the story, thank you so much for your feedback. The occasional video reviews have been awesome, and fair. I hope when I start my next big project that I remember everything that I've learned. I hope to have the story done before moving up to Oregon and resuming teaching... I so hope it's done...

To people who would like to support Horizons or my future projects, bits can be donated through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com or through my (still horrible) patreon account at www.Patreon.com/somber. Special thanks to Spencer, AllisOne, Quotidian, Dust Eagle, Carlis, Mysfit, David, O'neil, Fdot, Michael, James, Chris, Mark, FallenAngel, Kristian, GoFish, Robojan, and special thanks to Allen Medlen.

swicked: Reread the scene starting on the lower half of page 29 while listening to this:

<https://youtu.be/eqgSa9n2ZQk?t=2m15s>

It wasn't in Somber's head when writing it but it captures the scene so well...

Oh, and you'll never guess what Bastard's real name is, but trust me, it really *is* that embarrassing.