

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 77: All In

"What? My dream ended... happily? That. Cannot. Happen!"

We were nine. Nine going into the deeps beneath Hoofington, facing monsters and abominations from the pits of madness and horror. Nine with one goal: to stop the Eater of Souls from destroying the world... inside thirty minutes.

I wondered if Twilight ever had to do anything like this.

I couldn't really see it, honestly. The railcar we rode, careening through the gloomy labyrinthine tunnels below Hoofington, had originally been designed to travel the tracks under its own power for maintenance and repair work; a ridge of industrial-grade spark batteries centered in the back, behind the storage locker we'd piled our gear in, kept us whirling along at breakneck speeds. Someone had hastily welded a cowcatcher of sorts to the front and sheet metal to the safety railing around the side of the car to offer some protection to those ponies who now dove down into the heart of darkness. All of us aboard struggled to brace ourselves against the chest-high makeshift armor.

Once upon a time, I'd gone into the earth. My friends had suffered, and I had encountered an abomination of living machinery. Another time, I'd gone into the earth and faced a screaming room of flesh and steel. A third time, I'd gone into the earth and faced nightmares given horribly distorted form. Thus, I was somewhat inured to the organic texturing of the walls, meat and metal and blends of both punctuated by flashing red emergency lights that beat with an arrhythmic pulse. The world around us screamed, kept at bay by only the tiny little singing shards of hope most of us wore.

We hadn't had much time. I'd shared what I'd experienced in the Core and the threats we might face as the people I'd chosen grabbed whatever ammunition they'd need. Despite a few scoffs of disbelief, I'd worked out a few warnings and tactics we could use if, or rather when, we encountered the hazards of the Core. With the exception of accidentally collapsing the tunnel behind us, the others had adapted to the dangers well.

Despite everything, some of us were having a good time. A length of conduit revealed itself to be a thick, fleshy tentacle that lifted from the wall and swept across the tunnel like a giant hook. At the speed we were travelling at, we'd never be able to slow in time. But no matter how fast we were going, Whisper would not be outdone by a mere car. The pegasus darted ahead and smashed the tendril at its base, shearing the whole tentacle off like wet clay. The severed length dropped, struck the cowcatcher, and, with the aid of some magic, flipped over the top to crash and flop on the tracks behind us. "Woo hoo!" Whisper shouted. "That's four!"

From the roof of the tunnel ahead dropped a far more mundane threat to the airborne pegasus: two gatling turrets. The pair began to spray streams of projectiles, turning the tunnel into a shooting gallery. In a few seconds, she'd be turned into a cloud of lingering blood and feathers. Or she would have been, if the dark form of Dusk hadn't already been ahead with her, leading us down the tunnel. She swept between Whisper and the guns, the five millimeter rounds failing to pierce her power armor as her beam rifle blew out one turret and then the other in a shower of sparks.

"Dad's going to be so mad he missed this," Dusk said, falling back in next to Whisper as they flew ahead of us. Her voice had to get through the noise of the wheels, the wind, and the echoes, but fortunately my augmented hearing picked it up easily enough.

"Too bad you drugged the old fart then, isn't it?" Whisper asked with a grin.

"I wasn't going to pick him in the first place!" I bellowed up at them.

"Better he's mad at me for drugging him than mad at himself for being old and injured. My family needs him, and he can help them a lot more than he can help the world," Dusk said. "No pony needs me now."

I wanted to argue, but just then we passed through a merging junction. I looked behind us and spotted two Ultra-Sentinels emerging from the other tunnel and sprinting after us... literally. At least, they had been Ultra-Sentinels. The meaty flesh that enveloped their lower legs now formed mangled limbs they galloped along the tracks with. They still had their old armament, but now they had mouths! Great metal maws that screamed and gnashed mindlessly as they raced to take a bite out of us. "Two bogies on our rear!" I yelled.

"Oh, can I—" the mare at the control stand to the left of the locker offered.

"No!" four of us shouted at once.

"The supports were already compromised, and it only collapsed ninety percent of the section anyway," the mare muttered. "You all act like it was the whole thing."

"I'm on it!" Crumpets shouted. The Steel Ranger's thick armor absorbed the fusillade of red energy beams as she braced herself against the back of the car. She'd swapped her shotguns for something a little more substantial. "Clear!" she yelled, and a shimmery field sprang up between her and us. The missile roared down the tunnel at the pair of cyborgs, the fiery backwash curling against Crumpets and blackening her armor. The machine grenade launcher on her other side chugged away as well, filling the tunnel behind us with shrapnel and fire. Still, these were Ultra-Sentinel abominations, and even with chunks blown out, they didn't go down. They were just left behind, which was good enough for me.

"Switch!" Whisper yelled. "It's on the right!"

"We want to go left," a filly said, and I glanced down to Pythia sitting calmly to the right of the middle of the car in the space under Psalm, examining the tunnel maps duct taped to the floor around her.

"Hit the button," I shouted to Lancer. The zebra rose up and stood quite easily on the rattling, swaying floor, steadying his shot as we approached the switch. Three green lights, their colors washing out to piss-yellow with the pulsing of the red emergency lights, glowed steadily on the right wall, three dark lamps on the other side. Past the three pairs, a button no bigger than a hoof was set in a little box poking from the wall. Had we been travelling at sane speeds, we could have simply stopped, reached out, jabbed it, and waited for the tracks to switch.

Lancer hit the button at a hundred yards.

We needed the time as the lights on both sides turned to flashing yellow and automatic systems started switching tracks. We passed one pair of lights, the floor working ahead of us. Two. The tunnel clanked and clacked. The third, and the smoking remnants of the switching button flew past us.

Then, just before we reached the split, the lights on the right went out and the lights on the left began glowing steadily. The car careened around the curve past the switch, and half of us lunged to the left to keep us on the tracks. "See? Aren't you glad you brought me along?" Pythia said cheerfully.

"I didn't bring you! You stowed away! I specifically said 'no fillies or colts allowed!'" It had pained me to use that to deny Scotch Tape, but I couldn't take her down here. Not after what I'd promised. I held out a wing. "You're supposed to be this tall to stop the apocalypse!"

"Yeah, yeah. Like I'm going to miss out on a front row seat when you kill an undead star monster." She leaned over and marked an X on the map in red crayon before adding, "We're almost halfway there!"

"Just be glad I had my own moonstone," Whisper snapped back at us, touching her red earring, "or you'd be a pile of bloody goop."

"Yeah yeah," she said with a dismissive wave of her hoof as she looked from the tunnel maps to her starmap and flourished a crystal over it. "Oh, heads up!"

"For wha— Eeeee!" Whisper shrieked as a silvery blob exploded out of a vent, swirling like ink in water as it lunged towards her and Dusk. The latter shoved the former away, knocking her back over the railcar and leaving herself the sole meal. "Flame! Flame! Fucking flame already!" Whisper shouted. The mechasprites seemed to glue themselves to Dusk, their mouths working as they started to chew through her black-enameled armor. I had no doubt that when they were through, they'd continue to eat. Echo had discovered that the hard way.

Then the tunnel roof filled with fire as Aries, standing at the front of the car, set her incinerator roaring against the wind. Dusk was engulfed just long enough for the mechasprites to pop like popcorn. When the flame cut off, Dusk was left faintly trailing smoke. "You okay?" the pony in a new suit of red power armor shouted up, a few blackened bits of mechasprite bouncing off her. "Still rare?"

"Yeah. Just ruined the finish," Dusk replied, then barked, "Did you just make a joke about cooking me? What's wrong with you?"

"Hey, you work with fire for a living and see how many bad fire-related jokes you come up with," she said as she turned to incinerate the sprites just emerging from another passing vent, rendering the cloud into a shower of sizzling shrapnel. "This Burner blend is nasty. What kind of moron mixes an oxidizer with the fuel?"

"What kind of moron *uses* it?" I asked with a smile.

"Touché," the armored pony answered casually. I really wished I had more time to get to know her. I'd just wanted a flamer with me; I had no clue about the pony using it. A few more brilliant flowers of flame blossomed, consuming the last of the swarms, and then Aries asked, "Why wasn't any of this reported in the scouting?"

"Because the Eater wasn't truly exerting itself then," Pythia explained. "It is now. Its soul warps and twists these threats into reality," the filly continued as she traced her hoof along the red tunnel map. "Fortunately, the layout hasn't changed much. We're almost to the medial transfer ring. After that, we'll go into the inner..." She trailed off. "Rock!"

"Inner rock?" I frowned, then looked down the tunnel at where a large slab of the roof had fallen down. "Lift!"

Unicorn horns flared to life, and the slab lurched into the air. At the same time, Aries climbed onto the cowcatcher and braced herself against the forward rail. "Get clear!" she bellowed, and then the slab was on us. Her hindhooves impacted it just before we could smash into it, and the slab went rocketing down the subway tunnel ahead of the car, still suspended above the ground by our magic field. The car's wide metal wheels skipped over the fouled section of track with a hard bump, but we didn't derail.

"You okay?" I asked, working with Psalm to keep the rock levitated, sweat dripping down our brows as the strain started to wear. There was a curve up ahead, though, and it wouldn't hurt to ram a big frigging rock into the face of something nasty hiding around the bend.

"Earth pony for the win," she answered, then shifted from one hindleg to another and worked them back and forth. "Though I'm pretty sure Applejack never planned on this."

"Well, this a little much to plan for," I replied. Though that hadn't stopped some ponies...

"Huh?" Aries looked back at me. "I mean using power armor as construction equipment." Then she gave a low laugh. "Pretty sure ol' C.C. would have shit himself if he'd seen me just then."

I would have pressed further, but suddenly the chunk of ceiling flying ahead of us was bisected, then the halves were sliced, and those divided into smaller and smaller pieces. There was the faintest shimmer of silvery light.

"Wires!" I shouted, and the wheels shrieked, sparks flying as I leapt onto the storage locker to get a clear view. There was no way we'd stop in time, so I pulled out a bottle and telekinetically levitated a cloud of the sparkly, shimmery white dust inside ahead of us. Starmetal threads fizzed and exploded like fireworks as they came in contact with the cloud, the formerly taut ends snapping and lashing around the car. The pegasus had started pulling back as soon as I shouted, but Dusk, slower in her armor, didn't quite get clear. A wire wrapped around one of her forelegs like a strand of a spider's web, then tightened, cinching clean through the limb. The end of her leg went flying as she crashed in a heap on the car's floor, blood spurting from the wound.

Magic reached out and caught the limb before it fell off the car, immediately returning it to the injured mare. "Shhh," Psalm said as she touched her horn to the wound. "Hold still. It's a clean cut. If I'm quick enough..." The glow of magic flickered briefly. "Did that work?" she asked calmly as she looked at the pegasus.

"Feels tingly," she said, inspecting the line cut through her armor. "And my armor's damaged."

"Better than missing!" Whisper shouted. "Wrap it in duct tape and get back into the fight."

The cowcatcher blasted the rubble of the fallen, kicked, and sliced slab off to the sides, and as soon as we were past the threads, we got back up to speed. Soon our tunnel merged at an angle with another one, more cavernous than the rest and with a slight curve to it. Three sets of tracks ran parallel here, with all kinds of switches going from each track to the others. It seemed vaguely familiar to me. "This is it!" Pythia shouted. "The medial ring! We need to get to the far left set of tracks!"

Without getting blown up, cut to pieces, killed in a wreck, or shot to ribbons. While these tracks were nominally intact, they appeared to have been coated with the bloody gunk I'd seen under the city before. Grotesque, wiggling oblongs exploded into sanguine muck when we struck them. Dusk, her power armor patched with a strip of gray tape, took to the air again, and I landed back at the car's rear.

"Blackjack!" Crumpets shouted, and I stared behind us. The tunnel was coming after us, forming disjointed monstrosities resembling scorpions and crabs that snapped at us as we passed. Other patches of biomass were forming five-legged wolflike beings that loped after us with mouths that ran half their body length, or swarms of flapping, gnashing insectile birds that tried to keep up with us. The railcar skipped and bounced as the cowcatcher kept hitting the crud crawling onto the tracks ahead of us. "What do I shoot?"

Shit. We hadn't covered this. Also, what was that distant yellow light and screeching noise from around the tunnel's curve behind us? "Everything," I muttered, my eyes widening. We raced along, Crumpets's grenades tearing huge holes in the packs behind us, but there were always more forming and reforming. Ahead of us, incandescent flowers blossomed as Aries's incendiary grenades burst. "Shoot everything!" The whole car lurched as we splattered something the size of a brahmin on the tracks. "Get us off these tracks!"

"Hard to see the buttons," Lancer muttered next to me as he aimed down the tunnel.

"They're every hundred yards, I think," Pythia said. "Just use math."

"Use math," Lancer growled. "You're probably delivering us straight into its maw."

"Eh. That would be boring. And stereotypical. Bigot," the filly said casually. He started to retort when she shouted, "Switch coming up now!"

I didn't see if he was quibbling with Pythia or taking the shot, because I was occupied with several of the flesh dogs racing up beside the car. I lifted a riot shotgun, loaded a drum of flechettes, and opened fire. The pulpy masses that were their heads burst apart in tatters of gore, but more meaty mass arched from the globs alongside the tracks and assembled into tissue, muscle, bone, and fangs... many fangs. I tried to shoot them before they had their fangs back.

Dusk had slightly better luck. Her power armor had a little rig next to the helmet that held her sister's prismatic blaster nicely. The rainbow beam transformed monster after monster into sparkly dust. Aries sprayed sheets of flame overhead, transforming the flying monstrosities into blazing sparks that crackled and popped as they burned away. Crumpets's missiles and grenades sent huge swaths of the fleshy beasts flying away with each detonation, the missiles outright vaporizing flocks... er... swarms... huge clouds of the flappy bitey thingies! Turrets along the ceiling dropped, pouring out death of the ballistic and magical variety, and Psalm raised a shield to block their fire till we were past.

Then the apex of her shield struck an overhead girder, and the bubble popped with the force she tried to absorb. The alicorn all but collapsed next to Pythia, grimacing in pain. This wasn't the first time, either. One of the hounds launched itself onto the car at the pair, its elongated body opening wide in a maw that could bite a pony in half. Tentacles reached out, and even those ended in lamprey-like mouths.

Aries lunged at the monster and rammed the tip of her flamer, and her head, into its mouth, her forehooves reaching around to clutch its jaws shut. The hound's too-numerous eyes bulged and twitched, then smoked, then popped. The beast swelled and burst into blackened chunks of cooked meat. The red power armor smoked as Aries pulled back, the enamel pitted with hissing acid, but it was still intact. "Wooo-wee! If we had the time, that's what I'd call good eating!"

"You've been native way too bloody long, Aries," Crumpets shouted.

"That's why I left Bucklyn. Food sucked," Aries replied as she tossed the chunks of mandible aside.

"I have so got to hear this story when we're done!" I yelled. "So both of you live, okay?"

"Are you sure I can't..." our driver asked again.

"No!" I shouted at her. "We need you to control the car! Besides, remember what happened last time?"

"You nearly bury everypony alive *once*, and nopony lets you hear the end of it," she said sulkily.

Then Lancer found a switch and fired, and the lights, here half on the walls and half on signal posts between the rail lines, began to flash. There was a clack and then a jerk as we were routed onto the middle set of tracks. "One more!" Pythia said. "Then we transit to the inner ring. We should be able to get to the Eater's shaft from there!"

The hounds were falling behind, and it didn't look like any more were forming ahead of us. I had no idea why, but I'd take anything I could get at the moment. Now we had concrete support columns on

either side giving us some cover from the turrets above the outer track. Except for the predictable gaps for the switches that let the turret fire through, things were looking up.

Then bright yellow lights glared brightly behind us, and I turned...

The monsters had trains of their own.

Three of them.

And they had *mouths*.

The trains to the left and right of us started to pull alongside us while the one on our line moved in, at its front an immense, metal-studded compactor that smashed and gnashed behind us. Psalm lifted her head and interposed a beam of magic between us and that train. The magic bulged as the train behind tried to overtake us, bending elastically as she strained. The other two trains to the left and right slowly crawled ahead. The flatcars they pulled were bristling with Ultra-Sentinel monsterbots.

"Can I *now*?" our driver asked plaintively.

"Okay," I groaned. "Now you can."

"Finally!" Sweetie Bot exclaimed as she left the controls, turned, and squeezed past me. Crumpets was firing missiles at the train gaining on our rear, but the damn thing bit down on each projectile as it hit, filling its mouth with flames and jagged shrapnel. The robotic mare leaned against the back rail as if she were on a sightseeing trip. Then there was an ominous humming, and every muscle in her body tightened under her synthetic skin. "Let's see you swallow this, you hideous embarrassment of technology!"

The mare's horn erupted, hurling brilliant emerald green bolts screaming one after another down the tunnel behind us. They plowed into the wide maw of the train, shredding it to twisted metal and slag, but still the machine kept up her assault. More bolts drilled deeper and deeper into the train's body, its studded metal hide deforming and popping rivets like bullets, green flame and goopy disintegrating metal gouting from the holes.

Sweetie halted her attack, and for a brief instant we could see the monsterbots clean through the melting, glowing green hole blasted through the locomotive. Then the locomotive began to sag as if it was made of hot wax, its underside catching on the rails and driving it into the concrete floor of the tunnel. Robbed of its ability to move forward but none of its momentum, the train of cars previously being pulled by the mechanical nightmare was sent careening over its mangled, melting corpse, twisting off the track, into itself, and across the tunnel. The cars rammed into support pillars on both sides, sending webs of cracks up them, and the monstrosities the train had been carrying were lost in the new barricade of pulped flesh and twisted, smoking metal.

Sweetie Bot collapsed against the rail, her synthetic hide smoking around her brow. "Why the hell did Horse put that kind of firepower in a fuckbot?" Whisper demanded.

"A question for the ages," she answered gaily. When her dismissive response didn't dissuade us, she went on a little more waspishly, "The previous imprint made extensive modifications. It could never get them working, though; million-word semi-coherent expletive-riddled diatribes against Horse weren't valid hardware registration files. It did try to erase my pleasure routines, but I still have all five hundred verses of the Zebra Sutra programmed and available on demand."

"Whatever," Whisper said with a shrug. "Do it to the other two."

"Gladly," Sweetie Bot said. "Recharging. One percent..." She paused for several seconds. "Two percent..." We stared at her, and she flushed, "Oh, no one complains when stallions have to take a few minutes afterwards!"

Too long. The monsterbots on the trains flanking us were taking aim, and while the pillars gave us some cover, the monsterbots had a lot of miniguns to hurl a lot of metal. "Faster! We need to go faster!" I shouted.

Whisper and Dusk arched overhead, grabbed the back of the railcar, and fanned their wings like there was no tomorrow. Psalm tried to cover us all with a shield shaped to avoid striking the architecture around us but couldn't cover the pair of pegasi. Dusk had armor. Whisper didn't. The bullets and flak began to bite into her body, leaving bloody holes. She just screamed and pushed harder. Bit by bit we drew ahead of the train on the inner track.

"Switch!" Pythia shouted. Lancer snapped his gun up and took the shot. The railcar swapped tracks so fast that Psalm and I had to use our magic to keep it stable. The train now behind us roared and surged forward. Psalm resumed her magical beam, blocking it and giving me a chance to pull the injured pegasus in, but she had to drop her shield to do so. Crumpets maintained a steady, thundering barrage of missiles and grenades, but unlike the meat puppets, the resilient trains were hardly slowed by her firing into their gnashing teeth.

Whisper collapsed on the locker, her legs a bloody mess. "Fuck. Ow. Fucking ow..." she hissed. I lifted her up enough to open the locker and withdraw a couple of healing potions. "I want off this fucking train," she cursed between gulps.

"At least we put some distance between us and that other one," I said, looking at the far track.

No sooner had I said that than the train on the outer track moved into the middle and began accelerating again. "Oh, come on!" I shouted. The train behind us slowed while the one next to us started to pull not just alongside but ahead. "Something's going on," I warned as I watched the first train matching our speed while the other moved ahead foot by foot. The fire from the strafing monsterbots pinged and chattered all around us, and all of us except Dusk, Aries, and Crumpets ducked down behind the armor as well as we could. "How far to the turnoff, Pythia?"

She looked up as something marked on the wall whooshed by. "That was mile marker three so... a minute?" the filly shouted from the shelter of Psalm's legs.

"We don't have a minute. Soon as that train ahead of us reaches a switch, they'll move onto this track and crush us!" I bellowed over the grinding and screaming of metal. I stared at an oncoming switch and watched the lights change. "Lancer! Change it back!"

Aries stood, her armor providing Lancer with enough cover to rise, too. Lancer took the shot just before the train on our right reached the switch, the lights changing back and the rails moving back with a crunch. The train let out a growl of frustration before accelerating even faster. Crumpets had shifted to more judicious missile strikes that had rendered the train behind us a flaming mess, but it didn't matter. It didn't have to eat us. As soon as the other train got on the inner track, it could slam on the brakes and crush us between them. If it didn't get all the way past us before switching, it wouldn't even— "When's the next switch from this track to the middle one?" I called out.

"Um, that track's pretty occupied right now, Blackjack!" Pythia shouted over the gunfire. There were at least nine cars in view on the right.

"When?!"

"Twenty seconds!" she shrieked.

I couldn't have Lancer take the shot; it'd be way too close. I'd have to do it. I moved to the edge with Vigilance drawn and rose to my hooves. As the button approached, I jumped into S.A.T.S. and fired three rounds at it. One miss... two... but the third round struck home! The lights turned yellow just as we were passing over the switch. Our front wheels made it through, but, with a jolt, a screech, and a shower of sparks, our right rear wheel hit the moving rail and rode over it. For too long a moment I was afraid I'd just derailed us, that we'd get stuck in the switch, or flip over, or crash into a wall or pillar, but then we slammed back down and kept going.

The train behind us kept going, too. Right into the side of the train that had been trying to get ahead of us. The locomotive rammed the car it hit off the other the track and straight into a support pillar on the other side, all three disintegrating in a cloud of razor sharp steel and jagged concrete. It took with it all but the locomotive and first two cars of the center train, the rest ending up lying off the track, sideways, smashed, or scattered. On our track, the first car behind the destroyed locomotive was blown back off the track, one end hitting a support pillar and the other scraping the wall. The far end of the one behind it slammed into the ceiling. After that I lost track of which car was where except for the one hurtling straight at us. Psalm got her shield back up just in time, and I flung... something... some kind of shieldy sort of magic to help shore up her defense. The only other thing we could do was flatten ourselves to the floor and let the magic absorb some of the blow. Thanks to her, and maybe a little bit to me, instead of being crushed, we were merely knocked sideways into a spin, another shriek of steel on concrete joining the cacophony; Whisper was flung off and barely managed to catch herself with her wings before hitting the wall. When it ended, we were at an angle to the track, two wheels between the rails and none on them. As the remaining locomotive and its two cars of monsterbots disappeared around the curve, a roar of rubble and dust heralded the collapse of the roof behind us.

"Get it back on the rails!" I yelled. "Hurry!" We piled out, Crumpets, Aries, and Psalm getting to work getting the car back into position and Sweetie Bot 'supervising'. Up ahead, about three dozen feet, I saw the spur tunnel that would take us to the inner transfer ring. Past that, though, around the curve of the medial ring, I thought I heard mechanical shrieking and grinding noises. Now wasn't the time to worry about that, though; with the car stopped, the critters we'd left behind before were returning with a vengeance. They swarmed over the rubble, snapping and hissing and gnashing teeth in places that had no business having mouths. I wielded Vigilance and a riot shotgun interchangeably, switching between them as I needed to reload. Overhead, Dusk laid out a field of fire with Pew-Pew while Whisper was practically a yellow blur punctuated by brilliant flashes and splattering meat. Lancer stood upon a piece of rubble, firing at them with precision that was utterly wasted. These things, if they had brains, probably carried more than one in their bodies. His sniper rounds were going completely through the creatures and barely slowing them down at all.

"Errorerrorerrorerror!" shrieked an Ultra-Sentinel that clawed its way over the pile of rubble. Its gatling beam gun began to sweep back and forth across us as its twisted legs struggled to push and pull it through a gap the robot would never ever normally attempt. Lancer and Whisper's coats immediately sprouted black burn marks. Lancer swept his gun over to the mangled machine and fired shots repeatedly at the beam gun, shredding it in a shower of sparks and steel before it could inflict too much damage.

But he'd taken his eyes off the hounds. One of them sprang through a gap in the pillars, bounded once, and snatched him up whole in his maw like a dog with a bone, only his head and hindhooves sticking out from the sides as it began to thrash wildly about. I leapt at it, silver sword slicing neatly through its head, but the instant Lancer was freed, the dozen or more holes left in him began to gush blood. The halves of the hound I'd severed were busy pulling themselves back into new and deadly forms.

"Drink," I said as I levitated a potion to him. "Drink up!"

Blood bubbled out his mouth and nostrils as I struggled to keep the attacking creatures at bay and administer the potion at the same time. It was just trickling futilely down his chin as he struggled to

breathe. "Stop him," he said, weakly. "Stop my father. End his pain." He pressed his bent rifle against my chest. "Please. Promise. For me. My mother. My sister. My people!" Something lunged at me, but it collapsed in a shower of rainbow dust. "Please... promise me."

"I promise. Now drink, damn you!" I said, putting the mouth of the bottle into his, but it still just dribbled out the corner of his mouth. "Drink it you stupid, sexy stallion!"

But he couldn't. His eyes were glazed and unfocused as he crumpled in on himself.

One, a dusty voice chuckled.

"Blackjack!" Sweetie Bot shouted. I gritted my teeth and glanced up to see her pointing down the tunnel. The light was coming back. The car was back on the track, and I could hear the train getting closer again. I levitated up Lancer and set him in the car, laying his gun across his body. The wheels were turning, but the car was taking too long to get going. "Push!" Sweetie Bot urged Psalm, Aries, and Crumpets. I jogged alongside and climbed in with Pythia. As the car sped up further, the alicorn boarded with a flap and then levitated the Steel Rangers on. I took the shot at the button with Vigilance, switching our path to the spur.

The rear of the train came into view, coming up fast. Hounds chasing us and Ultra-Sentinels firing from the cars ahead of us, we accelerated so slowly it felt like we'd lapsed into S.A.T.S. Psalm's shield protected us from disintegration, but it buckled under a barrage of rockets as we raced the train to the spur switch. I wondered desperately if we could levitate the car to clear the rear of the train, but that'd just mean scraping ourselves to meat jelly against the ceiling. "Come on. Come on!" I shouted as the spur grew closer and closer.

The car slipped onto the spur, the rear of the train clipping the rear corner with a bang that nearly knocked us off the rails again. A moment later the reversed locomotive whooshed past us, maw snarling, and, from the sound of it, crashed its cars into the collapse with another thunderous impact of shredding metal. "Make sure it can't follow," I told Crumpets. The mare nodded, and her grenade machine gun turned the tracks behind us into an impassable tangle. Unless the train grew legs or something... which wasn't all that impossible.

Ugh... I fucking hated this place...

I squeezed over to Lancer's corpse in the front. Some of us stared at the body. Others kept their eyes out for threats, like I should have been doing. Did he have a chance to make amends with Majina? To make up for what he'd done... to those zebras at Brimstone's Fall... to me? I could only hope we'd be able to get his body back for some kind of... whatever zebras did with their dead. "So," Pythia queried, "how's that curse coming along, Maiden?"

"Not now," I answered.

"Not a whole lot of time left, if not now," she replied.

"What do you want?" I asked tiredly.

"Me? Saltwater taffy. A kitten. Front row seats at the end of the world. Usual filly stuff." She poked me in the chest. "What do *you* want, Maiden?"

I didn't answer for a moment. "I want people to stop dying," I answered as I stared at his body.

"Why?" she asked, as if genuinely perplexed.

"Why?" I echoed back with a great deal more scorn. "Do you want to die?"

"Eventually, yeah. Doesn't everyone?" she asked as she stared down the tunnel. "Death isn't a bad thing. Pain isn't a bad thing either, really. It reminds you that you're still alive." She closed her eyes. "Suffering is, but that's a concern of the living." She then looked gravely up at me. "Do you want to die, Maiden?"

I couldn't answer that. "I have to live. I have to finish this, with no one else dying."

"But do you want to die?" she asked, and when I didn't answer, she went on, "The Legate was obsessed with not dying. For him, it was the ultimate defeat. But so what? Eventually, you lose. It's what makes the game fun. The Eater's so terrified of death because it's the ultimate insult to its ego. How could it... mightiest and greatest of all... fail? But everything does fail, Maiden. Eventually the proudest mountains are ground to plains and the tallest trees collapse to rot."

"So you're saying that we should all die?" I snapped. Hadn't I heard enough of this shit from Tom?

"I'm saying that you need to separate death from suffering. Do you think Lancer regretted coming down here with you? That he wished he'd had a few extra minutes outside and let someone else take his place?" she demanded of me, and all I could do was shake my head. "Good," Pythia said with a small smile. "None of us do. We don't want to die, but we're not afraid to. All things come to an end." She stared at me. "The Eater wants to live. It wants a second chance at life, and it isn't willing to do it the natural way. It clings to existence because it is the greatest thing in the universe, by its own measure. To cease to exist would be intolerable, as it would bring about a great emptiness that, to it, nothing in the universe can replace."

She considered me soberly. "So, Maiden... Blackjack... what do you want more than anything?"

"Um, guys," Aries said from the front of the car. "I think we're almost there."

I stared ahead, scanning for turrets or wires or mechasprites or... anything... but as we emerged into the inner ring of the red tunnels--

...I hadn't expected this.

The Core.

The red tunnels were supposed to be reinforced against any kind of enemy attack, which was likely the only reason they survived at all. Here, though, parts of the inner wall and ceiling had been gouged away, leaving gaps that opened out into the colossal pit the Eater had scraped during its ascension. Everything that had been in the Core and hadn't been needed for supporting and elevating the Eater had fallen down here. Slabs of building. Passenger trains. Skywagons. Cascades of mulched furniture of all kinds. Pipes and other rail lines, some jutting out from the walls and others piled amid the wreckage. Thousands of emergency lights gave the entire shaft a garish crimson glow. As a final decorative touch, the entire mess appeared as if a bloody slurry had been vomited all over it.

All of us stared as we rolled along the Core's underworld, taken in by the sight and the coppery stench and the echoes of countless groaning, broken structures and the occasional snapping power line. Up above were the crushed-together bases of dozens, perhaps hundreds of buildings. Somehow I had to get through all of that. I gestured to Sweetie Bot, and the car slowed down as I considered what we'd need to do next. At least there was only one red bar on my E.F.S.

Wait. Only one?

From the depths of the pit rose a gargantuan shadow. A mountain of flesh and meat, pierced and studded with metal and wire. It was misshapen, unfinished, like a clay sculpture the artist had aborted

halfway through and had cruelly ripped and torn with malice before throwing it away. If only this were clay. If only.

"Blackjack," the Legate boomed as two enormous, milky eyes turned towards me. I knew he wasn't blind. He had a few hundred more speckled all over his head and shoulders, like zits, to follow us with. He breathed low and deep, not just through his mouth but through countless slits in his chest. He lifted a limb the size of a ship and slammed it into the wall above us. "I knew you'd come," he gurgled, the voice echoed by a chorus of lesser mouths on his hide, "Maiden."

All of us stared in shock and horror, except Pythia, who smirked flatly at the abomination. The talisman in his chest had prevented him from changing for the worse for ten thousand years or more. Ten thousand years of growth. Ten thousand years of injury. Ten thousand years of poison and disease. He was experiencing it all right now. Death would be a mercy for the Legate, not that he'd ever accept it.

"How's serving fallen stars working for you now, you moron?!" Pythia shouted up at him.

He screamed like a thousand backed up sewer pipes bursting all at once and rammed his hoof at us. We accelerated into a covered section of track just as the immense hoof impacted behind us, making the car skip on the rails. "Get in the air as quickly as you can," I ordered. "Fan out and keep him busy while I look for a way through." Then I hesitated with a glance at Lancer's body lying in the corner with his bent gun. "Try not to die. Please."

"Hadn't planned on it. That's your thing," Whisper snapped as we reached the next opening. "Got any heavy metal tunes you could pull out of your ass, Sweetie Butt?"

Sweetie rolled her eyes. "It wasn't exactly Horsie's favorite genre, but I think I have one or two tracks." I wasn't sure where she kept her speakers, but wailing sirens started, followed by a heavy beat. "Goat music... Ramsomething or other."

"Perfect," Whisper said as she launched herself into the air. The Legate's immense hoof streaked down towards us, but she skimmed its surface, drawing a dotted line of power hoof detonations, carnage fountaining behind her and twisting the hoof's trajectory to send it smashing against the wall of the shaft above us. I couldn't understand the song's lyrics, but I didn't need to. The sentiment was clear enough.

Dusk and Psalm launched themselves into the air, Pythia on Psalm's back. Aries twisted as we passed under the bulging limb and sprayed a thick sheet of blazing flamer fuel over the extremity as Crumpets sent a rocket up into its flesh, a bloody fountain of gore erupting out the side. "Fifty... Fifty-one..." Sweetie Bot counted morosely as she continued to blare the music.

Dusk went straight for the Legate's face, blasting those immense milky pools with her beam rifle as she swept around his head like a black wasp. He lifted his other foreleg, blocking the searing spear of light as if by reflex. Whisper was singing along with the music, either knowing the words or just channeling that strange power music held. She'd strafe along his body, arch out, and then slam in with four-hoofed kicks that blew out bloody chucks.

Now if only he wasn't as big as a skyscraper.

I jumped into the air and made my way up towards the tangle of beams, concrete, pipes, and wires, searching for a way through. It seemed impossible. The bases of all those buildings were compressed into a massive knot that even my sword wouldn't be enough to cut through. There had to be a way, though. Some gap. I tried to push through a hole but only got ten feet before it pinched too tight for me to proceed any further.

Pulling my head out, I watched as the car raced around the track, spraying fire and flame whenever part of the Legate got close enough. I needed something that could tear right through all this...

and then I spotted a green glow on the track. "Sweetie Bot!" I shouted, and teleported down to the car. "Don't—" Her horn let out a fusillade of bright green bolts that blew clear through the Legate's torso in a strobe-lit cloud of gore. The hole tore wide, unleashing a hot slurry that had him clutching his chest in agony. "Fire..."

"What *now*?" Sweetie Bot asked, her horn and forehead smoking.

"I can't get through up there. I need your horn to punch a hole through that crap!" I shouted, pointing up at the cavity's ceiling.

Sweetie Bot stared at me, at the ceiling, and then at the Legate. "Okay. Recharging."

"If you're just hanging out down there," Whisper shouted down at me as she whirled around the Legate's head, darting in and out like a yellow lightning bolt, "could you lend us a hoof? If you're not too busy?" The heaving mass clutched its chest as the hole continued to discharge gore. I watched the Legate carefully. He was healing, but nothing like before. His body seemed to be just squishing the injury closed.

I flew up to where Psalm was hovering with ammo and bottles of healing potions in Pythia's lap as she sat on the alicorn's back. "Does he still have the heart?"

"Namtar says only the Maiden can kill him, but Dagon says no living thing can slay him. Make up your minds..." she mumbled sullenly as she peeked at a folded-over section of her map before looking irritably at me and answering, "The chunks are in there still, and they're keeping him going. The Eater's probably supporting him with that soulless flesh, too. There's no way in the Abyss that he's alive naturally." Then she muttered, "The stars are being butts, though... I really thought I'd worked that out."

"Right." I sighed and closed my eyes, then opened them and stared down at the Legate. The immense behemoth's mouth split wide as his countless eyes glared back with millennia of malice.

"Come, Maiden. Let me correct my prophesy," the Legate said as he spread his hooves wide. But in doing so, he exposed that grievous wound in his chest. My eyes picked it out, a twisted knot of black and green light that wildly flickered and flashed. It was wedged in a spur of busted rib the size of a large tree.

"Tell the others," I said, looking at the pair as I drew the starmetal sword and Vigilance. "Get the pieces to me. Keep everyone alive." I stared at Pythia, and she started at my gaze. "If there's any star out there that will help me, I'll take it. Whatever games they want to play, I don't care. I need to win here."

For an instant, Pythia's expression mirrored her youthful form. Then she thumped Psalm's neck. "I need to fold out my map! Get me back to the railcar!"

"No deals dooming the world or garbage like that," I pointed out.

"Well, duh. I'm not a moron," Pythia said with a roll of her eyes. "I like the world staying here. It's where I live." Psalm teleported away as I looked down at the Legate. He spread his arms wide, ignoring Whisper and Dusk's assault upon his head. I was all that mattered to him right now.

"Come, Maiden," he said again, in a grotesque croon. "Let me reunite you with your loved ones."

I gave the sword a swish through the air beside me and disappeared, reappearing before the gaping, grotesque hole in his chest. Hot, wet air and the stench of a slaughterhouse hit me like a wall, but there, in front of me, lay a quarter of his heart, no bigger than my hoof.

And instantly I was assaulted by his fleshy entrails. A hundred or more serpentine coils of viscera shot out in bloody streamers, roping over my wings and legs. They coiled around the hilt of the sword and yanked the blade short of the stone. Both the blade and I were pulled into the cavity, and it took all my telekinetic power to keep him from pulling the sword away from me entirely. "Oh, a teleport. Didn't see that coming," the Legate chuckled sarcastically. "And while I'd love for you to watch *more* of your friends die, I think you've experienced enough of that." I smelled bile. "Time for lunch."

Crimson and rainbow beams dazzled around me, turning the flesh into a cascade of rainbow colored ash. Dusk whooshed in and ripped and tore wildly with her wings and barbed tail as Glory's prismatic blaster continued to fire. "The sword! Shoot the sword!" I shouted. She aimed with all the precision S.A.T.S. had to offer, and the tissue that was trying to engulf the weapon vaporized. Free of the flesh, my magic whipped it around and slashed at the lodged stone. The impact made the entire mountain of meat tremble as I struck again and again, feeling a thrill of joy at the Legate's howls.

On the third blow, the stone exploded into fragments, and I watched as those fragments exploded into dust. A dark mote, throbbing with crackling green energy, hovered for a moment before it was pulled into the Legate... towards his head... "The next one is in his head!" I shouted as loudly as I could. Probably inside a skull thick as a concrete bunker.

Dusk ripped me free, and I moved a little bit away. Dusk didn't follow, though; I turned and saw her struggling with her hindlegs buried in the Legate's mass. I grabbed her outstretched hoof with my hands, pulling as hard as I could, to keep her from being consumed. My horn flashed multiple times, sending bolts of white magic into the sanguine innards, but she was slowly pulled deeper. Then a shadow moved above me, and I saw the Legate's immense hoof sweeping down. "Go!" Dusk shouted, and then she shot me in the chest with Pew-Pew. Luna's armor absorbed the blow, but it still stung more than enough to break my grip. I teleported back, the hoof rocketing by and trailing a vortex that pulled me after it, flipping me over several times before I could stabilize myself. I watched as Dusk disappeared into the Legate's mass.

"Ohh, I can feel her wriggling!" the Legate taunted. "Now, be careful with those damned energy blasts. Wouldn't want to kill your friend!"

Oh, he really needed to die. Was he lying? Did it matter? Was I ruthless enough to risk vaporizing one of my own to stop him? His hooves rushed together at me, and I teleported away as they collided with a thunderous boom. I appeared above him, and Whisper flew up to me. "What's the plan?"

"The next one is in his head," I said, pointing down with the sword. "Have any clue how to get through that skull?"

"Heh." She grinned and dropped like a lightning bolt, landing atop his head with a resounding crack. Just as fast, she rose and fell again. And again. The flesh of his skull was blasted away, revealing a chipped plate of bone. The Legate howled as he swept his hooves over his head, but she just nipped around them, striking the same spot again and again.

Then, though, she rose back to me, her hooves trailing smoke and dangling metal. "Shit," she said in a disgusted tone. "His skull's thicker than most I try to get through." She regarded her power hooves. "Let me snag a replacement. I'll find some way to get in there." She darted down towards the car. The Legate punched a monstrous hoof straight up at me, and I teleported down to the car as well. The entire chamber boomed, and debris clattered down on us as we rolled along. Psalm protected us from the shower of stones, the cowcatcher banging aside the largest debris. Whisper landed and narrowed her eyes. "Frigging magic," she muttered as she pulled off the blackened power hooves. "How are we going to get through that skull?"

"Forty-one. Forty-two," Sweetie Bot counted regularly.

"Not you. I need you to make a hole," I told Sweetie Bot, then turned to the others. Behind us were loud booms as the Legate mashed his hooves at us, twisting around to try and get a good hit. We needed to scatter.

"You need to get his bonce open?" Crumpets asked me. I nodded. She looked at Aries, and the other Ranger nodded once. "Leave it to us. We'll crack that nut. I'm an expert at dealing with thick-headed ponies." Then she paused. "Where's Dusk?"

I closed my eyes. "She's inside that thing."

Then we were flying, and not in a good way. The Legate had finally found a way to catch us: laying his hoof across the tracks. We'd hit it like a wall... a fleshy wall, which was probably the only saving grace of most of us. Sweetie Bot had managed to snag the control stand, but the rest of us went flying into the Legate's limb. The Steel Ranger armor, and my own, banged loudly against the slightly yielding surface, and Whisper was able to fly clear. Psalm pulled Pythia into her hooves with her magic, turning and spreading her wings wide.

Then she slammed into the hoof, her bones crackling like brittle wood.

I watched her bounce off the surface, her wings having slowed her but not enough, as I crashed on my back back on the car. She managed to land on her hooves, but then she wobbled once, then collapsed. Under us, the wheels were spinning and sending out sparks. "Hey!" Pythia cried. "Come on! You're an alicorn! You should be able to take that hit!" She pulled free of Psalm's legs and scrambled for a bottle of healing potion from the locker, but it had smashed and dribbled over her hooves.

If Psalm died, what would happen to the Brood, even if I won here? I struggled to pull out one of my own potions when I heard the noise of rushing air. I looked up at the Legate's triumphant grin and his other colossal hoof descending towards us.

Then, he paused. His enormous, bloody sockets fixed on something behind me, and his grin lessened a little. I passed the healing potion to Pythia, which she quickly administered to Psalm, then saw his gaze. Not on me. No.

On the slain zebra in the corner. Even with the impact, he rested slumped, as if he could be sleeping. "My boy..." the Legate muttered. It was a moment, just a few seconds, but it was the time we needed. I flew out next to Whisper and robbed him of his chance to wipe most of us out in one blow. "The fool. Poor loyal deluded fool," the Legate muttered as hard contempt returned to his face. Aries and Crumpets were off the car, running back along the tracks as the Legate glared at me. "Do not mistake this for compassion. I have buried legions of my children, and my children's children. One learns not to get attached." That cunning grin returned. "As you likely know by now."

Maybe, but he had still been attached enough to hesitate. I had no illusions about saving the Legate, but he wasn't the Eater. The Legate had been a person. A horrible person who needed to die, but a person. "Maybe," I yelled back, "but I'm a slow learner." Wait, was that... I stared at the Legate. "Say something!"

His eyes widened, and then he scowled. He pulled back the foreleg across the tracks, freeing the car to resume its pell-mell travel, and smashed his hooves together in the air before himself. I could have teleported any number of places to get away from him, but I needed to see. Again and again Whisper and I flitted to the left and right. *Come on, you striped bastard! You're a talker! Say something already!*

"What are you doing?" Whisper asked as she pulled on a fresh power hoof, swooping like a wasp, effortlessly evading another swipe of a giant hoof. The weapon whirled as it automatically tightened on the end of her foreleg.

"Trying to see if he has something in his mouth," I growled at her in frustration, then shouted at him, "At least Lancer believed in something!"

"He was a fool! Like you all!" the Legate shouted, and I saw it. Inside his mouth, at the back of his throat, was a telltale black-and-green glow. He had a shard of his soul in his throat!

Whisper saw my expression as she activated her singular power hoof. "What?"

"It's in his throat," I said triumphantly. Now... how to get it out? I teleported next to his windpipe and made a horizontal slash, but he instantly brought a leg up to shield it before I could cut a hole big enough to find the portion of his soul. I teleport dodged back to avoid the other hoof, but he knew what I was up to now.

"Let him hit you," Whisper said.

"What?" I asked, my eyes bulging.

"I'm telling you, let him hit you!" the pegasus snapped, then darted away from me. The Legate was already drawing back for another blow. Let him... hit me? That was like advising I stand on train tracks when the locomotive was coming! Maybe I could just let him clip me? A near miss? The hoof flashed in on me, and I screwed up my face. Oh, this was going to hurt...

The blow sent me rocketing clear across the cavernous space, and I was content to fly clear through it with my wings and legs spread wide. I didn't quite splatter myself across the wall, but I definitely left a sizeable dent in the crumbly facade of an apartment building. Found it quite relaxing, actually, resting in that divot. I could spend the rest of the fight here. Bring Tom. I was good. I could watch all three giant Legates laugh as he drew back for one last blow.

He stopped laughing as a yellow blur streaked right into his maw.

I shook off the little Glories, P-21s, and Rampages telling me to get my ass back in the fight as I watched him clench his jaw, pressing his hooves to his throat. I flew up to him... well, weaved and swayed as my whole head throbbed way too much for more teleporting right now. His eyes bulged as he made choking noises, his mouth working around the clenched jaws. Then a flash went off behind his teeth. A second flash. A third. He opened his mouth, howling pain as Whisper sprang free, clutching the chunk of sundered heart in her hooves, dripping rancid spittle and blood. "Kill it!" she screamed at me, holding the stone out as I readied the sword. Its glittering starmetal edge descended towards the black, abhorrent thing.

As one, blade and jaws fell, the latter snapping shut on her wings with a wet crunch even as the former cleaved right through the stone. The two halves of the fragment exploded into black powder; the bisected bits of soul swept up into his brow and down into his swollen stomach. Whisper's eyes bulged as an immense gray tongue curled around her and started to pull her into his mouth again, his eyes narrowed as if daring me to strike.

Of course I did.

I darted in, slicing down through that thick muscle as I reached forward, popped my fingers, and pulled on Whisper. His mouth spread wide as he lunged at me, and I braced my hindhooves on his upper teeth and grabbed Whisper with my forehooves, pulling her to me and pushing back against him. His hooves were rising up to sweep us both into his dripping, gargantuan maw. As I pulled, though, she gave a screech of pain, and I saw that the tatters of her wings had gotten stuck between two of the immense teeth. We shared a moment, just one, and then without hesitation I brought the sword around and severed her wings in one smooth slice.

She fell, and I teleported to catch her as the Legate's frothing red maw gnashed on bare air. Blood spurted from her sheared-off stumps as I carried her through the air towards the car. We both crashed to the floor, and I was greeted by the welcome sight of Psalm awake, though slumped against the storage locker. Her horn was cracked at the base, and she was handling a healing potion delicately with her hooves. "Fuck. Fuck," Whisper muttered over and over again, taking the potion and drinking it down. When Pythia offered a syringe of Hydra, though, she immediately waved it off with a furious glare.

The bleeding didn't stop, so I pulled some bits of old cord from the storage locker and tied them tight around the stumps. "They can regrow them," I told her. "They regrew Glory's wing."

She just nodded, her body pale and trembling.

"I've got a full charge now, Blackjack," Sweetie Bot told me gravely. "I can make a hole up if you want."

It was the right thing to do. Except... "Go ahead," I said as I flew aloft.

And was struck by a boat. Okay, it wasn't a boat, but I'd been hit by boats before; this was just like that! Once again I was reduced to a quivering lump of augmented Princess. This time, though, I didn't imbed myself in the wall so much as tumble down the slope, banging and flailing as I struggled to regain control. I finally got caught on an I-beam dangling over the abyss. The Legate drew back a foreleg for a finishing stomp.

Then a flurry of brilliant emerald hail blasted right through his shoulder, and the limb was cleaved off completely, immense jets of gore spraying out of it and the stump as it fell. The Legate howled, then swung his remaining foreleg in an overarching blow that struck the tracks with an earsplitting crack. The section of track the car was on broke free, sliding down the ruin on a slope of debris that had the very earth shaking. The I-beam came loose from the rubble, and I went tumbling down through the dust as well, trying to keep myself together as I rolled.

I came to rest amidst the blood swamp that engulfed the Legate's waist. Above, he kept howling in pain, slamming his hoof around wildly, perhaps trying to bury us under all the debris he was knocking free. Finally, it stopped, and I made out the glow of an alicorn shield. I started towards it but stopped as a knifing pain blossomed in my side. I looked back at the sight of a length of steel bar punched clean through me. And another. And another. Lifting the sword, I carefully sliced through them all, then pulled out the lengths. After each, I chugged a healing potion as I felt my insides spilling out. "If only I'd had you on the moon..." I muttered as the dust settled around me. Over to the side, I could see the railcar lying on a slope few dozen feet from the jiggling pool of gore around the Legate. My head throbbed so much, I didn't risk magic, flying over to the vehicle instead.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked, looking at Sweetie Bot, her synthetic hide lacerated and exposing metal and bands of black muscle beneath. The music had changed from shouting incomprehensible lyrics to something lower, tenser, and instrumental. Psalm held Pythia in her hooves, the filly clutching the starmap to her chest and appearing as if she was actually regretting her brash decision to come along with us.

Whisper just looked equal parts miserable and pissed. "I can't believe I need a frigging gun..." she muttered as she glared at the battered and bent storage locker.

"Recharging," Sweetie Bot said with a definite buzz and crackle in her voice. "Diverting energy from repair systems to main pool. Mr. Horse is awesome—" Her green eyes flared. "Ugh... stop it!" We looked at her in bafflement. "I am in danger of losing my patience with that dumb protocol."

I didn't know where Aries and Crumpets were. There were two other blue bars besides the four with me, but I couldn't pick them out through the dust and wreckage. I had no idea what they were doing;

for all I knew, they'd been buried alive in the avalanche. "We need to end this," I said, pulling out Folly. "We only have fifteen minutes till Tom hits."

"Wait," Pythia said. "He's still got chunks of that soul jar left in him. You might vaporize his mass, but he'll still be here. Do you want to face whatever's left of him and the Eater at the same time?"

"There's one piece in his brain, and one piece... around there," I said, pointing at his waist. "I've got no clue how to get at either."

"Huh. They gravitated to his chakras. Be glad there's not seven chunks," Pythia said, and when we all stared at her, she waved her hoof. "Look, I don't have time to go into Eschatik meditation techniques right now, okay? Bigger things to worry about!"

"Such tenacious little gnats," the Legate wheezed. "You are wasting my time. I will be restored again and again." Then his hoof slammed down a hundred feet away, making the ground shake. "You cannot defeat me!" Another massive impact, closer. And closer. I slipped the silver bullet into the breach, and the weapon became live.

"Wait," Sweetie Bot said as she limped to the rear of the railcar, where the ridge of spark batteries crackled and popped. She looked them over. "Get ready to hit the stone in his gut," she said to me, then turned at Pythia. "Tell me where to aim."

"What are you doing?" I asked as she yanked out two sparking cables.

"Voiding my warranty. No time for a shielded interface..." she replied. She turned back to Pythia, and the mare pointed at a section right about where his navel would be if his navel wasn't covered in a patina of gore. The hoof rammed to the ground next to us, making the whole car slide several feet down the slope. "It's been fun," Sweetie Bot quipped.

Then she jabbed the cables into her ears as the shadow of the hoof rose over us.

"Wait!" I shouted, but it was too late. Her mane caught fire as her eyes blazed a solid green. Her voice crackled wildly as she spouted gibberish, and then her horn burst into light. The bolts roared out, not in curving aimed trajectories but in a straight line and so thick and fast that they looked like a solid bar of bright flickering green. The beam cut through the Legate's bulk like my silver sword writ large and blasted a cloud of dust and rubble from the wall on the other side. Sweetie Bot swung her head, and the Legate's grotesque form collapsed against the far wall, severed from its base. Then the beam stopped, the synthetic pony's horn sputtering out a few more bolts, the last veering off to the side. She stood there a moment, mane on fire, eyes aglow, the music freezing in a feedback screech, and sparking cables in her ears, and then, with a stuttering groan of "N-n-not tt-onight-t-t Horsiiiiie-e I h-have a h-h-headac-c-c-che..." from her speakers, her eyes popped like flashbulbs and left her still and silent.

Two, the dusty voice murmured.

From the hole in the Legate slithered a torrent of guts larger than my body, but I ignored that foulness and focused on the crackling ball of dark magic that came with them. I bodily shoved the masses aside, trying to push aside how they were forming wiggling fingers that started to clutch at my limbs, and pulled the stone free. One good hit, and it exploded into powder. The black soul mote streaked up, and the grasping tendrils around me melted into slurry... clingy, bloody slurry that was like wet concrete, but at least it wasn't getting too friendly with me...

The rest of the Legate was looking scarcely better than his rapidly dissolving lower half. His body sagged, as if he were having trouble keeping it together. As he swayed, he glared down at me and shifted his weight. Suddenly a whirring roar rose up from the car, where Whisper struggled to keep a

minigun braced against the railing. "This is so not my shit!" she screamed as she kept a stream of bullets pouring up at him. The hail of lead perforated his chest and side at Pythia's direction, for some reason.

"Enough!" he roared as he raised his hoof, which still had more than enough integrity to crush us all to goop. "You die! Your friends die! Everything dies!" I pulled Folly free of the slime and raised it. If I got lucky... maybe... maybe I could get him and poke a hole through the roof I could climb through in one shot. Maybe!

Then the Legate's side exploded in rainbow light, and I paused. From where Whisper'd been shooting poked a black form: a suit of Enclave power armor. Whisper cut off the fire, whooping, "That's it! Get back in the fight, you pussy!" Dusk definitely appeared worse for wear. Her armor had been cracked open, the mare inside looking half digested but still alive and armed. The beam gun bit deep into the upraised limb with S.A.T.S. precision; something in the joint gave way, and the entire limb twisted in on itself. Dusk slipped out between his ribs and tumbled along his body as the Legate worked the limb. He seemed to be struggling to restore it, though; the muscles were reforming, but they were malformed and warped upon his shoulder.

I gladly held my fire, kicking my way free of the gore and half flapping, half swimming to where Dusk was slipping under the ooze. Her feathers and dark mane were gone, and patches of her hide were milky and peeling off; others were missing altogether, exposing damaged muscle. "Med-X," she croaked, her whole body trembling as I kept her out of the slime. I administered an injection immediately, and she relaxed in my embrace. "Okay," she said weakly. "Daddy has no right to tell me he's the biggest badass in the Enclave just for fighting off an overgrown lizard." I carried her out of the pool to where Psalm had two healing potions and the Hydra waiting, and she eagerly sucked the potions down as the more potent drug regrew her epidermis. "That was the worst..." she started to say, then spotted Whisper's truncated wings and looked back at her own featherless but still present ones. "Huh..."

"Yeah, fuck you. At least I don't smell like barf," Whisper retorted.

The Legate slumped against the wall. "Persistent... tenacious... fools!" he boomed. I scowled and pointed Folly at his head. The angle would be all wrong for getting out of here, but at least I wouldn't have to deal with him anymore. His bloody lips spread in an impossibly wide leer.

Then, from high above the Legate came the thump of an explosion. Then another. Then a third, blasting out of a broken tunnel. The Legate twisted his head up and stared with an almost weary expression as a train, this one a string of industrial tankers, came rocketing out the broken tube. He struggled to raise his enormous hoof to block, but one tanker after the next smashed right into his face. Psalm grabbed Sweetie Bot, Lancer, and Pythia with her magic and took off, and I pulled up the pegasi as the wreckage continued past the ruin of his head to land around his body. The tankers burst open and covered him with pungent liquid, and flatbed cars sliced into him like immense blunt knives; then the fluids burst into flames, setting him howling, and then a pair of coupled locomotives shot out and smashed into his head like a thunderbolt. The whole thing came apart like a melon, leaving only a screaming mouth and a massive mound of gray meat sitting in a bowl of shattered bone. From far above, barely audible, Crumpets yelled out, "Got 'im!"

I set Dusk and Whisper over where Psalm sheltered the rest against the debris slope. The Legate finally seemed too stunned to defend himself, his whole body shaking as it burned with thick, oily black smoke and sullen orange flames. I flew over to the ruins of his skull and spotted the stone imbedded in a spiral-like wiggle of brain. "You die," I said as I raised the sword.

Then his body began to spasm wildly, not so much an attack as an epileptic fit. Back and forth he rammed into the walls, and the shard and I were knocked flying. Aries and Crumpets tumbled from the tunnel mouth and rolled down the slope like dropped toys. Before I could recover, I was smashed by the writhing body and fell down along its flaming bulk, back into the bloody lake below.

I pulled my head out of the gore, swimming between pools of blazing fuel, and saw the burning form arch over me, his smashed head crushing against the opposite wall as he dripped down upon me. His jaws were frozen in a skeletal rictus. "I... Can... Not... Die..." the crackling behemoth wheezed as bits cascaded down upon me.

I struggled to lift the sword and Folly, but where was the stone?! Where... I couldn't see. The Legate was collapsing slowly bit by bit, perhaps intending to bury me under his massiveness. "Where's the damned rock?! Where'd it fall?"

"Blackjack!" shouted Crumpets from the shore. I looked over and saw the battered armored pony holding the stone in her hoof. She whirled and bucked it straight to me. My fingers popped out, and I caught it.

She disappeared beneath the Legate's hoof.

I struggled free into the air and teleported next to the hoof as it rose up. The armor lay broken where it had been compressed into the debris. "Ow," she rasped.

"Hold on," I said as I looked at the monstrosity above us. "Enough! Die already!" And I struck the stone with all the force I could muster. The sword cleaved the last of his magical heart, and the last of it vaporized. The black soul mote exploded out and lingered in the air for a moment, then flew up above me to where the smoldering body had finally come apart in smoking slurry and collapsed down into the pool in a great splash of gore.

Everyone scrambled back down the slope to where Crumpets lay next to me like a broken toy. "Is she alive?" Dusk asked as she slumped against Whisper.

"Hey, Enclave. Don't you know us Rangers don't die so easy?" Crumpets replied.

"We have to get her out of that armor! A healing potion won't work if she'd being crushed," I said, lifting the silver sword.

Dusk shook her head. "No! Don't! She's probably got all kinds of internal bleeding. Right now, the armor is the only thing keeping her alive." The pegasus scowled back at all our stares and snapped, "What? You try having a sibling in medical school and not picking up some trivia."

"Well, at least he's finally done," Aries said as she looked up at the corpse. A dry chuckle sounded in my mind.

A hoof struck her helmet, pushed through her visor, and out the back in an explosion of bone, brain, and metal.

And that's three, the voice rasped.

Perched casually on her head, foot lodged in her brain, was the Legate. Not the enormous monstrosity. He'd reverted to his old size, but now he reminded me of Dawn. His coat was a silvery synthetic fused with pale hide, striped with glowing green lines of energy. His eyes churned with the green and black energy of the soul motes. One limb ended in a truncated spur of bone and meat that finished assembling itself before my eyes in a flash of baleful green energy.

"I told you. I cannot die," he said calmly, lips curled in sublime confidence.

I swept the sword at him, but he leapt away almost as fast as Whisper could move. "Oh come ON!" I shouted as I spotted him standing on top of his own body. "I smashed the heart. Game over. You're done!"

He was on me in a flash, literally. He might as well have been teleporting as he smashed into me from the left, and the right, whirling like a green-striped blur. Of all my friends, I was the only one who was, relatively, still in fighting condition. Again and again I struck out at him, and again and again he thrashed me. My bones cracked and my armor dented, and he knocked me to the ground. When I tried to rise, he hammered me back down again. Whisper and Dawn tried to move in closer to help, but I snapped, "Stay back!" I didn't want him to pull something with them. Three more times I struggled to rise, to blast him with magic, to cut him... to do anything... and three times I fell bloodied to the ground.

Finally, I simply stayed there.

"That's right," he crooned in my ear before slapping a hoof across my face and rising to address my friends. "I want witnesses to my triumph." More than his speed and his strength, that smug expression of superiority on his face really pissed me off. Still, his gloating was giving me a chance to recover from the beating he'd administered. A bit. For all the good it would do. "Just like our first time, isn't it, Maiden?" he murmured.

"It's the Eater!" Pythia shouted. "That's the only thing keeping him here!" The Legate looked at the filly with a murderous grin. "Get away from me, you freak!" she snapped as she hid behind Psalm and continued, "Half the stars say you don't defeat him! Half say you do... so... do it!" Her voice was quivering with panic as she stared at the glowing lines upon his face.

"Little fool. This is the true power the stars offer!" he crowed. "Slay me a thousand times if you wish, I'll return a thousand times, and more!" He touched his chest. "I'll get a new vessel for my soul, and slay the next world. And the next!"

"You idiot! What makes you think that the Eater will even need you after it's restored?" I challenged, and his smirk disappeared. "That's right. You're worthless to the Eater once it's back on its feet again!"

"The Eater of Souls needs me!" he insisted, his flaring, flickering eyes narrowing.

"For what?" I asked, rubbing my face as I stood. "You're nothing to the Eater. It doesn't need you."

"It has always needed me!" he shouted at me.

"Since when?" I laughed, scornfully.

"Always! I was the one who could hear its dying whispers! I was the only one who would listen to its call. It needed me to get my own wretched tribe to resurrect it! It needed me to use your people to raise it! It needs me now to forestall you just a few minutes more!"

Then we heard it. The scream of Enervation changed. Focused. For a moment, all around us, came a slightly different modulation of the noise. It could be summed up in three words.

OH, DO I?

The Legate's colors reverted back to white and red, and he stared at his hooves. His look of utter horror was absolute, and he gaped at me, his mouth moving silently. Finally, he rasped, "I... I am your ever-loyal servant! I would never presume..." He gagged, his jaw working. I just watched. "I... am... worthy! I—"

He hunched over as his body seemed to soften like hot wax. "No! Not like this!" He thrust a hoof towards the ceiling and screamed as his flesh ran in the heat of the Eater's ire. "You owe me!" he screamed as his gut distended, then burst like a boil.

Then he melted, rejoining the gore in the pit.

The soul mote lingered a few seconds longer, snapping as if caught in a great wind, and then the sooty black spot winked out.

I sank to my knees in the muck and looked over at my friends. Pythia stared at where the Legate had disappeared, then at her wrinkled, grubby starmap. "Oh! So that's what it meant! Huh!" She folded up the paper. "Well, that made the whole trip worth it for me."

None of the rest of us shared her glee. Three more of my friends were dead, and the others weren't much better. Psalm had recovered a little from her impact. Crumpets might not be dead, but she wasn't far from it. Whisper was half-chewed and Dusk half-digested.

"You're thinking of sending us away while you go on alone," the purple alicorn said serenely.

"What? Fuck no!" Whisper said as she leapt to her hooves, then came crashing back down again. She glared over her shoulders at the tied-off stubs of her wings. "I hate gravity," she muttered before she glared at me. "We came down here to see this through to the end."

"And you have," I told her, then turned to Psalm. "Can you take everypony to the Collegiate?" I looked at the bodies of Lancer, Aries, and Sweetie Bot. "All of them?"

Psalm gave a smile. "I will manage. I may burn my horn out, but I will see it done." She rose to her hooves and retrieved a canister from the storage locker. "Keep back. This ignition agent is dangerous," she warned as she stepped way back. My PipBuck's rad counter kicked up its staccato chatter as she cracked the case, bursting to a wild crescendo when she poured the glowing fluid inside all over herself. The clicking diminished a little as she shivered and groaned. "Oh yes... this should give me enough oomph to get out." She regarded the canister. "I think this will be very popular with alicorns in the future." She faced us. "We should go quickly, however. This radiation will not help the rest of you one bit."

Yeah... us going our separate ways... "Thanks for coming this far with me," I told them all.

"Will you be all right?" she asked as I pulled what remained of the healing potions and shotgun ammo from the storage locker. I immediately slugged down some RadAway and passed some pouches to the others. There was also a small bag of gemstones. After getting Luna's soul, I'd always been topped off, but still, couldn't hurt to bring them along.

"Hey. Nothing to it. Go up, spank the Eater, save the world. It'll be done in ten minutes, tops." Or else we'd be done. Either way. I looked at the maimed, the burnt, and the crushed, and then to Pythia. "Coming?"

The filly flushed. "There's a difference between being in the front row and being on the field. I saw the traitor undone by his own words. Thanks, though." She paused and screwed up her face. "I called in whatever favors I could. You've got a lot riding on this. Don't screw it up."

"What's it going to cost me?" I asked.

"You? Personally? Don't worry about it. The games and stakes stars play for... well... let's just say all the higher powers interested have put their chips in the pot. Just need someone to deal the cards and see who hits, who stays, and who goes bust." She peered at Crumpets. "And I think we'd all better get going."

"Yeah." I paused, then pulled out Vigilance and turned to Psalm. "Hey. Make sure this gets to Grace. I dunno which of them is going to use it, but they should have it," I said as I passed the weapon to her. "You know... just in case..."

"Oh, fuck that," Whisper snapped. She trotted right up to me and brought her hoof across my muzzle. "None of that 'giving your shit up before you die' shit. You're going to live, understand?" she demanded as she glared at me. "Rampage isn't here to smack that shit out of you, so I'll do it. And when you're back, I'm going to kick your cybernetic ass to show everypony who's the baddest momma in the Hoof. Got it?"

"Wait." I gaped at her. "You're pregnant?!" I never would have--

She stared at me flatly, then gave a strange noise, part contemptuous 'tch' and part teary sniff. "Just... fucking survive. Okay?" There were tears in her eyes, but she quickly scrubbed them away with a hoof. "Ugh, that breath..." she muttered before turning away and addressing the others. "Let's go. Blackjack can catch up later."

I walked a little ways from them. They stared at me and I at them, as none of us said the word. Psalm gave me a warm smile, her horn blazing brightly, and then disappeared. I stared at the space they'd occupied for a moment. "Goodbye," I murmured. Then I flew into the middle of the chamber. I drew Folly, smiling. How funny; what I was planning to do was almost the definition of foolishness. If I'd known when I'd taken EC-1101 from my stable what I'd face, how much I'd lose, how steep the odds I'd have to beat were, I probably would have thrown the damn thing in the ocean and called it good. Maybe the world would have been better for it.

Raising the gun overhead, I aimed right at the center of all that compressed ruin that had been the Core. I narrowed my eye a little, slipped into S.A.T.S., and activated the weapon one last time.

The beam lanced up, and the ceiling shattered. Girders, pipes, wires, wagons, trains, and concrete came cascading down in a deluge of ruin, filling the pit beneath me with the corpse of the city. Folly had cleared a path through the falling remains, though, and as they fell around me, none fell on me. I floated there in a void, the edges of the cavern invisible in dust, darkness, and rubble, green light surrounding me in a column descending from a hole like a great baleful eye. The junk overhead had resettled, but there was a way clear. It was just going to be a bit of a climb.

"So. This is it?" rasped a voice in my ear as I reached the hole. I started squeezing my way quickly but carefully through the packed mess as it shifted around me.

"Looks like it," I said, and glanced at the bony skeleton in the duster and cowpony hat. "I thought you'd died on the moon." I teleported through a gap that was closing ahead of me. Of course, the Dealer kept right along with me, shuffling cards between his dusty hooves.

"I was always more than just him. Besides, I know you wouldn't want to make this trip without an escort. No pony should die alone," he said as I climbed.

"Well, forgive me if I'm not in the mood to chat," I said as I used the starmetal sword to cut a gap I could fit through. I didn't want to wear out my horn before I got up there. "I don't know what we'd talk about, anyway."

"How about..." He drew a pair of cards and held them up for me to see: the ace and queen of spades. "How about you tell me about how you got your cutie mark?"

I stopped, giving him a skeptical glower. "My cutie mark?"

"Everypony has a cutie mark story. What's yours?" he asked.

I shoved a piece of steel. "I got it playing cards—" Suddenly, something gave, there was a bang, the piece of steel I'd shoved wrinkled like a wet noodle, and the cavity I was in halved in size. I stared around, wondering what would give first as I tried to find a gap big enough to fit through. "Why do you care, anyway? You're just a hallucination. Proof I really am crazy."

"Or proof that, even toting that goddess around, you're still Blackjack," the Dealer retorted. "Come on. Tell me. Who else are you going to confess your sins to?"

It was stupid. I should have been focusing on the task ahead, not the past behind. There was so much blood on that path. A river of blood. Yet I found myself speaking, despite everything. "It was the first card game I was ever invited to. With Mom's job, nopony wanted me around when rules were broken." I spotted a gap to the side and shimmied that way, finding a spot where I could climb up a dozen more yards. The Dealer kept up with me, leaning in a nook in the wreckage.

"So what's the big deal about a game?" he asked as his bony hooves shuffled the cards.

"I sucked at it, is what. I didn't know how to bluff, or count cards, or anything," I said as I found my way barred by a skinny beam that might, or might not, have been load-bearing. I couldn't get a good look in the space beyond for a teleport, so I braced my hindlegs and shoved slowly, but firmly, my body straining, the injuries I'd taken earlier burning. "I won a round and got my cutie mark. End of story." I finally made a gap I could get through, spotting a half dozen silver wires tautly strung in the space above. Good thing I hadn't teleported. I used a bit of moonstone dust to vaporize them. "Even Cognitum said so. Victory was my special talent."

"Mmmm... I don't think so," he said as he turned a card, showing me the nightmare version of myself. "After all, she didn't win where it really counted. She'd planned on ruling afterwards. Dying kind of negates all that." He put the card back in the deck. "That mark's seen just as much defeat as victory... luck of the draw, which comes out on top. Ah, but death now... *that's* been a bit more consistent around it, hasn't it?"

I froze, remembering that stupid card game with ponies I'd wanted as my friends. Maybe Marmalade could have been... or Daisy... if I'd just... done... something. "It was an accident."

"Of course. Accidental deaths at card games. Happens all the time."

"She got up to go pee and got crushed. End of story!" I shouted at him, then pointed a hoof up at where the Eater was waiting for me. "I don't have time for this now!"

"Right. You've got a debt to pay," he said, chuckling. "Still, no time like the present. How'd you get your cutie mark? How'd you *really* get it?"

I paused, pressing my head against the wall. It'd been an accident.

"Do you know what the cards on your flank really mean?" the Dealer asked as he held up an ace in one hoof and a queen of spades in the other.

"They're just stupid cards."

"Right. And that's just a stupid cutie mark," he responded with a laugh. "Ace of swords. Power. Focus. Determination. Victory. I did this once for you before, if you recall." He turned it upside down. "Confusion. Chaos. Lack of clarity. Sounds like both sides of your life."

My jaw worked as I stared at the card, then at the queen of spades, depicting Luna in profile with a sword. "And that one?"

"Queen of swords. Quick thinker, decisive... executioner." He practically purred the word. "And while you might not have deliberately chopped off the heads of your prisoners, you really never took that many prisoners to begin with. You are frightfully good at killing." He turned the card upside down. "Overly emotional, vindictive, morose... and bitchy." He scratched his bony chin. "How many enemies have you had who haven't died horrible deaths?"

"It was just a card game. Just an accident..." I whimpered, clenching my eyes shut. Don't think about it. She'd gotten up to go pee. Simple as that.

"Of course. She goes to pee and gets crushed. Happens all the time." I stared at him, mentally begging him to stop. "Woe to those poor fools who saw your flank and thought it was nothing more than playing cards. Even Cognitum's assumption it was victory was dreadfully naïve. If anypony with a bit of sense had seen your flank, they would have run the other way and never stopped." He paused as I swallowed, and then returned to his refrain, "How'd you get your cutie mark, Blackjack?"

What did it matter? He wasn't real. I tuned him out, or tried to, as I struggled to climb. The shaft I'd blasted with Folly groaned and twisted around me, but every time I turned around, there was the Dealer. Shuffling cards. Smiling. Waiting for the answer. I reached for a beam, and when it pulled free, I was so preoccupied that I fell a dozen feet and got peppered by metal and debris. He leaned over me. "How'd you get your mark?" he repeated.

I groaned, pushing myself to my hooves. What would it hurt to tell him? "It was Hatches. I don't remember what her real name was. We just called her Hatches." I closed my eyes. "First one to leave always gets picked up by security. The others had won, and it was either going to be me or her leaving first. Getting picked up after curfew was three days locked in rehabilitation cells, or flogging. So Hatches and I had one more round to see who'd leave first. I lost."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Then I was such a whiny baby about it that she agreed to leave first anyway. Nice about it, though. Claimed she had to pee," I muttered with a wistful smile that soon withered. "But the door's sensor had malfunctioned. She walked through, and it closed on her. Killed her... but I didn't get in trouble or have to tattle on the others at the game," I said lowly.

"So you won," the Dealer chuckled. "And all it cost you was a life."

"I didn't kill Hatches," I muttered. "I didn't want her dead. She was nice to me. Closest thing I had to a friend!" I insisted as I resumed my ascent. I didn't have time for this shit. "Go away. I've got a job to do."

Once again, he was in my path. "I'm sure." He was silent for a second, empty sockets almost pitying, then asked as calm and cool as poison, "What was her real name, Fishie?"

I quivered, hot tears on my cheeks. "I didn't kill her," I repeated, the words sounding like a prayer.

"Right. But people who help you do have a nasty tendency to turn up dead," he said with a chuckle. "Always somepony there to take the bullet. To die in your stead."

"I never wanted that!" I shouted back at him. "I tried to save people!" Again my grip slipped, and I fell, spreading my wings to catch myself, and got pelted by rubble. I coughed and wiped gritty muck from my eyes. Was that sky up there? I was so close...

The sardonic smirk was all the reply he needed, but he went on, relentlessly, "Sure. You didn't even want to kill your enemies. You just turned them into friends." His grin widened. "How'd that work out for them, again?"

I quivered as I stared at the death awaiting me above. "No pony should have died for me..." I whispered.

"Why? You were always ready to die for them. They were just better at it than you were." He made a show of inspecting my body. "And when you didn't have any pony to do that, well... look at what a pound of flesh can buy."

Finally, I balked and paused my ascent, staring at him as pebbles and scree rained down into my mane. He stared back, confident and smug as a skull could be. "Who are you? You're not my crazy... and I don't think you're the Eater, either..."

"No? Well, who can tell for sure?" The Dealer took his hat off. "If I were anything... and I'm not saying I am... I'd call me the Wasteland." And he gave me a little bow.

"The Wasteland?" I echoed as I stared at him.

"The desolation. The loss. The pain and sacrifice. I take you... all of you... and I make your lives living, bloody hell. I twist you. I tear you. I see what you're all made of. How far you can go. Where, exactly, you break." He showed cards of me after the *Seahorse*. Of me outside Maripony right before the bomb went off. Of Shadowbolt Tower dying. "And you... Blackjack... you're a pony who should have fallen a hundred times over. I try, and I try, and I try... but I can't *quite* get you."

"I don't die easily," I retorted, eyes narrowing.

"I don't have to kill you to get you," he said with a laugh. "I get everyone sooner or later, though. Everyone. You think I'm some desolate landscape? I'm everywhere. In Elysium and Flank. In the skies of the Enclave and the depths of your stable. Everywhere there's contempt, ambition, avarice, and callousness. I was here before the war, and I'll be here no matter what 'civilization' pops up, because murder and corruption, hatred and intolerance... those never change." He pressed a bony hoof to his chest. "And for some reason, people love me."

"I don't," I hissed.

"But of course you do!" He laughed. "Weren't you always hating yourself for being a screwup? You're now the most dangerously competent pony in the Wasteland. Weren't you always hating your tiny little horn and lack of magic? Well, you're descended from Twilight Sparkle now! Weren't you pining for friends and lovers? I've given you more than a few!" He cackled. "I am so generous, like you. I give people what they crave! What they yearn for more than anything!" He swept his hoof towards the ceiling above me. "And now, I give you what you desire most... a heroic death." He leered at me. "Make it a good one. You've none left to die for you."

Then he evaporated with a last laugh.

I hadn't killed Hatches, but there was no doubt I had benefitted from her death... from so many deaths... The spring from which the river of blood flowed. "One last round, then time to cash out," I croaked, then whispered, "Ante up."

I pulled myself through the last few dozen feet.

The hole opened up in the very bottom of the Eater's nest. The concave structure made of the dozens of skyscrapers spread away from me in every direction, the broken tips pointing up towards the skies. Six walls of magic surrounded the nest, radiating up towards the heavens. The storm whirled around me silently, discharging bolts of lightning into the sheets of magic and making them flare brilliantly. Power cables and pipes lay strewn every which way, the former snapping and smoking as they routed power from who knew where to the F.A.D.E. shields while the latter oozed red flesh. Unlike the nightmares I'd faced below, this meaty sludge seemed content to just trickle like runny magma, oozing

this way and that to form strange fleshy objects. Gruesome as they were, they appeared to be benign; nevertheless, I kept my distance.

And in the middle: the Eater, sitting on its bed of silver wire. Directly above glowed the moon, and shining brilliantly bright... Tom. A luminous swarm of souls swirled in a hollow column in the middle of the ring. Thousands of souls. Millions. And more were being added as I watched, glowing trickles flowing into the mass.

I spread my wings and flew around it, readying on my left the shotgun that held the moonstone rounds and on my right the riot shotgun, both now sporting glossy black finishes decorated with stars and moons. Up close, the Eater's two rows of silver spines no longer appeared uniform and unblemished. The central ring of the Tokomare was wrapped in rusty steel scaffolding and supports, and numerous beams and braces spanned the individual spines. The seemingly smooth surface was rough and mottled up close, with holes chewed clear through revealing green gemstones and lines of eldritch power that beat like a heart. Countless mechasprites, emerging from swollen hives of starmetal and tumorous flesh, were at work moving wires and cables around, chewing up deformed blobs of starmetal, and vomiting it forth to smooth out the spines they buzzed around.

I landed on a spine and felt my insides lurch. Though gravity still pulled me down, it felt as if an inexplicable force were tugging me sideways as well. I trotted along the immense ring, the swarms paying me no mind. Perhaps the Eater was unaware of me at this point, or simply saw me as another soul drawn to it.

That isn't going to last long, I thought as I remembered Glory's plan and sought out a larger section of the structure, where the ring was thicker and the spines a little thinner. Here was where one of the inner F.A.D.E. shield generators was supposed to be housed in a starmetal box. The inner shields were inactive, but that wouldn't last long either. I quickly spotted the box and wiped off the grime that covered it. 'F.A.D.E. I-1' was still legible under the dirt and gore. I backed away, readied the shotgun... and then spotted the terminal.

It was still active, despite evidently having been submerged. Probably the finest design Stable-Tec had to offer. I walked to it and cleared away the filth. The screen flickered a bit, but it worked. It showed an image of the Tokomare and scrolling data. 'Simulation' flashed in the corner, and I watched as Tom descended and was captured. As he was consumed, the Tokomare grew and merged with the surrounding nest. Then new towers sprang up around it, and a dome formed over the machine. More towers grew out radially, not just replacing the Core but crossing the river and growing across the land like a giant crystal. It was all very symmetrical and neat. There were parks marked on the display. Schools. Commercial centers.

Down at the bottom flashed a notice. 'Pending EC-1101 Clearance'.

I flipped open my PipBuck and loaded the program. Tame the Tokomare, or destroy the Eater of Souls? Restore civilization with the push of a button, helping so many ponies who had suffered from my actions, or destroy a parasite consuming the life of the planet itself? With the push of a button, I could make it all better. Security saves ponies. Princesses protect their subjects...

I stared at EC-1101. It would be so easy. So simple...

And I had never taken the easy road. Ever.

I pointed the moonstone shotgun at the casing and pulled the trigger.

The lead slug struck the starmetal casing and flattened against it, spreading out. In the center of the blob of metal, a small rock of moonstone flared brighter and brighter, and I jumped behind a spine as it exploded. The moonstone was hardly done, though. There was another loud pop. Then another, as it landed, reacted, and was launched aloft again. The reaction had taken out half the casing, leaving the

F.A.D.E. talisman dangling from a dozen or so wires, a large crack running through the diamond in the center. I didn't leave fate to chance: I pulled the trigger again.

The gem exploded in a glare of blinding white.

* * *

I blinked rapidly as my vision returned, voices coming from far away. "Are you alright, Blackjack?" a mare asked as I felt myself in a familiar bed. I quickly took stock of her, an earth pony mare, gray with a grayish-green mane, in Stable 99 barding. As I stared at her, she immediately smiled. "Oh, you are awake. I was so worried after that terminal overloaded. I can't believe I was so careless." I continued to stare, and she frowned. "Blackjack? Are you okay?"

"Duct Tape?" I asked thickly, sitting up in my bed, in my dirty, messy room. And she wasn't alone, either. Scotch Tape stood behind her, watching me shyly. "Scotch?"

"Scotch Tape," Duct Tape corrected, flushing a little. "Honestly, ponies are going to think I'm an alcoholic..." She shook her head, then recomposed herself. "She wanted to thank you as well."

"Thank you, Miss Blackjack. For saving my mom, I mean," Scotch said, brushing her mane out of her teal eyes.

I almost jumped out of bed. My legs were my legs. My horn... my horn. The pair backed away as I gaped at my own reflection. With the exception of nasty bedmane, I looked... like I should. "What happened?" I asked the others. "I was shocked?"

"Badly. You've been out for months," Duct Tape explained. "When you showed signs of waking up, they moved you here." I pushed past the pair of them into the hall. It was my stable. It looked the same. Smelled the same. "Blackjack?" Duct Tape asked in concern.

"Where's Mom?" I asked tensely as I levitated over my baton.

"In security—" she said, but I was already trotting. Running, actually, and not to security. This wasn't possible... but if it were... if it were... I raced through the halls.

And a pair of hoofcuffs appeared around my forelegs. I tripped and went sprawling across the floor, rolling in the direction of the fall to raise myself to my hooves. "Hey, nice recovery," Daisy said with a grin, Marmalade smiling behind her. "Guess being out for three months helped you keep on your hooves."

I didn't hesitate this time. My magic picked the simple lock to the cuffs, and I pulled them off. "Don't try and stop me," I told them, and Daisy's grin became a confused frown as I pointed the baton at her. "Where's P-21?" I demanded.

"P... wha?" Daisy asked, clearly baffled. I turned my back on her and continued. If this really was Stable 99, then there were going to be two changes, right now. I ran right up to medical, the pair following me and shouting my name. I stormed into the medical office, ready to kick flank and beat in skulls.

"Blackjack! You're awake!" Doctor Syringe said brightly, smiling in clear welcome. Only one thing kept me from bashing the unicorn's blue face in.

The earth pony stallion in stable barding next to her. He was just as blue as her, his mane thick and shaggy, his eyes deep but untroubled. "I can come back later," P-21 said evenly to the doctor, looking back at the dots and male mark on his flank. "I've lived with it for my whole life. I can wait a little longer."

She immediately flushed. "I'm sorry you had to wait at all. Now that we've got a sane Overmare, hopefully things can get better."

"Sane... Overmare?" I asked weakly.

"Oh, right. You missed a lot," Syringe said with a frown. "That little monster who used to be in charge is currently locked up till we can figure out how to deal with her. Your mom's the interim Overmare," she said, then regarded P-21 as she continued over my stunned bafflement, "One of the first things she did was audit the breeding program and institute reforms." She hung her head. "There's no way to make up for what we did..."

"No, there isn't," P-21 said grimly with a frown at her. "But you're trying to do better. That's all that counts." He clearly worked to repress his anger as he regarded me curiously.

"She... did?" I asked faintly, unable to tear my eyes off him.

"You sound so surprised," a voice said behind me.

I turned, gaping at the lavender mare with pink eyes and striped mane. "Mom?" I asked, my voice croaking.

"Come up to my office. I can fill you in on everything that's happened," she told me.

So we did. Overmare Gin Rummy had learned of the Overmare's plot to kill Duct Tape with the terminal and sell us out to raiders, deposed her, and then, a few weeks later, risked opening up the stable to trade with the Wasteland. Apparently, they'd hit things off wonderfully with a group of traders in Megamart led by a mare named Bottlecap. Mom had sat by my bed and told me all about the ponies she'd encountered since opening up the stable while I'd been in my coma. Bottlecap, Charity, Priest... Big Daddy and Doctor Triage... even the VC and Enclave. Rampage was the rude representative of the Reapers, and Morning Glory was with the Thunderhead ponies.

When she finished, I simply sat there.

Everything I'd gone through. Everything I'd been through... a dream?

"You can talk to them yourself. Now that you're awake, I think a celebration is in order," Mom told me, patting my shoulder. "Just give me a moment. We have fresh food. Fresh! Hee. No more recycled food. Isn't it wonderful?" she asked, checking me.

"Yeah. Wonderful," I said as I stared into her eyes. There was something I had to say. "I love you, Mom." And I hugged her tight.

It seemed to surprise her. "I love you too, Fishie," she said as she booped my nose lightly, then turned and trotted out of the office. I stared after her, then looked out the window. Out there were all the ponies I loved and cared about, alive and well. The stallions were freed. The Overmare deposed. My stable was helping the Wasteland.

Could this be real?

I stared at my own reflection, trying to think it through. Could Mom have deposed the Overmare? Yes. Could she have listened to Rivets and opened the door? Yes. Could she have told me about her own experiences, leading my shock-addled brain to weave a grand and terrible adventure from them? Maybe.

Would she have freed the stallions?

Not in a million years.

My mom had been a good mare, but she'd believed in 99. She'd never shown the slightest concern or consideration for their well-being beyond what was needed for them to service the mares. She liked stallions based on how they'd performed sexually, not for the people they were. She'd never hesitated to retire one, even my father. As much as I hated to admit it, Mom had been complicit in their abuse.

This was the dream.

Not all that surprising, either. Tom had plopped us almost casually into a dream to speak to us, and now the Eater was doing it to lock me up. And since I hadn't been obliterated, time had to be passing faster here than in the real world, just like with Tom. The only problem was that there was no Tom to end the dream. "Wake up," I told myself. Nothing. I closed my eyes and bashed my head against the wall next to the round window, but other than giving myself a splitting headache, I was still here in 99.

I'd had lots of experience in mindscapes though, and I had Luna. Ending a dream wasn't as easy as just trotting out of the stable. If the door was open, then the dream would just continue. There had to be something stopping me from ending this dream. My friends. My loved ones. Even my annoying enemies... pretty pathetic compared to what I'd come to deal with. I needed this dream to stop. Suicide was risky. If I just killed myself, I might be offing my ability to fight back. I had to reject this dream.

There was one way...

I heard Mom approaching, and my magic shut the door in her face, locking it. "Blackjack?" she called out as I walked to the controls. "Blackjack, this isn't funny!" she shouted, beating on the door. "What are you doing in there?!"

"Waking up," I said as I opened up the commands to the rigged ventilators. Rivets always had been bad at taking care of special jobs that weren't on the schedule.

Mom. P-21. Scotch Tape and her mother. Everypony I'd loved growing up...

I flipped the switch and immediately smelled the chlorine tang. A few seconds later, the screaming started. The screaming that I would never, ever, be able to forget.

"Blackjack! You murderer!" But this time there was no Lacunae to teleport me away. This time, I went with my stable.

* * *

I snapped open my eyes, staring at the bits of diamond bouncing out of the breached casing. In my mind, it had been hours, but here just the blink of an eye. "You're going to have to do better than that," I muttered.

The entire Enervation scream seemed to deepen into an ominous rumble. I ran along the central ring between the spines rising to either side of me. Was it just me, or were they starting to move? 'Morph' might have been a better term, the way they were bending into each other and curling inwards. The mechasprites at work around the Eater suddenly burst into action, becoming a whirling blizzard of shrapnel that streaked straight at me. I didn't blink, fire, or hesitate as I raced straight at the swarm. When they were close enough that I could see the tiny drill teeth in their mechanical mouths, I teleported right through the metallic plague to the far side.

The swarm took a second to reverse and come after me. The rest were in a frenzy to complete something. Liquid gunk was leaking from tubes, flowing over the metal and assembling into

pinkish-maroon tissues. If the F.A.D.E. shield generators were covered in flesh, that'd make it harder to disable them. I reached the second case a sixth of the way around the Eater and took aim.

The slug struck and stuck. I took cover as the reaction took place, the droning buzz of the mechasprites rising as they descended upon me. As before, the cover was blasted completely off, and the moonstone fragment that remained went flying. I caught it with my magic, redirecting it into the starmetal behind me as I rushed to the F.A.D.E. talisman. The fragment must have wedged somewhere, because the entire rock reacted at once, blowing me and the bots away in a single detonation. I groaned as I landed sprawled on my face in front of the generator. Squinting through one eye, I aimed Duty at the talisman, and—

* * *

"Luna, what are you doing?" Celestia asked, giving me a slightly baffled smile as I pointed a pencil at her. We were in my personal study, one of the few places in the palace where nopony was supposed to go. Books decorated the walls, though many of them were my own notebooks on various ponies I kept tabs on. Ponies who needed my help when they were alone and sleeping. The terminal on my desk had access to all the ministries, and the O.I.A., as well as dozens of other secret sources. So many secrets...

Of course, try telling your sister that she's not allowed to go somewhere in a palace that used to be hers. "They're all waiting for you, you know," the white alicorn said as she looked over my shoulder at a tablet of paper. "Drawing Blackjack again?"

I blinked at her, then at the pad of paper showing the cybernetic alicorn. She was collapsed on the Tokomare, bleeding as she pointed a revolver at a talisman, her eyes narrowed in focus. "I really don't see the appeal, Luna. Blackjack. LittlePip. Why do you obsess over failure and disaster when the war is finally over?"

"Over?" I asked. "When?"

"Luna, you've been working too hard." Celestia rolled her eyes. "It's all over but for the official signing of the peace treaty. Which, incidentally, is what everypony is waiting for... right now."

"Peace treaty?" I set the pad down. "How? That's not possible."

"I used to think so too," Celestia sighed. "I just couldn't bear it. But you persevered where I failed, and the Caesar has finally admitted that continued war will simply result in megaspell annihilation." She put a wing across my withers. "His ambassadors are here, and after reading the treaty myself, I can confirm that they're offering quite favorable terms for us. Apparently the Caesar's at risk of rebellion if he continues the war, too, and was willing to be generous." Celestia looked at me oddly. "Are you alright, Luna? You haven't been the same since the Gala."

"I... peace?" I asked weakly. Celestia gave me a nudge, and I rose to my hooves. She began to dress me in formal garb. "It just... it..." I looked at the pad of paper and levitated it, letting her dress me up in my best black silk and diamond gown. I flipped through picture after picture, looking at notes written in the margins of each.

"Once everything has settled down, you really should write those stories. It doesn't hurt to have a hobby, and you've always been more creative than anypony gives you credit for," Celestia said as she put the silver and moonstone crown atop my head. Standing before me, she sighed and smiled sadly. "I also want to apologize."

"For... what?"

"I haven't been very helpful. I thought abdication would ease my conscience and let me focus on the school, leaving you to sort out my mess. My... meddling... at Shattered Hoof didn't help." Her smile faded, regret etched in her face. "I should have trusted you more. Supported you more, as you supported me through the war. But I can see now that you're the Princess Equestria needs."

I stared at her, then walked to the mirror. My books were on the shelves, and all over the space were notes on the various disguises I'd worn when I couldn't bear to be Princess Luna. Eclipse, the black pegasus agent, was only the most well-worn of them. I was used to running away into fantasy when life became unbearable. Outside was Equestria, vibrant and alive. I could hear Pinkie's music, and from the fancy wagons arriving outside the palace, all the nobles would be there.

"This is a dream," I murmured.

"A dream come true," Celestia corrected in that vaguely annoying way she had. She probably didn't even know she did it. "Come. Everypony is waiting."

Together we walked down the hall, past two guards, past two others, and into the ballroom. Immediately the entire hall broke into cheers and stomps. I balked, but Sister's wing was at my shoulder, and I halted, looked to her, and received her nod. I hated crowds like this. Nowhere to hide. All eyes on me, waiting for me to mess up. At the end of the room stood my dark marble throne, decorated in stars, and the smaller, plainer throne beside it for my sister. Three chairs stood on either side of the thrones, and in front of them all was a long table.

Seated at it were five of the six Ministry Mares. Only Pinkie Pie was absent, her seat occupied by another mare. Goldenblood lingered back behind and to the right of my throne, wearing only formal castle livery like the rest of my servants. I trotted past a visibly pregnant Applejack, a radiantly happy Fluttershy, and an aged yet composed Twilight Sparkle. As I took my seat in the middle, Rarity leaned over with a wide smile and whispered, "Where have you been, Your Majesty? The cameras have been rolling for hours!"

"I was..." Drawing? Thinking about the Wasteland? Drawing the conclusion to an epic struggle of good and evil? "Occupied."

"Well, I suppose it can't be helped," Rarity said with a sigh, then waved to somepony in the crowd. "Smile and wave, Your Majesty. This is your finest moment!"

I raised a hoof and waved to the gentleponies as Celestia took her seat slightly behind me, looking over at Pinkie's. "Pinkie?" I asked the mares quietly.

"Still in rehab," Twilight answered me, her voice barely audible through the cheering. "Thank you for keeping it quiet. I know the Cakes are taking good care of her, but I don't think even Rarity could stop the media from hounding her if they knew of the scandal."

Of course. I kept secrets. The night excelled at hiding things... even things that shouldn't be hidden. Things that would eat you up if you didn't drag them into the light and deal with them. "Ready, Your Majesty?" Goldenblood rasped from my right. "It's all taken care of. All you need to do is sign."

"But... peace? The zebras would never..."

"We knew they would. It was a mathematical certainty," Goldenblood answered. "Also, I ordered you more art supplies. For LittlePip and Blackjack."

I scowled at him. "Can't I have anything private?" I huffed.

"It is private," he rasped softly, then looked to the head of the hall. "They'll come in. I'll read the terms. You and the Ministry Mares will sign. There will be a reception. I've got your speech ready." His smile wavered. "Are you alright, Your Majesty?"

Was I? "It just seems... impossible." And wrong, but yet so very right!

"Continued hostilities would have been his downfall. No leader can fight a war without the will of the people... or at least a clear majority," Goldenblood said confidently. "I'm sure he's quite desperate to present the peace accord to his own tribal leaders." He gestured to the front of the hall, where thirteen zebra dignitaries were trotting in, the room suddenly silent save for the snapping of cameras. They were bedecked in elaborate outfits that spoke of their tribal affiliations. Grain for the Carnilia. Swamp orchids for the Orah.

When they stood before the table, the leader, in traditional Roamani plate armor, trotted forward. A stallion levitated a scroll and started to read the terms, his voice booming out as my eyes swept over so many different ponies. There were Charity and Bottlecap. Over there, Big Daddy. Brutus was a royal guard. Glory stood in Shadowbolt armor, and P-21 in Royal Guard barding.

"The zebras admit fault in instigating and prosecuting the war. For this, the zebras beg forgiveness," the stallion read out, his voice ringing; the zebra's jaw worked, his eyes staring straight ahead. "The Equestrian people accept and give it, in exchange for economic restitution for the damages of the war."

I stared from one Ministry Mare to the next. Pregnant Applejack. Tired Twilight. Triumphant Rarity. Goldenblood smiling from behind the throne. Peace. Prosperity. A thousand years of Princess Luna ascendant. A dream come true.

"The zebra people admit fault in misappropriating ancient superstition for propaganda purposes. The zebras formally recognize that Princess Luna is not the entity known as Nightmare Moon, and beg forgiveness for their insult." The stallion droned on. Could I have created the Wasteland as a story in my own mind? A distraction from the horrors of war? A place where, no matter how bad the war became, I could escape for a time? "The Equestrian people give forgiveness for this insult, provided the zebra people allow pony moderators to ensure this lie is stripped forever from zebra lore." I considered the grieving face of Sekashi, who looked as if a friend had been sentenced to death.

A healthy Equestria. A whole Equestria. And who knew what the future could be?

"The zebras admit fault in the murder of innocent foals in the Littlehorn Massacre," the stallion said, his voice dull and heavy. "Let history remember them for their crime for all time. Let them surrender a number of their own foals for re-education by the Equestrian people, each year, as restitution for this atrocity."

I sat bolt upright, cutting off the stallion reading the terms. "What?" I murmured.

"It is only fitting after what they've done," Goldenblood murmured behind me. Then he spoke up, "Perhaps we should simply skip to the signing."

I watched as the paper was passed to Fluttershy, who nearly glowed with pleasure as she signed it. Then two zebras stepped forward to sign as well, the Mendi tribe of healers being the first. The willow branch crown the dignitary wore clearly marked her as such. Then to Applejack. Then back...

And all the while, my mind worked. Was it possible that the Caesar would surrender? Yes. I'd always known it would take a political shift back home to do it, but it was possible. Like all leaders, he would do what he had to to keep his seat, though this humiliation would disgrace him till his eventual

removal. And would they admit that calling me Nightmare Moon had been pure propagandistic nonsense? Perhaps.

But would my sister happily accept tearing zebra children from their families for indoctrination in Equestria?

No.

I stared as the paper was passed back and forth, mark after mark being put down. It wasn't fair! This was how it was supposed to have gone. An end to the war. A triumph for Princess Luna. A strong and secure Equestria where my people loved me!

All things I never deserved in the first place.

I stared out the window at the glowing jewel that was Equestria... a jewel smashed and squandered on war. It was a good land, and had things been different, I would have been worthy to lead it.

I wasn't.

But if this was a dream, then how to end it? The dream could go on and on, easily lasting a thousand years or longer. I watched Twilight sign with a weary smile of satisfaction as it returned to the next two. Refuse to sign? But I had to sign. This was a peace signing. If I refused to sign, the dream would go on, stuck on this moment.

The Roamani delegate, the last, signed. Then it was slipped in front of me. Every eye was upon me. My people. My sister. My Ministry Mares. My friend. Everypony stared at me, waiting for me to be the good Princess I wanted to be. To step fully into Celestia's horseshoes...

If only. I levitated the pen. Down, at the bottom, was a line marked 'Princess of Equestria:'. If only... If only...

I rammed the pen right through the parchment. The dull ripping was like a scream in the silent room as I continued the violation, tearing it in two. Then I rose to my hooves, thundering in the old voice for addressing my subjects, "You think this meager offering sufficient!? You will never have peace! Not while a single one of you accursed zebra walk free! You shall have war! You shall have slaughter! You shall not have forgiveness, but annihilation!"

The room exploded in shouts. Shouts from Ministry Mares, outraged that I had thrown peace aside. Cries of concern from my sister... my wonderful, kind... sister... Bellows and proclamations of doom from the zebras. Silence from Goldenblood.

It didn't matter now. The dream could only continue to two ends: the removal of Princess Luna from the throne, or the annihilation in balefire.

Either way, the dream of Princess Luna's Equestria was dead.

* * *

Emerging from the hallucination, I stared at the sight of the pieces of F.A.D.E. generator flying every which way, smoke rising from the barrel as I shook. Luna's dream... but that dream was gone, and now I returned to my nightmare. One where I fought on the body of an enormous monstrosity from beyond. A monstrosity with defenders, and not just mechasprite hordes. The fleshy glop had assembled itself into a host of horrid scuttling things that now crawled at me from every direction.

To my left, the riot shotgun fired a dozen rounds, flechettes tearing into fanged maws. To my right, Duty and Sacrifice blew meaty holes in the faces of the faceless. My sword swept to and fro before

me, slicing neatly again and again into uncaring flesh. It made no difference. I could not defeat these enemies with bullets and blade alone. In desperation, I threw together my bullet spell with the shield thingy I'd attempted earlier, and a sphere of brilliant white energy exploded out from me. The bubble swelled, pushing the rising, abominable tide back long enough for me to take to the air.

So did they. Buzzing chitinous wings, fleshy membranes, and greasy quills erupted from the creatures as they swarmed after me. I swooped and soared amid the spines, looping around the thick central ring. Every few seconds I'd twist around in midair, flying backwards as I blasted my pursuers with magic and bullet alike. A volley of shooting stars streaked out at them, seeking the nearest creatures and burning them with white-blue flames. Still, it wasn't enough. It would never be enough. This was a distraction, keeping me occupied.

I needed more time. An opportunity I could use to find the remaining F.A.D.E. shield generators and destroy them. As I streaked along the Eater, I glanced down at my hoof. A flip, and I stared at EC-1101.

Control the Eater.

Could I?

Dare I?

I flipped around and around the central ring, letting Luna do the flying. Soon I was chasing the rear of the swarm chasing me. A thin smile crossed my lips as I opened fire. The rear of the swarm turned, some pulling inside out as they reversed direction and dove straight at me. I waited, smiling. Wait for it. Wait for...

In a blink, I disappeared, and from the far side of the Eater I watched as half the swarm collided headlong into the other half, the mass dissolving into a cannibalistic frenzy of gnashing, wriggling meat. It wouldn't take long for them to sort themselves out. I made straight for one of the mucky terminals. If I could control things for just a few minutes and stop the Eater's interference, I could eliminate the remaining F.A.D.E. shields and get out.

Through the swarm of hungry nightmares, I spotted the light of a terminal jutting like a glowing cyst from the Eater's flesh. I teleported to it at once, banging the spacebar to make sure it still worked. Opening the back, I plugged the wires from my PipBuck into it. I could already hear the swarm, a curious rustling accompanied by a slimy sucking noise. I just had to use the program... take control...

Just like Cognitum.

I froze, staring at the screen and my reflection in it. Cognitum... she'd believed the Eater was just a machine. A dangerous one, but ultimately one that was simply malfunctioning. Fix the malfunction, fix the machine, fix the problem, fix the Wasteland. Save the Wasteland. Save the world.

Just like Dawn.

Tools were made to be used. They weren't good or evil. They simply were. I'd used my guns to kill hundreds, maybe thousands. That didn't make the guns evil. Was there any point in simply obliterating it? The ultimate waste of technology was to destroy it, forfeiting not only the use the technology would give but all the resources that had been spent in its creation. Whether I loathed it or not, this was just a device to be used. After all that had gone into raising this machine over the centuries, all the pain, strife and death, didn't I have a *responsibility* to use it?

Just like Steel Rain.

But I'd use it to save my friends. My stable. My loved ones! Certainly they were worth saving. I couldn't just let LittlePip and her friends die! Couldn't let everyone die when I had the means to protect them and give them the future they deserved! My ends justified these means!

Just like Sanguine.

Sweetie Bot had said that the program would link me to the Eater. It sounded so simple to assume that everything would go my way. That I could be hooked up to this colossal thing and be the one in control. But I'd been flesh and blood once, and blissfully reminded of that state for a moment in my blank body. There were consequences when you connected a pony to something they weren't ready to handle.

Just like Deus.

I didn't need to see the swarm to know it was racing up towards me. Gnashing, squealing, chomping, hissing, buzzing, flapping, scratching noises rushed at me with the growing volume of an avalanche. I didn't need to rush, though. I simply closed my eyes, smiled, and pressed a button.

And got rid of EC-1101 once and for all.

I wasn't sure what dumping a megaspell, uncontrolled and directionless, into the Eater would do. For an instant, I had a mental picture of immense magical power contained within a crystalline matrix of incomprehensible beauty and complexity. Then that matrix exploded into a billion fiery stars, and I opened my eyes as the scream sounded... not an Enervation scream, nor the scream of the monstrosities about to consume me. No, this was a physical scream that seemed to emanate from every direction at once. And there was one unquestionable aspect to it:

Pain.

The swarm collapsed into maroon splatters behind me as the entire massive structure heaved under me. I lapsed into S.A.T.S., but even that couldn't help me hit the cover of the F.A.D.E. shield generator. Two shots went wild, exploding against spines that seemed to be splintering, melting, and reforming before my eyes. I aimed along the barrel as those two fragments of moonstone each gave a final burst of bright white--

* * *

The whiteness faded, but what took its place made no sense. Everything blurred and swirled around, and somepony kept saying "Fish? Are you there, Fish?" from a million miles away. The blurs congealed themselves into shapes... books on bookshelves. A portrait of the Princesses over a cold fireplace. A clock with a pendulum slowly swaying. A desk. A pony behind that desk...

Goldenblood.

The scarred unicorn wore a sweater vest and a pair of black wire frame spectacles that he peered over at me. As I focused on him, he gave a relieved smile. "Oh, good, the drugs are working. We finally have lucidity," he said calmly. "Welcome back, Go Fish."

"T'not m'name..." I muttered thickly. What was going on here? "Yer suppst t'be ded," I said as I squinted at him. I lifted my hooves and felt them draw short with restraints. "Let me go," I growled at him.

"In time, Fish. When you're more coherent and cooperative. I'm very glad this new drug cocktail is working. Doctor Trueblood really outdid himself," Goldenblood rasped, his voice low and gravelly. "How are you, Go Fish? It's been awhile since we've been able to have a talk like this. We came close, once, but you slipped away before we could make any significant progress."

I narrowed my eyes. "This is a dream," I muttered as I glared at him.

"Oh?" he asked with a mild smile as he leaned back in his worn, upholstered chair.

"You're the Eater of Souls, trying to stall me from destroying you and saving the world," I growled at him. Goldenblood didn't say anything. He just cocked one brow, watching me with those annoyingly curious eyes. I glared around the office, then back at him. "You've stuck me in this dream of Happyhorn to convince me I'm crazy so I won't do what has to be done."

"Right. Save the world. Because that's the only thing that will make up for your mistakes, isn't it?" Goldenblood replied flatly. I felt the padded restraints on my hooves. Tugging would be too obvious. I needed to engage him till I could figure out how to get out of here. "In your long litany of failures and mistakes, the only way for you to atone is to suffer, and, since your failures are monumentally greater than all of ours, mundane suffering wouldn't be enough; you have to ritualistically self-inflict horrible injuries to make the world a greater place. To save it. Is that right, Fish?"

"That's not my name," I growled at him.

"I'll call you by your nickname if you'll openly consider what I have to say," Goldenblood said evenly, putting his hooves together in front of his muzzle. "Deal?"

I started to flex and relax my forelegs, giving a little tug with each. To him, hopefully, it wouldn't appear as if I was trying to pull free. "Fine," I answered. "Say your piece."

"Blackjack, you're sick. You're here at Happyhorn to protect you from self-harm while we struggle to treat you. Once, you were a police pony with aspirations of following your mother into the Royal Guard. You failed to protect one pony... a filly... and from that, your decay into increasingly self-destructive behavior and delusions commenced, eventually culminating in a complete split from reality. You've been here ever since."

"Right. Keep talking," I muttered, trying to think how to get out of this nightmare. The clock? The portrait? How could I end this? He wasn't talking though, so I had to. "If I'm crazy, why would I put myself in the Wasteland? Why would anypony?"

Goldenblood smiled paternally. "You'd be surprised how many psychotic breaks involve some kind of apocalyptic element. I'm working on a paper, actually. There's some deep-seated fantasy in pining away for the death of the civilized world. To some, it's a place of absolute freedom and liberty, where frustration can be met with responsibility-free violence. To others, it's an escape from the mundanity and tedium of life. For you, it's a place in which you feel like you can suffer as you deserve." He lifted a file as thick as my hoof and took out some withered pages. "Think about it, Blackjack. You got out into the Wasteland, and the first thing you did was run into foals needing your help. You failed one." He checked another paper. "A short time later, you killed forty foals. You magnified the failure of one to an unforgivable degree." Another paper. "Failed to prevent zebras from getting killed. Failed to protect mares wearing 'bomb collars'." Another, and he chuckled. "Killed everypony in your bunker home." He just smiled at me and then shook his head. "Every time you start to feel better, you find some horrible way to make things worse for yourself. You simply cannot forgive yourself for one mistake."

"Right. I want to kill helpless ponies," I scoffed.

"You want to suffer," Goldenblood countered wearily. "Back when you were lucid, you engaged in increasingly self-destructive behavior. The risky sex. The binge drinking. Masochism. Self-mutilation. You're punishing yourself for that one mistake you made, where you failed to save a filly." He sighed, opening the tometic file to bookmarked pages. "For a time, I hoped we were going to make a breakthrough, but it seemed your delusions magnified. Trying to stop a war in the sky? Going to the

moon to stop a superweapon? Fighting some 'Eater of Souls' for the world? Does any of that sound even close to reality?"

"It's not my fault," I replied, not wanting to admit that he had a point. "And it doesn't matter. I'm not going to believe none of that was real. I lost my friends... ponies I loved..." I hissed, feeling hot tears on my cheeks. "It wasn't just a crazy thing in my head!" I shouted at him, loathing the look of pity in his eyes. "How do you even know any of this?"

"While you have been mostly catatonic during your stay here, we've been monitoring your mental state regularly with magic," he said, his lips still fixed in that faintly amused and patronizing smile. "I loved how you cast me as some nefarious government agent manipulating everything behind the scenes."

"Right, so you became a psychologist after Littlehorn, is that it?" I snapped at him. Out! Where was the way out of this?

He sighed, rubbing his temples. "Blackjack, 'Littlehorn' never happened. The 'great war' never happened. They were ideas unfortunately implanted within your delusions by another patient here, which you eagerly adopted."

"Then how'd you get your scars?" I demanded.

He gave a strained, almost dangerous smile, before answering lightly, "Housefire, in which I lost my wife and daughter." I swallowed, glancing over at a picture of a pink-maned pegasus and small yellow-maned filly hanging by his desk. "Satisfied?" he asked thinly.

A sense of mortification stole over me. "Sorry," I muttered, looking away, feeling for the first time that this might actually be real. "But it happened. How do you just make up a war like that?"

"Ponies have been writing fiction like that for ages, Blackjack." The edge in his voice faded a bit as he went on with a touch of scorn, "But do you honestly think Princess Celestia and Princess Luna would ever, ever commit Equestria to a systematic butchering of another race? Especially zebras, who are a rational and caring people every bit as much as ponies?" When I didn't answer, he sighed again and shook his head.

"So... Morning Glory and P-21..." I spat at him, trembling. "Rampage and Lacunae and Scotch Tape... LittlePip and her friends... you're telling me they all don't exist?"

"Of course they exist, Blackjack. You didn't create all of your fantasy by yourself," he said, his horn glowing. The restraints I'd been trying to tug out of suddenly loosened. "Come. I'll show you."

He led me towards the door where Doof and Lighthooves waited, both wearing orderly uniforms. Both watched me with a wary eye, their gray and red hides bruised. "You sure about this, doc?" the earth pony asked.

"Yes, she needs to see while she's still lucid," Goldenblood said as he stepped into the hall. The pair fell in behind me.

"Easy for him to say," the red pegasus muttered. "He's not the one that'll have to restrain her."

"My balls still aren't the same," Doof replied.

"Yeah. Sorry about that," I muttered, getting a surprised look, then a suspicious glare.

Goldenblood took me to a large window. "Here's the Wasteland, Blackjack."

Gazing through it, I looked down at a large room with about two dozen ponies. A third of them were wearing patient gowns, the others divided into nurses and orderlies. And there, surrounded by other patients, were my friends.

Glory sat with her singular wing, away from the group, looking over textbooks, her purple mane so beautiful as it fell across her face. P-21 also sat by himself, off in a corner, glaring warily out at the others. The scars around his neck were visible even from this distance. Rampage, covered in bandages and wearing a straitjacket, seemed to be having a conversation with herself at a table. Psalm, not Lacunae, sat nearby, rocking in place as her lips moved silently. Scotch Tape, looking faintly older than the filly I remembered, gazed out a window through bars at the world outside. LittlePip, strapped to a wheelchair in a straightjacket, appeared to be raving as a red-eyed stallion addressed her with a worn expression. Velvet Remedy sat singing to a rapt audience of none, while Calamity watched her with a hollow-eyed look. There were plenty of other ponies I didn't know, too -- a vaguely familiar earth pony stallion conspicuously wrapped head to hoof in tinfoil, an absolutely adorable green pegasus stallion, a dishwater-gray unicorn surrounded by heaps of paper, scribbling words furiously, and a red-maned white mare with a neutral expression being visited by a green-and-gold-maned cream unicorn, for instance -- but most were ponies I knew.

My friends...

"So they're all crazy too?" I muttered, glaring at Goldenblood.

"Your delusions had their foundations in other patients here. Some were modified to fit your fantasy, others catered to you, lending their own fractured self identities to your mindscape," he answered calmly.

"Morning Glory?"

"Nervous breakdown, suffering from intense stress and expectations about her success, leading to control issues and anxiety disorders."

"P-21?"

"Who? Oh, him. PTSD from repeated sexual traumas with high risk of suicide."

"Psalm?" I asked, testing him, but he didn't falter in the slightest.

"You recast her as Lacunae, a mother figure, which is understandable given your own mother's remoteness and untimely death. Schizophrenia."

"Rampage?"

"Dissociative Identity Disorder," he replied smoothly. "You should really call her Peppermint."

"Scotch?"

"Scotch Tape. Borderline Personality Disorder, stemming from early abandonment. She also suffers from the delusion that others are fictitious parents of hers. It's a... rather unique take on the standard transient, stress-related psychotic features that we sometimes see in those clients," he added with a faint smile.

Okay. What about the others? "LittlePip? Seriously?" I asked.

"You mean Pipsqueak? Where to begin?" Goldenblood actually grinned. "First there's her rampant substance abuse, which has led to permanent psychosis. Add that to Narcissistic Personality

Disorder, and delusional disorder with delusions of reference and persecution..." He trailed off. "One pony controlling all the weather and 'saving the wastelands'? Sound familiar?"

I ignored that. "Velvet Remedy?"

"Narcissistic Personality Disorder and a severe case of delusional disorder. She is convinced that she's 'destined' to be the second coming of Fluttershy." Then, before I asked, he pointed at Calamity with a hoof. "PTSD from time served in the Royal Guard." He rubbed his chin. "They do work well together in group, though. Pity he feeds her need for reaffirmation. Ah well, there's always a dependent when there's a narcissist."

I huffed and just pointed at tinfoil pony, not having a clue where to start.

"Applesnack? Scopo and haphephobia." At my blank stare, he sighed. "Fear of being seen and touched, as well as some associated depression issues. You'd think he was a monster under there." I pointed at another, and he just gave me a parental smile. "We could do this all day, Blackjack, and you won't learn any more than you have in group."

Fine then. "What about me?"

His smile wavered a little and he took a moment before answering. "Perhaps one of the greatest cases for Complex PTSD that I've ever seen in my life. That, combined with an underlying Bipolar Disorder has created a, to be frank, fascinating mix of delusions, self-neglect, and impulsivity. You vary between utterly agitated to the point that we need to sedate you and catatonic depression where you don't move for hours. You portray yourself as either the sole savior of the entire world or scum that deserves to be raped and mutilated. Or both. And you seek self-annihilation for perceived, unforgivable offenses that are amplified and re-amplified in your mind."

"This is ridiculous!" I snapped as I turned away— and ran into Doof; immediately, both he and I tensed. What was I doing? Where was I going in a dream? "This isn't real," I said, wheeling on Goldenblood. "You're dead!"

The scarred stallion sighed. "Blackjack, think about it. What is more likely: that you are fighting for your life in some irradiated nightmare, or that you are simply ill and need to get better? That you're Security, facing incredible odds to save lives, or that you're a mare who's far too hard on herself and needs some help? That you're the long-lost descendant of Twilight Sparkle with Princess Luna's soul and a special spell that will save the world, or that you're just a police pony who let one bad day completely consume her?"

I turned back to the observation window and stared down at them all. Was it all in my head? I simply couldn't tell anymore. He put a hoof on my shoulder. "There is no Wasteland, Blackjack. There never was," he rasped, like a grizzled uncle who smoked too much.

Then I imagined the sound of shuffling cards, and an equally grave voice intoning: *You think I'm some desolate landscape? I'm everywhere.*

A world without the Wasteland...

I closed my eyes. "That sounds really nice. Really," I said in complete sincerity. "I'd like to get better. To have a simple life. Just be a pony... a simple... good... pony..." Then I opened my eyes and stared down at my friends. What would it be like to just going back to being just Blackjack? But as I gazed at my friends, something niggled at me. A malcontent little part of myself. I glanced at Goldenblood, in his glasses and sweater, his eyes full of concern. "There's just one thing I want from you. Something really simple."

Goldenblood's frown deepened. "Anything, if it will help."

"It will," I said as I stared through the window. "What is P-21's real name?"

There was no answer for several seconds, and I glanced at the baffled stallion. "What?" Goldenblood asked lightly.

"P-21. That stallion there," I said, pointing a hoof. "Though if you've been reading my mind, you know who I'm talking about." His eyes went to P-21 and then back to me. "Come on. You can't honestly tell me that his name is actually 'P-21'. So tell me his real name."

He continued to frown at me. "Blackjack, I can't just tell you..."

"Sure. Tell me this one thing! It'll be our little secret!" I said as I glared at him.

His eyes went from P-21 to me and back again. "Blue... Blue... um... hooves? Blue... buck..." He fumbled as his eyes twitched from me to the window repeatedly. Sweat trickled down his temple. "I can't remember. I'll have to check his file!"

"It's okay. He can tell me. Let's go," I said as I nodded at the window and started towards the stairs down to the room below. But Goldenblood and the other three weren't moving. I rounded on all of them. "You don't *know* what his real name is, do you?" I jabbed my hoof at the window. "Morning Glory. Psalm. Scotch Tape. Even 'Pipsqueak'... that was from LittlePip's book! So give me a name that's not from the Wasteland!" I shouted at him.

"You need to calm down!" Goldenblood replied in alarm. "Restrain her," he said to the two orderlies, who rushed in.

But I was through with mind games. The pair grabbed me with their hooves, but I didn't move. I just stared at Goldenblood. "You keep trying to trap me in dreams!" I shouted at him, the building starting to rumble and crack. "But I am the Princess of the Night, and you will constrain me no longer!" I bellowed as the cracks spread, now through the struggling, grunting stallions like they were cheap porcelain figurines. I seized that fundamental truth and pushed against this lie. I watched as Goldenblood's eyes went wide with fear before the world exploded into shards of darkness.

* * *

The interior of the *Seahorse*, with my legs nailed to the floor as stallions sweated and grunted against me. I ignored and pushed again, the ship creaking, the blackness of my sight cracking like smoked glass. Another dream. Another illusion! But I was through being distracted. I kept pushing my will against that blinding darkness. "Face me..." I grunted as I concentrated. The darkness shattered.

* * *

Now I was standing in a restored Core, wearing the most ridiculous princess garb as thousands of Wastelanders all shouted their love and praise. Cognitum would have eaten it up. My friends were all alive, of course. It was like the Eater didn't know what to throw against me anymore, but why was it bothering to throw anything against me at all? I stared straight ahead, denying the shoddy fantasy, watching the cracks creep down the black obsidian towers. "Face me!" I commanded over the crowd, and they disappeared like dust as the skyscrapers exploded into enormous shards falling into the sky.

* * *

Star House. P-21 as husband and father. Glory as wife. Rampage as friend. I pushed past it, the house shattering like glass into fragments of thought. These phantasms weren't my friends, and I

wasn't going to be caught up by illusions of the real thing! "Face me, you coward!" I screamed as the shards flew away from me in every direction.

* * *

And now I landed on my face atop the Eater. My brain felt as if it had been yanked out one ear, mashed liberally, and shoved back in the other. I struggled for focus, looking at the casing ahead of me. Through blurring vision, I raised the gun. "No more dreams," I muttered. "End this..."

The shard of moonstone flew true. I pressed my face to the ground as the casing exploded, showering me with bits of starmetal, talisman, and metal scaffold. Three down. Three to go.

Wait. Why was the world moving?

I raised my head and looked around, realizing that the silvery ring of metal was no longer a ring. The spines were curling and rearranging themselves, and the central ring I was on had become disconnected, now more like an undulating, segmented curved bar of metal than a solid loop. And it was continuing to move as I held on with my fingers, trying to avoid being flung off. But as the whiplike motions increased, all I could do was teleport into open air away from it and watch.

Like a colossal serpent, the silvery monstrosity rose up, the spines now merging to form both bony ribs and batlike wings. The large lump I'd landed on earlier was now an immense dragonlike skull with baleful eyes of green death glaring straight at me. The fleshy ooze covered it, forming muscle and scale. Two clawed hands floated to either side of it, able to hold a dozen Blackjacks each. Three small, flat silver satellites orbited it, beaming fields of magic out in a triangular arrangement to catch Tom as he fell. But I couldn't think about them now. All I could think of was the titanic thing before me.

"YOU HAVE MY ATTENTION, MY LITTLE PONY," it boomed, not just in mere sound but in a magical wave that tore at the soul inside me. That song within me was the only refuge I had against the impact of its attention. **"BE HONORED."**

I stared up at the brilliant glow of Tom. Three shields generators left to kill, and yet, I couldn't think with that thing before me. The sheer hideousness of those maroon and black scales... those eyes that plucked at my very soul! Give me the Legate. Give me a dozen Legates. They'd be better than this.

I gaped, struggling to think... to act... Finally, all I could do was say a single word.

"Why?" I whispered.

Its serpentine lips spread wide. **"TO SAVE THE UNIVERSE FROM THE INFINITE VOID. TO SPARE EXISTENCE FROM THE INDIGNITY OF DEATH. I WILL NOT GO WILLINGLY INTO OBLIVION. EVEN NOW, WITH SUCH ENTOURAGE, I AM ROUSED TO MOTION AGAIN."** Then the massive green eyes narrowed. **"YOU CAUSED ME PAIN, MY LITTLE PONY. GREAT PAIN."**

I licked my lips, murmuring, "It seemed like the right thing to do at the time."

The immense thing, its massive bulk floating so easily as it slithered on its bed of wires closer to me, smiled. **"I FORGIVE YOU. I KNOW PAIN WELL, AND I KNOW YOUR SUFFERING. I KNOW YOUR FEAR. LET ME END BOTH. LET ME GIVE YOU PEACE AND RELIEF."** It reached out its hand, claws as big as my body spread wide. **"LET ME REUNITE YOU WITH GLORY,"** the Eater offered in its sibilant hiss. **"FOREVER."**

To be together again... a part of me yearned for that.

The sword slashed across a massive palm, sparking with silver fire when it clashed on the starmetal bones within. The wound was virtually a papercut compared to the size of the monster, but

papercuts can still hurt! I flew back as the hand clenched shut on the space I'd occupied a second ago, the Eater howling as its eyes blazed in rage. "Sorry!" I shouted at it, a wild thrill running through me. "She'd never forgive me if I just gave up! I promised, after all."

"I HAVE WAITED EONS BEYOND MEASURE FOR MY RESTORATION. YOU SHALL NOT STOP ME, PITIFUL MORTAL!" the Eater screamed, but now I was in motion. There were three shields, their generators now detached from the Eater's body, that I had to take out before Tom came in contact with them. If he did, even disabling the F.A.D.E. generators wouldn't disrupt the magic. I teleported to the first of the three. If my count was right, I had three moonstone shells left. No pressure.

I hovered over it and took aim. The generator casing was now connected to a platform ringed with levitation talismans and crackling spark batteries, all held together with starmetal rods. I pointed straight down and— immediately dodged to the side as a tail as big as a skyscraper whooshed past me. Even though it missed, the draft behind it plucked me out of the air and carried me along like a feather. The Eater coiled around after me, lips wide with a malicious grin.

"SUCH HUBRIS. SUCH FOOLISHNESS. I HAVE SEEN THE FUTURE, AND IN IT IS YOUR DEMISE!" the Eater hissed as it moved far, far too fast for anything that size. Not even Raptors moved so quickly as it did in pursuing me. I teleported again... and was almost ripped in two by the sweep of one of its disconnected claws. **"YOUR EVERY ACTION, YOUR EVERY REACTION, ARE ON DISPLAY BEFORE ME. YOU CANNOT PREVAIL."**

"Talk talk talk," I grumbled as I kept flying, trying to avoid getting sucked into the massive drafts that followed its immense bulk. "If you're so powerful, I'd be dead already. I bet that it's taking a lot of energy to keep your corpse going."

"YOU WISH FOR DEATH! IT IS THE ONLY ATONEMENT FITTING FOR YOUR SINS," the Eater roared as we dueled in the air, me dodging, teleporting, and dodging again. This wasn't like with the Legate. One solid hit would be like the mother of all boats landing on me. **"ADMIT YOUR FAILINGS. YOU REGRET THE SUFFERING YOU'VE INFLICTED ON THOSE YOU LOVE."**

Okay, now this was getting annoying. It was taking all my skill and magic to avoid being smashed into cybernetic goo by this thing, and yet I couldn't help myself. "You know what? You're right! I do regret a lot of the shit I've caused, but I've always tried to do better." That tail streaked straight for me, and I hovered, teleporting just behind it as it passed. "But you know what else? It's not always me! Sometimes, the Wasteland just fucking sucks!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, at it, at the Dealer, at the whole damned world. "But I don't care, because I will never give up! Not even if it kills me!"

I flew for another floating shield generator but this time teleported backwards. The hand passed by, and I teleported forward before the draft could suck me away. I grabbed the starmetal framework and pointed the shotgun at the box. An immense mental pressure crushed in on my mind, but I shoved the attack away. A trigger pull, and I dropped. The platform exploded above me, shards of metal raining down as it collapsed.

The hands came up, and I tried to teleport away when suddenly a green light flashed. I tried to squeeze myself through the Blackjack-sized hole in my mind, but couldn't do it. Instead, I smashed into the upturned palm of one hand, ramming into it like hitting a brick wall. Immediately the fingers started to close, to crush me like a bug. But the starmetal platform fell atop me, and the flaming disk held the fingers at bay. I launched myself up through the burning hole in the middle, flying clear as the Eater screamed in frustration and flung the platform at me. I barely dodged aside, flying as fast as my wings and Luna's soul could take me.

One down, two to go. I tried teleporting, but it was no use! The Eater was now tracking me, watching closely. **"YOU THINK YOU CAN DEFEAT ME ALONE, LITTLE PONY?"** the Eater asked as it gazed hungrily at me.

"I am not alone!" I shouted as I flapped furiously towards one of the platforms. The Eater struck, mouth wide, but this time, I didn't dodge. I turned and struck, flying straight into his face. My riot shotgun blasts seemed imbued with a silver moonlight as I fired straight into those widespread eyes. "Everyone I've made friends with and who helped me is here with me now!" And with each shot, like a moment frozen in S.A.T.S., I could see Rampage's obnoxious smirk, Lacunae's patient smile, and Scotch Tape's innocent grin. The shots seemed to consume the Eater's corrupted flesh with white flame as I flew around its head far faster than I ever had before.

"YOU ARE ALL NOTHING! FLICKERING EMBERS IN THE ETERNAL DARK, EASILY EXTINGUISHED!" the Eater howled.

"But together, they got me here!" I retorted as I stung it like it had never been stung before. "Every one, every single person, who's helped me get to this point!" Whisper and Stygius. Lancer, Pythia, and Sekashi. LittlePip and her friends. Duty and Sacrifice barked, the shots burrowing deep in its scaly flesh before exploding like grenades. "All of us, working together, have a power you can't imagine!"

It raised both hands up to protect its face. **"THEN THE SOLUTION IS SIMPLE! ALL OF YOU MUST DIE! YOUR SOULS SHALL ACCOMPANY ME FOR ETERNITY!"** It inhaled and spread its hands wide, and from its maw erupted a torrential blast of balefire that sent my radmeter through the roof. I threw all my magic into a shield and managed to get clear of the core of the flame. But I didn't back down, retreat, or regroup.

No, that would have been the *smart* thing to do.

Instead, I darted in, dragging my vorpal sword along its body, trailing smoke and little bits of my armor and hide. "No! No more! It's time we're free of you!" I said as I hewed at it, seeing Glory and P-21 with their confident smiles... ponies I hadn't deserved, but who had loved me despite everything! The Eater would never take them. "Everypony I've cared about and loved is with me! You're the one who is alone!"

"I NEED NO ONE! NOTHING!" the Eater screamed, flailing wildly. Its claws and tail and wings smashed buildings, tore the wires free, and beat a whirlwind inside the glowing magical field. **"I WAS GREATEST! BRIGHTEST! I WILL BE SO AGAIN, EVEN IF I HAVE TO SNUFF OUT EVERY OTHER WRETCHED, TREACHEROUS SPARK IN THE SKIES!"**

While it ranted, I swooped in to the second-to-last shield generator. Two shotgun shells left. I fired, and the slug streaked in and hit the casing... but something was wrong. There was a feeble glow of white magic, and then the side of the case detonated with an anemic pop. I flew in and finished the shield talisman with my sword. The triangular projection of magic flickered and went out.

Then the tail smacked the platform with such force that I was all but plastered against it as it streaked right into the magical wall of the shaft. I heaved myself away with all the strength I could muster, the platform impacting against the wall of magic and the spark batteries exploding in a shower of lightning. I had only a moment to gather my wits before I was flying as fast as I could, a stream of blinding balefire pursuing me. I dove down, and the river of destruction followed, leaving blazing devastation in its wake. I raced across the bottom of the bowl, and the stream only died when it risked immolating the Eater's own serpentine tail.

Only one more. A light grew overhead as Tom re-entered with a blazing corona. No time to think. Only to fly. Only to win. I streaked along the massive, serpentine body, too close for it to hit me without blasting itself. Faster! Almost there! I could hear the moonstone song radiating above me.

One... more...

Reaching the Eater's head, I flew clear and streaked for the platform. My shotgun was ready. I was ready.

Then my wings disappeared.

The claw ripped through them so quickly and cleanly that I was transformed from a flying body into a ballistic one without being knocked off target. Bloody stubs of metal continued to beat in a futile attempt to keep me in the air. I waved my limbs in a desperate attempt to reach the floating platform before I tumbled to what would certainly be my end.

My fingers popped free and caught on the platform's edge, and I swung around the frame and collided with the underside with a resounding bang. "Ow," I groaned as I hung there a moment, then shook my head hard. "One more..." I muttered, pulling myself atop the platform and over to the box holding the shield talisman. Falteringly, I struggled to my hooves.

The Eater rose before me, the ruined remains of my wings being shaken from an immense claw as it spread its hands wide, deathly energies crackling in its maw. Overhead came a rush of wind and an azure glow, like a blue sun descending. It didn't matter. Distantly, I could hear Chapel's bell tolling.

I'd won.

I pointed the shotgun at the box beneath my hooves and pulled the trigger.

The slug impacted at my hooves.

And...

Nothing?

I stared down between my legs at the sight of the lead slug smooshed against the casing, but instead of a moonstone shard, starmetal glittered in the middle.

No, I thought numbly, drawing out the bottle of moonstone dust and seeing only silvery sand within. It fell from my fingers, tumbling down into the shadows below. The spent shotgun followed it.

Then one hand seized me, five points piercing around my torso. The Eater lifted me up before its face. **"I TOLD YOU, MY LITTLE PONY. FUTILE."**

Then its other hand grabbed my shoulders, and like a hellhound plucking the wings off a bloatsprite, the Eater of Souls tore me in two.

A numbness spread through me as I fell from his talons back onto the platform. Only my augmentation kept me from passing out immediately from blood loss as I lay there, seeing my entrails and synthetic sinews and wires dangling down beneath me. **"NOW! BEAR WITNESS!"** he bellowed as he moved down beneath the sole remaining field.

Tom impacted.

The tapered crystal seemed to have grown in its transit, or perhaps I was just a lousy judge of size. The tip of the stone dragged along the edge of the shaft in a blinding trail of fiery light and magic that swirled around me. Only my proximity to the shield talisman kept me from being instantly crushed and blasted off by the hurricane force of displaced air or the colossal heat. I'd eliminated five of the shields, but the sixth still sufficed to keep Tom from reaching the Eater.

An enormous flaming blue alicorn seemed to swell from the stone, and brilliant, blazing hooves struck around to either side of the magical wedge holding it at bay. The Eater wove back and forth, cackling with glee. Those floating claws snatched handfuls of blazing spirit fire and drew them to its maw, where it devoured them hungrily. Every bite seemed to make the Eater swell.

“YOUR CHAMPION HAS FAILED,” the Eater taunted amid mouthfuls of glowing blue luminescence.

“WITH MY LAST MOMENTS, I WILL DEFY YOU!” Tom cried out as the Eater’s disembodied hands ripped away more flaming gobbits.

“YOUR LAST MOMENTS ARE DELICIOUS,” the Eater cackled as he feasted on the still-living star.

And all I could do was hang there, my guts dangling out beneath me, my chest ripped open. I’d failed... I’d failed... Sister... Glory... I’d failed...

I closed my eyes. At least I could enjoy the moonstone’s song, beautiful, but now desperate and strained as it fought against its nemesis. It truly was a beautiful melody...

But not the only song I heard.

I opened my eyes and looked down at my chest. I guessed it was the big round drum with all the wires coming out of it. Slowly, dripping blood and other fluids, I pulled it from my crippled chest cavity.

You have a heart of moonstone. That was what Glory had said. I stared a second longer, and then I lifted my sword in my other hand. Carefully, I cut the end off the drum.

There, nestled in a bed of gemstones, was a hunk of moonstone. I’d been told she’d been lucky to find an ‘appropriate gem’ to power my body, and as I stared at it, I realized that I’d seen it before: in Horizon Labs and the disassembled silver bullet. It was larger than the slivers in the slugs I’d used before. It hadn’t been corrupted yet.

I wasn’t beaten yet...

I yanked the stone free, and instantly my vision filled with “CRITICAL ERROR” in bright red letters and “SWITCHING TO RESERVE POWER” with a percentage that was ticking down. Rapidly. I dragged myself along the frame, feeling my life ebb away with each exertion. Then I took the stone and pressed it against the casing. The metal began to glow brighter and brighter, and then exploded with a detonation that blew my hand apart but left a hole in the metal. I fumbled with the stone, barely able to catch it with my other hand, holding it as if my soul depended on it. I raised the sword with my magic.

“NO!” the Eater screamed, grabbing me again and pulling me away from the platform. The moonstone did nothing against the fleshy meat protecting his starmetal skeleton. **“NO MORE INTERFERENCE. YOU ARE DONE!”**

Almost...

But I wasn’t *quite* done.

I slipped into S.A.T.S.

Three magic bullets to the F.A.D.E. diamond inside the case.

Execute.

The magic bolts streaked out, hitting the insides of the box and ripping out the connections between the diamond and the power supply. The gemstone went dark, but the field was already active. The Eater froze, and then its mouth split wide in a hysterical laugh of triumph.

I stared at the stone and then closed my eyes. I might not actually be Princess Luna, but I had her soul. And while I couldn't raise or lower the whole moon...

...I could raise a small piece of it.

My horn flared as I pushed Tom up the shaft. Just a bit. Just enough for the wedge of magic to lose power, flicker, and disappear. With a relieved smile, I cut the magic.

Tom fell.

The Eater dropped me as Tom smashed the platform to the ground, and I fell along with it. Both of us landed on a knoll of rock, broken and bent. Lying on my back, I watched as the Eater clawed and raked his talons against the flaming hooves, but now nothing protected him. Every impact of Tom's hooves was a lightning bolt, and bit by bit, Tom smashed the Eater down towards the earth, and me.

"**YOU ARE DONE!**" Tom roared as his hooves detonated like megaspells, making the platform rock wildly. "**YOU ARE FINISHED!**" he boomed, rearing back and smashing the Eater in its blazing face. "**YOU ARE ENDED!**" he thundered as he blazed, the heat baking me even with my augmentation. Despite being mortally wounded, a part of me refused to simply die, and I stared at the inactive talisman next to me.

"**NO!**" the Eater whined. "**I CANNOT DIE! EXISTENCE NEEDS ME!**" But he was silenced by an azure hoof smashing him in the maw.

I fumbled with the moonstone, but my remaining hand couldn't seem to get it back in right. It would have been easy just to lie there and be obliterated by the two, but I needed to see this to the end. I reached into the generator casing, pulled out the darkened diamond, and reconnected the wires to the talisman. A flickering sphere appeared around the platform. As my systems rapidly drained, I desperately devoured the gems I'd taken from the locker, but they only barely stemmed the rate I was hemorrhaging power.

A second later, the Eater hit. The serpent was beaten back as the blazing alicorn slid inexorably down the feeding funnel that was now the Eater's execution cell. The Eater, now trapped within its own pit, thrashed wildly, slamming against the shield and the walls. The floor of the basin gave way, and both Tom and I followed as the Eater struggled to get away from its radiant enemy. "**NO! I AM BRIGHTEST! I AM GREATEST!**" the Eater howled. Tom pinned one of those claws, his furious aura burning away the flesh. The starmetal beneath flashed a brilliant white and exploded. The Eater screamed as the second claw, pressed against Tom's chest, soon followed. "**NO! I don't want to die! Please...**"

"**All things die,**" Tom answered. "**Hush now... it's time to go to bed...**"

The immolated flesh finally gave way, and the starmetal skeleton was now utterly exposed to the stone. Glowing. Shimmering. Shining. Swelling. Glaring. If I hadn't had my augmented eyes and been protected by the shield, I would have been blinded, then consumed by the sheer brilliance. The walls of the shaft liquefied... vaporized... and I was left in my tiny bubble of protection as the numbers in my vision counted down to zero.

Then Horizons went off.

Maybe it was one final gasp of Perceptitron weirdness, but all at once I could see not just from the shaft but from all over the Wasteland. From Charity in the door of the chapel to Grace in the hospital at the Collegiate, to Whisper staring from a rooftop... the blue-white glow was everywhere. I could only

guess the magic fields kept everypony from being blinded as the light stretched higher and higher in the sky, the glow spreading from horizon to horizon. It wasn't just mere light and energy, any more than the Eater was simple metal and malfunctioning machinery. It was a beam of light that shone out into the universe. In Tenpony's windows, a line of light gleamed towards the heavens from behind the distant mountains. In the S.P.P. hub, images from dozens of towers showed the pillar of light stream into the night.

Then, like a pitiful whine in the back of my mind, I heard the Eater's last whimper, "Will it hurt?"

And then he was gone.

Tom remained, an outline of moonstone chunks vaporizing in the furnace, looking at me gravely. Then the star spirit bowed its head once to me and vanished. The column of light dwindled to nothing. With the energy dissipated, the walls of magic disappeared too. Nothing remained of the Core. It had been transformed into an almost perfectly concave bowl resting at the base of the great granite knob that had been the southernmost tip of the island. I didn't know why, but the surface of the rock wasn't a molten mass. I could only imagine that somehow the departing spirit had prevented us all from being cooked.

But the souls lingered.

Millions. Tens of millions. Freed from the Eater, they hung like a constellation of stars spreading in all directions. Some sank into the earth. Others streamed towards the sky. Some touched the weary survivors. I killed the shield and stretched out my hoof towards the countless motes. One drifted against me, and for a moment I smelled Mom's mane. I heard the warm chuckle of P-21. Another gave my cheek the caress of a soft gray wing.

And from the mare's chest, a mote emerged. Among so many, few would note it any brighter than the others as it rose towards the starry sky which had been its home for so long. Only LittlePip, in the S.P.P., would hear a Princess's sobs as it joined the others.

The mare that remained, little more than a corpse animated by failing technology, stared up at the motes until they were indistinguishable from the stars, meaningless numbers approaching zero in her vision. To the south came a booming rumble as the concrete walls of the dams collapsed into the pit. To the north rose a matching gurgle as the sea rushed in to fill the void.

And there, on the wreckage of the platform, the mare stared at the stars as the number reached zero. Darkness took her. And silence. Yet her lips curled in a smile as she felt hot liquid rolling down her cheeks. The rumbling grew, becoming her entire world... stretching into eternity.

(Author's notes: Story is done. Epilogue to follow.)

(Hinds: I'm just going to go ahead and paste the release announcement I wrote for the forum:

"Well, everyone... It's out. 77. The final chapter, with the epilogue after it. I doubt that this is the end of work on PH; there will be typos found and fixed, almost certainly, there are a few edits Somber wants to make, and we hope to get it on FIMFiction. This is, however, the end of the story, over 1.6 million words resulting from over four years of work. We did it. It has been quite a ride. Kind of hard to believe that this is the last time I'm expecting to fly the Somber Signal... Though the Signal wasn't there at the beginning, of course, when PH, was just another small, anonymous FoE sidefic in an EQD compilation post, less than ten chapters to its name. Only two chapters posted, when I first saw it, and certainly no dedicated comment thread; I left my error-spotting mixed in with posts about many other stories. Still, Somber saw them, and [i]somehow[/i], I'm not really clear on the details now, I ended up working with him in the document for Chapter 3. I do rather wonder how my life might have been different if I'd decided to spend

that time reading some [i]other[/i] new two-chapter story in the compilation. PH has gotten so, well, okay, not big [i]exactly[/i], since it's still a niche within a niche within a niche, but hopefully you know what I mean. Speaking of that, thank you all very much for reading; without you, our readers, I doubt that we'd have lasted anywhere near this long. Some of you may have helped more than others, but I think every bit of positive or constructive feedback has probably helped. Anyway. The end of the story is here. I hope you enjoy it. :)"

Oh, and, after Murky, Somber asked if any of us had ideas for cameos of characters from other FoE stories. He ended up going with my suggestion of Whiskey Rose and Caravan Lily from Cascadejackal's [Wasteland Bouquet](#). Which I keep trying to drum up readers for, as it has less than a hundred votes total and only eighty-three upvotes. If you're looking for another FoE story to read after PH, why not give it a try?)