

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 35: Learning

“And I saw the most amazing, most wonderful thing I’ve ever seen. I poured myself into learning everything I could about magic.”

I’d died. I’d come back. Now, I suspected that that had been my big mistake. I lay in bed feeling like my brain had been squeezed into a jar two sizes too small. My vision, whether my eyes were open or closed, was filled with glaring flashes warning of toxicity levels, interface conflicts... and I could have sworn that there was an actual ‘user idiocy’ warning going off. My mechanical limbs twitched as I sprawled on my side. All I had to do was crawl out... but my metal legs just twitched and jerked again as I went nowhere.

I could just lie here... yes... lie here in this nice soft bed and wait for sweet oblivion to claim--

“Hey, Blackjack!” Scotch yelled in the perfect filly pitch to make it feel like an icepick had been shoved in my ear canal. I tried to say something about loudness, volume, or killing noisy fillies. I’m fairly certain that all of that went right over the olive filly’s head, though, as she screeched, “Glory told me to come in and ask you about hangovers! She said you probably had a doozy of one, so I should talk really loudly!”

“Nggggghhh!” was all I could reply as I flopped around and finally managed to bury my head under the pillows.

“So, Blackjack, are you hungover? Do you need me to talk louder? Hey, Blackjack! Can you hear me now? Blackjack!” she shrieked as she shook me hard, making my stomach-thing lurch and my bladder (*did I still have that?*) clench. Urr... I didn’t need to be dealing with this and a hangover at the same time... “Blackjack! Blackjack! Did you really fly around on a wing of alicorns? Did they crown you? Why were there security ponies asking for you? Oh! And this one black unicorn wanted me to say you were a horrible influence. That was mean, but she gave me a whole bag of candy to tell you really loud, and Glory thought it was a good idea too and she gave me three Sparkle-Colas and Blackjack! Can you hear me, Blackjack?”

I could kill them. I could kill them all. No court in the Wasteland would convict me...

* * *

A trip to the bathroom and a shower later, I was in a far less murderous mood. The real fun was trying to mentally bash and thrash my legs into moving. I distinctly remembered walking and trotting around without a problem! Okay, the memory *was* a bit fuzzy, but still, I’d been walking better drunk than I was sober! Fortunately, Scotch enthusiastically herded me, preventing me from actually falling on my face again.

Once I’d gotten myself clean and flushed out, the alarms died to a few sullen yellow warnings that seemed to be there mostly to remind me not to do anything like last night ever again. I needed food... power... metal... Med-X or *something* to make my head stop feeling so... ugh... and somepony who could fill me in on what exactly had happened last night... morning... conscious time! A little chronometer in the

corner of my eye told me that it was now early afternoon. Hopefully, I'd be able to get my body and brain and everything... and coming out of the bedroom, I tripped on my own feet and tumbled down in a heap.

"Ughhh... walking shouldn't be so hard..." I groaned, face down on the concrete tiles. Hadn't I been kicking ass a short while ago? I was fairly sure I had. Somehow...

"Maybe some more Wild Pegasus?" a mare said in a strange electronic voice. I blinked and looked over at the small collection in the living room. Lacunae was lying on the floor next to Glory on the couch. The gray pegasus was so... neat. So clean and tidy that I had to double check. Next to her, Scotch sat eating one of my birthday cupcakes with a crown of whiskey bottles atop her head. She grinned sheepishly at me. On the coffee table was a large metal drum with a camera on top and a speaker set in the base. There was some sort of generator next to it, along with some strange medical-looking equipment that beeped softly. Sitting on the opposite couch were Homage and a strange buck with a crimson and scarlet mane. P-21 trotted up to help me to my feet. I had to admit, he cleaned up pretty good too.

"I think she's had enough Wild P for one lifetime," Glory said with a somewhat stern smile that told me I was in a bit of trouble. Not that I blamed her, given the condition I'd been in last night.

"Did you really drink all six bottles in four hours? I'm pretty sure that would have killed anypony else," the odd buck said. "When Homage told me that you and LittlePip were being flown here by five wings of alicorns, I had to wonder if she'd been drinking too."

The gray unicorn chuckled and shook her head, then gestured to her companion. "Blackjack? Life Bloom. Life Bloom? This is Blackjack. Also known as 'Security' around Hoofington." Her blue eyes focused on me as she said evenly, "Life Bloom here is representing the Twilight Society and wants to speak with you about Professor Zodiac's theories regarding your lineage."

"Oh... yeah. That." I trotted towards the assembly, P-21 more than once keeping me from falling flat on my face... again. "Look, I know she thinks I'm special... but I'm not. Okay? I don't know why I can open up the cases, but I'm not related to any Ministry Mare, and I'm certainly not related to Twilight Sparkle!"

Life Bloom smiled politely. "Why are you so sure you're not? There's much we don't know about the Ministry Mares. The Ministry of Image did an exceptional job obfuscating and hiding the truth. Applejack was the only mare who was ever publicly confirmed to be in a relationship, but it's unlikely that she really was the only one."

Homage gave me a gentle smile. "It's possible that your relationship is only tangential. You could have some Apple blood in you. That would explain the cases." She folded her hooves before her.

"It wouldn't explain Project Steelpony being unsealed perfectly," buzzed the speaker on the can. "While I agree that being Applejack's cousin might be enough to open a security case, it would not work for EC-1101. The fact that she's capable of interfacing with that program tells me that there's more to Blackjack than meets the eye."

"There isn't. Really. I'm not," I said firmly, shaking my head. I sat down beside the coffee table, and Glory pushed me a bottle of clean water. It might not be whiskey, but it was certainly welcome. "I'm just... me. A security mare from a stable. I'm not special." I looked from one to the next and felt a stab of

irritation at the speculative gazes. "Look, why does all this matter? Why do you want to know so much?"

"Quite honestly, many in my organization don't want to know," Life Bloom said calmly. "You must understand that, for two hundred years, the Twilight Society has been responsible for Tenpony Tower and the secrets of the M.A.S. hub. Many of my order believe this building to be the last remaining bastion of old Equestria. As such, they take anything to do with the M.A.S. and its Ministry Mare very seriously."

"So what does it mean to the Twilight Society if Blackjack is related to Twilight?" P-21 asked pointedly as he looked at Homage and Life Bloom.

"We're not sure. There's a great deal of disagreement in the Society about that," Life Bloom admitted, drawing a surprised look from Homage. "Some believe that, even if Blackjack is related, she has no right or connection to the Society. And on the other end of the spectrum... there are those saying that, if she is... then she is the legitimate head of the Twilight Society." He looked at me slightly apologetically. "Most don't know what to think and/or are reserving judgment until we can verify if you are or aren't."

I jumped to my hooves. "Now wait a second! You're not turning me into your new Ministry Mare!" Wait, how'd I move like that? I wobbled and fell against the arm of the couch. Lacunae's horn glowed and she steadied me.

"Would it really be so bad?" Glory asked softly as she put her hoof out to touch my shoulder.

I closed my eyes as I tried to think of a way to make her understand. "Glory... she was Twilight Sparkle. She was the Element of Magic! She was responsible for an entire ministry and programs and... and everything! I'm Blackjack. I think I'm the biggest screwup in the history of Equestria! I can't even do magic, period!" I said as I pointed at my dead horn.

"Neither could Twilight Sparkle," Life Bloom said evenly.

Excuse me? All eyes were on the red-and-red-maned unicorn as he smiled. "Twilight Sparkle didn't pop from the womb using super-powered magic. In fact, not many people knew it, but she was so bad at magic that she flunked out of magic kindergarten. I understand that there were quite a few magical mistakes made when she was young. She likely would have never gotten into magic at all were it not for her witnessing Celestia raising the sun. After that, she worked hard to learn all the spells she could. Even then, when she applied to Celestia's School for Gifted Unicorns, she was by all accounts quite mediocre. It wasn't until the first sonic rainboom incident that her magical potential showed itself. Only then did she receive Celestia's personal attention and tutelage. Even then, though, her magic was the product of a lifetime of hard work more than of her admittedly great natural talent."

"But... I mean... I can't even do the simplest spell. All I can do is shoot things with my horn." Make that *could*, Blackjack.

"Yes, but did you have Princess Celestia as your teacher?" Life Bloom asked. To be fair, Textbook had been about as interested in me learning as in watching paint dry. Even Mom's endless attempts to remediate me were more embarrassing than instructive. "Twilight Sparkle received the instruction and attention she needed to excel. From Glory's description, it's doubtful Twilight would have learned any magic at all were she forced into your circumstances. And before you ask, neither Twilight's mother nor father were exceptional magic users."

For some reason, his assurances were making me feel more and more panicked. I wasn't Twilight's descendant! I couldn't be. I was nopony. A screwup! If I were related to Twilight, then... then I'd be responsible for fixing the entire Wasteland! I'd have to use EC-1101 to do... something! I couldn't even fix Hoofington yet. Of course, my stupid body felt all calm and still... I needed to get some kind of heartbeat simulator installed.

Homage looked at me with a sympathetic smile. "Why don't we just get it over with, Life Bloom? The door test?"

"Door test?" P-21 asked with a small frown.

"There's a door in the tower enchanted to only open for Twilight, though we think that a direct descendant could also do it," Homage said calmly. "So, all Blackjack has to do is try to open the door."

"Right," I croaked. "Let's get this over with."

"Are you sure you don't want to eat something first?" Glory asked as she looked up at me in worry. "You look even paler than a white pony should." I shook my head firmly. With the way my guts churned, I was certain that I was going to puke if I actually had something in my... wait... those were guts, right? Ugh, I wasn't sure if I needed an owner's manual or an anatomy lesson! In either case, no. Food was not a good idea just now.

"I look forward to hearing all about it when you get back," the professor said as the camera turned to face me. "Remember, whatever is inside was Twilight's. That means that, if you can get to it, it's yours, Blackjack. Don't let them take it." Life Bloom merely smiled and said nothing.

We trotted out like an execution procession, leaving Lacunae with the professor. I looked around and asked dully, "Where's Rampage?"

"Your friend Rampage is in security till you leave. Somepony pointed out that, since she's a Reaper... technically, she's a raider. Normally that would be a death sentence, but... well..." Life Bloom coughed.

"Yeah, good luck with that," I said as we stepped into the gilt-decorated elevator.

"Are you sure you're okay with this, Blackjack?" Homage asked quietly beside me.

I sighed. "No, I'm really not. I just came back from the dead. My body... half the time it works flawlessly, and the other half I'm falling on my face. But the Twilight Society helped bring me back... they could have told Glory and the professor to piss off. Then I'd be a *tainted* cyberpony."

"Being related to Twilight won't change who you are, Blackjack," the blue-maned mare murmured as the car came to a stop and we set off down another corridor.

I slowed my pace, letting the others go ahead. Then I looked at her. "Won't it? You heard the professor and Life Bloom. If ponies find out that I'm Twilight's... I don't know... heir or descendant or something... what is that going to mean? I can barely handle being Blackjack, security mare, reject of Stable 99."

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to think that, if I opened that door, things would still be fine. Hey, maybe it would make things easier. Except that my life was never easier. "You're not a reject or a

failure, Blackjack. I've seen what you've done."

"Really? Did you see Fallen Arch? Did you see Clover's head explode? Or Glory's wing fall off? Did you kill only Goddesses know how many Rangers to sink a ship? Did you see that?" I asked sharply, my irritation from the morning returning... which made me kick myself even harder. She was trying to help me, and I sighed, lowering my eyes. "I know you told me I did good things, but it all feels like a lie. It feels wrong... like I'm winning some sort of prize I didn't earn." The others had realized I'd stopped and were starting to look back. "I really don't want to do this... but I have to... so let's get it over with." I wanted a drink. A whole bunch of drinks, right now.

Everypony was gathered before two large doors. They were of sturdy light wood and beset with amethysts. I felt nausea welling up from an organ that didn't exist anymore. The gems glowed a faint purple. There were other ponies here, watching with grim expressions. I didn't want introductions. I just wanted this over with. I looked at the doorhandles and sighed.

"So... anypony laying odds?" I asked, swallowing hard.

"It's going to be all right," Glory assured me.

"Please get on with it," drawled one buck, clearly not anticipating anything important happening. I wanted to capture his complete skepticism... but my mind kept going back to that horrible room with that sobbing mare, and the surrogacy spell... I thought back to Twilight saying farewell to Big Macintosh.

"Please... please please please let it be somepony else," I prayed aloud as I walked to the doors. I closed my eyes, suddenly glad I couldn't hyperventilate. Slowly, I reached out with a hoof, the limb jerking around a little before I was finally able to rest it on the latch, feeling the oddly warm metal underhoof. I didn't even have magic to open it with...

My hoof pressed down on the latch, and...

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

I stared, and then jiggled it with my hoof. My jaw just hung open as I tapped the metal hoof against the door latch. Nothing.

"Probably related to Rarity," one of the mares drawled as she turned away.

"What a drama queen..." agreed another as they trotted off.

"Well. I suppose that is that," Life Bloom said with a sigh. I couldn't look away as I tapped the door latch one last time. Still didn't budge. Homage looked at me in concern. For a moment there, I'd been... I'd been absolutely sure!

"Huh... I guess..." I gave a little half smile as I looked back at everypony. "I guess I got all worked up for nothing, huh?" It was like stepping out from beneath an immense weight... and yet... I looked back at the doors. If I was so relieved... why was I feeling so... so disappointed?

"Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern as she walked up next to me and hugged me with her wing. I closed my eyes, relief mixing with the bittersweet sense of failure. I couldn't tell which was stronger. I

should be happy... right?

"I'm good, Glory," I said and smiled as I settled on relief. "I'm just surprised. I mean, I know the odds were against it, but I think that, at the end there, I really was convinced it was true. Heh... such an idiot." I made my synthetic lungs draw a deep breath, despite the little green O2 readout at the bottom of my vision, and looked at the others. "So I guess I'm probably a cousin or something twice removed?"

"I suppose. We may never truly understand the circumstances of your lineage," Life Bloom said, shrugging. "Regardless, now that that's out of the way, would you care to see the rest of Tenpony Tower?" I laughed and nodded, feeling much better now that that nightmare was over. Scotch trotted on my other side while Homage and P-21 came up behind, talking softly.

I had to admit, seeing the agricultural chambers designed to grow contamination-free food was somewhat impressive, even if their output didn't come close to supporting even the population of the tower. Glory laughed in delight at the sight of the alicorn fountain in the library atrium, and Scotch burst with dozens of questions when she saw the DJ's broadcast room. Homage made her apologies for the DJ being out at that moment. Then we reached the... I couldn't even begin to pronounce what the gray unicorn called it, but it was pretty obviously a library. I couldn't imagine anypony being physically able to read all these books in one lifetime. Maybe P-21 or Glory. Me, I doubt I'd read more than ten books in my entire life.

Just another reason why the idea of me being related to Twilight was such an insult to the former Ministry Mare.

"Something on your mind?" Homage asked me quietly, making me jump a little.

"Oh... nothing. I never have anything on my mind. I'm not a smart pony, after all," I said with a grin. "I think you could sum it up as 'booze, guns, and flanks.'" Oddly, she didn't appreciate my joke. She looked sad, and even a little bit angry.

"Why do you always lie to yourself?" she asked me in a low voice. "You say you're stupid, but you've been exposing secrets and conspiracies from two centuries ago. You say you're a failure when you've helped countless ponies and stopped a war. You say you have no magic, but look at what you can accomplish."

"It's not lying, Homage. It's being honest," I replied, and for some reason that comment seemed to shock her more than anything. "Lying would be saying I'm awesome and ignoring the fact that I've gotten ponies killed. That I've murdered... so many... who didn't deserve it. If there were a guidebook for messing up, I'd be the author. And no matter how much I try to tell myself I've paid the price and I'm even, the honest truth is that I'll always be a murderer. The second I forget that or it doesn't matter... that's when I'll be a monster." I looked at her with a half smile. "The truth... no matter how bad it hurts, right?"

I looked at all the books. "That's why I'm so glad I'm not related to Twilight. It was stupid of me to get worked up in the first place. There's no way somepony like her could be related to a pony as messed up as me."

"It's not like she would be your mother, Blackjack. There would be something like ten generations between you and her," Homage said quietly. I turned away; she didn't understand. But the gray unicorn jumped back into my path. "You know what I think? I think that the reason you're so glad Twilight's not a

part of you is that it would disrupt this perfect little horrible picture you have of yourself. You're a good pony, Blackjack. You've helped so many. You helped LittlePip! She's so boneheadedly determined to do everything on her own that it's a miracle for anypony to be able to tell her to hush up and accept aid."

I blinked as I looked down at my hooves. She didn't understand... just like I didn't understand what P-21 had been through. I didn't know what to say, and finally she sighed and then hugged me tightly with her hooves. "Someday, you will know the truth. Someday, you'll know what it's like to live without hating yourself."

It was a nice sentiment, but she didn't understand. Some ponies deserved to be hated. Like Goldenblood. Like Sanguine. Like Deus.

Like me.

She sighed as she let me go, then narrowed her eyes at me. "Now... what's this I heard about you kissing my marefriend?"

I blinked. "You're... you mean you and LittlePip are...?" Wait! That *actually* happened? I jumped back. "... she... I mean she was... you know... she was looking and I was... you know... and she... we... I..." I waved my hooves before me. "I'd never... had I know... I mean she's cute... and all... but... ah..."

Homage arched a brow coolly, then smiled. "We are and she did and she is. And I'm pretty sure I'll be able to use that kiss for some fun tonight." Then she looked over at Glory as she trotted towards us. "I'm just wondering if she knows about you kissing on my LittlePip?" Glory's purple eyes suddenly turned cold as she looked at me.

Oh shit... "I... merp... jah shek...you... gah..." I struggled as the pair of mares just stared at me.

Then Glory looked at Homage. "There's only one thing to do, isn't there?"

Homage nodded gravely. "There is." This was it. I was gonna die.

Glory and Homage stepped closer... their eyes locked on me... and then both smiled in immense satisfaction and lightly smooched each other on the lips. At which point something in my brain burst and I fell over in a heap, twitching. The pair laughed as they trotted away, talking about evening plans and how silly LittlePip and I were.

Life Bloom trotted up. "She certainly is quite the odd mare, isn't she?"

"Something like that," I said with a sigh, shaking my head. Evil was more my thinking... both of them.

"I love this room," he said with a smile, looking at all the books with a soft gaze. Then he blinked, "Oh! That reminds me. I think I left a book on the desk in the office over there. Could you get it for me, please?" I looked at his perfectly capable legs, and he added, "It might also give you a chance to lose that flaming red expression on your cheeks." Ahh. Yes. It would, wouldn't it?

I walked towards the door he'd indicated, set off in the back corner of the aet...er... big library room thingy! What was it with smart ponies and ridiculous sounding words? Like everything else in the room, it was decorated with a golden unicorn with an amethyst eye. There was a tiny spark, and a little

pink pony in my head gave a little 'ooh'. I glanced back, but Life Bloom was talking with P-21 and Glory was still chatting evilness with Homage. Them kissing each other like that... evil...

I stepped into the study, feeling my cheeks burn. I wasn't exactly in a rush to get back outside, so I looked around a bit. Surprise, surprise... there were even more bookshelves in here, along with several books sitting on the desk (I probably should have asked *which* book Life Bloom wanted, but... eh, I could do that later) and, oddly enough, a great number of scrolls. They were stored along one wall in a rack like bottles of wine. I levi... fuck... I looked at them like an idiot before I remembered that my horn didn't work and instead pointed my hoof at it. "Fingers... on. Thumbs... function? Freaky digit powers activate!" Finally, I sighed and bit the end of one scroll; it easily opened. I wondered if it was on magic paper or something. Slowly, I unrolled it and looked at the elegant script.

My dearest, most faithful student, Twilight,

You know that I value your diligence and that I trust you completely, but you simply must stop reading those dusty old books! My dear Twilight, there is more to a young pony's life than studying, so I am sending you to supervise the preparations for the Summer Sun Celebration in this year's location, Ponyville. And I have an even more essential task for you to complete: make some friends!

Your devoted teacher,

Princess Celestia

I stared at the letter in astonishment, then flushed and wiped away the slobber I'd gotten all over the end of the scroll. I was a little relieved to see that none of it seemed to stick to the surface. Magic paper indeed. This was a royal letter and a historical document! I carefully rolled it back up with my hooves and returned it to its cubby, selecting another scroll. This time, my fingers folded out to nudge it into my hooves.

My dearest, most faithful student, Twilight,

I know that there are no words I can adequately express for the loss of your friend, Big Macintosh. I realize that, in times such as this, words cannot convey any cure for the pain we feel when one of our own dies. I am sorry that he died to protect me from that assassin's bullet and curse myself that there is no way to undo what has happened. All ponies pass, and I know that one day you will be reunited with him. I am here at the school if you should ever need me.

Your devoted teacher,

Princess Celestia

I sighed, rolling the scroll up and returning it to the rest. I couldn't discern any order or other method of filing; Twilight had probably had each one memorized. I pulled out one more. The dark silver ink and the look of the writing had a slightly cold tone.

My dearest, most faithful subject, Twilight,

We wish to express our profound dismay at the lack of progress towards the war effort. Have we not provided you with every resource of the kingdom to your ministry? Do you not have at your disposal the most brilliant magical minds of our time? Yet when we ask what is being done to counter the

development of zebra balefire weaponry, we do not hear of our own weapons being devised but instead talks of ethics and discussions about if it is right to weaponize megaspells. You can be certain our enemies waste no time with such nonsense. We are sure your purification matrices and radiation nullification spells are admirable goals, but they will come to naught under zebra rule. We know your burdens are great, but, while we will do all we can to help you bear them, we must know that you are up to the challenge.

We know that you will not fail us. You never have.

Your benevolent monarch,

Princess Luna

Wow. The contrast was night and day. Not at all what I'd expected from Princess Luna... but then, why had I expected differently? Luna was running an entire kingdom. If she failed, then the whole country would fall. Even if she won the war, there'd probably be a whole lot of ponies pissed off at her for every little thing that went wrong during the fighting. I frowned as I tapped the scroll softly against my lips. Luna... I suddenly realized that I knew almost nothing about what Luna actually did to run the country. The ministries took care of the war effort. The O.I.A. took care of all the dirty business. So what was Luna doing the whole time? I knew more about Goldenblood than I did the monarch of the country!

I sighed and shook my head. A smarter pony might be able to unravel all of this. I just shot things. Carefully, I put the scroll back in the cubby, walked to the desk, and started looking at the books on it; maybe I could figure out which one was Life Bloom's. *Predictions and Prophecies. Elements of Harmony, a Reference Guide.* And most curious of all was the book on top: *Magical Exercises for Young Unicorns.* I looked at a penned note sitting atop it.

Dear Marigold,

I'm sorry you've been having problems with Tarot. While most unicorn fillies her age have started using their magic, it's not uncommon for there to be delays. I used to think that my horn was completely useless! Tell her not to be frustrated. This book should provide her with some exercises to get her horn working, as well as a few useful and interesting spells and notes she might find helpful.

Your cousin,

Twilight Sparkle

I sighed. 'I need you to get a book,' Life Bloom had said. Very sneaky, giving me a book on rebuilding my magic rather than letting me kick myself for being a failure... with a note from Twilight to my own ancestor, even. I sighed and slipped the book into my saddlebag. "Okay. I get the message. Stop freaking out, cut out the self-hating, and start doing better. I get it."

"About time," the Dealer rasped, and I spun, tripped, and fell on my back looking up at the old pony. His milky eyes stared down at me as he worked his cards.

"I thought they'd cut you out of my brain!" I shouted as I thrust my hoof at him.

"Oh, I reckon there's more than enough left you're not using for me to hide in," he said dryly with a smile.

"Yeah, well, you missed your big chance. I couldn't open the door. I'm not related to Twilight," I said with a smile as I spread my hooves.

"Why should I care if you are or aren't? Makes no difference to me," he said as he turned a card with a picture of Twilight on it and flicked it at me with his hoof. "Twilight. Applejack. Rainbow Dash. Rarity. Fluttershy. Pinkie Pie," he said as he flicked one after the next at me. I collected the cards in my hooves. "They've all been gone two hundred years. What do they matter? Why get worked up over corpses?"

I looked at the spread of cards and glared at him. "Because they were good mares! They tried to save the country and do good things! They tried to do better."

"Even though they blew the whole damned world to hell? Well, so long as they tried..." he snorted. *I've known ponies whose fuck ups killed millions.* "Trying doesn't mean shit. Consequences. Those are what matter. Twilight Sparkle and her friends tried, but they ran Equestria into the ground."

"Shut up!" I said as I rose to my hooves. "Trying matters. Even if they failed, there's something in making the effort. It's better than giving up!" The six cards returned to his hooves.

"Pinkie Pie tried to make everypony happy through drugs and eliminating bad memories. Fluttershy modified memories to change other ponies' very selves in the name of taking away pain and suffering. Rainbow Dash killed only Goddesses know how many. Applejack made the weapons of war that killed millions, including her own brother. Rarity spun lies into truth and made deception into a whole new art form. And Twilight pursued one magic trick after the next hoping to find one that would work. A foolproof spell to win." I flinched as he flicked the cards with his hoof again. "And all any one of them had to do was quit!"

"What?" I blinked, staring up at him.

"That's all. One resignation. One. That's all it would have taken. Rainbow Dash quitting would have knocked out the pegasi and forced Luna to surrender. Applejack retiring would have thrown the war production into disarray, the heads of the companies under her fighting tooth and hoof for her position. Fluttershy's resignation would be joined by hundreds of doctors, nurses, and medical staff. And any of those six quitting would have led to the resignation of the other five." He gave a dismissive snort. "With the Ministry Mares gone, the whole government would have folded like a deck of cards."

"But Equestria would have lost the war!" I protested.

"So what?" he asked softly, but with a tone of such utter contempt that it made me pause. He gestured out the window. "Are you saying that this is better? The zebras had lost so many people that they were forced to use robots, tanks, and missiles because they couldn't continue their traditional way of fighting. A victory for them would have meant them returning home and the abdication of Luna from the throne. All it would take was any one of those six... any one... and Luna would have been unable to continue the war."

"So what are you saying? That they were scum for fighting for what they believed in, or that I should give up?" I asked with a sigh.

"I am saying that you are wrong for thinking they were flawless. I am saying that they made mistakes. They did what they did for all the wrong reasons." He looked around at the office and sighed.

"This isn't a bad place, Blackjack. You could make a life for yourself here. You and your friends, away from the Hoof."

"I can't," I said softly. "I sat still for a few hours after coming back from the dead and then went and apparently got myself and LittlePip all shot up. I can't just stay here in Tenpony, assuming I could afford it and they'd let me."

"Get therapy. Helpinghoof will work with you on that. But you need to do this because it's the right thing to do. To fight because it's the right thing to be fighting for." He lifted the card of Twilight Sparkle. "Because, if you're doing this because you feel like you have to, then, related or not, you are exactly like Twilight Sparkle and the rest of her friends."

I sighed as he disappeared, leaving me alone again. Of all the times for him to show up... why now? I carefully removed that note from the book. Was I taking this because of things that happened two centuries ago? Or was it because I wanted to get my horn to work again? Because I wanted to do magic on my own? I read the note three more times and sighed. No. I'm Blackjack, and no matter how lacking I might be, I was supposed to do magic. A unicorn is more than just an earth pony with a horn.

I trotted back out and saw Life Bloom waiting for me. He had the oddest look on his face. I tapped my saddlebag and mouthed 'Thank you'. For a moment, he paused, and then he smiled. Homage was looking at me too, a touch worried. But I smiled back and nodded, and that seemed to put her at a little more ease.

* * *

The rest of the afternoon was spent in an unsettlingly relaxed manner. My friends and I got to enjoy the many splendors of Tenpony Tower. I had to admit, I'd never been anywhere quite so clean before that wasn't actually some sort of death trap or house of horrors. The sight of ponies trotting around, talking, and trading was soothing. Whether here or in Flank, trade saved the Wasteland. Since Helpinghoof refused to accept most of the chems provided by Caprice, I sold them to a vendor for a decent amount of caps.

That allowed Glory and I to enjoy a perfectly nice, ridiculously overpriced meal in one of Tenpony's restaurants. I personally found it more than a little bland... but then, so was everything else. My sense of taste was a little off. I wondered if that had something to do with the whole 'eating metal' thing. I bit down on the head of a fork and squeezed my jaws closed. There was that faint tingle, and the metal softened enough for me to chew it. Huh... nope, not much difference at all. The waiter took one look at me holding half an eating utensil between my hooves, and his eyelid twitched. What? It came with the meal!

There was a sizable crowd eating at the moment; I wasn't very used to that, either. Heck, even back in 99, most of my meals were during curfew. Glory was ruminating on a café very much like this back in Thunderhead, but something at the next table over caught my ear. A little phrase that spilled out of the mouth of a mare a little too dirty to be a full resident but a little too clean to be somepony long in the Wasteland.

"If you want to make caps, get to Hoofington," she said with the faint slur of somepony who'd had one drink more than they should. "A quick in and out and you'll solve all your monetary problems."

Glory had noticed me turning in my seat to look at the mare and her three companions.

Laughing... joking... but paying her enough attention to hear what she was saying. "Blackjack?" Glory asked in concern. But I stared at the mare with her greenish-yellow hide and her wide smile, and a pink pony hissed in my ear, 'She's a bad pony.'

"Just want to say hello," I said absently as I rose from my seat and trotted towards the mare and her friends. They were all tower ponies... well dressed and more or less clean. But there was just something off about the yellow-green mare.

"It shouldn't be that hard to set up an expedition," mused one of them aloud. "A sizable caravan. Twenty ponies, ten brahmin at least. Soon as this beastly siege lifts..."

"Better to make it thirty. The Hoof isn't exactly an easy place at times, but once you've found a spot, you'll..." the prospector mare suddenly blinked up at me, then smiled a little too easily. "Oh, hello. You interested in making a fortune out east?"

I grinned as Glory trotted up beside me, frowning in worry. "Yeah, you can say that. You just come from there?"

"Surely did," she said with a wide grin. "Came back with trunks loaded with mint condition guns, ammo, caps, and a couple crates of food. Felt bad leaving a bunch behind but I just didn't have any more brahmin!" She laughed, and the other three joined her.

"Well, you could have gotten some more from the Finders in Megamart. Caprice's always happy to help for a good price," I said, and immediately drew the curiosity of the three.

The prospector's smile turned a touch sickly. "Well... If you've been there yourself, then you'd know...um... it's sometimes hard dealing with her..."

"No doubt. But, heck, I've had the roughest time with the Finders. You ever get over to Flank up in the north?" I asked, feeling something tightening inside me. I had a target on her face and felt my legs humming faintly.

"Uh... no. I was more... westish..." She rose to her hooves. "If you gentlemen would excuse me..."

"So, by Scrapyard?" I asked with a grin as I jumped into her path. "Great place for salvage. One of my favorites."

"Yeah, sure!" she blurted as she tried to dart around me. "Now get the fuck out of my--"

I might not have had a gun or weapon on me, but I certainly knew how to take down a mare. I grabbed a mouthful of the earth pony's greasy mane and jerked hard, pulling back and making her rear up as she yelled in response. I hooked my left leg around her waist and jerked, slamming her back to the table and sending the fancy meals dancing.

"Quick! Call security!" one of the three bucks yelled.

"I'm right here!" I shouted as I glared down into her fearful piss-yellow eyes. "You're lying about coming from Hoofington! I know you are! What I want to know is, *why* are you lying?"

"Get off me!" she yelled as she struggled. I unfolded my fingers and closed them on her

windpipe.

"That place is a deathtrap! Anypony that's been there knows it." I looked at one of the three. "Did she mention anything about Enervation fields sucking the life from you?" I looked at another. "How about a plague that turns you into a cannibal? Or the wars and fighting?" I looked down at her. There were ponies coming who were not in a good mood. I grabbed her in my synthetic hooves and slammed her against the table. "So I want to know why!"

She coughed and gasped. "They paid us!" she yelled, and I released her enough to breathe properly. "They paid us caps... more gear than I could imagine! Gave it to us like it was garbage! Told us... told us to go out. Find ponies and tell them... tell them to go to Hoofington." I retracted my fingers and she rubbed her throat. "They found us after we fled Gutierrez... said... said we could keep everything. Just had to say we came from Hoofington."

"We... there were others?" I asked as Tenpony security arrived.

She coughed as I moved off her. She didn't look well at the moment as she stared at me. "They sent us out... Friendship City... New Appleloosa... here... told us to tell folks Hoofington was rich and safe and... and..." She jerked sharply, whimpering and holding her gut. "Said to tell everypony... Hoofington Rises..."

"They... who are 'they'?" I asked, but she clenched her eyes shut, shaking in pain as she curled up even more.

"Hurts..." she whimpered as she rolled off the table and suddenly screamed. She rolled in agony, and her mouth puked a bloody foam. Everypony backed away except for me as I looked her over. Her stomach was undulating under her hide. Then there was a pop and her insides burst in a red rain all over us. One of the three lost his very expensive lunch. The rest of the lunch crowd was either screaming and fleeing or looking like their brains were fully tied up trying to explain to their eyes that what they'd just seen could not possibly have actually happened.

I looked at Glory, who was staring with mixed horror and interest. The Dealer had said we could leave the Hoof behind. That we could have a normal life away from that cursed city. Maybe we could, but now it looked like the Hoof was drawing more ponies to it. "We need to get back home," I said grimly. Then I turned and looked at the half dozen security ponies in front of me and dropped my eyes to the dead prospector. "Oh... shoot..."

* * *

"So. What are you in for?" Rampage asked me as she stretched out on the bunk in the Tenpony detention cell with her hooves behind her head. Right now, Glory and Homage were trying to clear things up after my little disturbance. The security ponies were trying their hardest to hush up a nasty death before it disturbed the natives' delicate sensitivities. I was fairly sure there would be at least three new patients needing Helpinghoof's therapy. The inside of that prospector hadn't just been blown apart but shredded from the inside. Apparently, that wasn't common in Tenpony...

Damn, was I really this jaded?

"Got in a fight," I muttered.

"Shouldn't do that," Rampage tiskied softly. "Puts the locals in a hanging sort of mood."

"Then she exploded," I muttered. Rampage slowly sat up and looked at me for some hint of a joke or sign that I wasn't serious. I glanced at her and sighed. "Really. I'm not kidding. She started talking about 'they' and 'them' and popped like a balloon full of red paint."

"Why do the most interesting things happen around you when I'm not there?" Rampage asked with a chuckle. I wasn't laughing, though. Somepony had sent her here with bags full of caps and loot and a story that she'd gotten them from Hoofington. There were at least two others. And whatever had been done to her, she'd been ignorant of it.

'Them'. Conspiracies. Killings. Elusive plots. And somehow, I couldn't help but think that somepony was pulling together a plan of some sort. With the O.I.A. and Goldenblood and EC-1101. And now it'd just killed that poor clueless mare...

"Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!" I screamed all at once, thrashing my metallic limbs as hard as I could against the hanging bunk. The metal screeched and deformed before the frame snapped and dumped me on the floor. "Stop killing ponies, you fuckers!"

"What's going on?" the security ponies asked as I rose and proceeded to kick and stomp the frame till it snapped off entirely. Then I applebucked it against the bars, making the pair jump back as I smashed what remained into broken steel. I wanted to be out of breath, my heart to pound, my legs to be sore... and the sensation that I'd pounded whoever was behind all this into twisted metal. Instead, I just sat down on the concrete floor feeling like an idiot.

"Saw a radroach," Rampage said calmly. "She can't handle those things."

I looked at the twisted remains of the bunk and sighed, feeling like a royal idiot. "Sorry." I was pretty sure my chances of getting out of here were somehow lower than those of me being related to Twilight Sparkle now.

"Not likely," one pony said to the other with a soft snort. "You won't find those things here."

"Oh, you might. Darn things are all over the Wasteland. Even get into stables, evidently," Rampage drawled. The talk of radroaches was distracting them a little from the fact that I'd just thrashed their bunk.

"Not in Tenpony," one of the security ponies said as he reached over and tapped a small flat metal box on the wall. "Ever hear of a pesticide talisman?"

I looked at his hoof and the flat box. Slowly, I crawled to the bars and stared across at the flat little casing. It was simple, nondescript. Something that had been there two hundred years or more. Just one little piece of equipment like thousands of others bolted to subway walls or in the backs of crumbling houses. I'd probably passed thousands of pieces just like it.

The one thing that drew my attention more than anything, though, was the faded name on the case. 'Roseluck Pest Solutions'.

"Open it," I said as I stared at the little box. I looked up at the guards, who were not unjustly looking at me like I'd lost my mind. "Please. Please open it." The security guards looked extremely

skeptical, and I knelt with my hooves clasped before me. "Please, I promise I'll behave myself and not make another peep. Just please open it."

"It's locked," one muttered, tapping the little case. "I doubt anypony knows where the key is."

"Call my friend P-21. Great with locks. Blue earth pony. Probably somewhere scowling. You can't miss him!" I hated this sense of stillness inside me.

"And I thought the striped one was a nutcase," the guard sighed before he scowled and said to one of the others, "Please see if you can find this friend of hers." Then the tan buck looked at me. "And you... behave. Turn off your eye... beam... things."

"Huh?" I looked at my hoof and saw the red pinprick light dancing on it. "Whoa... that's new."

The security ponies moved to a healthy distance, talking quietly to each other. I looked at the cot mattress wrapped in twisted metal and glanced hopefully to where Rampage was stretched out. She arched her brow. "Hey, don't even think about it. I'm not dumb enough to wreck my own bunk." I sighed. My butt didn't have enough metal in it for me to ignore how hard the concrete floor was.

After one hour, twenty-two minutes, and thirteen seconds... and I had to find a way to turn *that* off or I was going to go nuts... P-21 came in escorted by the tan security buck. He looked at the crumpled metal and scowled at Rampage. She sat up and pointed at me. "Hey, she was the one who felt a sudden need to redecorate! Not me."

I pointed with my hoof at the box. "Please. Open that."

"Blackjack... you're acting crazy..." he said in a tired voice.

"I just had a pony explode in front of me, okay? Just... open that box. Then I'll be a nice and quiet mare. Really." I stared at it as he looked at the tan buck for permission. He gestured with a hoof for P-21 to get on with it. He produced his tools from his saddlebags and in three seconds popped open the dull metal case.

"Huh... that's weird. Where's the gem?" the tan security pony asked in surprise. And as P-21 backed away, I felt my mane stand straight up along my spine.

There, sitting quietly in its unsmashed case, was a silver ring about the size of my hoof. Just like in the back room of Silverstar Sporting Supplies and just like the ring that had been tossed at Lacunae during the battle. The Enervation rings weren't just in Hoofington. Suddenly, I had the feeling they were in a whole lot more places than just Hoofington.

* * *

"It can't be generating Enervation," Helpinghoof said as he stared at the silver ring on his desk. "Enervation is a phenomenon found only in Hoofington." Life Bloom had arranged our release and now my friends and I had gathered in the office.

"And I'm telling you that the ring in the sporting goods store was just like this," I insisted. Life Bloom had taken my concerns seriously, though he looked just as confused as Helpinghoof. "And during the battle, somepony had rigged one of these with a spark battery." Due to her prior experience, Lacunae

was staying with Rover. I could only imagine what they were spending their time doing.

"Well, while I'm not sure what this ring does, it's not killing us," P-21 said. Life Bloom rummaged in Helpinghoof's cupboards, came back with a battery and two wires, and carefully attached them to the ring. Again... nothing.

Now everypony was looking at me like I was a madmare. "Blackjack, it's just a coincidence," Glory said softly as she nuzzled me.

"You didn't see the ring, Glory. It was exactly like this. Same shape and size," I said with a huff, feeling let down.

"You've been through a lot, Blackjack," P-21 said, trying to comfort me. He was really lousy at it.

"You're welcome to stay another week," Life Bloom said, then paused and amended, "You *will* be welcome after I tell everypony that what happened in the café wasn't your fault." I scowled as I stepped away and walked over to the gurney the dead mare lay upon. He gave a sigh of frustration; clearly, me relaxing and calming down was in the script.

"What about her?" I asked as I pointed with a hoof at the dead mare. There was a look passed between everypony, and finally, with a reluctant sigh, Helpinghoof trotted to the gurney.

"Rusty. We confirmed she was in Guttersville before it was destroyed," Helpinghoof said. I was glad he didn't show the body. "Whatever happened to her... it was like a grenade went off inside her. But her major internal organs were all destroyed... it was as if she was torn apart from within before detonation."

The Tenpony bucks looked spooked, but I shared a look with my friends. This wasn't even a bad day in the Hoof. Still, there was no missing the concerned looks being traded. Blackjack was now half synthetic. Blackjack had spent three days braindead. Blackjack was attacking strange mares who exploded! These were not signs that Blackjack was okay.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and paused briefly to mentally thank whoever had left me the ability to do that. "I know... I know I've been a little off since I've come back. I mean, the whole drinking thing, and then the test and the fight. But... there's something bad going on in Hoofington, and I can't shake the feeling that it's other places, too. So we have to get back. I can't spend a week just recovering here. I'll be climbing the walls in no time."

"You might have to," Glory said with a little frown. "Captain Thrush nearly burned out her engine getting us here."

Oh, wonderful... wait. "Where is Thrush?" I asked, realizing that I hadn't seen her since we arrived.

"Friendship City," P-21 said. "She sort of fell under the same rule as Rampage. 'Raider activities'." And who knew how far away that was? The idea of being stuck here was starting to creep up on me. I hated waiting. I needed to do. To act. To get things done. Otherwise, I was going to start thinking.

"I thought they called that looting and pillaging," Scotch Tape commented as she fooled around

with Helpinghoof's little ear light thingy. The filly had gotten her hooves on a lot of loot and plunder herself, no surprise when you come from a stable where ninety percent of the property is communal and then go into the Wasteland where you owned whatever you found.

"Aren't you supposed to be in school?" Glory asked.

"School?" I frowned in confusion.

"Boring pony thinks I'm a kid, so she enrolled me in some stupid school thing they have here."

Glory nodded primly. "It's important every young filly get a quality education."

"Education..." Scotch Tape snorted. "It's boring and stupid. I told them how to strip and rebuild a steam gauge assembly. They were making sand art. Art... from colored sand..." Her tone left no confusion at all about how she felt regarding that little enterprise. "I told them the only sand I ever played with was in a high pressure nozzle stripping rust and old paint from parts."

"So, no colored sand cutie mark then?" I asked with a smile. Her green glare informed me that rusty parts weren't the only thing she could sandblast. I grinned. "We could call you Sandy." Scotch growled and tried to tackle me.

"She goes from a warning about an Enervation device to insisting on getting back to Hoofington to teasing a foal about her cutie mark..." Life Bloom murmured. The fact was that teasing Scotch... who was finding out that biting mechanical legs wasn't very effective... let me think on the other two. The discovery of a silver ring here in Tenpony had panicked me, but now there wasn't much I could do. Why it wasn't causing the eye-bleeding mind screams was beyond me. But if they were in Tenpony, then I knew they had to be elsewhere, too, and the fact that they weren't projecting Enervation now didn't mean that they couldn't start.

Getting back to Hoofington, though, was in the short term a more troublesome problem. As I kept my hoof on Scotch's head, pushing her back as she swung her front hooves wildly at me, I thought of our options. One... going on the *Seahorse*, which would be delayed for many days due to the damage. Walking would be even slower, and I didn't relish the idea of hoofing it clear across Equestria with a Reaper and a purple alicorn anyway. I had no idea how to contact Ditzzy to go by air...

Hmmm... Maybe...

Then that thought was lost as Scotch Tape pulled away and I fell flat on my face... not because my brain didn't know how to work my legs, but because one of my legs wasn't there! The filly was trotting away with my right foreleg in her mouth; how the heck had she taken the thing off?! I scrambled back up on my three remaining limbs. "You bring that back!" I yelled as I staggered after her.

"Come and get it, Queen Stubby!"

* * *

"It may be possible," Lacunae informed me after I was whole once more. I tried to see how she'd taken it off with just a little wrench; the idea that my foreleg was attached by three pins and a half dozen nuts and some cables was more than a little concerning. "We are outside Hoofington's Enervation field; we can bring more resources to bear. And in return, you will go to Hippocratic Research and get Chimera

for us.” I didn’t know if it was being outside the city that gave her the ‘Goddess’ talk or if the hive mind was once more connecting to her.

“Yeah. I won’t trade EC-1101 for it, but I think it’s time I took that Project out of Sanguine’s hooves,” I said, popping a ruby into my mouth. As soon as I closed my jaws, there was a tingle and the sweet, slightly spicy flavor trickled down my throat as it was liquefied. I washed it down with a Sparkle-Cola. Rubies were spicy, emeralds tasted like spearmint, sapphires like peppermint, amethysts were fruity, citrines tangy... aside from your local dragon, who knew? Oh... and rocks tasted like mud.

“Thank you,” Lacunae said quietly.

I looked at her and thought about what LittlePip had said about mind-reading monsters. “Can I ask you something? What’s it actually like to read a mind? I mean, do you look at a pony and just know everything they know?”

She looked at me curiously and with a touch of amusement. “Oh, no. It is like... staring into a pool of water. The most immediate and active thoughts are on the surface. They flash and flicker before our eyes. This morning, your thoughts were all of inebriation. Deeper thoughts are like fish far within the pool. We may see them, but we do not immediately truly understand their meaning. It takes a great deal of time and effort to extract a memory and understand it.”

Like she’d done when I was asleep weeks back. I shivered a little. “Sorry, but that’s just creepy, Lacunae.”

The purple alicorn smiled sadly. “We are quite used to that sentiment, Blackjack... it is because of that that there are so very few capable and willing to help us freely.”

I sat sucking on the ruby for a while. “Is this coming from the Goddess or Lacunae?”

“Yes,” she replied with a small smile. “We wish only what is best for Equestria. We understand that few others can accept this. Equestria is as it is, and it is foalish to deny it. Talk and dreams of fixing and restoring Equestria to as it was before the war are a waste of time.”

“So?” I replied with a smile. “If you break it down, anything that’s not putting food in your stomach or breeding is a waste of time. Reading books. Doing magic. Fixing things. If we only did things that mattered to our survival, it would be a really boring world.” I reached out with my fingers, grabbed an opal, and tossed it in my mouth. Mmmm, milky! “Let me ask ya this... say the world were fixed... could you... all of you... exist in it?”

“Of course. We can adapt to any environmental condition,” the purple alicorn said primly. “But we thrive in a world that is rich in ambient arcane magic.” Aka, the radiation that killed anypony not a ghoul or alicorn.

“So you’re saying that, even with wings and a horn and the intellect and souls of who knows how many ponies, you still have to have the deck stacked in your favor?”

“Ponies who join in Unity will survive forever in us,” she insisted. Personally, I was a little skeptical of ‘forever’.

“No doubt... but why not coexist?”

There was a long pause at that. "Have you heard of something called Gardens of Equestria?" she asked politely.

I felt a cold frisson run down my spine and prayed that my mane wasn't standing on end. I looked Lacunae and the Goddess in the eye and hoped she wasn't reading my mind right now as I lied through my teeth. "Gardens of what?"

"Like Chimera, it was one of the O.I.A.'s secret projects. Somehow, Goldenblood stole staggering amounts of materials, equipment, and arcane supplies for an unknown and unapproved project. Several sub-projects were carried out right under Twilight's nose, some in this very tower, under the pretext of purifying magical waste or nullifying magical radiation; she had no memory of approving their development. When it was discovered, Luna was furious beyond compare. For Goldenblood to work on such a thing rather than pursue the war effort... well... she sentenced him to be executed for his crimes."

"She... what?!" I stared at the alicorn in shock.

"Oh, yes. Apparently, it was designed to restore Equestria in the event of magical catastrophe. The mere implication of such a catastrophe was intolerable to Princess Luna. How dare her subject suggest imminent destruction would claim the kingdom? More to the point, his unwillingness to say what Gardens did... where it was... how it worked... these were all a fundamental betrayal of the Princess's trust." Lacunae sighed. "Ironically, the very next day, the bombs fell."

"So... why would the Goddess care about this Gardens thing?" I asked as casually as I dared.

"We doubt it was ever completed or worked; else, why hasn't it been used? But if it was capable of a tenth of what was predicted, then why would it have to revert the environment? Could it not be tasked with expanding and enriching the Wasteland with more radiation?" She asked it very matter-of-factly, but suddenly I realized why ponies dedicated themselves to fighting alicorns.

"You want to use this Gardens thing to make everything worse?" I asked in a horrified voice.

"From your current perspective, yes." I suddenly imagined radioactive fields as far as the eye could see. Surface ponies would be wiped out. Ghouls would thrive, but against immortal and permanently regenerating alicorns, how long before they were blown to pieces? Eventually, radioactive clouds would poison even the Enclave.

"Yeah... that would make coexistence pretty tough," I muttered softly.

"We are otherwise occupied with our defense and the biological problem. But someday, we would seek out what became of the Gardens." Well, great, another apocalyptic threat. At least this one wasn't urgent, though. Maybe I could find another silver bullet and pay the Goddess a visit... but... what would that do to Lacunae? And did I still even have Folly? Probably not. And should I use it if I did? But if nopony stopped the Goddess... urrrrghh! My brain was not meant for dilemmas like this!

I sat back and stared at her for a long moment... something was different here. Who exactly was I talking to? "You don't really talk to non-alicorns like this, do you?"

"In truth, only one other. He was brilliant, but ultimately we could not risk his inclusion in Unity. He swore to aid us in solving our biological issue in return for our power, but I suspect that he simply

wishes our annihilation.” She sighed. “The rest of the Wasteland is filled with cowardly, craven, cruel ponies who fear our potential or slavishly worship us for our power. They do not respect us. They cannot! And you ask why we cannot coexist with them when they are unable to accept us!” I had to admit, I’d never thought of it like that before.

“So... why me now? Especially after that stunt I pulled this morning.” To my amazement though, she smiled. I guess I really couldn’t imagine the Goddess as having fun.

Then she looked out the window. “You kept our secret.” I blinked in surprise. “About the silver ring. You could have told others how horribly it hurt us... tearing our souls out through the connection. You could have informed the tower... they would have been far more interested had you shared that fact. Or told your friends. Or that... diminutive little...” she snorted sharply. “But you didn’t. No pony realizes just how terribly that hurt us, save you.”

To be honest, it had slipped my mind. “You might have noticed I’m not the sharpest knife in the drawer.”

“Oh, we have. Indeed, it is unmistakable and somewhat terrifying how unintelligent you are.” Well... thanks! “And yet, you did us a favor and may do yet more. You do not hate us. Do not kill us. And, while we may quibble about certain things, we feel you are... decent. You do not care if a pony is surfer or pegasus, alicorn or ghoul. That is... commendable.”

Well, if there’d been alicorns all over Hoofington fighting me, perhaps I’d have been different about it. Lacunae had made things easier. Really, the Goddess couldn’t have asked for a better ambassador than her. Helpful, polite, quiet, elegant and dignified... and... “This isn’t the Goddess I’m talking to, is it?” I said softly, looking up at her with a little smile.

She looked wistful as she turned away. “No. It’s not. But wouldn’t it be wonderful if it were?”

* * *

The invitation to Homage’s dinner party came soon to both my and LittlePip’s friends. I’d been warned to stay in my room by Tenpony security; at this point, I think Glory was the only one they wanted trotting around, and they were even nervous about her. Still, she was out, I was in... and I was bored. I lay down and tried to go into another memory orb. Nothing. Zip. Tossing it back into my bags, I rolled onto my back. Should I even try and regain my magic? I was never good at it, anyway. I was a cyberpony now. I needed to learn how to get my body to work and focus of that. And heck, I hadn’t come across many decent orbs to spend time in.

Wouldn’t it be wonderful if I could make up my mind? What did I need magic for?

I summed it up in a word: Goldenblood.

As infuriating as he was, as much as I hated seeing him slime around the corners of Equestria, he was the key to what was happening in Hoofington... and now, maybe, all across the Wasteland. Something had happened to him. Treason? Taking credit for Gardens? Being sentenced to execution? I just didn’t understand it. If he was a monstrous shit, then fine, I could have dismissed it. But he’d apparently protected Twilight from Luna. Why? He’d hit her for making alicorns! He’d taken her memories!

And, apparently, gone to the block rather than betray her.

Most infuriating of all, I was the only pony who seemed to know about him at all. The O.I.A. had gotten Image to cover their tracks. I found the O.I.A. 'office' in Tenpony converted into a cheese shop; the only indication that it had ever been something else were the faded rings and cutie marks next to the door. The emblem had been painted over and only barely bled through the white layer. Only Professor Zodiac had any direct knowledge at all.

The three most important things are loyalty, love, and secrets. Who had he loved? What was he loyal to? Why so many secrets? All this thinking was making my brain hurt. But I'd learned the most through memory orbs. To make orbs work, I needed magic.

Though... maybe not.

I might not be allowed to trot through the shops below, but I'd been shown where there was a dandy library up above...

* * *

Reading was hard. I'd snuck... well... technically, I doubted that I would be kicked out if I got caught, but why take the chance? Anyway, I'd reached the aerthithingy place, but once I'd gotten in... I was completely screwed. I figured that a library was a place where you just looked at book titles and find 'Goldenblood: a memoir' or something. It never occurred to me that, with thousands and thousands of book titles to look at, I could spend years searching and never find a thing!

"Uggh... damn it. There has to be something in here on Goldenblood. He can't have just disappeared!"

"I'm afraid that most references to Goldenblood were removed by the 'Intellectual Reorganization Command' of Princess Luna's third year," a mechanical, feminine voice hooted from up above, making me jump and bite down on a book, readying it for throwing. From the roof descended a golden owl that landed on the rail and blinked at me with bright purple eyes. "Need I remind you that biting books is not good for the preservation of the covers, Mistress?"

I spat out the book. "Who are you? What are you?"

"I am Nyctimene, Mistress. I am the keeper of these books," she replied. I slowly walked around the golden machine, and its head slowly rotated and remained focused upon me. "I am Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle's personal assistant within Tenpony Tower; second to her number one assistant, of course."

"So you are a robot?" Robotic owls. Who knew?

"That is a fair assessment," Nyctimene said with a nod of her head. "You desire texts on the first O.I.A. director, Goldenblood?"

"Yes!" I said, glad that I'd finally hit a break. "Tell me you have a biography or something on him."

"I'm afraid not, Mistress. As you know, most texts referring to him were purged following the establishment of the ministries."

"You must have *something*."

The owl stared at me for a long moment. Then, suddenly, she winged away to one of the upper shelves. She hovered in front of the bookcase and carefully pulled out a book with her claws, then flew back to a reading desk and set down the slim gray tome. 'Luna's Academy for Young Unicorns: Get Sent to the Moon!' I flipped it open and was astonished by a picture spread over two pages. Luna was standing in the middle, looking like she was struggling not to cry. The faculty flanked her, and a hundred or so unicorn foals smiled at the camera... save one who was levitating up the pigtails of the filly beside her and a pair of colts down in the front row poking each other with sticks.

And there, right beside Princess Luna, was Goldenblood giving a stern look at the two disobedient colts in the front.

I flipped through the pictures. There was an article on the academy being in a remote location, keeping it safe from the war. A short little comment from the Princess about how she'd always had a fondness for young ponies, but she could never gobble more than one. So many pictures of young ponies learning... everything. Unicorns learning magic. Studying. Meeting in clubs. And in the middle of it all was Luna. Luna smiling. Luna teaching. Luna looking happy and useful and loved.

The photographs of Goldenblood were much more difficult to find. The pale buck might not have been ravaged by poison, but he was still more homely than handsome. Most of the pictures caught him while he was asleep in an empty classroom or staring out of one of the stained glass windows. 'Professor Goldenblood: History, Culture, Literature, and Psychological Studies' read the caption. There was one picture of him surrounded by a half dozen colts and fillies. The desk in front of him was covered with rocks of all types. 'Littlehorn Rock Club' read the caption.

A rock club? Really? What did they talk about? The merits of igneous rocks? Which rock was stripier than the others? I looked at his hoof resting on a strange fossilized bug. Next to it was a strange twisty stone. 'Hoofington Meteorite' read a tiny tag beside it. A unicorn filly and, most curiously, a pegasus colt, both looking far too alike to be a coincidence, held up an enormous geode filled with gems.

But more than that. Goldenblood looked happy. Tired. Guarded. Older than he probably was, but still happy. From the few other pictures, I gathered he'd been the 'strict' teacher. I noticed a young black unicorn mare, a teacher's aide, it looked like, behind him and stared for the longest time. She might not have been in a uniform, but there was no denying that that mare was none other than Psalm! I flipped through a second time, picking her out in the background. Again and again. She was almost more elusive than Goldenblood!

There were pictures of him with the Princess, the pair talking and laughing. A picture of him lecturing a filly with a mask cutie mark who was trying her hardest not to laugh as Luna made faces behind his back. A picture of the Princess drawing a mustache on his face in black marker as he slept. 'I need you,' she'd said to him as he lay dying in the hospital. He'd been more than just Luna's political advisor... He was Princess Luna's *friend*.

And then, a dozen years later... she was ordering his execution.

Loyalty, love, and secrets.

Goldenblood might have been a bastard, but he hadn't always been that way. He'd been a teacher. Brilliant. Intelligent. From the look of the students around him, though, he'd been respected as

well. Had it been Littlehorn that changed him?

I looked up for a moment and noticed that three more books were on the table in front of me; Nyctimene must have brought them down while I was looking through the first one. Setting 'Littlehorn' aside for now, I pulled the book on the left over.

I opened 'Dancing with Stripes' to a number of grainy black and white pictures of a zebra metropolis with marble pillars and white temples. In the front of one of the pictures was a unicorn mare in a frilly, fancy dress that was right up the Overmare's mother's alley standing beside a young colt wearing an explorer's cap. Even as a colt, he seemed a solemn and guarded kid. 'Sundancer and Goldenblood' read the caption. My eyes moved to the text beside it.

...from our many adventures in Roam and other zebra lands, we have found this a strange and enchanting place. For many ponies, zebras are hut dwelling primitives practicing strange shamanistic magic. It is unthinkable that zebras should have cultural and historical accomplishments that rival, even exceed, those of even Ponyville, much less the greater Equestrian cities. My son and I have explored the vast empty Savannahs, crossed blistering deserts, and explored strange jungles only to be dazzled and amazed by these genial folks and their strange but not unwholesome ways.

While ponies can easily separate ourselves into groups of earth pony, unicorn, and pegasus, zebra affiliation is far more tribal and fragmented into herds and bloodlines stretching back to antiquity. Some, like the Zencori, wander far and wide collecting lore and stories to bring back to their ancestral lands. Others are far more cerebral and mystic like the elusive Achu, who blend hoof fighting with meditation and spiritualistic behavior. The Propoli are every bit as urbane as the most sophisticated Canterlotian pony, placing great stock on lore and education. Indeed, a traveler can find as much difference between an Atori and a Eschatik zebra as between a pegasus and a unicorn!

While most zebra tribes are friendly, if odd, one must take care to avoid 'star touched' tribes. The term describes tribes that have dabbled in dark and forbidden magic or performed horrible crimes. The most infamous, of course, are the Starkatteri, or 'Eaters of the Stars', tribe, whose dark tales of ritual sacrifice, flaying the skin off still living prisoners, profane rituals, and other dark deeds have become the stuff of trashy adventure tales back home. Others, like the Carnilala, engage in disturbing sexual practices and self-mutilation. These 'star touched' tribes are shunned by zebra society as a whole, but sadly they are the first thing many ponies latch onto when thinking of our striped neighbors.

I flipped to the next page and looked at pictures of zebras. Some were wearing fancy clothes and dancing on their rear hooves. Another balanced on a pole... upside down. Four calmly discussed things in a library that looked almost identical to the one I was in... only somehow even bigger. Two zebra mares struggled in brutal hoof to hoof combat. A pair of zebra males stared out with dark eyes from a shadowy

doorway, their faces branded with a swirling star and other ritualistic scars.

Still... there wasn't much I could see about Goldenblood.

I sighed and pulled the next book over as Nyctimene flew down to put away the ones I'd finished with. This one was about the Hoofington reconstruction and had a picture of Goldenblood dramatically speaking before a crowd of thousands as blood ran from his mouth. He looked flayed, the scars barely bandaged and stained pink and red. Other photos showed him talking with Rover, who looked really strange without his mechanical limbs.

The sole book on the O.I.A. was barely fifty pages long and sounded like it'd been written for children. It didn't tell me anything new. The O.I.A. hub was in Hoofington. It worked to keep the ministries going. No mention of secret projects. No mention of creating monsters or cyberponies. Just that it was the hard-working glue and oil that kept the ministries working together and smoothly and reported directly to Princess Luna herself. Damn thing didn't even mention Goldenblood... Oh, wait. There he was: 'The O.I.A.'s director resides outside Hoofington near Black Pony Mountain.' Not even mentioned by name! No wonder everypony else thought I was going crazy.

I closed my eyes and I leaned back, letting the golden owl take the last book away. I wondered if, two centuries from now, somepony (or alicorn, if the Goddess succeeded in her plans for Unity after all) would discover little snippets of my life and wonder 'who was this crazy mare, and why didn't she just write an autobiography telling everypony about herself?' More and more I kept feeling... trapped. Things that happened centuries ago kept creeping through things I felt now. Like I was caught up in a great current and I was helpless to escape it. Heck, I was glad I didn't have to face crushing waterfalls along the way.

"Hey, Blackjack?" LittlePip said, making me jump and fall over. I hit my head on the leg of the reading desk and hissed, rubbing my skull. Why hadn't they thought to armor that, huh? The little unicorn looked at me in sympathy. "You okay? I didn't expect to find you here."

"I'm trying a new thing... thinking. Seems to be all the rage among wandering Wasteland heroines these days," I said as she lifted me to my hooves easily. "I heard the Stable Dweller is a master at it."

"Um, I don't know about that," she said with a little flush and smile. "Homage sent me to look for you. Her dinner party's about to start. She doesn't get to entertain much, and she wanted to make sure you didn't miss it."

I blinked in shock as I looked out the windows. There were only the dark purples of twilight left in the sky. How long had... I checked the chronometer. Three hours looking at books? At this rate I was going to turn into an egghead! They'd have to start calling me Professor Blackjack or something. "Wow. Time flies with a good book..." I said with a sheepish smile, shaking myself as we walked together towards the door. "So... you figure out how you're going to deal with your mind-reading nemesis?"

"Already did," she said with a little, uneasy smile. "I've taken out my memories regarding the plan. What I don't know, she can't use against me."

"So you don't remember us--" I started, and she raised her hoof in alarm.

"Don't tell me! My brain's already scrambled enough as is. I don't want them to have to go in and

take the information out all over again!" She sighed. I stared at her, thinking about Doc Oct's warnings and about what had happened to Scotch. Would ripping holes in her own memory cause reactions and mistakes? Cause her brain to scramble or drive her crazy? She noticed my look and bowed her head. "The only way to do this... the only way for me to be sure... is if I know there's nothing in there for her to pick out."

I looked at her for the longest time. I couldn't imagine her going through what she had, facing what she did. Actually sabotaging her own brain to thwart a mind-reader? All I did was shoot, get shot at, and have mysteries thrown in my face. I'd never have it as hard as LittlePip did. "LittlePip..." I began, but she shook her head, cutting me off.

"As is, I'm probably going to have to drop a few more memories before I'm sure everything's set," she said with a little sigh and roll of her eyes, as if it wasn't a big deal at all, and the look on her face said that she didn't want me to treat it as if it was. Wow... she might actually have been able to give the Stable Dweller a run for her money.

"So," I asked, "you don't remember *anything* about our adventure?"

"I know it involved me taking a PTM," she said, her eyes falling. "Again..." Ooooh, I knew that 'kicking myself' look. I was a master of that look! And on my watch, I was going to be the only one of the two of us wearing that look.

I frowned and stopped. "Listen... I was there." I put a hoof on her shoulder. "I know why you took it. You had to. There was no other way. It wasn't because you had an excuse to take them. Okay?"

LittlePip brightened a little and nodded. "Thanks..." Still... she wasn't quite letting go of the self-kicking... I could see it in her eyes. Well... hell if I was going to let her do that! There was only room for one grade A self-recriminist in this tower.

I chuckled as I stepped closer, and instantly her ears perked in alarm. "It's too bad though. I know I'll never forget discovering such a wonderful kisser," I said, giving her flank a nudge with my own as I trotted past and out the door, looking back at a little unicorn inventing whole new shades of red to blush.

* * *

When we arrived at the dinner party, I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised to find most of my crew chatting amiably with most of LittlePip's crew. And since we were arriving late, there was nopony in the way between me and the buffet table! I was feeling positively snacky!

I was trotting towards it when my ear twitched at the sound of Glory talking to Calamity. "So... you're absolutely positive you didn't kill off your entire squad in a rampage of death and destruction and flee to the surface to avoid lawful prosecution by the authorities?" she asked as she balanced a cup of punch on her outstretched wing.

"Let me think on that..." the brown pegasus drawled as he rolled his eyes in mock reflection. "Mmmm... nope! 'Fraid not. Said my piece and went on my way, though it weren't like they were keen on makin' it easy."

"I'll say you did," she said with a little frown. "You know, you completely undermined what we were trying to do in Thunderhead with that display."

He gave a little shrug. "You Thunderheaders. Always with the great big ideas and stuff. So long as Neighvarro's got the guns, not much you can do."

"Well somepony's got to have the big ideas," she replied firmly. "Besides, I thought you were all about helping the surface."

"Ah ahm," he replied. "But sendin' down some healin' supplies and takin' some food back ain't helpin'. It's flirtin'. There's no way yer gonna do more than that."

"It takes time. You can't just do it all at once," Glory protested.

"Sure. Been two hundred years. What's another two hundred more?" he countered, then saw her ears droop. The brown buck sighed. "And if it were Neighvarro, it'd probably be two thousand years before they sent so much as spit. I just ain't one fer itty bitty steps."

"You sound just like my father," she said. His expression turned a touch more curious. "Sky Striker."

"He's your father?!" he blurted, then stared at me, then at Glory's missing wing, then back at me. "Landsakes! He's gonna take off your head when he finds out you broke her!"

"He already knows," I said with a flush as I trotted away, and the two began to talk about the legendary Sky Striker. Anyway, if he wanted to kick my tail, he'd have to come down here and get it. No way I'd ever be heading to Thunderhead any time soon.

Moving around, I spotted Scotch Tape seated next to a giant green flaming bird. Given that nopony in the room was alarmed at this, I assumed it was some sort of pet. It seemed the two were locked in a staring contest of sorts, only from the expression on Scotch's face she clearly expected to be eaten if she lost. The crackling avian seemed to be having quite a bit of fun with the petrified filly. Both our PipBucks clicked softly.

"Pour RadAway on her," I suggested, drawing the look of Velvet Remedy away from P-21.

"Don't you dare! You'll make her all sticky!" Velvet protested.

"Oh, we do that just standing here," Homage said as she trotted up and glanced back at where LittlePip was taking a drink of punch, her eyes locked on all our rumps. She gasped, choked, and fell over coughing and sputtering.

"You *are* evil," I said in blind admiration, chuckling.

Then there was a loud sizzling squawk, and the three of us turned back to see Scotch with a ripped open RadAway pouch in her mouth and a smoldering, not-quite-flaming bird dripping orange fluid. The olive filly looked at us and then at the glaring avian and pointed a hoof at me. "She told me to do it! It was her idea!"

"Not sure you noticed, Scotchy, but my ideas tend to get my rump thumped more often than not." The reigniting bird thing screeched, and the olive filly dove underneath the buffet table as the animal

stalked atop it, glaring down as only a very grumpy bird of prey can for any sign of the filly emerging.

I trotted around a bit more. I talked with Calamity about the finer points of Wasteland cuisine. My eyes were a little glazed over after listening to Glory and Velvet make medicine talk, and I made my way over towards Xenith. The zebra mare looked over at Glory. "So, you are with a mare as well?" When I nodded, she simply shook her head. "And you two, do you try for the record as well?"

"Record? What record?" I asked with a little frown of confusion. Calamity trotted up and Glory looked over, her ears twitching.

The zebra looked coolly over at the littlest unicorn present and said, "I believe the number is thirty-three?" LittlePip's eyes went round and she immediately blushed.

"Thirty-three...?" I asked in confusion.

"In a single night," Homage said with a smug smile. Thirty-three... Oh!

"One night?" Glory asked with a flush. "I'm not sure that that's medically possible..."

"Hmmm... that could be a challenge! Hey, we could turn it into a contest!" I said, and Homage grinned in delight. I looked at the gray pegasus. "What do you say, Glory? I've got an itch in my nethers, a non-stick hoof, and these things!" I said, popping out my fingers and wiggling them.

Glory and LittlePip stared at us, perfect copies of one another, jaws dropped and cheeks flaming.

"Sweet Celestia, there's two of 'em," Calamity muttered, pointing his hoof at one and then the other as P-21 stared at us in disbelief, "Which one's Lil'pip again?"

"It's like looking in a mirror," Velvet murmured.

The pair looked at each other, looked back at us with a scowl, and shouted in perfect unison. "S-Shut up!"

* * *

As folks were enjoying themselves nibbling on the repast prepared, Homage trotted up to me. I nearly jumped out of my hooves at her approach. I might like teasing Glory, but the gray unicorn just oozed this sexy confidence that made me... alert. "Are they back to normal yet?" she asked as she looked across the room to where Glory and LittlePip were still fuming.

"Definitely pinkish still. They keep sneaking looks at each other and then going red again," I said with a soft chuckle.

"Mmmm... they're adorable," she said with a shake of her head, then looked at me with an arched brow. "You seem to handle it a little better."

"Told you about 99, right? Five hundred mares. Forty bucks. A mare that didn't like sex with other mares was in for a pretty lonely life."

"LittlePip would have loved it there," Homage said softly, but I sighed as I watched her. I knew

better.

"No, she wouldn't. Daisy would have picked on her. Marmalade would have helped. I would have turned a blind eye." I sighed, closing my eyes. "She would have been stuck in her role, whether it suited her or not. She'd never have left and she'd have been miserable. No pony was happy in 99. Happiness? That was just a delusion."

Homage sighed softly. "On that happy note... Hoofington's gone dark." I looked at her sharply. "Four days ago, right after the *Celestia*. I'm not getting any signal from the towers there. Actually, I'm not getting transmissions of any kind from there."

"I've got to get back..." I murmured. There were things happening, and I was having dinner and laughing and teasing and... I yipped as a tail spanked my ass hard. "What was that for?" I asked as I rubbed my stinging derriere with a forehoof, blushing hard myself.

"You were getting that whole 'kicking yourself for having fun' look going," she replied with a smile. "You can't run off this very second and you aren't a bad pony for enjoying yourself. Just letting you know."

I nodded; she was right. That had been exactly what I'd been about to do. "I just..."

"You want to help ponies. That's commendable. It's what I love about LittlePip," she said with a laugh. "But you don't have to go charging east just because I give you some troubling news."

"But I thought that that was what heroes are supposed to do? We charge off into the fray so other ponies can get away," I said with a touch of sarcasm. I glanced over at Homage, but the gray unicorn wasn't smiling as she looked across the room at LittlePip talking with Rampage. "Homage?"

"I hope she knows I don't want her to go," Homage murmured softly. "I know I tease her... sometimes I think I'm absolutely horrible to her. But it's only because the alternative is crying and begging her not to leave. I know she has to. She's just like you; she has to do things. Save Tenpony. Save the Wasteland. Save me. I'm just scared that I'm going to lose her. Sometimes I wish I could go with her... so that if something bad happens, then I'll be right there with her. I'm so jealous of you and Glory."

I closed my eyes. "I wish I could leave her here. I saw her die right before my eyes, Homage. Just a few days back. She was inches from my face, and then she fell. One of my enemies saved her life, but for a while there... It crushed me. And I'm always afraid that some decision I make is going to kill her."

"I'm just scared something's going to happen to LittlePip," Homage said and I looked at her. "Every time I see her, she's slipped a little further from me. It's not so much her dying... as terrible as that would be. I've had somepony I loved killed before. You live through it, as much as it hurts. I'm afraid that something will happen... something like... like what you had to do in Stable 99. She'll have to make a choice... or she'll go too far... or something. I keep telling her to fight the good fight... and she will. She'll fight till it destroys her."

I knew something of the blame game. "I haven't really known LittlePip all that long, but I think she'd do this whether you told her to fight or to stay. She's like me like that. Dumb, huh?"

"Mmmm, but it's what I love about her. She really, truly, will do whatever she has to to help other ponies," Homage said softly, sniffing and rubbing her eyes. Of course, at that moment LittlePip was trotting over with Xenith and Glory.

"I can't believe she survived being put through a wood chipper," LittlePip murmured. "Is Hoofington like Freakytown Central or something?" But then she spotted Homage and started to look concerned. "Homage? Are you okay?"

"Sure. Absolutely," I said with a wide grin.

Homage nodded and smiled. "Mhmm."

"Hey LittlePip..." I gave my slyest grin. "I just couldn't help but notice that Homage likes mares... and Glory likes mares... and you like mares... and me, well I think the three of you are the cutiest darn trio of fillies collected in the Wasteland. And, as I recall, Twilight once owned a book called the Zebra Sutra. Not suggesting anything. Just saying..." I grinned as lecherously as possible.

Xenith looked at the little unicorn and one-winged pegasus and observed curiously, "I did not know pony hooves could blush."

* * *

Things smoothed out a bit after that. There was one little inescapable hitch, though: the alicorn in the corner. She sat quietly, her purple eyes observing us all. LittlePip had done her utmost to ignore her presence completely. I'd explained she couldn't read anything if she didn't touch horns, but the little unicorn just grunted sourly and kept her distance. Still, as the night wore on, LittlePip kept looking over at the far corner where the purple alicorn sat silently.

"Are you absolutely sure she's safe?" LittlePip asked softly.

"Oh yeah, Lacunae's an angel as long as the Goddess isn't possessing her," I said with a casual smile.

The little unicorn balked. "Wait. She can just take over at any time?" I nodded and got that 'you are crazy' look again. "Aren't you afraid she's just going to take over and kill you?"

"Kill me? Do you realize how much I owe the Goddess?" I said with a snort. "I'm in debt to her up to my horn. She's not going to just throw all that away." Velvet stared in shock as P-21 sighed and shook his head. I continued, "Besides, all my friends have tried to kill me at one time or another. You get used to it." I shrugged, and LittlePip looked at my friends in shock.

"I haven't!" Scotch protested as she peeked out at the balefire phoenix stalking above her.

"Oh, right. Scotch hasn't," I amended with a shrug.

LittlePip rubbed her chin. "Now that I think about it, most of my friends have tried to kill me, too..."

Rampage laughed. "Hey! We could make a 'Tried to kill our leaders' club!"

"Could I get in on that?" I wondered.

The striped mare nodded. "Sure, Blackjack! You've tried to kill you more than anyone!"

LittlePip, Rampage, and I laughed as the black unicorn stammered, "This... this isn't healthy!" She looked at the blue buck as she pointed at me and LittlePip.

P-21 just nodded and deadpanned, "Yes, Velvet. Everyone from the Hoof is like this." He lead her off. "It helps if you think of her as a foal dropped on her head... repeatedly."

"Don't forget the lead paint!" I called after them, getting a look from LittlePip. "What? That stuff's good."

LittlePip shook her head. "Blackjack, you are just so... random!" I grinned as we approached Lacunae, Rampage trotting away to talk to Velvet. The purple alicorn looked at her calmly as LittlePip forced a small, tense smile. "Hi."

"Hello," she said telepathically, making LittlePip's mane stand on end.

"Well so nice to meet you! Goodbye!" she said as she turned, and I caught her.

"She's not going to gobble you up," I said firmly.

"Well, duh. I know that," she said, as if she were trying to convince herself. She slowly turned back around and took a deep breath. "Hi. Lacunae... right? That is your name?"

"It suffices..." Lacunae said quietly. "Lacunae is what I am. Something missing."

LittlePip frowned in confusion. "Something missing from you?"

"Things missing from others," she said cryptically. I rolled my eyes.

"Lacunae's where the Goddess shoves all the memories and thoughts she doesn't want to deal with in Unity. Apparently, there's a whole lot of guilt and angst when you blend together the minds and souls of thousands of ponies. Rather than deal with it, it all gets repressed."

"All in one pony?" LittlePip asked with a note of concern. "How do you... I mean... I would have thought..."

"That I'd be a complete monster?" Lacunae said quietly. "Like how you see all alicorns you've encountered?"

LittlePip winced. "Well, you've been helping Red Eye and trying to kill me..."

"Red Eye was the first to ever come to us with an offer to help. You were in Appleloosa to interfere with his operations. Were we supposed to abandon that allegiance and betray him?" she replied calmly as she stared down at LittlePip.

"Well... yes?" LittlePip said with a sheepish smile. "I mean... all the things he's done..."

"He was the first power in the Wasteland to work with us. We have no desire to perpetuate slavery. We are trying to save all of ponykind through Unity. We tried to send out priests and converts,

but they were assaulted and killed by all manner of perils. We were attacked on sight by so many settlements.”

“You don’t... you can’t just sit there and try and tell me you’re the victims here! You force ponies to join Unity!”

“Would you allow somepony you care for to die because they refuse to take medicine that will cure them?” she replied calmly, making LittlePip balk. “You kill enemies and threats to survivors in the Wasteland, but do you remain to make certain they do not starve next month? Die of thirst next week? In Unity, we transform ponies into a form that does not hunger or weaken in this world. We protect their souls in us. Can you do the same?”

“In you?” LittlePip murmured in shock. “You mean... you trap their souls inside you?”

“In us, we endure. They are not hurt. They are safe from death forever,” Lacunae murmured softly, then closed her eyes.

LittlePip frowned, looking confused and a little guilty. “I think I liked it better when you were just trying to kill me.”

“You are helping us,” Lacunae said calmly, and that seemed to make her squirm. “Reluctantly. Unwillingly, perhaps. But helping us. With your help, we will stop Red Eye, end slavery, and halt the suffering of all ponies in the Wasteland.”

But as she spoke, our friends gathered around us, “And what about others?” Homage asked as she trotted up with a small frown.

“Others?” Lacunae said in confusion.

“Yes, others. It’s not like it’s just ponies out there! What about zebras?” Xenith looked at Lacunae with that steady, imperturbable gaze.

“They are... not us. We cannot... We do not know...” the purple alicorn started to stammer.

“And griffins?” suggested Calamity. Doubt flickered in Lacunae’s eyes. “You just gonna kill ‘em?”

“We would rather... it is not... you don’t understand...”

“And hellhounds?” Velvet Remedy asked as she joined in as well. I blinked at that and Calamity groaned softly. Weren’t hellhounds some kind of monster? But then, weren’t alicorns?

“And dragons?” asked Rampage. “I’m pretty sure there’s still a few of those around. You gonna be able dip them into Unity as well?”

“And ghouls!” piped up Scotch Tape with the phoenix standing on her rump. I looked at her with a smile, and she flushed. “What? Harpica and those other ghoul kids were nice!”

LittlePip looked at all of us backing her and smiled before she looked back at Lacunae. “That’s why Unity’s just not enough. It’s not enough to save just ponies by turning us all into alicorns. We have to fix this world.”

"We have to do better," I said quietly. "No one person... no one goddess... can do it all themselves."

Then Lacunae sighed as well. "We liked it better when you were dropping boxcars on us too." Then her eyes turned hard. "WE WILL SAVE WHAT WE CAN, HOW BEST WE CAN. WE SHALL THRIVE IN THIS WORLD. REMEMBER OUR ACCORD, AND THEN YOU WILL LEARN THE PEACE THAT COMES THROUGH UNITY!" she thundered at all of us. LittlePip drew Little Macintosh, but I shook my head hard. Lacunae shuddered and sighed. "My apologies for... that."

LittlePip put the revolver away, looking on in concern, "Are you all right?"

"She hoped to convince you. To truly convince you. She did not expect... that..." she said as she slumped against the wall. "Now she's feeling shame... and doubt... and questioning herself."

"She is?" Velvet asked in astonishment. "Then maybe..." but Lacunae sniffed softly and shook her head.

"She's stuffing it all into you, isn't she?" I asked as I knelt beside her. Lacunae nodded silently and I cursed the coward.

"You mean... anything that might convince her to change her mind is being put into you?" Velvet asked softly.

"All that remains is the certainty of the correctness of her course," Lacunae said as she looked at LittlePip. "You know she plans to force you into Unity when you uphold your end of the bargain?"

The little unicorn swallowed hard and then gave a grudging little nod. "I figured she'd do something like that."

"And you have a plan to stop her?" Lacunae asked as I saw, for the first time, tears in my friend's eyes. LittlePip stood there for the longest time and then gave a single jerky nod. Lacunae gave a small smile as she closed her eyes. "Good."

* * *

The party was pretty well done after that. Calamity and Velvet trotted out. I wasn't tired... but then, my body didn't do tired anymore. I wondered if this was how Harpica and Ditzzy felt all the time, this stillness within. I wasn't hungry. Wasn't thirsty. Couldn't detect myself breathing. No heartbeat. Was I really still alive at all? I trotted to the window and looked out at the darkness. Red Eye's forces had withdrawn; whatever LittlePip had said on the radio had convinced him.

"Quite a party," LittlePip said as she trotted up beside me and looked out as well. "Looks like it worked... whatever we did," she said with a small expression of confusion.

"You did it. I was just backing you up," I said softly as we both stared out at the night. "Your mind-reading enemy is the Goddess, isn't she?" LittlePip looked down at her hooves and sighed, then nodded. See... the Blackjack express would arrive... eventually.

I closed my eyes. Should I tell her about the Enervation ring? Should I try and talk her out of it? Help her? Warn Lacunae? I tapped my head against the thick glass window. I couldn't deal with this

now. Why couldn't it all be simple? It was never... ever... simple!

"I wasn't sure I could tell you earlier. Now I'm not sure what I had planned exactly. It's all... muddled up." I sighed, wishing I could tweak my own memories as well. Simple ponies like me were not meant for brain-perplexing problems!

"Be careful with that memory manipulation stuff. Tried it on Scotch to remove some horrors. Didn't work too well," I warned as I looked out at the night and the few lights that filled it, distant and dark like the black beyond the stars. I sighed. "And I know you're not going to like this... but the Goddess knows about Gardens."

"What?" she asked as she stared at me in horror. "How? I thought..."

"She knows it exists, but not where it is or what it does. Spike's safe. And I'm so brain damaged Lacunae will never pick it up. But you should know the Goddess thinks that it might be able to be... well... repurposed."

"Repurposed? How?" Then her eyes went wide. "You mean instead of purifying... she could use it to contaminate everything?"

"Mhmmm..." I said with a nod. "That's about how I felt when Lacunae let it slip. The Goddess could use Gardens to pick up where the bombs left off." LittlePip groaned as she buried her face in her hooves. "Well... bombs plus taint, I suppose," I amended as I patted her shoulder.

"Everything alright?" Homage asked as she walked up to us.

"Oh, just talking about fun stuff. Radiation. Taint. The end of the world," I said with a roll of my eyes.

"Lots of fun," Homage murmured as she looked at the little unicorn.

"Personally, I just wish I knew what taint is... I mean, I had a gun filled with the stuff!"

"It's a potion that was developed by Twilight Sparkle in the years before the ending of the war," LittlePip murmured dejectedly. "Twilight Sparkle used it to create alicorns. It was her last act before the bombs fell. There were huge vats full of it in Maripony, and the diamond dog warrens underneath Pleasant Valley were full of rejected batches."

I blinked as I stared at LittlePip. "Well... that doesn't make any sense."

"Huh?" LittlePip slowly lifted her head to look at me.

"Well... I mean, it couldn't be just the potion. Because taint is all over the place, right?" I asked, looking at Homage.

The gray unicorn frowned, but then nodded. "Well... yes... but the contamination is strongest around Maripony." She rubbed her nose, her brows knitting. "But... you can find taint from Hoofington to Trottingham and all over the place in between."

"So did the potion magically teleport itself halfway across Equestria from Pleasant Valley?" I

asked as I looked at them, and now LittlePip was looking confused as well.

"Look, the potion causes massive magical mutation. I don't know how it got so... so scattered... but it must have somehow," LittlePip said with a frown.

But the old Blackjack express was wheeling along for once. "Except... Twilight made a spell to neutralize taint *before* she completed the potion, right? Why would she create a neutralizer spell for her own potion she hadn't even completed?" LittlePip's frown faded as she nodded. I felt a five watt bulb alight in my brain. "So... whatever taint is... it can't be the potion... or rather... it can't be *just* the potion."

"Maybe... I don't know," LittlePip said with a frown. "It doesn't quite add up..."

"Twilight must have had some hint though as to what taint was and how to stop it before she made the potion. Some... something. And so she made a spell to remove it. Then she used that something to make her alicorns." I clopped my hooves together.

"Maybe..." LittlePip said with a sigh as she rubbed her chin. Then she frowned. "Ugh... I hate mysteries."

"You're telling me?" I laughed, and got a smile in return. Glory trotted up as well with a smile.

Everypony was starting to head for the elevators. P-21 carried Scotch on his back, and I felt a warm and fuzzy feeling in my... magical blood pump thing. We started to drift over as well. "You know what sucks? I'm probably going to have to erase everything that happened tonight in the morning," LittlePip said with a sigh as the four of us filed into the elevator.

"Well..." Homage said with a mysterious little smile as she pushed the button and the doors slid shut. "Best make it a night worth forgetting."

* * *

It was very late... or really early... when I pulled myself from the sweaty sheets, listening to the snores, marveling in the simple music of unregulated breathing. I felt good... not just content or pain free... but good. And as I walked to the window and saw the faintest glow to the east, I was glad that Glory had saved me. Glad that I'd met LittlePip and Homage. There were good ponies out here... ponies who wanted to help and be friends.

"Ponies worth fighting for," the Dealer said quietly as he sat on the windowsill. I glanced at him. He looked younger; I didn't know what that meant. He nudged back his battered, wide-brimmed hat as he looked to the east. "So you're going, then."

"You knew I would," I replied quietly.

"I knew you would," he rasped as he shuffled his cards. "But somepony needed to give you a choice... even if it's one you could never make."

"Thanks," I replied, sincerely. I heard steps behind me, and he disappeared from view.

"Who were you talking to?" Glory asked softly as she hugged me from behind, snuggling her legs against my body and sheltering us both with her wing.

"Just my crazy," I said as I leaned back against her, thankful for every inch of my hide that wasn't metallic. I still smelled her in my nostrils and tasted her on my lips, and when we kissed it was the sweetest flavor ever. Finally, I pulled away. "Thank you for last night."

"I wasn't sure you'd want to do it... not after... not after what happened on the boat," Glory said in a soft, scared little voice.

"You mean when I was raped?" It was a curious word. I would have thought that I'd flinch or something. But it was more like a lead weight on my mind, compressing my feelings under its subtle, heavy load.

She nodded. "I wouldn't think you'd want... you know... at all."

I smiled and kissed her again. "They didn't beat me, Glory. If they had found Scotch... if they'd touched her... I would have been destroyed. That would have been it for me. So they fucked me good and hard... slimed me up and tore me raw... that didn't matter. Hurting me didn't matter. Long as they didn't hurt anypony else... I didn't matter." The whole memory was just one ugly cloud. I couldn't get rid of it... I didn't deserve to be rid of it. So I'd just carry it along with all the others.

She started shaking behind me, hugging me even tighter. I heard her sniff and give a little sob as she tried to remain as silent as possible. Hot tears trickled down the side of my neck. "Glory... why... why are you crying?" I asked, feeling baffled. I'd just told her it was okay...

"Because you won't!" she said in my ear, muffling herself with her mane. "You matter to me, Blackjack. You matter... you matter to so many ponies and you... you died! You were hurt! You... sweet Celestia, why are you so convinced you deserve to suffer? You paid for 99, okay? You've paid for everything. So why can't you accept that you matter and it's as wrong for you to be hurt as it is for Scotch or me or anypony else to be?"

I closed my eyes and marveled at the silk of her mane, the wet trickle of her tears, the sound of her ragged breathing and the beat of her heart. The most beautiful sound in the world. "I don't know... like I said. Crazy..." She broke into more sobs as she held me close, shedding tears I couldn't. I wished I knew a way to make her stop, or a way for me to join her. "Anyway... thank you for last night," I said softly as I was held by her. "Oddly... I think I understand why Deus acted like he did..." She silenced, and I peeked back at her with a little smile.

"You understand him?" There was something in her face; a look both repelled and curious at the same time. I supposed it was the doctor in her. "That's... I don't... um... wow..."

"Sorry for the awkward," I said with a rueful smile.

"You don't... I mean... do you want... like he..." She was babbling, and I smiled and kissed her.

"You didn't turn me into a cyberpony sexfiend rapist." At least... I really really *really* hoped she hadn't. "I just mean that, now that half of me is mechanical, I think I know why he acted like he did."

Glory relaxed a little, and her curiosity seemed to be overcoming the part of her that was horrified that I might empathize with a rapist... having been both a victim and perpetrator myself... honestly, I was getting a little turned around trying to come to terms with it. "What do you mean, then?"

"The professor said they had to let him retain his penis. Seems kinda stupid, given what he did..." I murmured softly. "But Glory... what we did together... it was the first thing I've really done that made me feel like... like a pony. Like I was more than a machine. And making you feel good... making you happy... it made me feel like I'm more than just a source of misery and pain for you. I know that he was a monster for what he did... but given how he felt... I know how important it was to him."

I thought of the professor, stuck in her jar with only a vague hope of getting her body back. Would she last years like that? Months? Weeks? Until I'd had sex, I hadn't realized what a fundamental need it was for me. It was the last little bit of my flesh and blood equinity. I wouldn't have survived as a brain in a jar. No pony could... not with their sanity intact.

I sighed as I felt her reach down and felt her touch a warm and tender part of me. I groaned, a little part of my mind telling me that this was stupid and wasteful and indulgent and... and I took that part and mentally beat the shit out of it and leaned back and let her help me feel like a flesh and blood mare again.

* * *

My barding was buckled, the usually simple task now... *interesting* with no magic and my new fingers. The battle saddle that Calamity had rigged for me yesterday was in place, Taurus's rifle on one side and a new twelve gauge shotgun on the other. Vigilance was polished to a gleam and set in a foreleg holster. Lacunae had sewn my Crusader filly onto the Reaper hoofball uniform. My saddlebags were in place with an ammo feed to each gun. I was still getting used to the control bit.

"How do you keep from shooting by accident when you talk?" I asked as I looked back at Glory. This whole setup was weird... and just a touch kinky.

"Practice," she said as she nudged me with a smile. She then looked a little concerned at me working my tongue and reached up to tap a little tab on the side of my mouth. "Also, safeties." Oh, yeah. That'd probably be smart.

We made our way up onto the roof where the three wings of alicorns awaited, six greens along with three purples. The green alicorns, according to Lacunae, had the ability to boost the purples' teleport ranges. Rover grumbled nearby as he gave sullen looks and kept his exact opinion of alicorns to himself. LittlePip was staying out of sight, having decided to erase every memory of me and my friends she possessed. And I'd just have to make sure the Goddess didn't suck my brains out when I was asleep.

Homage trotted up to me and gave me a nuzzle. "Be careful. I hear Hoofington's a dangerous place."

"Be careful yourself," I replied with a smile.

"Please. I live in Tenpony. What could possibly happen to me here?" she countered with a grin. "But really. Be careful. Whatever took down the MASEBS in the valley wasn't just some overeager scavenger pulling a plug. It was cut off by somepony who knew precisely what they were doing. So watch out."

I nodded again and looked at Helpinghoof. He cleared his throat, then said softly, "I'll keep an eye on your little metal ring. We'll have the DJ let you know if it comes to anything. We'll have him call it

'Blackjack's science project' or something." I thanked him for taking my concern seriously.

Life Bloom gave a cool, if slightly curious, look at the alicorns before looking back to me. "Hope this is a safe mode of travel."

"The Goddess still wants to use me. Till then..." I gave a little shrug. Then I sighed. "Sorry I didn't turn out to be Twilight Sparkle's kid." Homage's smile faded as she looked over at P-21. I tried to ignore the pink pony going 'oooooooooh' in the back of my brain as I focused on Life Bloom. And... was it just me, or were the purple alicorns now glancing at each other?

"You've given the society and myself a lot to think about, Blackjack," he said with a smile. "Thank you."

"No problem. And thank you for the book." I smiled at him, and he blinked as if he didn't know what I was talking about. "Magical Exercises for Young Unicorns?" I said, giving him a sly wink.

He hesitated, then smiled. "Oh... yes. Of course. You're welcome." He really should have gone into acting. He had me almost convinced! Then he trotted away with Homage and Helpinghoof.

The purple alicorn beside me projected into my mind, "WE CERTAINLY HOPE YOU DO NOT EXPECT TO MAKE A HABIT OF THIS! WHERE DO YOU WISH TO GO IN THAT MISERABLE CITY?"

I looked at all my friends, new and old, and smiled. "Home."

The world disappeared in a purple flash.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: I'd first love to give thanks to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria and to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster on making this something worth reading. I'd also love to thank my readers and their comments. This story is now longer than the original Fallout Equestria. I'm really sorry about that... you'd think 600,000 some odd words would be enough to tell one story. I'd also love to give special thanks to Swicked. He provided some of the grade A material in this chapter, stuff I never even imagined but that kept me in stitches the whole time. Finally, I would like to thank those generous readers who have donated to the bit jar at David13ushey @gmail. com through paypal. Next chapter... back to the Hoof.)

(Note from Hinds: To those wondering whether the Gloryjack scene was just a Gloryjack scene or...something else, the ambiguity is deliberate. I personally prefer to think that it's just the two of them...but Somber wanted the readers free to make up their own minds. :) I write this note because there's been some confusion in the comments as to whether the ambiguity was deliberate or bad writing, and I certainly don't want people to think that PH is badly written.)