

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 34: Birthday

"This is the greatest day ever! We need to celebrate your birthday, babies, 'cause you were just born today!"

Once, after Hatches got killed, I'd asked Hymnal about what happened when we died. The question seemed somewhat pertinent at the time. The answer she gave was simple: we went into the recycler and somepony took our place. Finding that answer somewhat less than fulfilling, I pressed on. She attempted some muttered comment about how, when you died, you went to the everafter to be reunited with the Princesses and your loved ones. Then she reported me to Mom, and one sore butt later I learned not to harass our stable's duly appointed spiritual leader.

Personally, I was finding being dead not much different than being alive in the ocean. It was black and quiet and I couldn't feel anything. I was just... nowhere. I had a vague sensation of motion, but I couldn't begin to tell you how I was moving or where I was going. I had no limbs to move, no heart beating, no mouth to speak or breathe through.

It was at this moment that I had my epiphany: death is *really* boring. Mom had taught me about how the living dealt with death, but she'd been somewhat lax on what the *dead* were supposed to do about...

A tiny pinprick of lavender light far off in the distance came to life, and with it I heard a single soft note and felt a gentle pull towards it. Now, I know that most ponies say not to head towards the light. Those ponies failed to mention that there weren't actually a lot of other options. Considering how many bad choices I'd made in my life, what was one more?

Though, considering how many bad choices I'd made, I looked forward to Celestia punting my sorry ass straight into Hell. I guess I could have fought against the pull, but... I was tired of darkness.

As I moved, I could hear the tone more clearly. It wasn't one constant drone but a single musical note that pulsed with the throb of the light. And... another pulse accompanied the first one. I moved closer still and saw a second light, a soft orange point that sang the other sound. And then a third was born, a cheery pink. Another, majestic purple. Teal. A pair, green and gold. A pair of pink motes pranced and tumbled around each other with a tinkling like laughter while a purple and lavender pair hovered attentively nearby. Each with its own note. Its own music. There were hundreds. Thousands. Millions...

Wow... stars...

They weren't just lights in the sky. Well... they were. But they were other things as well. Like how, when you took a hoof and held it in front of one open eye, you could see both your hoof and whatever the other eye saw. But I didn't know what I was looking at. They were luminous things... Strange and unusual and powerful... some kind, most politely indifferent. Some were the shapes of wheels and eyes and brahmin. Others were strange patterns that twisted and seemed to sing notes of music my mind couldn't understand.

And some were ponies, glowing outlines that frolicked as they sang their music together, their individual notes rising and falling and growing and blending with the notes of the other things that shared this great expanse. They filled the void with song and light and their own strange beauty... their harmony. Other beings flitted among them and spread chaos and discord to stir up new melodies and music they could not create themselves. And I knew that I was home. I could stay here, if I wanted. There was always room for one more. For countless more. And I'd be happy here, I was sure of it. A part of me belonged here.

Except...

I looked back behind me at a round ball orbited by two lights, one pale and beautiful and the other bright and radiant. But the world they revolved around was dark and ominous. What of my friends?

The song turned mournful. There was nothing I could do now. I should stay. There wasn't any place there left for me, nothing that could hold me. But I kept looking down at that distant world. I felt one of those giant luminous shapes move behind me and gently hold me in her hooves. *Stay, please...* she seemed to beg.

I saw other worlds with other lights. Some orbited distant radiant orbs. Others had dozens of expectant motes above them as they sang down their own melodies. But all these worlds were bright with countless twinkling specks, like glitter or dew. And I watched as one of these luminary beings grew bright, and in a burst of light and song disappeared. The glowing cloud left behind spread, and new lights began to settle on other worlds or birth new luminary beings. Even these things were not eternal.

But in that darkness beyond their light, I felt certain there were things that were.

I looked back at my world. There were so few glimmering lights, and there seemed to be almost a spider's web of shadow draped over the entire world. Some light escaped... but most seemed caught in that dark web covering everything. The light of those orbiting spheres couldn't reach most of the world, try as they might to find some gap in the darkness and shadows.

What the hell had happened? The hooves holding me tightened, and off to the side I heard another note rise. It accompanied a star glowing with a fierce blue-white corona. A pony... no. An alicorn, proud and regal and glorious. He spread his wings wide and sang his note loud and gloriously across the heavens. He drove back those shadows beyond and all things that dwelled within. Such was he that his song drowned out all others as he swelled with pride. I expected the star to eventually stop and take a break, but he didn't. Instead, he grew along with his volume.

It grew to the point where the melody of the those luminary bodies was drowned out. Grew to where it became almost painful. I kept waiting for him to burst as the others had and let something new take his place. The mischievous ones floated about him, trying to trick him and break his onerous note, but he burned them with his scorn. Louder! Louder! It was if he were trying to fill all the universe with the single overwhelming note! He struggled with the strain, the note transforming into a scream.

Then he exploded. It was not a gentle burst of life-giving light. No, this explosion was raw and violent as his scream echoed to the farthest corners of the universe. Then his cloud fell inward; he would not die as the other luminous ones had, would not share his life. His blue glow contracted and darkened. Something that was a star hardened and transformed from light to something dark and base. And still it screamed, tearing at the melody around it. No trick by the spirits could stop it. No song from the others

could reach it. And as the song died, the darkness encroached.

Finally, a blue radiance altered its place in the heavens and plunged straight at the screaming mass. It sang its own ominous melody as it plunged in faster and faster towards the sullen ember, one song combating the other as they closed together. The impact and the blast of light filled the skies as the blue luminescence died and the screaming ember shattered. Only a dark and twisted core remained, tumbling through the heavens like a heart of black iron. Its scream rendered pitiful and thin, it flew towards that darkness untouched by the stars.

But by chance a world, green and rife with the tiny specks of ghost light, drifted too near. The twisted remains curved towards it, speeding as they plunged towards the highest snow-capped mountain. The blast shattered the great peak, blasting it apart into flying stone. An immense pillar of cinder and flame shot up, raining down in an ever-widening circle of destruction. More mountains split and shattered, vomiting great torrents of fire and surging floods of magma. The forests transformed into sheets of flame. The seas were poisoned by ash and pieces of the star. The sky was rendered black with clouds. Those fragile motes and their infant songs were snuffed out in an instant.

From the great impact a ring of stone formed, the pieces drawing together to collect the tiny specks of life. Sun and moon orbited the blackened rock. Eons passed before me, and I watched the clouds thin and the first rays of sunlight and moonlight play on the blackened ground. The dead seas lay calm and still, the broken mountains finally silent. Where the dread heart had fallen was a vast bowl filled with black rock. The heart, its spiteful malice sated, slumbered, its hateful note dropping to a whisper. Rain fell, washing out the dust and smoke and filling the bowl with a deep lake of dark water.

Tiny patches of life began to grow beneath the passing sun and moon. The patches became brush and forest. Insects and fish began to populate the world once more, then larger and more complex animals. Mountains rose and fell and the world shifted and changed as life once more flourished. And then those motes of life began to sing their own simple melodies. Their songs became more complex, rising and falling and evolving. Trickster spirits came to mold and meddle and inspire. The songs spread to every corner of the world... save one.

In the dark lake the buried heart stirred. It shrugged, and the mountains broke and the waters drained into the sea. The heart could do nothing but hum its one hateful tone and wait. Life crept innocently into the crater, and soon there was no warning to the rest of the world save for a knot of granite rising like a tombstone in the center. Deep within the earth, the vicious star waited. It could do nothing, its dread power spent.

But then zebras came to it with their songs and their dances. They built their homes and temples and finally a city. Most had no idea what was beneath them... but for some, sleep was troubled as the star droned its hateful tune. And from the pain it caused came inspiration for magic dark and foul. The songs were silenced. The dances stilled. Dark robes were donned, and the temples soon rang with the resonant drone. The ground was torn away, and fragments were forged into terrible weapons. The zebras went out to silence all other songs and to turn all voices to the star's dread tone. It grew strong as others sang its song on its behalf, that hateful noise so like a scream.

And the stars perceived.

With magic and sorcery, the zebras called forth the fallen star and bade it rise. Return to the heavens. Thousands were offered in sacrifice, their screams rising up until the heavens could no longer

bear them, and one star plunged down to silence it forever. Like a great flame it fell and shattered the zebra city, and the broken mountains shuddered and collapsed to bury all beneath their rubble. But the dark heart was still not destroyed; it caught the falling star and consumed the luminescent being within. Only two specks escaped... one rising to the sun... the other to the moon.

Time passed, and the buried star waited. Greenery returned. Zebras shunned the valley, calling it cursed, and did not tempt the stars to fall again. Clouds obscured the sun and moon so they could not see its resting place. But soon, new creatures came to the valley: ponies.

The star once more whispered and tempted, ensnaring the heart of a beautiful Princess and turning her against her sister... but the sister wisely banished her from the earth and to the moon where the glowing light could leech out her poison and venom till a chance at redemption was possible. Time, though, was forever on the side of something older than the moon itself, and when foolishness and wickedness stirred in the hearts of pony and zebra alike, that thing hummed its hateful note once more. Ponies built their machines and weapons and spells and slew one another in bloody combat. The song was lost to a scream of hate and pain. This time, however, as ponies and zebras died, not all their tiny notes returned above. Many, a small fraction, but still so many, were snared in the spider's web and whisked to the dark heart, there to scream the dark note. Waiting. Tempting another star to fall and be devoured so that the heart could be freed.

And now I looked down at my dim world with a sense of horror and sadness. Was this true? A war between stars and monstrous things from beyond? A fallen star humming madness in the ears of the ponies of Equestria? I wondered if I was crazy; I hoped that I was. That all this was just my brain making its last feeble connections before finally expiring. This couldn't be true! It just couldn't!

It was too big. Too much. Even for me. And the glowing ponies around me agreed in their song.

But that was the point...

Of course it was too big for one pony. For one anything! That was why the single star with its single note had failed. Not even these glowing stars could keep back the darkness alone. It was when they worked together, combining their songs and changing... growing... that they could drive that vast and terrible darkness back. Harmony, not power, was their strength. Life, not destruction, was how they won.

So why didn't they help us? Here their song changed. Why help a world so close to complete failure? How could they spare more luminaries when every last one was needed? Some calmly, perhaps callously, suggested that we clean up the mess ourselves. The help of others would be of little use; what good would it do ponies to be transformed into spires of singing gelatin? But most stars simply had concerns of their own, and those that could help were helping as best they could.

But it wasn't enough. The dead heart of that star continued to hunger for the souls of its own, and its own dread note was beginning to build. It was intolerable... And with each light that spiderweb captured from my world, its song grew...

I had to go back. I couldn't be here while Glory... P-21... all of them were there. Make me a ghoul. A ghost. A monsterpony. Anything! I couldn't sing with the others and leave them down there. I had to do something. Anything. Whatever it took. They mattered more than me!

And the stars' song turned mournful. No parent wanted to lose their child. But I wasn't a child

any more. I turned to see that glowing lavender unicorn with a striped purple and red mane, and she smiled. 'Security saves ponies', she seemed to say. Then she leaned down and kissed my brow, and her gentle light became my world.

* * *

"Welcome back, Blackjack," a mare said quietly. I blinked rapidly, and the white resolved into four gray walls. Stable walls. Two rows of desks with the projector in the middle and the teacher's desk in the corner. Only Textbook hadn't ever smiled... well, except when she was a psychopath trying to kill me. I was the same age as Scotch. I looked around, feeling disoriented. Hadn't I just been floating... or something? I had a vague recollection of lights... and before that, being on a ship. No... dying on a ship!

"Oh crap," I muttered. "I've died and gone to Hell."

Textbook laughed. "Well, you're half right. You most certainly did die. Complete cardiac and respiratory failure for almost eight hours. Fortunately, your pegasus and Reaper friends are resourceful. Since Rampage is effectively immortal, Glory was able to shunt her circulatory system into yours, keeping your body and brain alive long enough to reach your destination." Considering how Rampage healed... that couldn't have been pretty.

"So... are you Doctor Octopus or something?" I asked with a little frown. "'Cause you're using a lot of really big words that make my head hurt."

"You don't remember us coming aboard?" she asked with a small smile, then sighed. "Well, that's no surprise, considering the state you were in. We kept quiet for most of the trip. We didn't want to risk you guessing our plan and stressing yourself with objections. No offense, but you're remarkably stubborn at times." Her form shimmered and became an aging gray and white mare with a curious striped mane and legs. One that I'd seen teaching in a university before Goldenblood had recruited her.

"Silver Stripe?" I blinked.

"Nice to meet you brain to brain," she said as she looked around. "Is this really what you think of when you think of school? I was hoping for some nice lecture hall." She sighed again and nudged the projector. "Ah well. The concept's what's important, not the aesthetics."

"This is taking place in my head?" Well, unless I'd inexplicably reverted to a filly... which, actually, I had seen happen before. "If you're here... then... Steelpony?"

She nodded, and the projector lit up. "Project Steelpony." An outline of a mare with three cogs in the center appeared. "One of the O.I.A.'s projects to build a better pony. We're using it to save your life."

I stood on my chair, pointing my hoof at her. "You are not turning me into Deus!"

She rolled her eyes. "And this is why we didn't tell you beforehoof..." Clicking her tongue, she shook her head. "Sorry, but it's all done. We were just waiting to see if your consciousness emerged or if your brain had suffered too much damage." The picture on the screen changed to a frowning Stable-Tec pony icon with several organs displayed. She pointed a hoof at the projection. "Heart, both lungs, stomach, and some other organs were all irrevocably contaminated and had to be replaced with synthetics." The bad blackened organs disappeared, and new shiny silver ones appeared. "Your stomach and digestive tract were also removed and replaced with a special processor developed by your

friend Rover. Your mouth has also been altered, so you can now eat not only regular food but also gemstones and pieces of scrap metal. According to your friends, this won't be a big dietary change for you."

"Wait. I can eat metal and gems?" I asked, blinking in shock. This was too much, too fast...

"Can and have to. Your systems are powered by an internal microgenerator... we were actually very lucky to find an appropriate gem to run it... but to supplement that and repair damage, you'll need to ingest gemstones and scrap metal occasionally. On the upside, though, you'll never get tired again." The stomach on the picture disappeared and was replaced with a tiny generator picture like what I'd seen in the medical center dream. "Though you will still need to sleep occasionally to let your brain rest. There's a function in the PipBuck interface to let you know how badly you need it.

"You'll be glad to know you'll be seeing your friends very soon. You've got two full ocular implants; they should look relatively similar to your old eyes... barring a slight glow effect when you look right at somepony. Well, and the *lack* of a glow from irradiation; you're a rather unusual patient." She tapped the screen, and two eyeballs appeared. "You also had some brain damage. While we were able to remove the taint causing it, the damage itself was beyond our ability to repair. However, as far as we can tell, all of the damage is benign, which I'd probably not believe if I hadn't seen the diagnostics myself. Of course, we won't know for sure until you're awake."

"Why am I not awake now? And, am I going to have... have pistons and things sticking out of me?" I asked in a rush. I remembered that sensation Deus felt every minute of his life. The feeling of machinery struggling with flesh. I fought to calm down; if this was what they had to do to save me, then... wait. There was something... something Zodiac had said days back... no... I looked at Silver Stripe in shock, and she blinked, then smiled and shrugged.

"You should be okay. We neutralized the remaining taint. And no. While Rampage suggested something along the lines of Deus or Rover, Glory thought you'd prefer something less blatantly mechanical." The legs appeared on the projection. "All four limbs are reconnaissance grade, light and agile with rubber soles to cut down on sound. You can still crack skulls with them, but not tanks." She sighed. "Though why Rover insisted on adding--"

"Professor... you said..."

The professor didn't look at me, keeping her eyes on the projection. "Now, while your limbs may be powered, you'll still need to take care of your own flesh and blood. Most of your other biological systems are still intact and functional, and we were able to make a few improvements there, too. So long as you survive and aren't in truly ridiculous levels of Enervation, your biological parts should regenerate slowly. Nothing like Rampage's regeneration, but--"

"You said it would take years to make cybernetic organs from Steelpony!" I said as I jumped off the desk. Oddly, I felt myself transform into my adult self as I trotted in front of her. "Did you lie to me about that?" I asked as I stared into her gray eyes. I saw the tired sadness within them. "Please tell me you lied to me."

"They're good parts. Two centuries old... but well made," she replied softly. "I know you'll use them well." Her lips curled in a small, sad smile. "It's not like I'm planning to die. Rover's just going to move my head into a jar. Not much difference. Body in a jar. Head in a jar. Really, it's much more

efficient.”

I gaped at her. “No... no no no... you can't do this!”

“It's already done,” she replied. “And it was my idea, Blackjack. Believe me, Glory was no happier about it than you are now.” She sighed. “Unfortunately, I'll be stuck in Tenpony until I can get a new body. My life support isn't exactly portable. Not one of those brainbots... that's too much crazy for me to deal with.”

“But... why?” I asked, my rump hitting the ground, feeling numb all over. “You waited years to get your freedom.”

She looked at me for a long time. “I'm more than two hundred and fifty years old, Blackjack. In that time, I was a somewhat decent instructor, the leader of an illegal research project, and not much else. For a hundred and fifty years I sat in Tenpony Tower planning for the day when I'd actually start fixing things... and as soon as I got the chance, all I did was trot around in circles killing raiders and gangs and driving my friends away from me. In the end, I wound up in a jar.”

“But what about the Collegiate? What about the Zodiacs?” I pressed, not believing what I was hearing.

“Both fine groups. I have faith that Triage will run things well now that I'm gone. She's cynical and hard, but she's a realist who won't let the rest of her fellows down. And the Zodiacs will support her. I made sure all of them will continue.” She dropped her gaze. “Now that they have Steelpony, I know they'll have a future to work towards.”

I stared at her hard. “How long?”

“Excuse me?”

“How long till you have a new body? Till you're trotting around like normal?”

“Oh. That. Yes... well... there are many different factors to consider. The fact is that Steelpony was made to augment an existing body, not replace it outright. I could be shoved into a robot, I suppose, but that tends to degrade one's sanity pretty darn quickly.” I glared at her, tapping my hoof on the floor as she looked away. “Well, taking into account current technological levels and the fact that most of my body was synthetic... probably... fifty or sixty years...”

If I hadn't already done it, I would have sat down hard. Fifty years? That was two pony generations! “But why? Why me? Why throw your life away when you finally have a chance to get it back? You had Steelpony. You could finally have been... been something!”

But she simply shook her head. “You don't understand, Blackjack. All my life, I've wanted to make the world a better place. That was why I became an engineer and a teacher. To make things to help ponies.” She pointed to her math equation cutie mark and then sighed. “But I haven't helped anypony at all.”

“What are you talking about? You helped--”

“No, Blackjack. I didn't,” she replied firmly. “I didn't heal a single hurt soul. I didn't take down a single criminal. I didn't do anything but sit in a glass jar while ponies like Triage and Sagittarius did the

real work.” She then looked at me, and I saw the anger and shame etched on her face. “For two hundred years I watched ponies die. I stood in the background while my friends actually fought to change things. And in the end, I accomplished nothing but losing their friendship!”

She gripped my shoulders. “In one month... you...” She paused to nudge my chin upwards so her gaze could meet my downcast eyes. “You have done more to help ponies than I have in a quarter of a millennium. You have suffered and sacrificed and paid in blood, sweat, and tears. Do you understand how incredible that is?”

“It’s nothing. Luck and my friends. I cause more mess than I solve,” I said, now the one feeling ashamed.

She shook me once, and forced me to look back into her eyes. “It’s not nothing. You’ve changed ponies’ lives for the better. And I won’t let you die, not when you can have a chance to accomplish so much more.” She closed her eyes. “If me spending the rest of my life in a jar is the price paid so you get another shot, then I actually feel like I’ve done something worthwhile. Something not undone by war and death.”

I stared at her for a long moment, and she looked away, her ears folding back. “There’s something else, isn’t there?”

She closed her eyes. “There is something else... yes.” She took a deep breath. “You may be related to one of the Ministry Mares.”

What?

“That’s... that’s ridiculous.” I laughed, expecting a smile or something... some hint this was a joke. She wasn’t laughing, though. She simply looked at me, almost with pity. “Completely ridiculous! How could I be related to any of the Ministry Mares? Why would you think that?”

“Two reasons,” she replied soberly. “The first is that Glory told me about the silver bullets and the black security cases they came inside.” A picture of one of the silver bullet cases flashed onto the projection screen. “Each of these are enchanted so that they can only be opened by a very few select ponies or relatives thereof.” I had a feeling that that list neatly matched everypony EC-1101 was supposed to go to. “The ministries used the security cases to transport very secret letters and small objects to each other towards the end of the war.”

“So, what... my great great aunt twice removed was Rarity’s cousin? What’s the big deal?” Certainly not something worth dying over, that was for sure.

“If that were it, then it wouldn’t be a big deal. But then there’s Project Steelpony. I expected the data to be damaged. In fact, I was dreading the months or years needed to repair it. After all, trying to force EC-1101 to unseal it when you’re not authorized to do so would hardly be good for Steelpony or the program.” The picture on the projector showed me cutting open a terminal with a chainsaw. The zony began to pace. “However, Steelpony wasn’t damaged. It was unsealed with all its data completely intact. There were files there that even I had forgotten about. The only way that would be possible is if EC-1101 actively removed the seal... and it would only do that for a direct descendant of a Ministry Mare or the Princesses.”

I stared as the picture changed to one of me pushing a button with a hoof and the terminal saying

'access granted'. "But..." I thought of Fluttershy, Rarity, and Twilight.

She gave a little smile. "But that's impossible. I know. The Ministry Mares never married or had children. Rainbow Dash was widely believed to prefer the mares, but the others didn't, and believe me, they were under constant and intense public scrutiny; only Applejack was ever in a confirmed relationship, and even that was often regarded as questionable."

"Yeah, what was with that?" I asked with a small frown. "I mean, the whole 'no dating, no kids' thing."

The zony sighed and shrugged. "It was a prevailing attitude during the war. So many were giving so much in blood, sweat, and treasure that it was seen as indulgent. The Ministry Mares were supposed to be working on winning the war full time. Towards the end, I'm afraid the public would have been outraged at any act of self-indulgence. I heard Luna herself asked Applejack to postpone her relationship with the buck she was dating till after the war was settled. The closest one ever came to being married was Rarity to Prince Blueblood. I understand her rejection was quite legendary."

"Yeah. He was still feeling it two centuries later." I sighed as I rubbed my leg. It felt flesh and blood here in my head. "So... what does it matter if I am or not? I mean, if I remember correctly, EC-1101 goes to each of the people in the line of succession and then to a 'descendant'. And that was broken or something."

"As far as EC-1101 is concerned, I don't know how or if it will matter. But there are other considerations too." Great! Lay it on me. I was now part robot and apparently the great great grandkid of one of the Ministry Mares. I could take it! "You see, in order to purge the taint saturating your system, we had to have access to a spell held by the Twilight Society, a group of ponies descended from the M.A.S. researchers who survived the bombs. They control Tenpony Tower, where we, physically, are now, and unlike us, they had some very specific demands."

"So, let me guess, I owe them a million bits plus my firstborn?" I asked with a snort, knowing that would never happen.

"No. What they want you to do is to try and open a door," she said grimly. "A door that can only be opened by a Ministry Mare. One *particular* mare."

"Twilight Sparkle?" I wondered if the Twilight Society could have just asked the Goddess. Twilight was a part of it... somehow.

"Right. A one in six chance is better odds than they've had in ages," she said quietly. "If you can't open it, then I'm sure they'll pat you on the head and send you on your way. But if you can, then they'll try to get their hooves on whatever is inside." She looked at me soberly. "But if you do open that door, that means that everything inside is yours by right. I know you're inclined to give things up, and I know they will plead their need. Trust me, it's a lie. For a century and a half, I worked with them. Whatever help they need is nothing compared to the help they've denied to others. They could have dedicated themselves to improving the Wasteland; instead, they turned Tenpony Tower into a gated community and turned away everypony they couldn't either exploit or use. And the second you turn the room's contents over to them is the second they will boot you and your friends out the front door."

Well... that sounded... pleasant. "But... Professor... I... I don't want you to be trapped like this." It felt like she was going to die or something! Was it just me, or was everything starting to get hazy

around us?

"Looks like the sedatives are taking effect." She put her hoof to my lips. "I've had years to come to terms with this. You saved Capricorn and Pisces. You gave us Steelpony, even after I tried to trick you. By destroying the *Celestia*, you saved the Collegiate as well. I have no doubt that Steel Rain would have destroyed us if we resisted, and if we surrendered, well..." She closed her eyes as she smiled, looking tired but happy. "By saving your life... I can save more. Isn't that what you always do, Blackjack?"

That was different. I'd killed ponies who didn't deserve it. Deep down, I wasn't much different from the people I fought, if maybe a little more stupid and reckless. I didn't want good ponies to die for me. But... that wasn't what she needed to hear from me right now. "Yeah. It is," I said as I looked at her. Funny, but did she always look so old and tired? "Thank you, Silver Stripe."

"No, thank you, Blackjack," she said as with a curl of her wrinkly lips. "And happy birthday."

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My eyes opened, and at first all I saw was a gray haze. Then a black and white picture of a hospital gurney took shape next to me, beyond it a wall decorated with a butterfly motif. A sheet was pulled over a vaguely pony-shaped mound... a mound missing its legs. Black and white gave way to grainy color, and I stared at the pink splotches on the sheet, matching the wings of the butterflies on the wall. A cable trailed from the covered head to my own temple. A dark tan earth pony stood next to some equipment that beeped and bubbled, his hoof disappearing under the sheets. "She's sedated. We can make the transfer."

"Pickled pony is best pony," growled a familiar voice. I slowly turned and looked up at the cybernetic sand dog, Rover. He snorted. "Pony is awake. Pony should still be sleeping."

I felt hooves on my shoulder, and feathers tickled my side softly. "Welcome back," Glory said in my ear before she bit the cable and gently pulled it out. I felt something tickle behind my eyeball as it was removed. Oh... that sense of wrongness was kicking in. These legs didn't feel like my legs. They felt like... like enormous complicated booties glued to my body. I kicked and rolled off the table, and my body moved on its own to put its hooves down. Of course I fought it and went rolling across the concrete floor. Alarms and alerts flashed in my vision.

This was bad. This didn't feel like me. Every movement I made felt awkward. I flailed on my back. I finally just stopped and looked at every eye on me. My friends all stared at me in shock. I could see their faces as clearly as if I was looking at them through a scope: fear and worry. I gasped... and yet... my heart didn't thunder in my chest. My pulse didn't pound in my ears. My body felt unnaturally quiet and still as I stared up at them.

"Pony is so dramatic," Rover snorted, rolling his green eyes before returning to the sheet-covered mare. "Doctor Pony. Pegasus Pony. Best we work now, or only have scraps left."

P-21 trotted towards me, kneeling. "Blackjack..." I jerked again, my mechanical hooves driving me back and bouncing over the floor. I fought it, which resulted in me rolling over. My flailing limbs caught him in the gut, blasting the wind out of him.

"Stay back!" I shouted. "I have no idea what's going on!" What was my body was trying to do?

My random rolling knocked over a table; hopefully I hadn't broken anything.

"This is no way to operate a surgical environment," the brown buck said behind his operating mask.

I managed to rise to my hooves, but it was tough trying to learn how to walk. My brain kept sending signals that my legs weren't following right. So I'd move, then I'd correct, then overcorrect, then overcorrect for the overcorrection... and then land on my face. I didn't walk out of the surgery so much as repeatedly fall over in the general direction of the door. Finally, out in something that looked more like a recovery area than an operating room, I found a corner and collapsed in it.

'ERROR' flashed over and over in my vision. That seemed to sum up everything in me right now. Rampage, P-21, and Scotch trotted after me. I wanted to gasp, but my lungs didn't gasp. I wanted my heart to race, but it didn't beat at all. They stared at me, P-21 in pain as he held his gut. Rampage stepped closer. "Blackjack..."

I closed my eyes, then looked at her again. A targeting icon appeared on her head... then I looked over at P-21... and watched the blue crosshairs lock onto his head as well. And Scotch. I clenched my eyes shut.

"It was the only way we could save your life," Scotch said softly. "Sorry I lied," she added as her ears folded back. I looked at her and gave a small smile.

Alive. I was alive. My friends had worked their asses off to save my life. I could see. I could -- at least in *theory* -- walk without feeling like a cripple. I'd been given a second chance. So why was I so upset? Would I seriously have preferred being dead to this?

I'd been given a second shot. Was this really how I was going to treat it?

Slowly, I opened my eyes again, and thankfully they weren't throwing targets all over the place anymore. Things still felt... off. A sort of nagging discomfort where my shoulders and hips met my body. It didn't hurt... exactly. More like my brain wasn't sure what to make of it. At least my mutated limbs had been a part of myself. Now it felt like half my body was wrong.

But I'd gotten used to faking it.

"No problem, Scotch. I probably would have freaked out horribly if you'd told me the truth," I said as I tried to hug myself. Again, my legs went wonky and jerked spasmodically.

"We weren't sure you made it," Rampage said with a little frown. "We were hours away from Manehattan when your heart stopped. Rover had some pipes Glory was able to jam into my chest and yours to keep everything going inside you. Thrush set a new speed record, and once we were at the tower, Lacunae got the army outside to let us in." She jerked a head towards the window. "Red Eye probably has a thousand troops surrounding this place... but apparently nopony messes with alicorns around here. They stepped aside easy as you please. Then she stayed behind. Said the tower wouldn't be friendly to her."

P-21 nodded. "They almost didn't let Rover and Rampage in."

"They insisted we turn over all our ammunition," the armored mare said as she looked at her

hoofclaws. "I think they realized at that point that there was a mistake in their security policy. Actually, I think they were going to shoot me on general principle, can you imagine? Nearly had to commit a bloodbath just to be allowed inside," she said with a little pout. "Fortunately, they reconsidered when I shot myself in the head in front of them. For some reason, that just cut right through all the arguments."

Somewhere in Tenpony, I was sure there was a head of security taking either antacids or shots of hard liquor. Possibly both. I made myself smile. "Tell me you behaved yourself." The three of them clearly relaxed. I hoped that meant that they didn't see me trying to squirm out of my own limbs.

She inhaled and rolled her eyes. "Please. One pony did say something about zebras and filthiness, but when I asked him to elaborate, he suddenly remembered an appointment," Rampage said as she tapped her chin. "There may have been claws on tile, too. Hard to say."

"You're on Mint-als again, aren't you?" P-21 asked her flatly.

"I've been out for days! I finally got to replace my stock!" She giggled as she bounced on her hooves in a very glittery circle. "These Tenpony guys always have the nicest shit!"

"Yeah. Well, they provided the very nice hospital to put me back together again," I said as I looked at the clinic. "What about Rover?" I couldn't imagine being in a tower full of ponies was good for the old dog.

"He's staying out of sight. He doesn't like ponies and ponies don't like him. Apparently, when Zodiac asked him to do the surgery, he was quite... something," P-21 said as he looked back into the operating room. "He wanted to make sure she was taken care of. I guess there aren't many folks in Equestria like them."

"When Glory used your broadcaster, she got help from all over the Hoof!" Scotch said with a grin. "Sure, Sanguine made his snotty offer, but so did the professor. Well, not snotty in her case. Dusty Trails sent a box of gems straight quick. Bottlecap didn't have any parts, but she said the vendors took up a collection for when you were better. Hell, even Caprice sent a whole case of quality chems, plus every chunk of Deus she could find. Apparently, she only sold Zodiac the back half and was still trying to figure what the front end was really worth."

"You mean I have pieces of Deus in me?" No wonder my insides felt out of it. I could almost hear tiny metal parts inside me screaming 'CUUUNNNNTTTT!'.

"A few. Apparently she had to extract some sort of metal stuff to strengthen your bones... or what used to be your bones. And there're some other parts in there too," she replied softly, not quite understanding my reaction; but then, she hadn't been chased halfway across the Hoof by him.

Pieces of Deus. Pieces of the professor. "Is there anything left that's original?" I muttered, looking at my... hooves and tapping them together idly.

"Can't you just be happy to be alive?" P-21 asked with a little frown. "A lot of people wanted to help you." I smiled at his stern tone and looked up at him. He flushed, rubbing his brushy blue mane as he looked away.

"You're right. You're right. I just... it's a lot to get used to." A target locked onto his head, and I

closed my eyes tight. A lot to get used to. "Speaking of broadcasters, where is my PipBuck?"

P-21 reached over, took my left hoof, and pressed in a plate. It slid away, and there was the familiar screen. "It's built-in now. You don't need to cover it up any more."

"They'd have to take your leg off to get it now," Rampage said with a grin. Then she frowned and rubbed her chin. "Of course, I'm pretty sure Psychoshy and Sanguine wouldn't have a problem with that, so I wouldn't get too comfy."

"Right," I chuckled mirthlessly. "Comfy..."

"Blackjack? What's wrong?" Scotch asked. I sighed and closed my eyes, tapping my head against the wall.

"Nothing, Scotch. Just been through... a lot," I said as I tried to sort through my emotions. All this help. All this attention... I was nothing special. Even if what the professor said was true, I didn't deserve it. I looked at her sitting there with her head bowed. "And none of it was your fault. Understand?" She sniffed again and nodded, pressing her hindlegs tightly together.

"Well... I got some news you'll like," Rampage said, and she used a tone that promised that, if I didn't like it, she was going to do something unpredictable to me. "Big Daddy is alive, and the first thing he did was thump the gangs into pulling back. He's got your eyepatch, somehow... not sure if he lost an eye in the shelling or if he just likes the look, though. The peace is holding; it's been three days, and DJ Pon3 hasn't announced any new killing." She looked at me with a cool smile. "Oh, and for blowing up the *Celestia*, you are now a Reaper, whether you want to be one or not. They're scrubbing out Deus's room for you."

"Well, so long as everypony understands that I am one lousy Reaper," I said as I closed my eyes, then frowned and peeked, catching the three of them giving each other skeptical glances. I gave a stern look, and all of them blinked and grinned.

"Absolutely! Blackjack: Worst. Reaper. Ever," Rampage said, and Scotch nodded quickly along with her.

P-21 chuckled. "Things are a little messier on the Steel Ranger side. Apparently, the entire order has gone crazy. A group of them actually attacked the Stable Dweller's stable. Then there was Rain's shelling. Some nasty business elsewhere. The whole thing's blown up in their faces, though. And apparently Crunchy Carrots didn't make it. Good thing, or she'd probably be shot for having lost their base. Stronghoof rallied the survivors, but he needs somewhere to operate from."

"What about Steel Rain's followers?"

"No idea. He left things a mess when he died, but their whole order is screwed up at the moment," P-21 said with a shrug. "They still don't even know if he drowned or got vaporized when the *Celestia* blew."

"So..." I said as I rubbed my head. "That leaves the Enclave... Red Eye... the zebras and their tank..."

"Actually, I don't think that that was their tank," Rampage said as she fished out another Mint-al

from her pouch.

"Uh... it was striped?" Scotch Tape said, wisely omitting the 'duh?'.

Rampage rolled her pink eyes. "I mean that, while that was a Zebra Behemoth class tank, I doubt it was fighting for just the zebras." The three of us looked confused as she popped the Mint-al into her mouth and chewed. "No pony throws heavy armor like that at a bunch of infantry. It's stupid. They just scatter and call in air support, artillery, or armor of their own. If that were a zebra tank, I'd like to kick the shit out of their commander for not using a fire team to pin us down. Two sniper teams and we'd have been dead meat. Or a melee specialist unit..."

"Twist?" I asked softly.

"Hmm?" She smiled at me, then blinked. "What?"

"Just... making sure of who I'm talking to..." I said as I glanced at P-21 and Scotch.

The striped pony chewed thoughtfully. "My guess is, that wasn't zebra. So somepony else has a Behemoth class tank after you."

"Well, that's so much better," P-21 muttered sarcastically.

"Actually, it is. One tank is pretty easy to avoid if you're careful. But you get a few dozen foot soldiers pinning you down so that it can blow you to pieces, and you'd better hope your air support is top notch," the striped mare said matter-of-factly. "As I was telling Shujaa and Minty, you can't just throw a single..." Then she blinked as she looked around. "Wait... something's the matter..."

I saw the pupils contract. "Twist... don't panic. Please..."

"What's... what's happened? Where am I? This isn't Miramare! Where's Peppermint? What happened to her?" She began looking around wildly. "Where are they? This is a hospital! Are they hurt? What's going on?"

I sighed. I couldn't have her freaking out now, in the middle of Tenpony Tower! "Rampage!" Please don't make me have to hunt down a gun to sedate you! I sure didn't want to find out how busted my horn was.

The pink eyes blinked as she stared at me in horror, and then slowly they relaxed. She closed her eyes and slumped, hugging her head. "No blood anywhere... That's a good sign."

"You just went out again. It wasn't bad," I added quickly, and she looked relieved for that. "You were talking all military and stuff." I frowned a moment as I looked around. Scotch suppressed a yawn as I asked, "So where is Lacunae?"

"The professor's quarters," P-21 replied. "An alicorn, a sand dog, and a cyberzony's severed head. Sounds like the start of a bad joke." I had to wonder about his sense of humor...

"Ponies is all bad joke," growled Rover from the doorway. "Is done. Is okay." I rose to my hooves and slowly walked towards the aged canine. His cybernetic eye followed my steps carefully as I staggered. "Pony is doing all wrong. Do not think of walking, pony. Walk. Legs is smarter than pony."

"I can't help it. My legs want to do something else," I said as I looked down at them. "I'm tripping over my own hooves!" I protested as the damned things twitched under me. He just sighed and rolled his filmy eye. I sighed too as I looked at him, then past him at Glory and the brown buck. "Look. I just wanted to say thank you. To all of you, for everything. It's just... right now, it feels all muddled up. I'm trying to sort it all out."

"Ponies is always whining," Rover growled, shaking his head, and then shuddered as he closed his eyes. "Always the whining." Then he pointed a mechanical finger at me. "Pony has better leg now, like dog. Dog make best pony legs ever. Better than professor pony."

"Why did you help?" P-21 asked with a small frown.

He looked at the blue buck and snorted. "Pony take home. Dog work under city. Many accident. Many. Pony not care about dogs. Professor care. She make new leg. Strong leg. Show dogs how make, too. Make organ and parts so dog can do job and live. When bombs fall, dogs use metal parts to survive. Not become twisted. Not become hellhound. Stay dog. Stay sane. So she say she need dog help, dog help." He growled and pointed a finger at P-21. "Dog remember promises and favors."

"Well, thank you," I replied as I looked at my body. My synthetic limbs were some sort of light metal painted with a matte white enamel. The forelegs ended all the way up at my shoulders, but the metal of the hindlegs stopped just below my cutie mark. I still had my lucky... well... relatively lucky queen and ace. "I'll... I'll try to remember, too." Then I laughed. "At least I have hooves again. For a while there, I thought I was going to grow--" I froze as four white digits extended from my hoof and flexed before my eyes. "AHH! I have fingers!"

Rover snorted, but I swore he was smirking! "Thumbs is better, pony. Pony will see."

"Come. Let's get you to the cargo elevator," the brown buck said. "Crazy times in Tenpony. I swear." He smiled though, as if quite welcoming this craziness. Then he pointed a hoof at me. "Stay here, please. At least a few hours for observation. After working on you for three days, last thing we need is for one of those synthetic organs to be rejected." He escorted Rover from the clinic. Given how dark it was outside I figured most of the tower was asleep. Glory gave a tired yawn, and all my friends seemed likewise bushed.

"Do you have somewhere to stay?" I asked as I looked at them.

"The Twilight Society provided a room," P-21 said with a little frown. I agreed with his expression; the Twilight Society of Tenpony Tower definitely wanted something from me. I had to wonder what I was going to do about it. He fought another yawn. "We were worried... I mean, after three days we weren't sure you were going to be coming back. Or if you did, that you'd be... you know... you."

Glory bit her lip as she peeked at me behind her falling mane. "You said... any way to save you..."

"That didn't involve Sanguine," I finished for her. I looked at the white appendages sticking out of the end of my right forehoof and bashed it a few times with my left. Finally, there was a clack, and the fingers retracted. I really wished there was some sort of manual or something: 'Your New Mechanical Body and You'. Finally I smiled as I looked into her eyes. A real smile. "You did good," I said as I nuzzled her cheek. "I really thought I was toast."

"You were," Glory pointed out with a sigh before she kissed me back. "After two days of fiddling with you... I was seriously about to track down some zebra witchdoctor or something to bring you back." She sighed as she held me in a tight hug, kissing the side of my neck. "Do you remember anything? While you were out, I mean?"

"No... not really. Something about stars, I think," I said softly before I pulled back. Blood smeared her forelegs and she looked like she needed a good long day of rest. "Why don't you go clean up and catch some shuteye? I'll try and figure out... stuff." I forced a smile as a crosshair appeared on her forehead. "You know, while it's quiet?"

"You promise you won't get into trouble?" Glory asked. What was I, a foal? What kind of trouble could I get into here in Tenpony Tower? "I think Helpinghoof would be okay if I slept in here." I sighed, shaking my head as I tried to carefully stroke her cheek.

"Glory. It's a bed. A clean bed. With a shower and a toilet and..." I sighed again; now I was really wishing that I could go with her. "Nnnngh... maybe I can leave Helpinghoof a note?" I looked at the enamel coating my limbs. Hopefully they were waterproof.

"Already disobeying doctor's orders? It's his clinic. Try to follow..." She yawned and swayed. Rampage caught her before she staggered.

"I think we should all go," P-21 muttered as he rubbed his eyes. "It's late... or early... somewhere between the two." He pointed to some boxes in the corner. "Your things are over there, along with a bunch of stuff folks gave us to give you. We were going to do a party, but I don't think anypony expected you to pull through so early."

"You all go ahead. There's not much I can do anyway, beside figuring out complicated skills like walking." And, according to the refreshingly familiar screen of my PipBuck, I wouldn't need to sleep again for a few more days, minimum. After watching my friends leave, I walked back to the operating room, every third step sending me staggering as I overcorrected.

I felt a stab of guilt at the bloody mess left behind; I had to do something about it. I looked around the back room and found a janitor's closet. I stared at the door handle and concentrated. I knitted my brows, grit my teeth, and crossed my eyes trying to get my horn to work.

Just as much nothing as when Lacunae first regrew it; I was a horn-headed earth pony now. I sighed, opened the door with my hooves, found a bucket, filled it up, and added some Abronco Detergent. I started to clean up the blood that smeared the floor and the operating table. On a counter was a large jar covered with a sheet, a monitor machine next to it. The talisman hummed as it beeped softly.

I was halfway through cleaning up, and probably making more of a mess in the process, when the brown buck returned. He looked at me in surprise as I squeezed out the dirty sponge between my hooves. "You know, we have janitors for that."

"It's my fault there's a mess. Least I can do is clean it up," I said softly as I scrubbed the floor. He looked at me curiously.

"Actually, most of it was from Rover removing her head. Say what you will for neatness, those claws of his can sure dismember a pony," he said as he got a sponge as well.

"You don't have to do that," I said as he started cleaning up the mess from the other side.

"It's no trouble," he began.

"You don't have to do that!" I snapped. I stared at him in shock. I looked down at the dirty floor, my eyes targeting soap bubbles now. "No pony should be troubled on my account. I'll clean it up."

He just stood there for almost a minute, watching me as I worked. "You really hate yourself, don't you, Blackjack?" I stared at him for a moment, half in confusion and half in fear. "You don't think we should have saved you, do you?"

"I'm glad Glory did," I said as I looked back at the mess I was making worse.

"No doubt. She's happy, which matters to you. In fact, if Glory wanted you dead, you'd probably shoot yourself just to make her happy," Helpinghoof said with a little chuckle. "What I mean is, you don't think you deserved to be saved, do you?"

I didn't answer. I just sloshed around dirty water as I stared down at the sponge. Finally, I said quietly, "There are better ponies... ponies who should be back." I sighed softly, closing my eyes. "Scoodle. Radishes. Mallet. Tarboots. Elder Crunchy Carrots. Roses. Thorn." I clenched my jaw. "Marmalade. Rivets. Midnight. Mom..." "So why is it I get to die and come back but they have to stay dead?"

I wanted to gasp. I wanted my heart to pound. Instead, everything inside me was still. "The professor... Glory... my friends... everypony... they all think I'm special. That somehow I'm important or better or... or something! How can they think that?" I asked as I stared at him. "I've screwed up so many times... how is it that I'm worth giving a second chance?"

Helpinghoof just chuckled and shook his head. "Because folks like you, Blackjack. You're a good pony."

"Am not..." I muttered, squeezing out the sponge. "I'm not special at all."

He sighed and then barely suppressed a yawn. "You don't feel you're worth the help others give you. You feel that there's somepony better who should get it. So you feel guilty, and when half the Hoof springs to action to help you... you feel bad because you think you don't deserve it."

I looked at him curiously. I hadn't thought of that. He asked after a minute, "Do you think your friends show good judgment, Blackjack?"

That's a good question... "P-21 follows me into irradiated tunnels, I've shot Rampage in the head on more than one occasion, and Glory loves me." He laughed as he squeezed out his sponge, and I smiled despite myself. "Honestly, I think Lacunae's the smartest one of all of us. But on average, I'd say my friends have better judgment than me."

"Then trust their judgment. If they... and so many others... think that bringing you back was the right thing to do, then trust it. Accept it's good and worthwhile." He smiled. "But if you insist on cleaning up, then by all means. I'll be in my office." I watched as he stood, dumped the bucket of dirty water into the sink, set the bucket down, and started to leave.

I blinked as I watched him go. "So... you're going to let me just clean it up on my own?"

He looked around at the mess and then at me. "Well, we could talk about it, but you'll just say you're not worth talking to. We could fight over it, but you'd just thump my rump." The brown buck chuckled as he shrugged. "At least with cleaning therapy, you work off some of your guilt issues and I get a clean operating room." And with that, he trotted out and left me to my work. I laughed despite everything, shaking my head. Security... blows up battleships and cleans floors. All I had to do was learn to cook, and I'd be perfect.

I played some of Mixers's finest, and an hour later I had the room as clean as I could get it. The constant activity was helping me figure out some of the weirdness in my body, too. Finally, I dumped out the buckets and put everything away. I looked at the covered jar next to the beeping equipment but couldn't bring myself to look inside. After all, what would I do if she looked back? Instead, I trotted out into the recovery room, glanced into the small office, and turned off the tunes.

The brown buck had his head on his hooves, snoring brokenly as he slumped over his desk. I sighed, looked around, and spotted a threadbare prewar jacket. I draped it over his shoulders and then closed the door behind me.

So... what was there to do in Tenpony Tower at two in the morning?

I trotted over to the crates. Birthday presents in 99 were usually an extra portion of recycled yogurt and maybe a 'free bump to the head of the breeding queue' voucher. I looked at my thrashed saddlebags and shot-up armor. The poor rearing filly patch was stained brown and half peeled off. The word 'Security' had so many bullet holes and dings that it was hard to tell if I was Security or Secretary. I looked at the shreds of duct tape still clinging to the legs. I sighed, running my hoof over the chewed and patched kevlar.

I smiled as I saw Vigilance. My horn couldn't even flicker, but I cradled it in my hooves as I lifted it out. Well, I needed more practice using the mouthgrip anyway. Then I looked down at said grip.

A new name had been carved into it. 'Blackjack'. I sniffed as I looked at that list of names, from Card Trick to myself. I looked at 'Tarot'. Could there somehow be some way that Tarot was Twilight's child? And the gun had been passed down from mother to daughter, to me. I pressed the cool metal slide of the weapon to my warm brow and sighed. Then I set the pistol aside.

Beneath that box was one box from Bottlecap. By 'collection', she'd clearly meant a collection of ammunition. I looked at the box of ammo and then recalled what Rampage had said. Filling up my saddlebags with bullets at this moment might not go over well with Tenpony security. I wondered how they'd gotten the crate in. Panic, rush, and threats? I covered it up. Really... why confiscate ammo, anyway? It seemed a lot more energy-efficient to confiscate weapons... but it wasn't my show. Besides, I doubted I'd be as easy with the idea of Vigilance taken from me rather than bullets for the gun.

Underneath that was a box filled with a bottle of Buck, Party Time Mint-als, some Dash inhalers, Rad-X, and RadAway, as well as a little jar of bright blue dust that I assumed was Moon Dust. It seemed that Caprice had been all out of Med-X. Still, there was a little note: 'Sorry.'

I'd probably give most of the box to Helpinghoof. Underneath that was some black, reinforced leather barding. I pulled it out and checked it carefully for cutie marks. None. It had a pony skull on the flank, and written on the back was 'Reapers' over the number '99': an old hoofball uniform. Sadly, it was

in better condition than my combat armor. I looked close and saw that the 99 had once been 66... altered just for me. I wondered if Lacunae was behind it.

In a small cardboard box were a dozen cupcakes with red and white swirled frostings and a little 'Happy Birthday' card from Homage. I tried one. It was good. Really good. I felt a sick little knot in my stomach... or where my stomach had been. Was it now my 'reprocessor'? Was that where the guilt came from? A old, battered book from Triage: the Canterlot Journal of Medicine. Well, it'd be good reading for Glory in any case.

Finally, the last box held three things from Chapel. The first was a little note from Priest.

I've known many ponies who have gone to Celestia. Now I'm thrilled to know a pony who's come back. No matter how black things become, there is always... inevitably... a dawn.

I sniffed and felt a sick little joy that I still had tear ducts. I supposed even cybereyes would get pretty itchy without them. Helpinghoof was right... I felt so damned guilty. I didn't deserve any of this. I sighed, swallowing as I pulled out a small gold and silver pendant in the shape of Celestia raising the sun. I'd give it to P-21.

I set it aside and saw six bottles of Wild Pegasus in all their amber glory. Exactly what I needed right now. And if I was somehow incapable of getting drunk, then I was going to have Glory turn off my liver. But then, at the bottom was the absolute perfect present. It was from Charity, and it was *precisely* what I needed right then:

An invoice.

* * *

I'd just finished sorting the presents and was sitting on one of the recovery room's beds playing with my 'fingers' when the doors into the entry room opened. I glanced over through the open folding divider, expecting Glory. Maybe she'd washed and wanted to finish snoozing here with me? But instead, a young mare poked her head in. She looked like hell, with shadows under her eyes and a definitely frazzled expression. I noticed her stable barding and PipBuck and smiled. She looked over at me and my wiggling appendages. I gave a half smile. "Hey. I have thumbs."

The little unicorn almost skidded to a stop, and she gave me the look. That look that said that she was assessing whether or not I bore hostile intent and that the color of her E.F.S. would determine if I was about to receive new holes or not. But after a second, the little unicorn relaxed. "Sorry," she said as she rubbed her rumpled mane. She'd definitely been through the wringer.

"Doc! You got business!" I called at once. The black unicorn and the brown pegasus buck who followed were only slightly better off. The zebra in the back was the only one who didn't look half shot to hell.

I went back to fiddling; it'd take more than a medical journal to make me worthwhile in a situation like this. Besides, none of her friends were really critically injured, though clearly they'd been well-chewed by the Wasteland. The black unicorn had a nasty scar on her leg that bespoke a dire injury. At the moment, though, the friends were more engaged in argument with each other than whatever had brought them to the doctor. I took a long swig off one of my bottles.

"And that, LittlePip, is why you don't go trotting right up to Red Eye's folks to have a chat. And it's 'specially why you don't do it alone!" the brown, winged cowpony said just before he drank down a healing potion. "If we hadn't been ready..."

LittlePip groaned. "Red Eye would have done it..." she muttered as she glowered at the purple healing potion before her.

The black unicorn sighed as her own nicks and injuries healed. "Well, while I admire your attempt at diplomacy, I'm afraid that, in the face of alicorns, griffins, and this army, it was a little... ah... overambitious?"

I then noticed something out of the corner of my eye and turned. The zebra was a hoofreach away and was just watching me. She didn't glower or frown, but I had the distinct impression that if I sneezed wrong, she'd turn me into pulped pony. "Hi," I said, blinking. She didn't respond. I lifted the bottle of whiskey in my hooves. "Drink?" She still didn't respond. "Okay, am I going to have to kiss you to make you relax?" I'd seen eyes like these before...

"That probably wouldn't be good. She's had a bad experience with another cyberpony," the charcoal unicorn said, fighting a yawn. I looked again at the zebra. A bad experience... like P-21 had had his whole life in 99? Like I'd had... my nethers clenched and I dropped my gaze a moment.

Then I looked into her eyes and said, "I know what that's like. I'm sorry." Because I knew what it was like, and I was sorry any pony or zebra had gone through it. Her expression didn't soften in the slightest, but she finally looked away from me.

Helpinghoof fought another yawn as he passed out a tray of healing potions. "Well, you all made it out alive. It could be worse," he said as he made sure that the potions went down.

"It nearly was. I almost lost a leg!" the black unicorn said as she showed off the gnarly scar ringing her foreleg. The healing potion had smoothed its lines a bit, but that was the kind of mark you carried for the rest of your life. I knew; I still had them decorating any part of me that wasn't metal.

"Just one?" I asked with a small smile, tapping my hooves together. Oh... hello awkward. Welcome to the party! Just take a seat everywhere. She flushed and looked away as I shook my head. "Sorry..."

The pegasus stallion looked at the brown bottle between my hooves. "Is that... shoot, is that Wild Pegasus?"

I couldn't help it. I grinned and said, in my best Dusty Trails drawl, "Surely is, pardner. Only the finest single malt whiskey made from the greatest barley in all of Equestria, stored in oak casks for a minimum of ten years and bottled in custom-enchanted preservation bottles. Guaranteed to ruffle your feathers, curl your tail, polish your horn and get you good and fuckered up." I knew that from the back of the label. He nickered, his eyes lighting up like he'd just seen the sunrise, and I tossed him the bottle. He blinked as he caught it with his hooves. "Here."

"Yer just givin' it to me?" He stared in amazement. I nodded. I had more. Why not? "Well, shoot my nuts and call me a mare... this is... really nice, stranger."

"Blackjack," I replied, digging out a second bottle with my mouth.

"Calamity," he said, "and my friends are LittlePip, Velvet Remedy, and Xenith," he added with gestures at the appropriate ponies. We tapped the bottles together and shared a drink. Well... it burned smooth and sweet and rested with a warm glow in my... well there was a warm glow *somewhere* in me, and that was what mattered! He wiped his mouth with a hoof. "Oh my... that surely is the real deal. Can almost taste the sky barley." Sky barley? "Heh, you can get six months fer possession of this stuff back home. Food waste." He snorted in disgust, then looked at me holding the bottle between my hooves. "Why are you drinking like that?"

"Oh. Yeah. My horn doesn't work," I said with a smile and a shrug. "Got chiseled off a few days back." What was that, awkward? You want to bring your whole family? Well sure, come on in! Now LittlePip and Velvet were staring. "What?"

Velvet flushed, then said to Helpinghoof, "Anyway, enough of our little problems. When can you take care of LittlePip's... erm... little problem?" she asked with a flush.

The brown earth pony looked at the little unicorn. "Oh. Well, unfortunately there's going to be a bit of a delay. We had to purge another patient's contamination earlier." It was amazing to see how hard they tried to not stare at me. I looked indolently back as I took a sip from my bottle. Personally, if she didn't have jelly legs, I thought she'd live.

Clearly, LittlePip wasn't worried either as she sighed, "It's not a problem. Look, why don't you three go up to your rooms, clean up, and catch some shuteye? I'll just wait here till they're ready."

Velvet frowned. "I don't know. I think one of us should stay with you." LittlePip scowled slightly. "Calamity or I..."

"I get a bottle of Wild P and yer telling me I have to drink it alone?" Calamity whined, wagging his eyebrows at the black unicorn. She blushed quite rosily.

"I will stay with her," the zebra said softly.

"No offense meant, Xenith, but once the rest of the populace wakes, they might not take well to your presence," Helpinghoof mentioned. A zebra in a town full of ponies... yeah, I didn't see that ending well. Particularly this zebra. She reminded me of Lancer rather than Sekashi. At least you could laugh with Sekashi. Xenith scared the piss out of me.

"I'll do it," I said as I sat back on the bed I'd claimed for my own. The four looked at me as I took another sip from the bottle. "What? Doc wants me to stay. I'll keep an eye out for her. No problem." Velvet looked at me skeptically, and I gave my best 'trust the strange cyberpony in the clinic' smile.

Finally, fatigue or bad judgment prevailed. "All right. We'll see you in the morning." LittlePip sighed as she looked at her hooves. Velvet Remedy gave a bedside smile. "I'll suggest that Homage wait till after the procedure."

"Indeed. It will be difficult for them to beat her old record if she is not fully restored," Xenith deadpanned. LittlePip's depression was overcome by furious embarrassment, and I looked from one to the other. Record? Was I missing something here? The little unicorn was rendered speechless as her friends left. Calamity had the bottle balanced on his flank as he trotted out singing, "Wild P... Wild P..."

Got muhself some Wild P..."

I looked back at LittlePip as the doctor went back into his office. "You have some interesting friends, kid."

She glanced at me as she slid back into a funk. "Yeah. They're great..." She clenched her jaw and then smacked her hooves together hard. "Damn it! It should have worked!"

"I take it that 'it' is whatever got you all shot up?" I asked as I slipped off my bed and trotted over to her. She frowned and nodded. "So what went wrong?" I asked as I held out the bottle.

She took it with her magic and then sighed. "I needed something of Red Eye's... but I couldn't convince them to let me speak with him... or whoever is in charge of that army out there. I got frustrated, yelled... and they started shooting. So I shot back... only there were a lot more of them than me. If Calamity hadn't been ready... I dunno. I know Red Eye doesn't want me dead yet, but that doesn't mean some overeager thug of his might not kill me anyway, just to be on the safe side."

She took a drink, and her eyes bulged as she gulped and then coughed. "And I thought apple cider was bad! What is that stuff?"

"Eighty proof," I replied with a smile as I took the bottle back and took another drink with my hooves.

"How'd it happen?" LittlePip asked as she stared at my horn.

"Oh... ah... no big deal," I replied as I tapped my forehooves. "A bunch of bucks were in a raping mood. I was with a filly friend of mine from my stable... good kid... and so I made sure they focused on rutting with me rather than looking for her. Of course, when they got bored with me, they started looking anyway. So I shot one with my horn." I rolled my eyes. "Needless to say, that blew their mood, so they chiseled off my horn. After that my friend showed up and saved both of us." I took a drink as she stared at me in horror. "Not a big deal. I mean, the plan still worked. If they'd thought to take my horn off when they nailed my legs down..."

Funny how I didn't feel horror at it. I didn't feel anything at all, thinking back to it. "They nailed your legs down?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yeah. Had to cut them off," I said softly and tapped my hooves together with an awkward clank. "Then my friends went and got me new ones. New legs... new eyes... new organs..." I sighed.

"You don't sound very happy about it," LittlePip said quietly. "I can't imagine having parts of me replaced with..." she trailed off, closing her eyes. I gave a sad little smile. I'd mentally kicked myself like that far too often to miss it. I sighed as I swirled the bottle. "I know I wouldn't want to be in your shoes," she finished.

"Even if the alternative is being a corpse?" I asked, arching a brow. She looked, then frowned and sadly shook her head. "My friends moved heaven and earth to save me," I said. "You'd think I'd be all yippee skippy. But I don't feel like myself anymore. I feel like a... a thing... this thing that was once Blackjack but now... I can't even do magic anymore. I'm a half-metal horned earth pony now. And all my friends are so desperate for me to be happy and thank them and stuff..."

"There was a pony I... knew... she was smart and good, but she made some mistakes and she was dying." LittlePip shivered a little. "To save her... this thing... this monster I'm trying to fight... absorbed her. Technically... she's still alive. Or... something." Clearly, not something good.

"Not that I think--" she said hastily, then paused. "Sorry," she said, scowling. "It's just... it's tough. Celestia's flaming solar anal probes, why the hell do some ponies do that? Why would anyone do that?! It makes me so mad!" She frowned at me. "At least tell me you blasted those bastards so they'd never do it again!"

She sounded like P-21. I wondered if she understood. "I let them go." At least, I hoped they were let go. I wouldn't put it past P-21, Glory, or Rampage to have exacted some vengeance on my behalf.

"You what?" She blinked, eyes wide.

"I let them go. I was dying anyway at the time," I replied with a shrug. "Killing them wasn't going to make me any less dead or my butt hurt any less." I sighed as I looked out the dark window. "Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they'll just do it to another. Maybe if I catch them, I'll have to kill them anyway. But at least I could give them a chance."

She smiled and took the bottle, sniffed, and then passed it back to me. "You're amazing."

"Wuss," I teased and took a drink. "Amazingly stupid and naïve, anyway." Was that a buzz? I really hoped it was a buzz. "Amazing at getting ponies killed. Amazing at hurting folks who don't deserve it." I sighed. Ugh... was I this whiny before I died?

"What do you mean?" she asked with a frown. Then I looked at her PipBuck and her barding and I closed my eyes. I shouldn't say. Don't tell her. She wouldn't want to know. She doesn't mean it. I took another pull off the bottle.

"I killed my stable," I said softly. "Being a stable pony yourself... you can appreciate what that means." I sighed. Why was I saying this? Why couldn't I just let it go? Hadn't I found peace with Gardens? Hadn't I paid the price on the boat?

What was the price of four hundred lives? I looked at the revolver in her holster.

LittlePip was just staring at me in horror and I closed my eyes. "There was a virus. It infected a part of the population. Turned them into psychopathic cannibals. Nasty stuff. We were able to kill them all, but... I was tired. I wasn't paying attention to what I should. Distracted by... by other stuff. And while I was getting laid and resting and taking care of myself... the remaining four hundred ponies were exposed." I sighed, grimacing. What did I want? Why did I hate myself? Why wasn't atonement enough?

"They were starting to turn. They were becoming more and more aggressive and the population was armed. A few more days and they'd be killing and eating everypony they came across. We got one uninfected filly out... and then... I gassed them." I mimicked pushing a button with my hoof. Making a clicking noise. "Easy as that. Flooded the whole thing with chlorine gas." I let it fall. "Of course, I'd planned on gassing myself with them, but Lacunae ruined that. So... yeah. Four hundred innocent ponies." I looked at her gun.

I wanted justice. I wanted the pony responsible to pay the price. That was why I didn't feel the horror and shame of being raped. I wanted to be judged and condemned and punished for what I'd done. Not suicide. That was trying to escape from justice. I needed somepony to call me the scum that I was and to put a bullet through my brain like I deserved. I wanted to find somepony like the Stable Dweller who would do the right thing and kill me like a mass murderer deserved.

I didn't have four hundred and something lives to atone for four hundred and something deaths; but I could at least surrender one.

Then I closed my eyes and waited for the bullet that I so richly deserved.

Instead, I got a hug.

"I... I can't imagine being... doing... what you had to do. But... it sounds like it was one of those situations where they were doomed either way," she said softly in my ear. I sighed, slumping. "I know that if I were in that position... diseased... dying... I wouldn't want to die going crazy or worse. I'd want to die like a pony. And... quick. If you'd sealed it..." I sighed, remembering Stable 90. The shortest-lived stable in Equestria. "There wasn't anything you could have done."

I jerked away from her and flailed as I overbalanced and fell on my side. My hooves kicked as I struggled to roll over and find my footing. Finally, I stopped and just lay there. "Why do you say that? Why does everypony? I could have tried telling them! I could have gone pony by pony! I could have... I could have gone to Sanguine... given that murdering bastard what he wanted in exchange for a cure! I could have had the decency to die with them!" Why didn't she understand? Why didn't anypony?

Then she levitated me into the air, and I blinked in surprise. The little pony looked long and hard at me. "Would you dying have cured them?" I hung there in the air before her. Okay, an alicorn with magic this strong I could understand. This was a little intimidating. I shook my head. "Then all your dying would have done is killed one more pony," LittlePip said firmly before she set me back down beside her. "You forgave those rapists. Why can't you forgive yourself?"

"Have you ever gotten innocents killed?" I asked. She looked me in the eye and then shook her head. "If you do... tell me the trick, and I'll do it." I sighed, feeling dejected as I rubbed my face with the cool metal of my forehoof. If I stayed here, I was sure I'd start spilling every whiny, angsty thing that'd happened to me. "You know what... let's go do something."

LittlePip frowned. "Huh? What do you mean 'do something'?" I took a nice long pull on the bottle and smiled. Attention Canterlot, we have inebriation. Take that, super magical synthetic organs! "I thought we were supposed to be waiting here."

"You are waiting for a healy taint purging. You can do that anywhere. I am supposed to be observed. You can observe me anywhere! So do you really want to waste time here trading sob stories?" I asked as I slipped to my hooves, a little more carefully this time.

"It's two in the morning!" she said with a disbelieving smile.

"So? Haven't you ever worked the late shift? Trust me, there's always something somewhere... some trouble... that we can get into!" I said with a wiggle of my brows.

* * *

"How did I let you talk me into this?" LittlePip shrieked as the next wave of screaming, clawing ghouls came charging at us. Her revolver, a *sweet* custom-modified IF-18 Horseshoe that I slightly wanted to snuggle even while fighting for my life, barked and transformed the head of the monstrosity slashing against my upraised hooves into twitching corpse meat. I heaved the body away from me and into a crowd of three more. It was amazing... think about walking: fall on face. *Don't* think about it because you're too busy dealing with dozens of shrieking zombies while inebriated: limbs work fine.

Which was a very good thing. One ghoul opened its mouth wide as it lunged, and I reared on my back legs and punched my hoof into its maw. The combined momentums drove my hoof out the back of its head, rotting brain smearing it as I pivoted on my rear legs and threw the corpse at the three scrabbling to their feet. "Hey! This is *your* secret passage!" I shouted as another ghoul lunged in low and I leapt over its snapping jaws. All four legs came straight down on its head, and the zombie's skull popped like a rotten apple.

"I wanted to levitate you down from the roof, but no!" The trio of ghouls rose a third time, but three blasts from Little Macintosh transformed their skulls into bony, goop-covered shrapnel. "You don't like heights!" Spent revolver casings popped into the air and got turned into hot brass projectiles, briefly driving one of the zombies back into the blasted subway tunnel it'd been crawling out of.

"I'm sorry! Not all of us fly everywhere in skywagons, okay?" I yelled as another group crawled out of a hole in a rusted sewer grate. I hooked my forelegs into either side of the gap and swung in, my rear legs pistoning wildly as they hammered into whatever soft undead flesh made itself available. "I suggested getting Lacunae, but nooooo! *You* don't like alicorns!"

"They're monsters!" LittlePip shouted as her horn flared and scraped a fallen piece of roof along the side of the subway. The block of rubble was easily as big as I was and tore the emerging ghoul in half as she loaded another six rounds into the revolver. "It wasn't an option, okay?" She whirled and placed three shots into the head of a glowing ghoul; its head exploded like a fountain of luminescent snot. "You were the one who insisted on doing this in the first place!" she yelled as she backed towards me while I scrabbled away from the sewer grate and into the middle of the subway passage, tackling a zombie that had been about to snap at her flank.

"You said you *had* to do it... no friends... Remember?" I said as I hooked a foreleg into its mouth like a bridle, gripping it with my hindlegs. I wrenched as hard as I could and was rewarded by the head coming off in my hooves. "So then you say 'Oh, there's a secret passage in the basement. We can get out that way! Only a *few* ghouls!'" She'd worked her arcane sciency magic on the terminal beside the door and managed to override the lockout; neat trick. I'd ask her to teach P-21 if we made it out of here alive! I threw the head as hard as I could into another charging zombie; it broke the creature's run just enough for me to bring both metal hooves down on its head with a pulpy crunch. "This is more than a *few*!"

LittlePip carefully planted three more shots in the zombies coming out of a side tunnel as we moved towards the head subway car. The tunnel was lit by the sickly green radiance of even more glowing ghouls. "Well, you said the more there were, the more fun!" A ghoul scrambled onto her back, its jagged hooves hooked into her reinforced utility barding. Her horn glowed as she lifted the monster into

the air, and there was a crack as the entire creature was squeezed. She threw the crushed remains back down the tunnel behind us.

“LittlePip, I’m *drunk!*” I yelled before biting hard on a length of rebar and swinging the chunk of rubble on the end like a club. The weight knocked back three more of the screaming monsters.

“No, you’re *crazy!*” she yelled back as she looked around. Okay, this was rapidly getting past ‘dozens’ and into ‘fucking ridiculous’ numbers. What, had Tenpony been built right on top of Manehattan ghouls central? “Get in the subway car! Hurry!” Well, it was better than my plan to ‘hit them some more’. Somewhere in the process of planning this adventure, I’d trotted off without barding, gun, or even saddlebags. No, the only pieces of ‘equipment’ I’d brought were bottles of whiskey tied together around my neck like some sort of tribal good luck charm.

It’d seemed funny at the time.

I scrambled in first. One ghoul charged down the aisle at me; I hooked my forelegs into the seats, swung my back legs up, and smashed both rear hooves into its head. Then, of course, I landed flat on my back next to the wiggling corpse. I smashed my legs down on its head repeatedly, looking at LittlePip upside down as the small unicorn hopped in after me. “Okay. Now what?!”

She tossed Little Macintosh at me; I caught it in my forelegs and transferred it to my mouth, sitting up. A ghoul was thrashing its way through the doors at the other end of the car. “No ticket!” I shouted before hopping into S.A.T.S. and planting one of the revolver’s heavy bullets into its skull. ...Actually, what I really said was ‘nung thhhgkts’ with lots of slobber, but it wouldn’t have known the difference anyway.

As I pulled myself to my hooves, the subway car lurched. A glow had spread from LittlePip’s horn to envelop the massive vehicle. The wheels underneath squealed, and there was a metallic bang as something broke underneath the car. With a scream of metal and rust, the subway car broke free of the rest and began to roll down the decayed tracks. Of course, there were still ghouls leaping onto the side of the rolling car, trying to pull themselves through the windows; I raced from one to the next, Little Macintosh blasting their skulls to fragments until the hammer fell on an empty casing.

No problem. Have hooves, will thrash! Ghouls fell beneath the screeching, grinding wheels, and chunks of undead spattered at the pursuing crowd. A few more tried to scramble on; I manually persuaded them to get the hell off.

In a minute, we’d left the undead behind, and I’d finished off anything still wiggling. LittlePip gasped as she looked at me a touch wild-eyed. She levitated the gun from my mouth, wrinkling her nose at my drool. “This is one of the crazier things I think I’ve ever done,” she yelled over the shrieks as we rolled along.

I took a long pull off one of the bottles of whiskey, watching the text in my E.F.S. warning me of the drug toxicity that my system was trying to purge. “Really? I thought it was Tuesday.”

* * *

“So... why is it you couldn’t bring your friends along?” I asked as we made our way through the

subway station. "I mean, Xenith I can understand. She has that whole 'I can kill you with one hoof' vibe going. Calamity seemed okay, though. And Velvet seemed nice... even if she's got that whole bossy momma bear thing going for her."

LittlePip was drinking a healing potion she'd found locked in a medical supply cabinet. The sight of it had floored me. Healing potions as fresh as you please even after two centuries. Sweet Celestia somethin' obscene somethin' (where did LittlePip learn to swear like that?) did Hoofington suck! She sighed as she looked at the empty potion bottle. "It's... complicated. I'm going up against two monsters, and each one wants me to destroy the other. Both have armies and power, and one can even read minds."

"Ouch." I winced, then extended my 'fingers' to carefully pick up a piece of scrap metal. 'Eat', huh? I tried to bite it in half. Nothing. Finally, I stuck the chunk in my mouth and felt a strange warmth. The rusty lump softened to the consistency of taffy... tasted pretty good, too! I smiled as I chewed the lump of metal and swallowed, then caught LittlePip's shocked stare. Okay, maybe it was a little freaky. "What? I'm on a high iron diet." She snorted, and I smiled as I took another drink.

"Well... if I take Calamity along and he gets too close and gets his mind read, then it's game over." She sighed, then floated my offered bottle over and took a drink herself. "Velvet Remedy... well..." A small smile spread on her face. "She's a special kind of girl. She wants to help everypony she can. Even slavers and monsters and... everypony. So if she knew what I was going to do... well... I dunno. She might try and stop me."

"And Xenith?" I asked with a smile. "Same deal as Calamity? Or would she headbutt the beastie?"

She looked a little sad and a little guilty. "Pretty much."

"So, once you get the bomb, what then?"

"Then?" She smiled. "Then I blow Red Eye's citadel to the moon. I think that's the most you should know." She wasn't telling me something, but then, she fought mind-reading things. I imagined great big tentacle brain monsters... ooh, or maybe magical computer things! I chuckled, taking a drink. Considering the shit I'd dealt with, who was I to insist she tell me more? Then she gave me a small, thankful smile. "Thanks for helping me with this, Blackjack."

"Thanks for giving me something to do," I said with a laugh. "Shoot at me, stab me, or fuck me, but whatever you do, don't let me think." She blushed... why was she blushing? Why was she acting all... Gloryish?

"So, next part of the plan?" I asked with a smile as I stood and turned towards the doors leading outside. "We make like the Stable Dweller, you drop a building on them, and I thump anything that keeps wiggling, right?" Then I blinked when she didn't call me an idiot... or laugh. I looked back at her, and... was she staring at my ass? "Uh... LittlePip?" Maybe she really liked my new hardware?

She snapped to and looked at me. Wow... she blushed just like Glory. "Right! Plan. The plan... with the planning things and the... ah... planning... stuff... plan plan plan..."

Was she actually checking me out? Oh Celestia... something something... she had been, and I couldn't help smiling. I could count the number of mares interested in me... well... honestly interested

rather than planning to sell me out... on one hoof. I turned slowly towards her and watched her eyes get big as she gave a crooked little smile. "LittlePip..." I said as I leaned towards her. "I'm sorry..." Her ears fell... "But I'm just not drunk enough to think this is a good time, with the surgery and mission and everything."

Wow... I didn't know a pony could achieve that shade of red! "Oh... I mean I shouldn't... I... Homage... and..." she started to babble. So... I kissed her. I was also quite delighted to discover she was an exceptionally sweet and adorable kisser. And despite just how embarrassed she was, she definitely kissed back. Now she was red and stiff as stone; I imagined breakers blowing in her head. "Celestia's flaming cunt drips..." she murmured, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Have I no fucking self-control?"

"But I *am* drunk enough that one kiss seems okay," I pointed out with a laugh as I walked to the door. "You grew up in the wrong stable, LittlePip. If you were really into mares, you should have been in 99."

She snapped out of it a second later. "Yeah... but... didn't you say it was a horrible, brutal rape factory or something?"

Did I mention that? I'd told her something about what 99 was like. My brain was a mite fuzzy, but the alcohol was definitely lubricating the whole walking... thing. "Well yeah... it was. But for a mare that really likes other mares... well..." I looked right at her with a wide smile that I think set her blush in stone. "I think you would have fit in just fine. I'd love to have had you in my stable." Then I took a deep breath. "Anyway... don't you have a leader to sweet talk?"

She stared at me, then shook her head hard. "Right... right! Right... with the talky... sneaky... plan... thing." She thumped her temples lightly. "Next time you wanna mess with me, could you... I dunno... just shoot me?"

"Kissing you was funner." Oh my, there she went again! Didn't anypony ever hit on this mare? Sure, she wasn't insanely gorgeous, but she was outrageously cute. "Okay. So... we got to trot up close enough to speak to somepony in charge without getting shot at."

"Yeah. And the camp's huge. I dunno if I have a StealthBuck that'll last that long."

"So... plan B."

She blinked and looked at me warily. "I'm not sure I want to know."

* * *

"Last time I did this, my friend shot me. A lot," LittlePip said as she tied on the red sash of one of Red Eye's enforcers.

"Last time I did this, I had to eat my friend's heart," I said as I made sure my nice artificial legs were good and covered up before slipping on a pair of battered sunglasses.

She looked at me a moment and finally asked the million bottle cap question: "Blackjack, how in Luna's frosty bits are you sane?"

I looked back at her. That was a fair question. "Maybe I'm not. I do what I can to help and I do what I have to do to win." I looked at her in surprise. "Don't you?"

She dropped her gaze. "Some things you shouldn't do..."

"Well, yeah. I mean, you gotta make sure winning's worth it," I said as I turned towards her. "And sometimes you screw up big time in the process... but nothing's worse than losing because you sat on your hooves when you could have acted." I rolled my eyes and looked at the knocked-out guards we'd gotten the uniforms from.

"Would you break a promise to a friend?" she asked, not meeting my eyes.

"Look, I'll explain to Homage about the kiss..." I said with a sigh and a smile.

She flushed again, then shook her head. "I don't mean that." She adjusted her helmet so it covered her horn. "It... I mean..." She stomped her hooves once... "Damn it, why is this so hard?" I sat as she struggled. "I feel like... like I can't trust myself." She closed her eyes. "I had a problem with a drug a while back. Party Time Mint-als. Brain enhancers."

"Right. Rampage chews them all the time. Mellows her out," I said with a confused smile. Actually, I had no idea if she ate party time or not; it'd never occurred to me that they might come in different varieties.

"Exactly. They make ponies more agreeable. Nicer. Charismatic," she said. "They're also extremely addictive... It was a big, big problem for me."

"Sounds useful. Got some?" I asked. She closed her eyes and pressed her lips together as her magic pulled out a tin from her bags... wow... she must have known precisely where they were. "So... I'm guessing you promised to never ever ever take them again? No matter what?"

"Yeah. Something like that," she replied. "So right now, I've got a little pony in my head telling me to take them locked in mortal combat with another little pony in my head telling me to keep my promise and find another way."

"Right." I took a deep, contemplative drink from the bottle. "Let me ask you this... your friend you promised this to... would they want you to die to keep your promise?"

LittlePip sighed and looked towards Tenpony before saying, "No."

"And if we botch this up, are we going to die?"

"You're helping the wrong pony cheat," she muttered. "You're supposed to be helping me keep my promise. That's the right thing to do." The little unicorn sighed. "I just... I don't want it to be my addiction making me take these. I don't want to fuck up and fail my friends again."

"Shows you deserve your friends," I said with a smile. I took another drink, then sighed. "It's easier to get forgiveness if you don't die. So. How about this? You take them till we're out of here, hand them over when we go, and then spend all day tomorrow apologizing and blaming me for being a horrible influence on you."

"Velvet's going to kill me," she said as she lifted out one minty pink square decorated with little

balloons and streamers. She popped it into her mouth, chewed, swallowed... and relaxed. Then she opened her eyes, and suddenly I felt like the one about to be kissed as she adopted a coy, cute little smile. "Well... worry about that later. Now... how to get inside to speak to Red Eye..." She looked at me and tapped her lips. "That should be easy enough..."

* * *

The headquarters for this army consisted of three or four old canvas tents strung together and reinforced with sheet metal. If the large broadcast antenna raised on a pile of rubble behind it was any indication, it would be a good place to contact Red Eye if whoever was in charge locally wouldn't give LittlePip what she wanted. Of course, before we could even find out the answer to that, we'd have to think of some way to get past the power-armor-clad griffin guards.

"I take the one on the left, you take the one on the right?" I suggested.

"How about we just go in to report a disturbance in the Tenpony subway tunnels?" she replied with a cocky little smile.

"But... they're in power armor. And I haven't beaten a griffin in power armor yet." I wondered if you could fly them as easily as Enclave pegasi. We hid among some nearby supply crates, watching the comings and goings of the headquarters.

"You can do that later," she said as we watched two ponies approach. The griffin said, "Flange." The two ponies replied, "Gear." A minute later, another pair approached. "Strut," they challenged. "Truss" replied the ponies, and they were admitted. LittlePip seemed to be nodding to herself.

"Yes... that's it exactly!" the small unicorn said excitedly.

"What. What's it?" I blinked, but she immediately left the cover and walked casually towards the two armored griffins, leaving me scrambling to catch up.

"Bolt," one challenged at our approach.

"Crank," LittlePip drawled in a bored tone.

The pair looked at us, then at each other. "I don't know you," one challenged LittlePip.

"And why are you wearing sunglasses?" the other growled at me. "It's the middle of the night."

I paused, then grinned. "I'm just that cool."

"Wanna bet?" He reached out a claw and flicked the black plastic off my face, then suddenly he stiffened as he saw my cybereyes glowing like two red stars. "You... what..."

"We've got a special report to make. You are wasting our time and delaying our inevitable, glorious future," LittlePip said imperiously as she tapped her hoof with the perfect stomp for indicating irritation rather than annoyance. The pair looked visibly shaken as they carefully handed back the battered sunglasses and waved us through.

"You should have been an actress," I murmured. "Are my eyes really that freaky?"

"No. But Red Eye has that kind of effect on his followers."

The pair that had entered before us were trotting back out again. We followed the sounds of speakers and equipment into a small room with a desk and shelves of papers. Two tired-looking middle-aged mares sat at desks with piles of papers around them. The larger room the communications office opened off of was filled with maps of Manehattan and other cities around the Wasteland. A bunch of symbols had been drawn on them; in particular, the locations of the freaky MASEBS towers were all outlined in red.

It sure didn't look like Red Eye thought in small terms. "Your report?" a lime green mare asked us as her eyes went from one of us to the other. Then they went really round as Little Macintosh came out. She opened her mouth to yell, but LittlePip's magical glow forced her mouth shut. I leapt on the other and got her in a headlock, effectively wrestling her to the ground. My fingers popped out and I held her mouth shut as well.

"Now what do we do with them?" she asked with a small frown as she looked at the pony with earphones on sitting obliviously at the radio with his back to us.

"Got any Wonderglue?" I asked with a small smile. She smiled back.

The two mares with their hooves glued together and their lips duct taped shut just glared at me as LittlePip talked to the radio operator with the pistol pointed at his head. I really hoped his loyalty to the cause didn't make him realize a gunshot would get us killed pretty quick. A few minutes later, he got to join the glue party as LittlePip put on the headphones. "Keep an eye out," she said as she closed the big canvas flap between the rooms and started talking in a low voice. I looked at the three incapacitated ponies heaped in the corner.

Okay. So... waiting in the middle of an enemy camp. Smart thing to do would be to wait attentively for somepony to approach and intercept them with a story or plan... delay them outside the reports room. But I had to admit that those were some awfully pretty maps. I looked at the one marked 'Hoofington'. There was the Core. The little districts surrounding it. The Collegiate. Rainbow Dash Skyport. Megamart. Elysium. Arena. Ironmare Naval Base. Grimhoof Army Base, way off to the southeast... that was new. Luna Space Center was next to it. Scrapyard. All four broadcast towers...

Hippocratic Research.

There wasn't anything printed on the map, but there was a bright red circle exactly where my PipBuck said it would be located. I reared up on my hind legs, marveling at how they kept me upright like some kind of freaky zebra. They let me get a good look at the top of the map, though. A green line had been drawn from the circle under the Core out to the rail lines that led straight to Fillydelphia. In contrast, Paradise was simply a yellow sticker.

"Why the hell would Red Eye be working with Sanguine?" I glanced at the leg containing my PipBuck. Brass had said that somepony was holding Sanguine's hooves to the fire. Somepony like Red Eye?

Oh, my mane was inventing all-new creepy sensations now! I thought of Red Eye getting his hooves on EC-1101. If he was a cyberpony, what were the odds he could get it to work for him for his own nasty ends? I'd been so fixated on the Projects; maybe the real threat was something very here and

very now.

"Excuse me?" a voice said from the door. A pair of runners stared at me and then at the three prone ponies.

I extended my fingers and slowly pulled the glasses from my face. I stared long and hard down at the two bucks and said, as low and cold as I could manage, "Yes?"

"Ah... ah..." one stammered as he stared up at me. Slowly I walked, step after step on my hindlegs, towards the pair.

"Are you going to trouble me too?" I growled as I looked down at two bucks bigger, stronger, and more heavily armed than I. One reached into his saddlebag and handed over a folded stack of papers. I took them in my freaky metallic fingers. "Thank you," I said in as deep a tone as I could manage. I was somewhat shocked to feel... well... anything. Somehow, the legs conveyed tactile sensation.

Nodding, they staggered back and trotted for the exit as quickly as they could without running. "Was that thing... drunk?" one asked the other.

I rushed to the flap and made a 'hurry up' gesture with my hoof. She waved me away and then said, "Give it to me and you get what you want... and I get what I want." Then she added, "Of course, you don't trust me." And... "I've seen her. You've seen her. Can you think of another way?"

"Excuse me," a female said behind me. I slowly started to turn as dramatically as I could. Then I saw the red feathers, the tawny flanks, and the wide eyes of a griffin I'd seen a few days back. A griffin who I'd left glued to the side of a boxcar outside Scrapyard. We stared at each other for a moment. "You!" Scarlet shouted, pointing a claw at me. I supposed you'd remember a mare that cemented you to a wall. "Alarm!" she screamed at the top of her lungs.

Well... time for plan D. I raced and tackled her, and we went flying into the canvas wall behind her so hard that it split. We were rolling, screaming, clawing, and squawking as she scratched at my limbs and I pummeled and kicked like mad. The chaos was spreading by the second as we snapped one of the poles holding a section of the tent. There was more shouting and scuffling, but thankfully no gunshots yet.

Then we were out in front of the tent and I finally had Scarlet in a headlock. "Okay... no alarms from..." Slowly, I looked up at the dozens of very armed ponies and griffins surrounding the pair of us. Wow... that's a lot of guns!

"HOLD!" boomed a voice that made everypony, including me, jump to their hooves.

Oh... wow. I'd thought, having seen Lacunae, that I understood just what an alicorn was like. Big. Wings. Horn. Pretty standard stuff, really... right?

Wrong.

Fifteen alicorns, purple, blue, and green, hovered around us like a judgment host. They were surrounded in shimmering shields and looked fit to blast me into chunks. Only one thing saved me. The leader of the host pointed her blue hoof at me and boomed in shock, "YOU?! WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?! YOU SHOULD NOT BE HERE! THE GODDESS DEMANDS TO KNOW WHAT YOU ARE

DOING HERE!"

I pulled off what shreds remained of my disguise and tossed them away. Then I pulled out one of the last bottles of Wild Pegasus and tugged it free, holding it in my fingers. If I was going to have to deal with Goddess yelling, I needed more alcohol. The alicorns were so stunned that I was able to take a good long pull off the bottle. "Well. Had to get fixed up... new legs... eyes... that sort of--"

She jerked me into the air before her with her magic. "THE GODDESS DEMANDS TO KNOW! ARE YOU WORKING WITH RED EYE NOW?!"

"Why, is he recruiting?" I asked, seeing the apprehension in her eyes. I reached up and tapped my horn. "Find out for yourself," I said. Honestly, I had no idea if it would really work while my horn wouldn't do anything... but then the probably-compensating-for-some-inherent-shortcoming-sized horn touched mine and I immediately felt that sensation of rummaging in my brain. I thought of what LittlePip had said; hopefully after blasting Red Eye to dust, she could do something about the Goddess.

"GOOD! NOW WE MAY DISPOSE OF YOUR MEDDLING--"

"Red Eye knows about Sanguine," I thought at her, and she froze. "Which means he might know about Project Chimera."

For several seconds I just hung there as she dug through my head. I finally finished drinking the last drop, really wishing I had some more. Whiskey whiskey whiskey whiskey...

"SHUT UP! WHY MUST THE GODDESS SUFFER YOUR MINDLESS WITLESS PRATTLE? WHY AREN'T YOU DEAD YET? WHY CAN'T WE JUST KILL YOU?! WHY?"

Hey, don't look at me. I'd tried to die more than once. "Aww... I thought it was 'cause you liked me," I thought at her and belched. "You wanna prance around my head some more or talk turkey? You want alicorns with cocks. I imagine it'd do you wonders if you got laid. I really want to smash Sanguine into ghouley goo. All of us want Red Eye gone. And I owe you for 99." I smiled as I dangled in front of her. "Or you can just kill me and wonder just what Red Eye is up to... your choice."

Then LittlePip was escorted out of the tent by a buck in a big fancy hat that I supposed put him in charge. The effect was immediate. "NOOOOO! THESE TWO MAY NOT BE TOGETHER! THE GODDESS FORBIDS IT!" She waved me in the air like a rag doll.

"Shut up!" I bellowed up at her. "She's doing what she's doing and I'm doing what I'm doing and... ugh..." A red warning in my vision flashed 'purge' at me.

And then in front of everypony I lost my whiskey. The blue alicorn dropped me to the ground in disgust.

The buck in the fancy hat rubbed his face. "Why can't we just shoot them all... why?" He pointed his hoof back at Tenpony. "Just... go! Go!"

I rose to my hooves. "Oh no. You're not just going to throw us out! Forget it! We're staying put unless we get a proper send-off!" Everypony stared at me in shock and confusion.

"WHAT... WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

I looked at the wing of alicorns and grinned.

* * *

There are... in reflection... many ways to travel the Wasteland. By hoof is most common. Occasionally in vehicles. Sometimes on wings, if you had them. The Goddess had told Lacunae to warn the others of our return, and so they stood on the roof of Tenpony Tower as dawn broke. For a brief moment, the sun peeked through the gap between the distant clouds and the horizon, illuminating us in gold as fifteen alicorns flew in formation around the tower, carrying LittlePip and myself back to our friends. From my PipBuck played the most sweeping and dramatic music of Octavia's concert I could find as inebriation helped me overlook the very splatty distance below.

Maybe the crown of whiskey bottles was a bit much...

The two carrying LittlePip and I set us down next to LittlePip's skywagon thingy, every jaw dropping as I turned and lifted a hoof to the beasts. "Thank you, noble alicorn, for our safe arrival!"

"GO. AWAY," the blue alicorn said in disgust, and as one the group flew away from the tower. Was it just me, or was Lacunae trying very hard not to grin?

LittlePip looked horrible... I felt pretty horrible too. I was pretty sure I was really pushing things with the amount I'd drunk in the last few hours. As my friends trotted across the landing pad towards us, LittlePip pulled out the tin of Mint-als. I grabbed it; Rover was right, fingers were useful. "Now you keep your promise..."

She looked at me with desperate eyes, and I flung the tin away before she could take another. Her whole body jerked after the tin, but I held her back and she finally slumped against me. "I... I need Helpinghoof... please..."

"Who's that?" P-21 asked.

"Blackjack! Are you... what's... what did you do last night?!" Glory stammered.

"And why didn't you take me along?" Rampage added.

"Did you really drink *all* of that?!" Scotch pointed at the crown.

"What?" I said as I swayed. So many flashy warnings on my screen... so many *many* flashy warnings... "I was just celebrating my birthday... urp..." And then everything went swirly and fell away to black. What a life... but it was mine...

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

New perk added: Adamantium Bone Lacing: Your bones are now 50% more resistant to breaking. This perk does not stack with Bone Strengthening Brew.

Quest perk added: Cyberpony: +1 Agil, +10% radiation resistance, +10% poison resistance, +10% damage resistance.

(Author's notes: This chapter was very difficult to write. I wanted BJ to meet LittlePip since I started

Project Horizons. I know... I know some people will hate it or think it's contrived, and it is and I'm sorry and... just... sorry... The only time that was possible was in the gaps in LittlePip's memory. There were several ideas I had that just got cut out. Others were very OOC. I've struggled to keep LittlePip as much in character as possible. More than 20p were removed or edited. I hope that, after putting all of you through Black, you found Birthday an enjoyable ride.)

(In addition to thanking Kkat, Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster I would also like to thank Doubleclick for helping me with LittlePip's dialogue and Hobo for cyberpony issues. You are all incredible and thank you for making Horizons the best story possible.)

(Finally, if you liked the story and wish to assist the author donations can be made to David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal. Every bit is appreciated and needed. Thank you!)