

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 44: Mares and Stallions

"It's awfully pretty."

"Yes, she was."

The Wasteland is a poisonous place. I don't mean the taint, radiation, and disease; sure, those are problems, but they're not the Wasteland's true assault. All of those can be fought or borne. They could even be defeated entirely... but not by one pony working alone or by warring gangs or small, scattered, distrustful settlements. Red Eye's slave empire might be able to do it, but then the old horrors would just be replaced by new ones. To heal Equestria, ponies needed harmony, true harmony, and that was what the Wasteland fought against most strongly. The poisons that are killing us aren't magical or chemical; they're psychological. And they were killing Equestria even before there was a Wasteland.

Rampage had tried to show me that, but I hadn't quite gotten it. I was poisoned; we all were. Doubt. Fear. Hate. Regret. Shame. Pride. I was a walking toxic waste dump of mental venoms that were killing me and ponies around me. No wonder I'd taxed Happyhorn's therapy machines to their absolute limit. No surprise they couldn't create a simulation that I'd have been content with. The faults lay not with the environment but with myself.

And I'd killed an innocent filly.

I knew I wasn't Deus yet; I hadn't gone in there intending to kill Boing and her two friends. They'd been casualties in my fight with the Seekers. But two weeks ago, when I faced the Reapers in Megamart, I hadn't tried to tear them apart like I had the Thunderhead pegasi in Yellow River. I could have talked my way out, especially with Dusk there. I could have tried to find a better way.

Now... now I wasn't even sure I was trying anymore.

And I'd have to change that. Since I'd gotten back to the Hoof, I'd been falling apart. No. Even before that, when I'd pulled that stunt with LittlePip... would I have done something that reckless if I'd been normal? And everything past that... Brimstone's Fall... Priest... Chimera... the Harbingers... I was running full out with no brakes or thought at all. Something inside me was wrong, and I needed to find a way to fix it. Pieces of myself had been falling away bit by bit, and I needed to find a way to pull myself together.

And the first step was finding a place to sleep.

I'd wanted to go back to the tunnel with Boing. I'd wanted to give her and her friends a burial like I hadn't given Scoodle, but that wasn't possible. I'd gotten into viewing range of the construction site and could go no further without being spotted. The Seekers were using the train tunnel to come and go in their search for me, and without a StealthBuck, I'd be toast. Even with one, I doubted I could sneak out three bodies for burial.

So now I was heading due south towards the western edge of the immense plug of black rock. It had to be almost a mile across and at least that high, disappearing into the clouds above and probably only visible against the dark sky due to my cybereyes. It was funny, though: the more I looked at it, the

more boring it became. It was just a rock. Big and black, but a rock.

Around it for several hundred feet was a tumbled field of jagged and broken obsidian. Five minutes spent trying to pick my way around massive hexagonal blocks of stone that had peeled away from the sides of the mountain, and over shattered black volcanic glass, convinced me that this was a good and nasty way to die. The sharp glass edges promised a particularly bloody end at the slightest misstep. There was, though, life among the rocks, and while it mostly consisted of a low thorny brush that was practically impenetrable, there was also some amazingly green grass.

I found a small trickle of water running out from a gap in the black stone; I followed it for a while and reached a place where the water pooled in a largeish wedge formed by two massive blocks. As I was taking a nice long drink, a thought struck me. I looked around; I'd deactivated my E.F.S. so that the red bars would stop twitching in my vision everywhere I looked. There was no way I could fight them properly if they all were real, anyway, and it was impossible to pick anything useful out of all the noise my wonky brain was throwing in. The night *seemed* quiet and still, though, save for the soft noise and motion of the water. This was probably still a bad idea, but... I stripped off my armor and carefully waded in; I definitely didn't want to get over my head, as swimming was impossible with my metal legs. The water turned out to be quite warm, somehow; despite everything I'd been through, I smiled at this simple pleasure.

Was there anything more soothing and civilizing than enough hot water to submerge yourself in?

I washed the accumulated blood, sweat, and grime off my hide and white-enameled limbs, then gave the same treatment to my thrashed armor. Half the ceramic plates lining the back would have to be replaced, but I had some suits from Happyhorn that I could use for repairs. I'd have killed for a block of soap, but just cleaning myself off helped to keep me stable. I was walking a very delicate line; the hospital had helped me face what I'd done, but I hadn't really processed it yet. Heck, I still wasn't over Scoodle or what had happened on the boat.

The boat... I thought of how I'd been acting. The ghoulish scavenger in Brimstone's Fall... Candlewick's ass grab... was I even safe to be around males? The thing was, after getting to know P-21 as a person and meeting Priest and others, I liked them. For most of my life, they'd been nothing but reproductive equipment, and I'd used them as such. I hadn't been much better than the bucks who'd ploughed me on the *Seahorse*. Out in the Wasteland, I'd realized that they were so much more: friends, enemies... and maybe even something else someday. Oh, sure, Glory had my heart. But I didn't want to be... reactive. Assertive: yes. Respected: would be nice. Berserk... no.

I found a submerged ledge I could sit back on and looked at my mechanical hoof. I extended my fingers and watched them slowly move. There was a special kind of magic there, taking my thought to move and translating it into the motion I wanted. Enchanted to repair itself and to magically translate feeling, pressure, temperature, and damage. Tough. Yet as I stared at the water beading on the white surface, I had to admit that, if I'd been given a choice, I'd have had my normal limbs back.

But I was a cyberpony. One I'd known had been content to be reduced to a life in a jar. The other had been a sadistic monster. The only other people like me that I'd met weren't even ponies. That didn't leave me with a whole lot of definite ground to figure out what I was supposed to do or be. Theoretically, I might live for centuries; the professor had. But what about relationships? Would I outlive Glory? Could I have a family? Should I even want to have one? I still could feel pleasure; hell, it was the

last remaining thing I had that was unquestionably organic. Something to live for...

If only the thought of it didn't make one part of me start to panic and another part of me feel horribly guilty and another part feel ugly and mechanical. I touched the restored left side of my face. Glory had saved my sanity; I never would have lasted if I couldn't even look in the mirror and not see a machine.

I gave a rueful smile as I played matchmaker in my head. It helped take my mind off other things. If I were to get physical with a stallion, who would it be? P-21? Ohh... that thought opened up a can of radroaches even I couldn't begin to deal with. I'd had a brief fantasy of a fling with Priest before he'd reminded me that not all bucks were interested in me. What about Brutus? I thought of the massive black earth pony and smiled. Okay, *there* was a warm and fuzzy tingle. Sagittarius? He was a little older than me but certainly had some possibilities. Splendid? Hmm... if you got past that whole 'Society slavery' thing, he was positively delicious. Stronghoof was... a little too intense. Lighthooves...

That curdled the buttery feelings churning in my nethers. So much for that little thought escape. And really, why was I contemplating who I'd like to slap flanks with at a time like this? Shouldn't I be kicking myself for Boing, fearing myself for what I'd done at Yellow River, berating myself for not following Happyhorn's advice and finding a way to sleep, or disgusted with myself for even thinking about sex after what happened on the *Seahorse*? Surely I should be hating myself one way or another right now?

"Self-destructive impulses... gee... I wonder why the machine would say that?" I muttered with a groan.

I lay back on a rock, staring up. There was a gap between the clouds and the mountain, enough to let a tiny crescent of white moonlight peek through. The pale luminescence turned the black knob of stone into a glittering, ghostly sculpture. I had to admit, I was astonished to find anything beautiful in the Hoof; this place seemed to thrive on ugliness and miser--

Oh. Hello...

Two yellow eyes peered out of darkness of the thorn bushes. Vertical pupils cut through yellow irises, coming to points like a dragon's. The eyes watched me with a very steady stare, and I didn't dare move towards the gear I'd left dripping on a rock beside the pool. Finally, a minute passed, and I began to get more and more tense. "Can I help you?" I asked as I slowly moved to stand on the ledge.

Step by step it... he... emerged. He was a pony like none I'd ever seen before. His hide was a dark gray and his tail a deep purple; I couldn't see his mane under his helmet. To my shock, he had wings... but not wings like a pegasus. These wings were leathery skin--similar to a manticores--rather than feathered, and his large ears had prominent tufts at the ends. I'd never seen a monsterpony like this before... and I'd thought that Brass had been the last one anyway. He wore dark purple metal armor that appeared almost archaic but also quite intricate and clearly well-crafted and tended. At least that suggested he wasn't a feral monster...

"Okay... look... Sanguine is dead, so let's just let bygones be bygones and I'll be on my way, okay? Okay!" I said with a strained grin. He stood on one of the rock slabs that formed the pool wall. I saw he had a freshly killed radhog slung across his back, bleeding all over his sides and wings. He simply looked at me and then removed the ornate-looking helmet, revealing a short mane the same purple as his tail. Next to it he set his kill.

Then he took off his armor and I amended one little fact: he wasn't just a stallion... look past the freaky wings and the eyes, and there was absolutely no denying he was a damned good-looking stallion. Little apprehensive alarms began to sound along with an admiration I just been practicing earlier. I had to admit that from a purely biological standpoint, he was damned fine! Toned flanks sporting a strange heart-shaped gothic shield, strong shoulders, he was big but not *too* big... I shook my head hard. Okay... *not* the time for this!

Of course, that did nothing for the part of my mind that was screaming and making my nethers clench. Another little part of the crazy that was my brain wanted to get friendly then and there just to prove that what had happened to me wasn't in control. Fortunately, I had just enough sanity left to seize both impulses and send them into opposite corners of my mind for a time out. "Hey... um... it's really nice to meet you! At least, I hope you're nice! I mean, of course you're nice. We're all nice here, and--"

He jumped into the other side of the pool, disappearing under the water. Wow... was it just me or did the water get a whole lot hotter?! It might explain why I was so warm all of a sudden! He emerged just a few feet away, the water cascading off him as those bright amber eyes peered at me. He then sat on the ledge beside me, and I just sat there, ears folded back, staring at him. There was a riot going on in my head as I had parts screaming to attack, parts screaming to run, and parts screaming to rut. Silence was my only hope.

Fortunately, he didn't speak to the crazy cyberpony sitting with her legs pressed together and her tail so tight between them that it'd take a prybar or a little flattery to get it out. He washed the blood off his lovely charcoal gray coat, his wings stretching out a little. I couldn't take my eyes off him. I had no doubt I could kill him; that wasn't the point. I wanted to be around a stallion without reacting like they were the ones on the boat. I didn't want to be a grenade with the stem pulled. He sighed and reclined in the hot spring, and that pulled my eyes in an entirely different direction.

I was pretty sure my face was the same color as my mane as I sunk down, staring straight ahead. What the hell was the matter with me? I was just taking a bath with a... very... very... nice stallion. One who just looked at me and smiled steadily. This wasn't 99; he wasn't on my queue. I wasn't forcing anything. He wasn't forcing anything. He wasn't trying to shoot me... always a bonus! Say hi, Blackjack. Run away, Blackjack. Don't kill him, Blackjack. Do *something*, Blackjack!

"Gottagohiwhatsyernamebye!" I blurted all at once, and he looked at me in surprise. I covered my face with my hooves. "Look. Thank you for not trying to kill me. Really. I really appreciate it! But I'm just a little bit of a basket case and I've been through a lot and you're really cute... really... but... yeah. Sorry." And I turned and climbed out of the pool next to my gear.

So did he.

I froze as I saw him right there behind me. Neither of us blinked as he just looked at me and I stared over my shoulder at him. If he put one hoof on my flank I'd kill him. But I also really wanted him to... and I also felt horribly guilty for wanting him to... and so I just stood there as he sniffed the crazy mare. Ooookay... apparently I smelled good. I didn't dare move, and if he touched me... oh, I really didn't want to kill him. Except that I also really did. My brain was zigzagging all over the place; in 99 I was the one who was supposed to fill my queue, make all the moves. This was... new. He lifted his head and smiled at me with a soft nicker. He was game. Oh was he game.

Was I?

Finally, the assorted crazy that was my brain lurched to a decision as I turned to face him and backed away. As much... as nice... as the idea was, there were way too many unknowns, not to mention the fact I might snap and kill him right in the middle. I was really glad for once that my heart wasn't pounding in my chest; the noise would have been a dead giveaway. But I didn't know who or what he was beyond male... Sweet Celestia, was he... but I didn't even know his name, not to mention species!

"Look. Ah... I need to go. I am... really... not in any condition to... ah... you know. And... thanks for not killing me. Or trying to. It's just... yeah... okay..." *Please don't follow. Please don't follow,* I mentally begged as I went to my gear. "I'm really flattered but I'm kinda cursed and a little unstable and I really appreciate what you're doing but really it's just a bad idea and I don't even know your name or what you are exactly so thanks but..." I babbled a constant stream, hoping that I'd eventually hit the word or phrase that would convince him I was not the kind of mare he wanted to rut with.

I looked down. Gear. Guns. Good to go! I just bundled them up in one heap. I'd put them on later when there wasn't as much penis around me... nice penis on a strange bat-stallion who might just be sizing me up to eat or-- I looked up and he was right there. Just... right there in front of me with his bright eyes and what was the matter with me? What was the matter with him?! Wasn't there this huge sign around my neck saying 'Don't spank flanks with the crazy'? My brain gears locked up. "Hi," was all I could squeak out. "Please I'm not safe to... ah," I whimpered as he leaned in. I really didn't know what I'd do if he...

Apparently, it was stop thinking. His lips met mine, and while I was in no condition to be kissed, another part of me came roaring to the front of my mind and with primal rage stomped every last bit of guilt from my crazy. Don't kill him... please don't kill him... No doubt I'd be angsty like crazy for this later, but for right now I just let it go. I kissed this strange, utterly anonymous stallion back. No doubt he'd turn out to have some sort of terrible secret or dark past or traumatized soul or... something! But right now, I had to admit he was a damned good kisser. There was just one thing...

I slugged him so hard he landed in the middle of the pool with a splash. Fortunately, he wasn't half metal and floated there in a daze as I huffed, inventing all new colors of red. With him further away and my ardor momentarily doused, I was able to sort a few things out.

I had to admit, I'd really needed that kiss. I might have radroaches in my brain, suffer from self-destructive episodes, and be half metal... but as he pulled away, a little pony in the back of my head gave a little 'Woot! I'm cute and good enough to get kissed by a cute guy!' cheer and dance. I quickly backed away, feeling confused and thankful and wary all at once. He blinked at me from the middle of the pool, and I was oddly glad and at the same time alarmed to see him smiling ruefully.

"Um... thanks... but don't do that again," I said as the cheer wore off and wariness resumed, but he seemed to be content with just that and backed away. The kiss had rearranged things a little. No, rutting was off the table and I'd smash him if he tried. Panic was shelved for the time being; if he had friends show up, though...

Hey... I'd just kissed a guy and not shot him! That was progress, right! *Right?* Ugh... Why now? I didn't know how to deal with a buck that was interested in me like that.

First things first. "So... do you talk?" I asked him as he dragged himself out of the pool. He held the side of his face and frowned, but thoughtfully rather than in annoyance. Finally he shook his head and pointed at himself. His mouth opened and closed several times, but then he pointed his hoof at me

and covered his ears.

"You can talk, but I can't hear it?" I asked in confusion, and then he tapped his nose with a nod and smile. "But I can smell it?" He froze and then sat, waving his hooves in front of him and shaking his head. "I can't smell it?" He stopped and looked at me now with probably as much confusion as I had. "Okay, okay. The important thing is that you can't talk in any way I can understand?" He sighed, rolled his amber eyes, then shrugged.

He stood and trotted to his armor, then pulled out a chalkboard and a piece of chalk. He popped the latter into his mouth and wrote 'Yes'. Just like Ditzzy Doo, as I recalled. Okay, so we had communication... sort of. He erased the board with the tip of his wing and then wrote 'Stygius' and grinned as he tapped his chest with a hoof. "Your name?" I asked, and he nodded once.

Stygius... okay. I apparently attracted all sorts. "Okay, Stygius. My name's Blackjack. What are you doing out here?"

He looked surprised. He pointed at the radhog, then crouched and pounced the rock a few feet ahead of him, all four hooves hitting the ground at once. He swept his forehooves wide, making a popping noise with his tongue. Then he pranced along the side of the pool, fanning his wings. He stopped, covering his eyes with a hoof as he looked at me. Then he gave a broad and somewhat cocky little smile as he dipped his hoof into the pool and made a little splash. Then he kissed the air and abruptly stood upright on his hind legs, and slowly fell back till he collapsed with all four legs thrust up into the air.

"So you were out hunting, made your kill, were flying back, spotted me and... decided to flirt?" The batpony sat up, rubbing his chin, and then grinned and nodded. "You didn't think I was a raider or... bait? Something?"

He grabbed his slate, cleaned it, then wrote, 'Too sexy.'

Seriously? "You thought I was... I was too sexy to be dangerous?" Now I was more worried about him than what he might do to me. He grinned ruefully and shrugged, smiling up at me. Clearly I'd need to hit him again if I was going to work that interest out of him. I rubbed my temples and moved on to the next important question on my mind. "What are you?"

The batpony blinked, then wrote 'Luna's guards'.

Okay... so not a monsterpony. And plural. I certainly hadn't heard anything about them in school, or the Wasteland Survival Guide, or from DJ Pon3. "You used to guard Princess Luna?"

He pointed at himself and then shook his head. He then wrote 'Great x10 grandma'.

"Oh. You're the descendants of Luna's guards..." I said, and he tapped his nose. I assumed that that was his way of saying 'yes'. "But... why didn't they die in Canterlot with her?" He looked at me with a flat expression, and I winced inwardly; I couldn't blame him. That was a 9.5 on the bluntometer.

He rolled his eyes and cupped his forelegs, rocking them back and forth. Then he pointed betwixt my legs and tapped his stomach. Then he pointed at himself and held his hoof colt-high in front of him. I struggled a moment, then guessed, "Oh... so there were babies, mothers, and young ponies who weren't

in Canterlot?” He nodded vigorously. “Do you live around here, then?”

He froze, then forced a grin and shook his head firmly. He looked a bit too nervous to me, though. He glanced out into the darkness, then waved vaguely off towards the east. “Ah... Well, very nice to meet you, Stygius...” Really, it was nice to meet something interesting that wasn’t trying to kill me. “But I really should be on my way.”

I shook the water out of my barding and strapped it on. Stygius looked crestfallen as he watched me. Suddenly, he darted back to his dark purple armor, put it on in a flash, and soared over and landed in front of me with a broad, cocky grin. But due to his haste, his armor was askew and his helmet was on backwards. He froze a moment, then reached up and turned it around straight, trying to maintain a dignified expression. “You... want to come with me?” He bowed deeply. I sat and looked at him flatly. “Why?”

He glanced at my posterior, then grinned and struck a noble pose.

It might have been a little bit impressive, even with the backwards helmet, if a second dark form hadn’t swooshed out of the night and pounced right on top of him. He slid almost ten feet, looking up at a second batpony with the same dusky hide; her mane was more bluish than purple, but other than that they looked quite similar. This batpony was a mare in the same sort of armor, and she looked pissed as her bright yellow eyes glared down at him. Suddenly, I could just make out the faintest chirps, squeaks, and squeals at the edge of my hearing as she moved her mouth. The lecture was accompanied by her pointing at me and then smacking him upside the head.

Somepony was in trouble...

Finally, she huffed and stepped back, letting Stygius rise. She glared at his armor and roughly jerked it all into place and buckled it down, then snorted and nodded before frowning at me. Her hoof pointed imperiously away.

“Okay. Okay. I get the idea,” I muttered as I backed off.

Stygius launched himself into the air and landed next to me, the batmare looking shocked as he landed. I heard the faintest squeaks and chirps as he pointed at me. She frowned at him, now more in worry than anger. She made the smallest chirp, and jabbed her hoof in my direction. Then she looked at him suspiciously and pointed at me again, making another noise. He suddenly looked nervous, fidgeted, and then assumed the noble pose once more and made what I assumed was supposed to be a gallant sound.

She looked at him flatly, then sighed and shook her head, taking off and soaring in an arc to land before me. Then she reached out and patted my shoulder gently. I just stared at her in utter confusion as she trotted past Stygius with a scornful snort, grabbed the radhog in her hooves, and flew off into the night on silent bat wings.

I looked at Stygius. “Sooooo?”

He sighed, grabbed his chalk, and scribbled ‘Twin sister.’ A moment later, he added ‘Tenebra’ underneath it. Strange names must be a batpony thing. He erased it and then wrote, ‘She mad.’

No. *Really?* “Why?”

‘Rules.’ He made a snapping motion with his hooves, then pointed at me and shook his head. Breaking rules?

“Oh. You weren’t supposed to... ah... join me?” I asked. He smiled and tapped his nose. “Why not?” He blinked, frowned, started to move... stopped, then frowned again. He erased the board and started to write. Frowned... erased it... started again.

Finally, he huffed softly and wrote ‘Cause’, then nodded once. I supposed that that would have to do.

“And you want to come with me?” He grinned and bowed deeply. “Why?” He blinked and started to strike a pose, but at my flat look he froze, his grin becoming tense. He slumped, took the chalkboard slate in his hooves, erased it, and wrote slowly.

When he’d finished, he hung his head as he held the slate up between his hooves. ‘UR pretty mare.’

“Pretty?” I said as I took a step back. He nodded and sighed. “You want to come with me because I’m pretty?” He nodded again, peeking at me. I covered my face with a hoof. “Look... Stygius... I have issues. Balefire bomb-sized issues. I might just snap and geld you because you look wrong at my butt. I just got out of an insane asylum. Heck... I’ve got an army of cultists trying to track me down!” I didn’t mention the worst thing I’d done in the last day. “The smart thing for you to do is go and join your sister. I’m nothing but trouble.”

He blinked and frowned, then rubbed his chin. “Seriously! I am not safe to be around.” He pursed his lips as he stared at me. I took another step back. “C...come on! You can’t seriously want to come with me just because I’m pretty!” He gave an easy grin and nodded. Nasty, suspicious parts of my head were hissing all kinds of accusations. This was obviously some sort of plot. There was some kind of scheme here. No stallion could want to just trot along for the heck of it. He wanted something, and I was fairly sure it was right underneath my tail.

But was that necessarily a bad thing? *Hell* yes, roared part of my mind.

Maybe not, murmured another part.

Once upon a time, P-21 had accused me of having trust issues in that I was really, really, stupidly trusting. Now here I was, suspicious simply because a strange buck liked me, was interested in me, and wanted to come along. I laughed softly, shaking my head and earning a quizzical look from the charcoal batpony. Batpony... there had to be a better name for them.

I sighed and nodded in resignation. “Okay. But please, don’t get killed. Don’t... try anything too friendly.” Then I frowned and added sharply, “And don’t shoot me! Understand?” He looked at me in blank confusion, then gestured to the fact he had no guns. In fact, I didn’t see any weapons on him at all; if I was lucky, that meant that he was such a master of hoof-to-hoof combat that he didn’t need them... but this being me, it probably just meant that he was good enough to take a radhog by surprise and had never needed to fight anything else. “Don’t look at me like that! Just because you don’t have a gun doesn’t mean you won’t find *something* to shoot me with.” Wait... I froze as I felt myself turning red as he looked at me with a smile that was way too cocky... erm... smug, for my liking. “I mean bullets!

Shooting... bullets... just don't!"

He gave a soft, high pitched chuckle just barely in my hearing range as he flew lazily behind me... and for the first time ever, it was my tail that was feeling all tingly, not my mane. Together, we picked our way along the scree and thorn bushes towards the southern edge of the mountain.

* * *

"And she said she was cursed! Cursed! Just for bumping into me. I mean, I know I sometimes cause trouble for ponies without meaning to, but cursed? That's a little upsetting," I rambled as we made our way along. Clearly, travelling with me for almost an hour and hearing my entire life story hadn't really convinced him that I wasn't the safest mare to be around. I had left out the worst parts, though, for now... and might have shuffled things up. He was flying after me with a funny look on his face as we crept around the edge of the talus, at least; I hoped that that meant that he was reconsidering.

Like the far side of the valley, this area was more sparsely developed. What *had* been built here looked like it'd been built like bunkers. The homes were made of reinforced concrete rather than wood and stone, and the apartments were like miniature fortresses fighting the creep of nature and water. Most of the buildings looked sunken into the slope, though, and it was often easier to trot over the flat, muddy roofs of the few in our way than it would have been to go around them. None of the buildings were very habitable; if they weren't bombed or blasted, they were usually filled with mud and reeking stagnant water.

And as if matching that style, the two largest buildings off in the eastern edge of the city were of the same brutal architecture, resembling immense concrete blocks with the edges filed off. The larger of the two, south of Black Pony Mountain and all the way up on the slope of the eastern mountains, I assumed was Hightower; it wasn't quite as tall as the Fluttershy clinic, but it was a wide, square block of a building about the same size as Flash Industries and surrounded by a high stone wall. I could barely make out a garish rainbow-colored glow on the south side.

My sleep-deprived brain was getting weird again, and yet I felt fine. I knew that I needed sleep, hoped I could somehow find it. But I didn't see anyplace around here. I guessed that whatever state I'd been in at Happyhorn hadn't counted as sleep. In fact, I couldn't remember, in any of my memories of that place, having slept. It all just blurred together into one smear. With the shadows getting twitchy and my E.F.S. switched off, I needed to hole up and do something to try and shut down for a few hours. I just couldn't see any place nearby that sounded like the place the Dealer had mentioned. Somewhere safe?

Wait? What was that?

Somepony had dropped a giant pink gumball in the low, thorny woods. The gnarly trees obscured it, but from above the sight was impossible to miss. It glowed slightly with a strange internal illumination, and I found myself just staring in shock at it. I pointed down at it with my hoof. "Um... what is that?" Stygius simply shrugged and made a motion of pushing against something, then beating it with his hoof, and then he hunched his shoulders once more.

Hmm... well, it was the most unusual thing on the mountain slope, so... might as well check it out.

Making our way closer to the pink ball, I found myself looking nervously at the trees. These were actually alive, and after my last experience with a 'forest', I was definitely leery of timber wolves,

exploding apples, anything blue... However, aside from a carpet of dead, soggy leaves underhoof and numerous little streams trickling along, there wasn't much that stood out. I tried eating one of the greener leaves but found it tasted like a mouthful of tart wax. That didn't stop me from eating it, of course, but it did get me some curious looks from Stygius. He chewed cautiously on one, then spat it out immediately.

Life endured. Even in the Wasteland. Most of Hoofington might be dead and sterilized, but life was crawling back. This was the result of two centuries, though, and there were other parts of the Hoof that were still just dead forest and struggling yellow grass. Without something like Gardens of Equestria, who knew how long it would take for the land to really recover?

Then again, one way or another, recover it would; that was heartening, if only a little. But it raised the question of whether ponykind would recover too... and that looked far more iffy.

We found a track through the woods; scraping away the mat of leaves uncovered the cracked and broken surface of a road running along the curve of the eastern valley. Most of the homes here were in the process of being consumed by the dead leaves and detritus carried on the streams that cut along the hillside. Once or twice we saw wagons that had been split and twisted by the growth of the trees. I noticed a radhog family rooting around in one of the heavy concrete homes, but they didn't seem to notice us, or maybe didn't care.

Then we reached the pink bubble; it had to be almost a hundred feet in diameter, and the looming trees around it were slowly growing along its surface. Stygius flew overhead and rammed hard into the shield, and to my amazement it indented a great distance before snapping back into place and flinging him away. He flipped end over end before righting himself and shrugging in midair. Then he flew down next to me and stood upright, leaning against it.

I trotted up to it and pushed my hoof against the surface. There was a ripple, and he tumbled through. I stepped through beside him and looked at him sprawled out on his back and gaping at me. "Oh, yeah. I'm related to one of the Ministry Mares, apparently. Not Twilight, though..." He just stared at me in bafflement, and I smiled. "Sorry. I might have skipped a few parts." Then I looked past him and my eyes widened. "Whoa." He scrambled to his hooves and stared as well.

Inside the bubble was a house the likes of which I'd only seen above Chapel. It wasn't an ugly block of concrete looking more suitable for a standoff against the striped hordes, but a place where ponies could live. Long green grass grew in a lawn around a stone cottage, and the dark hexagonal stones were covered in green vines, the delicate pink bells of their flowers filling the air with an indescribable sweetness. The cottage was built back against a natural ledge of dark stone; water poured out of a fissure above to tumble into a wheel beside the house that slowly turned and splashed.

Never, in all my crazy visions of a world before bombs, could I have imagined a place like this. It made my chest hurt to think that any place like this could exist. As we walked along the flagstones, I was struck by the mixing of delicate and thriving life with the hard stone plinths scattered around the home. Some were obsidian, others rusty red, others white marble, others gray granite slab. There were empty spaces for nests and birdhouses that were now vacant.

The one thing that didn't belong, however, was the birthday presents.

They lay around the cottage every few feet, colorful cubical parcels about a foot on a side. Most were topped with bows and fancy ribbons. One lay right on the steps leading up to the front door, this one with a little handle sticking out of it. I felt a frisson of anticipation as the handle started to turn of its

own accord and tinny music issued from the parcel. I reached out a hoof and pushed Stygius back a little.

Suddenly, the top of the box popped open and a pink pony head popped out on a spring. It wobbled a few times, and when it finally slowed I saw it was done up like a grinning Pinkie Pie. It turned, looked right at me, and straightened. "Hi!" a mare said in a cheery voice, "I'm really so very sorry, but this is a special private Pinkie party and I'm afraid you don't have an invitation. This is a very super secure crime scene, and if you're here, I'm afraid you're going to have to wait for a M.o.M. team to say it's okie dokie lokie to leave! Please sit quietly and don't make any sudden moves, Naughty McNaughterson. Otherwise, I'll have to just go ahead and assume that you're a Bad Pony, and we don't want that!"

"Right..." I said as I pulled out the riot shotgun I'd gotten at Happyhorn and, after a moment of consideration, slapped a drum of buckshot in. "'Fraid there's no Ministry of Morale anymore and we're not planning to wait here forever, so you can just... not do whatever you were going to do."

The pupils of the bobbing Pinkie head suddenly flashed bright red. "Ooooooh... some naughty pony's gonna need a time out, aren't they?" Suddenly the lids started popping off the other wrapped presents in clouds of confetti, unleashing a swarm of buzzing brightly-colored little spritebots! The winged orbs swooped up over us, their eyes glowing the same ominous red as the Pinkie head's.

Okay, if there was ever a time for a shotgun, this was it! I backed towards the house as the robots closed in from either side, blowing cones of lead out at the swirling machines. They exploded into flying shrapnel, but every gap that opened was immediately filled! I wasn't doing much more than slowing them down, and at this rate I'd have to switch drums really soon. And at that thought, the cloud of spritebots that had now completely cut us off from the shield opened fire. One of their little red bolts of incineration magic did little more than sting, but these sprites were firing hundreds of them and making my armor start to smoke!

There was only one thing to do: get inside and hope Pinkie Pie hadn't left anything else nasty! We ran up the stairs onto the porch that ran the length of the front of the house, and I jerked on the front door. Locked, of course. I gave it a solid thump as the spritebots swarmed around us and the batpony darted into the air. The door sounded very solid and was firmly closed. Stygius swooped and wheeled above me, drawing the robots' fire as I tried to decide between trying to pick the lock and just trying to batter the door down. Every now and then he'd open his mouth and let out a scream that I could barely hear but also actually barely see radiating out from his mouth. The shimmering screech made the tiny robots in front of him crackle, spark, and drop to the ground smoking, but he had the same problem as my shotgun; no matter how many he took out, there always seemed to be more to take their places.

I gave the door an experimental kick. Ow... Okay, lockpicking, then. I tried my best to focus as I knelt at the door, brushing aside the yellow tape printed with 'Crime Scene: Smart Detectives and Bumbling Assistants Only' to get at the lock. I didn't have very many bobby pins, and I sure didn't have time to screw around. Focus... don't think about the buck getting shot to buy you time to do this. Don't think about him turning to ash and drifting from the sky. Don't think about how handsome he was or that he was nice enough to come along with you in spite of your crazy!

Snap. Well, I did still have more. Break. Two more. Crack. Okay. Last shot, and I could *not* mess this up. Calm... focus... twist it just like so... turn the lock, and! Broken. I gave a little scream, grabbed the screwdriver with my teeth, and twisted as hard as I could. For a second the lock caught, and then my luck saved our asses again and it popped open. I kicked the door wide. "Stygius! In here!

Quickly!"

He dropped down onto the porch in a landing that was just short of a crash, his armor and hide smoking in dozens of places and the swarm not far behind him. I grabbed him by his armor and hauled him in, slamming the door behind him. *Good* thick, solid door; please do keep the robots out. He collapsed onto the polished wood floor with a raspy exhalation.

Around me, lights flickered on automatically. I looked around anxiously, shotgun out, but didn't see anything that looked hostile. What I *did* see was that the house was, astonishingly, completely clean. Aside from a faint layer of dust, I might as well have been two hundred years in the past. I had to take a second look at Stygius to make sure I wasn't seeing things... though I still might have been, of course.

Then I kicked myself in the rump and set to finding some healing potions. With all the grass outside, I doubted there was an Enervation ring here. I ran from room to room and finally spotted a yellow medical case bolted to the wall in the water closet. It was thankfully unlocked and held four bright purple healing potions, and I immediately lifted them and raced back to him. Don't die... Please don't die.

You're cursed, Star Maiden.

No I'm not. Curses schmurses. He was definitely on the well-done side, but he was still breathing when I reached him. I held a potion to his mouth and he eagerly slugged it down. The burns on his hide lightened only a bit, so I gave him another. The angry red evened out, and after a third potion, his dusky gray hide closed with barely a mark. He groaned and lay out flat, hooves and bat wings splayed wide. I looked down into his eyes with a thankful smile. He was going to pull through.

He looked back up at me, gave a wide grin, and puckered his lips. I balked, fighting the impulse to smash his face in. So he was a little flirty... don't kill him for that. I closed my eyes a moment, then snorted and pushed his face away. "Don't push your luck." Please.

He looked at me in concern, but now that worry for him was past I was taking a longer look at the house I was in. Like the outside, the inside was decorated in a style that reminded me vaguely of Star House and the Fluttershy Medical Center's atrium. Most of it was wood depicting butterflies, bunnies, flowers, trees, and birds, but there was also a fascinating collection of gems and metalwork. In the kitchen, the faucet was shaped like a swan's neck. The wings of the butterflies on the mantle were perfectly cut rose quartz. Copper verdigris crawled alongside ivy carvings and literally popped out off the woodwork. The detail was such that I could see the veins in the metal leaves.

One thing was out of place: there were stacks of bright pink plastic crates piled up next to the door. All of them bore the grinning pink pony icon of the Ministry of Morale. I noticed a checklist on a clipboard resting on top, though, and read, 'Ministry of Morale Crime Scene Evaluation Checklist for Super Smart Smartypants Detective Ponies'.

- ✓ 1) *Know who the bad ponies are.*
- ✓ 2) *Arrest bad ponies.*
- ___ 3) *Find evidence to prove bad ponies are bad.*
- ___ 4) *Question bad ponies to give up other bad ponies.*
- ___ 5) *Repeat steps 1+2.*

Now, I might not have known a lot about crime scene evaluation, but I found myself extremely

grateful that Pinkie Pie hadn't written the security procedures for Stable 99. I doubt there'd have been a mare left under such guidelines. I dug through the crates, keeping an eye and a riot shotgun out for anything that flew or talked, but they were empty save for dozens and dozens of little envelopes and plastic bags. There was a date written in one of the boxes at the top of the MoMCSEC3SDP that piqued my interest, though. The day the bombs fell.

Decorations like the Fluttershy clinic and Happyhorn? Searching for evidence in a house that had some kind of magic bubble around it? And who was a prominent figure arrested for treason right before the bombs fell? The book I'd found in Tenpony Tower had said that this place was near Black Pony Mountain, and Dealer had steered me to it.

Goldenblood's house.

Standing there, I felt a shiver run through me as I stared around the great room. Here was where the stallion himself lived; where he'd hatched his schemes. Where he'd had a brief life together with Fluttershy; clearly he'd done all he could to make this place her home as well. This home had absolutely none of the ostentation of Blueblood Manor. Everything appeared to be simply crafted, yet there was also a quality in the woodwork that I simply couldn't shake.

Stygius appeared more concerned about me as I sat there staring at the furniture and decorations. I might find out everything I wanted to know here! If it hadn't been removed... I simply had to search! Sleep could wait.

The ground floor turned out to consist of a library, some sort of workshop, a water closet, and the kitchen adjoining the great room that the front door opened into; stairs led up to a balcony running along the top of the enclosed rooms, and more doors opened off of that. I trotted to the kitchen cupboards and opened them up only to see that they were devoid of any food. The plates were all neatly stacked, though, the forks and knives polished. The refrigerator wasn't just bare; it was empty and cleaned.

In the library was a collection of books on history, politics, and other things I had no idea about because they were written in zebra glyphs or languages I didn't even recognize. The desk drawers had stationery, scrolls, quills, and inks all neatly stacked in their respective places. Everything was clean and, for the most part, clear of dust. I was shocked to see how many pictures he had on his desk. Fluttershy was first and foremost, smiling as she held a little bunny, but next to her was Luna hugging an embarrassed-looking, unscarred Goldenblood. There were Twilight Sparkle and an adolescent Spike in his cave, sitting on his hoard. Applejack and Applesnack looking equally uncomfortable at some fancy function. An incredibly young-looking Pinkie Pie dancing around a toothless lizard with her friends. Rainbow Dash flying in formation. Rarity wearing a stunning dress in black and red.

Yet as I sat and looked around his desk, I also took in what wasn't there. No notes. No garbage in the wastebin. No half-used-up pencils, crumbs, or dirty dishes. No letters to be answered nor address books nor terminal, even. In fact, the room was so clean that I would have been hard pressed to believe it had ever been used.

The workshop, like the library next door, was neat and orderly. Tools were left hanging on the wall next to a workbench; tiny little hammers, pliers, and eyeglasses mounted on leather headbands were all in order. In the corner was a heavy stone oven of some sort. I frowned and checked inside. Swept clean of ashes. In drawers under the workbench were spools of copper, silver, gold, and steel wire, verified with a nibble on each. Goddesses, didn't *that* get a funny look from the dusky batpony. I

self-consciously transferred the spools to my saddlebags anyway, though.

I looked around again. There were no half-finished projects anywhere. No scrap bits left on the floor. Nothing to imply that anypony had actually lived here long ago. I glanced back at Stygius, caught his questioning look, and sighed. "Sorry. Once upon a time there was a pony who lived here that did a lot of secretive things. I was hoping that I might get some ans--"

Why did I hear music? It was distant and tinny, like a bad recording. Slowly, I looked around; Stygius was visibly flickering in and out of sight while by the workbench a yellow shape was moving like a ghost. "Wait a minute..." I murmured as I cautiously moved to the side, towards the corner of the workshop. The further I moved, the more Stygius faded from view and the more Goldenblood appeared. I heard his rasping cough as he struggled for breath. He wore a clear plastic mask over his face as he levitated a length of silver wire before him. Finally, when I was in the very corner, he appeared completely solid.

He also looked like hell. He was covered in bandages, some of which were yellowed and dirty-looking. Yet despite the wet sound of his lungs, he still kept his magical grasp steady as he molded steel, gold leaf, and silver wire together as easily as if they were clay. There was a radio on the table beside him playing familiar string music.

"Professor?" a mare asked softly from the door, and like a ghost materializing, a stricken black unicorn appeared. Her silver eyes were wide and shimmered with tears. A lone candle was on her flank. She sniffed and rubbed her nose.

He didn't look up from his work. "I'm not... a teacher... anymore... Psalm," he wheezed in that boiled-sounding voice. Slowly he turned to look at her, stiffly, as if every motion were agony. His eyes fixed on her standing there as she sniffed. "It's not... your fault, Psalm."

It was the wrong comment. "How can you say that? It was my fault! All of it!" she sobbed as she collapsed, hanging her head. "If I... if they... Oh Luna, I wish I'd died with the others!"

He slowly rose, hobbled towards where she lay in a heap, and, moving with great pain, gently hugged her. "It is... not... your fault..." he rasped, then coughed that horrid, wracking cough.

"I shouldn't have done it. I... they did it because of me."

He answered her in short, gasping broken lines that I threaded together. "You are not to blame, Psalm. Not for your kindness. What happened at Littlehorn was not your fault, nor will you wishing to assume responsibility make it better." He patted her mane. "I wish I could help you understand that." He held her in his hooves till her sobbing abated. "There... better?" She nodded and wiped her nose.

"What about you, Professor?" she asked with a worried frown. "When you collapsed at the speech... I was so afraid."

He struggled for breath before rasping, "I likely have a month to live. Two at the most. Luna herself is helping to heal the damage to my lungs." He smiled and gave a little shrug, his eyes distant. "She wants me to help her set up her government," he said as they shifted, sitting and facing each other. He hung his head as he spoke. Suddenly he arched his back and resumed coughing and retching. He took the mask off and choked a moment, and a thin pink stream trickled out of his mouth and onto the floor, smoking where it met the wood. I remembered how Glory had cut away the environmental suit that

had fused to my hide from the Pink Cloud; suddenly I had an unsettling idea of where the stallion's injuries might have come from. Psalm rushed out and a moment later returned with healing potions. It took four before he finally recovered.

"You should be in the hospital, Professor," Psalm murmured, looking at the hissing pink spittle.

He didn't answer or argue at first, seeming to need to concentrate on breathing. Then, "The future of Equestria might be better if I don't survive," he said, so quietly that I almost missed it.

"What... but..." Her horn glowed as she lifted another healing draught to his lips. He suckled on it, coughing wetly again. "But why? You said Princess Luna needs you. Don't you want to help her?"

He didn't answer for such a long time that I was sure he wouldn't. But then he said in his low, raspy voice, "I do. More than you could imagine, Psalm. But she wants a government every bit as grand and powerful as her sister's. I can give her that. It's possible. But I fear what will be required to create such a rule. I'm terrified, Psalm. Terrified that if I help her do what she wants, it will destroy her and Equestria."

He paused to retch up another stream of the pink fluid into an empty potion bottle. Then he sat back and caught his breath. He looked up at the ceiling. "I can see it now, Psalm. She will be loved... but unlike her sister, she will be feared as well. She'll have all the power of Celestia in her hooves, but she'll not need to use it. Misdirection... doubt... ambiguity... these will reign, and there will be none to stop them. Not for centuries, at least." He sighed as he closed his eyes. A strange calmness seemed to spill over him, and his words became stronger. "It's like I can look ahead the entire span of a millennium, great and terrible and bloody. There will be murder... slaughter... betrayal. History assures it, a tale wrought again and again all across the world. It will be a nightmare, Psalm. I can see it clearly... as if it's already happened and old history. Past. Dry. Dead."

He shook his head and said in his rasping whisper, his voice flowing like a hissing steam pipe as he spoke with a look of sad resignation, "I've never been so certain of anything as I have this, Psalm. So I must ask myself, would it not be better... more merciful... to help it fail? To try to bring about its ruin swiftly and surely and in the process save the hearts and souls of both Equestria and Luna from that grim future? Or should I embrace audacity and try to steer this bloody calamity towards some yet unknown beneficial conclusion? What is a hundred dead... a thousand... a million... over the span of a thousand years and more? What is a few cold betrayals when we've all passed into the everafter?" He shuddered and once more broke into great heaving coughs. He spat more of the pink foulness into the bottle and sighed. "Truly, death would be a fine, if cowardly, escape from these questions churning about in my head."

Finally he relaxed, and Psalm cracked a tiny smile. "Wow... are monologues a side effect of the poison, Professor?"

Her attempt at humor prevailed. He smiled back. "I'm dying. It gives tremendous license towards the melodramatic." Then he laughed and immediately broke into deep, wet, heaving coughs. When he'd brought up more pink, he sighed. "I just don't know what I should do."

"Professor. She's... she's not just Princess Luna. She's Luna. *Our* Luna. The one who actually read your papers on petriculture and zebra mysticism? The one who didn't think that a rock hunters' club was a stupid waste of a unicorn's time? We have to help her!" Goldenblood closed his eyes and shook his head. Psalm pressed her lips together, then nudged his shoulder. "If you don't, Professor, somepony

else will.”

The comment stirred him, his golden eyes opening and his lips pressing together in a line. “You’re right. I can just see... the nobility... wealthy... privileged ponies...” He retched again and then stood. “I can just see what my father would do if he got her to listen to him. His lot got us into this war in the first place. ‘A week long war...’ Fools. Worthless fools... they’ll perpetuate the butchery ad nauseum. It’s not as if they send their children to die,” Goldenblood muttered as he paced slowly. “In time, she’d see through the flattery... but it would take years... perhaps generations... before she could be strong enough to rule on her own.”

“You have to help her, Professor. She’s Luna. She’s... we have to help,” Psalm said as she touched several strangely parallel scars on the inside of her foreleg. “Please... I know you want to help her. You love her.”

Goldenblood smiled, slow and sad. “She’s a Princess... how could I not?” He sighed and looked at her. “And you, Psalm? How will you help the Princess?”

“Me... I...” she stammered, and then closed her eyes. “I think... I’ve been thinking... maybe I should enlist?”

“Psalm... soldiers kill...” he murmured. “You burst into tears when you saw a hawk kill a rabbit for lunch. Are you sure?”

“I know. I know it’s wrong... but... they burned my home and they killed my school. I...” she stammered and sniffed. “I... I have to do something, Professor! I don’t think I could live with myself if I didn’t!” She bit her lip as she fidgeted. “My roommate Twist is going to sign up. We shared a space above her candy shop, and since it was completely destroyed... well... she says she’s going to thump and twist those zebras like they were huge black and white stripes of taffy.”

He was quiet for a short time, then sighed. “Just, please... if you are going to enlist... Please promise me that you’re doing this for Luna. Don’t do this out of hate.”

“I won’t, Professor,” she replied softly. “Hopefully they need somepony for support. Carrying water or helping the medics or... or something. I doubt I’d ever be able to kill anypony.” Funny, remembering her fighting alongside Big Macintosh, I’d say she’d proved quite able.

He smiled and lifted the steel rose with his magic. The glow deepened, and the rose came alive, the petals extending and curling, gold and silver. Finally, he bent the stem and hooked it gently around her ear; it gleamed brightly against her ebony coat. “Here. Take this. For luck.”

“Professor! I can’t. It’s too... too good for me. I don’t deserve something so lovely,” she said, blushing.

“Indulge me. I’m dying. It’d be rude to not accept,” he said with a raspy chuckle. “Now, help me into the kitchen. The hospital provided some absolutely horrid mush for my meals, but that doesn’t mean you can’t have something nice to eat.”

She helped him to his hooves, and together they walked out of the room. My vision flickered, and suddenly a pair of slitted yellow eyes were staring into mine. “Gah!” I shouted, my forelegs kicking out at him, but he seemed to be wise to me and nimbly darted back. I looked around, then slumped. “Whoa.

That is so weird.”

He pointed at me, then suddenly swayed as he sat on his rump and let his eyes go glassy.

“Sorry about that,” I said with a little frown, rubbing my mane. “I sometimes have...” How to explain this without sounding crazier than usual? “Visions, I guess.” He looked at me skeptically and I waved my hoof at him. “I know, I know. Sounds crazy, but I do.” I looked around the workshop with a sigh, then turned. In the corner of the room, right above my head, was a small hole. I’d bet my horn that there’d once been a camera of some sort there. Why? Goldenblood wasn’t the director of anything back then...

Ugh... add mystery four thousand, seven hundred and two to the list.

I rose to my hooves and gave myself a shake, looking at the concerned batpony. He smiled at me and gestured with his hoof like he wanted me to go on. I groaned and shook my head. “You remember the pony I mentioned. The one with all the secrets? Well... he used to be a teacher. He taught at some place called Littlehorn... and apparently one of his students blamed herself when it got destroyed.” I frowned as I looked at the worktable. “He was also an artist...” Funny. I didn’t like thinking of him like that. Bastard. Manipulator. Son of a mule... sure. “He helped Luna set up the ministries, but... he didn’t want to. He really didn’t.” I shook my head. “I guess... he cared too much for Luna to turn her down.”

He gave me a sideways, appraising look. He pointed at me, clutched his hooves over his chest, and thumped them rhythmically as he adopted a besotted expression. I noticed he was just a bit nervous as well.

“You want to know if I have a very special somepony?” I asked, and he nodded. I smiled fondly. “Yeah. I do. Her name is Glory.” At once his smile melted, and he slumped. “What?” He rolled his eyes towards the roof, hooves wide, looking anguished. “What? What’s wrong?”

He pointed at me, then pointed between his legs at his equipment and adopted a disgusted look, thrusting his nose into the air with a snort. He looked so disappointed I couldn’t help myself and smiled.

“No no. Glory is strictly mares only, but I don’t mind males like that. No... my issue with males is... um...” Come on Blackjack, admit it. It stuck in my throat a moment, but finally I managed to spit it out. “I, ah... got ploughed pretty bad not long ago. Yeah...” He stared at me in shock and I felt myself flush as I looked away. “That’s why I’m so... nervous... around you. ‘Cause I’m trying to... you know... not kill you.”

Stygius looked mad and worried. He scribbled on his chalkboard slate, ‘I not hurt U’. Then he growled and stomped what I assumed were my imaginary violators.

“Thanks. I know that.” Or he was one hell of an actor. “I’m just... I don’t want to do it with you and have a flashback in the middle.” I smiled crookedly at him. “You wouldn’t want to fool around with me if I might hurt you, would you?”

He seemed to think of it for all of two seconds before he smiled and nodded once. I couldn’t help but laugh... and speculate.

It occurred to me then to wonder how Glory would take my behavior with Stygius. I’d only just

met him, though, so it wasn't like there was any emotional connection, and she wouldn't be interested in him herself. Probably not even interested in hearing about it. A little 'recreation' would be nice; damned nice, if it didn't involve raping a male on a breeding queue or getting nailed to the floor. Some nice, plain, middle-ground sex.

I wasn't like Glory. What had happened on the *Seahorse* aside, I liked sex with stallions. A lot. I'd always looked forward to my turn on the queue. Even Vanity's memory orb had been fun; had it been viewed in private, I probably would have had a new toy.

Stygius interrupted my thoughts by pointing at me and then bumping his forehooves together and giving a pointed look. I flushed, but aside from that nagging panic in the back of my mind... it wasn't an entirely unpleasant proposition.

"Maybe," I said, making him grin. "But not right now." From the look on Stygius's face, though, he'd follow me through a fire for a chance at my hind end.

Stallions...

* * *

I spent the next half an hour running around the first floor trying to find some flicker or hear something that might be another recording, but the radroach in my head was waking up and starting to scramble around. I kept seeing things flickering in the corners of my vision. Every now and then I'd see a red bar, even with the E.F.S. off, and have to fight the urge to shoot randomly into corners. Yet I also felt slow. Before, I'd had a nervous, almost manic energy. Now I felt lethargy slipping over me. Not fatigue so much as an inability to really put things together.

I was wasting time. Procrastinating; wasn't that the word? I knew what I needed to do, and yet... I didn't want to. As stupid and illogical as it was, I was certain that if I truly slept I'd wake up... wrong. Completely robotic, or maybe I'd find out that all of this really was a dream and I was really just a mutilated, violated, mutated mare waiting to die. I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something fundamentally wrong with me, something more than just the fatigue and the augmentations.

It was like my own mind was trying to kill me... putting off what I needed to do. Happyhorn had gotten me to finally admit that what I needed wasn't more action but inaction. Not more running around but slowing down and facing what was the matter with me. It was harder; when Harbingers attacked, I just shot back. Killing was easier.

"Goddesses, I am turning into a monster," I said aloud, sitting down on the great room floor and cupping my face in my cool metallic hands. At least Deus was sane. Brutal and terrible, yes, but in control. Stygius stood nearby, looking concerned.

I needed friends. I needed other ponies. I couldn't do it alone... and so I smiled at him wearily. "I need to sleep." If those spritebots outside haven't come in yet, we should be safe. And I couldn't imagine Seekers getting in through that shield.

He wrote on his slate and held it up. 'Tired?'

For some reason, the question struck me as incredibly funny, but my laughter was ragged and high-strung. Now he looked even more worried. "Actually, that's the funny thing. I'm not. I'm not tired at all." I trotted to the couch and looked at it with a sort of dread. I remembered lying down after Priest died and not being able to get up again. Not sleep... just... lying there. "It's just, over the last day, I've blown up a secret facility, gotten chased by a giant killer robot, had half my face melted off and sewn back together, been attacked a half-dozen times, discovered my best friend was a drug addict, tried to comfort my marefriend, who turned into Rainbow Dash, had a refinery blow up around me, watched a buck take out a tank with a rifle, trotted through a horrific prison camp, ripped apart an Enclave squad, killed a filly, and was plugged into a mental therapy machine in an insane asylum." I turned my back on him, rubbing my skull. Maybe it was the fatigue that was making me all flirty and boycrazy?

He tapped his slate, and I looked over at him frowning back at me. 'Killed a what?'

I closed my eyes and sighed. "It was an accident... I didn't realize who she was till too late... but I still killed her." The tension in my head was growing again. "I know it was wrong... I want to make up for it. That's all I can do now." That made him look a little less angry and more concerned. He pointed at me and then shrugged in confusion. "I... I need to sleep. My brain needs it. I need it." I just wasn't sure I could anymore.

He pointed at the couch, and I lay down. "Hey... Stygius... I was wondering. Where do batponies like you come from?" Ugh, procrastinating again, Blackjack. He blinked and scrunched his brows together. I guessed that that was the sort of question you couldn't answer in a few words on a blackboard. "Sorry... nevermind. I just..." I sighed and I closed my eyes. "It's been so long that I... I don't know how exactly to do this."

I lay there for a few seconds, then heard the soft click of a door closing. He was a nice guy; the fact that he wasn't okay with what I'd done to Boing showed that he wasn't just some killer. Okay, maybe he was a bit of an idiot, following me... assuming he didn't have some outside agenda. Maybe he--

Sleep, Blackjack. That's what you need now. Sleep. Don't think about anything but that. Though it would be nice for P-21 to have a guy he could... hopefully... relate to. I hoped they could be friends. I know Glory would probably be fascinated by him... unless, of course, the Enclave already knew all about Luna's guards and the like, bu--

I grabbed a pillow off the couch, covered my face, and screamed in frustration. Just... stop! I'd gone through most of my life not thinking about things. Why was it so hard now? Just sleep, Blackjack...

If I sleep... I'll die. I could remember being on the boat, feeling warmth on my face. The feel of Glory holding me as I slipped away. Goddesses, I wanted it so badly. I remembered... I remembered stars. A vague, fuzzy memory of stars and beautiful music and a feeling of belonging. A feeling of others wanting me to stay.

Self-destructive tendencies... was that why I was so messed up? I'd died. I'd been at peace, and then... I'd come back. Come back as this metal and pony thing. They turned me into Deus; maybe a less clunky Deus, but still a cyberpony. Glory had been right not to tell me. If she had, I wouldn't have let her. Better some more worthy pony like the Stable Dweller take EC-1101 and try to find out about Goldenblood and Horizons. Instead, she'd plotted with everyone behind my back to save my life! How dare she? How could she? What gave her the right?!

I opened my eyes and stared up at the ceiling, my mechanical fingers about to rip the flowery pink

pillow in two. I was angry... at Glory? I was... I really was. I felt hot tears running down the sides of my head. Ever since I'd come back in Tenpony, I'd been trying to tear myself apart because I was angry at the mare I loved. And yet, I did love her, and yet some fundamental part of me was outraged that she had turned me into this. Yes, technically she had saved my life. Yes, she had done so out of love...

Life isn't about what you want, Miss Fish. It isn't about what happens to you... it's about how you respond to it. Somepony had told me that a long time ago; a stallion with a candy-cane-striped mane on a long walk to medical...

How had I been dealing with coming back? I'd bottled it up like P-21. Let it fester. Let it drive me to be reckless. Stupid. I'd turned my back on my friends and turned my back on Glory.

I lay there and closed my eyes. I imagined a great bank of electrical switches. One by one, I slowly flipped them off. I turned off my thoughts about Stygius and my newly annoying libido. I shut down my uncertainty and worry about the Harbingers, the Core, and EC-1101. I switched off the nagging curiosities of Goldenblood and Project Horizons. One by one, it was like bits of my brain were going dark. I deactivated my newly discovered anger at Glory and powered off my concerns for my friends. Finally I broke the connection to my self-hatred for what I was: a filly-murdering mechanical monster.

I was left with one last switch in my head. My fear. My certainty that if I pulled it, I would die. I imagined the mare in black from the Happyhorn simulation trying so hard to protect me. Protecting myself from the very thing I needed most. I grabbed the handle of the switch with my magic and started to pull.

You'll die... a part of me said as everything let go.

Maybe. But perhaps you get to dream when you're dead...

~ ~ ~

"Professor Goldie! I got to go to the bathroom!" Rampage whined, the striped filly hopping about with her hindlegs crossed as we scrambled along the floor of the canyon. The students all carried their own saddlebags and wore hiking boots on their hooves as they made their way along. A beautiful sunny day filled the sky, making the bands in the rock walls gleam and sparkle brightly around us. At our lead was a younger, healthier, happier Goldenblood. The river poured through the curving divide, bouncing and spraying over rocks as the rock hunters' club made our way along the bank. There were ponies I knew and ponies I didn't, yet I could see them all so clearly.

"You know you're in the middle of the woods? Pick a tree," P-21 muttered beside me, rolling his eyes. Overhead, Glory and Stygius were hovering over the riverbank where water had polished the boulders until they resembled giant gray eggs. The gray pegasus filly was telling a tan pegasus colt that they couldn't have been left by dragons.

"Don't fly out too far over the river, Glory, Pound Cake," I called out in concern as the fliers wheeled about over the boulders. I helped lift a tiny Boo and Scotch Tape up over a ridge of stone, my magic holding them steadily.

"I don't even know why they're allowed to go to our school," a coltish Trueblood said with a snort. "It's Luna's Academy for Young *Unicorns*. I mean really! What are pegasi and earth ponies going to learn about magic?"

"While it's true that most of our students are unicorns," Goldenblood said quietly but in a tone of voice that made my ears perk up, "there are forms of magic that are beyond most unicorns. For instance, you might spend your entire life trying to learn a spell to tend a garden, while an earth pony could accomplish it with ease. And just as we can learn from them, they can learn from us."

"Besides," piped a tan unicorn filly beside Rampage, "he's my brother! So he can come to my school with me if he wants!"

"Well said, Pumpkin Cake," I said, giving the young mare an approving smile. She beamed back.

Trueblood snorted at me. "Well, fine, but I don't know why unicorns with less magic than an earth pony are allowed to be here. What's *she* going to teach us? How to not do magic?" Suddenly a rock flew through the air and smacked him upside the head. "Ow!" He stared at the filly. "Professor! She threw a rock at me!"

"Accident! My magic went off," Pumpkin Cake retorted, sticking her tongue out at him.

"Professor!" Trueblood whined.

"Unicorn magic is a strange and sometimes unpredictable thing. Especially when you're insulting said unicorn's family and friends," Goldenblood countered.

The colt snorted and muttered, "At least for unicorns that have magic." He glared at me sullenly. "She shouldn't even be here. When I tell Father, he'll write to Princess Luna about me being around deadhorns like her." I dropped my head a little; I really didn't want to get fired from this job.

"She is my assistant, and her magical ability is none of your business," Goldenblood countered with a tone of soft yet firm reprimand. Their eyes met, and the maroon colt lowered his head, muttering to himself. Goldenblood's gaze met mine, and the pale unicorn smiled.

"Professor Goldie!" Rampage whined as she hopped in place, screwing up her face.

"Tree. Just. Use," P-21 muttered.

Goldenblood sighed. "I'm afraid he's right. Otherwise, it's a long way back to the toilet at Littlehorn."

"Ooooooh!" she whined and then darted off into some brush. "Don't look!" she shrieked.

"Who'd want to?" P-21 asked as he shook his head, looking around at the others.

"Hey, what are you doing in those bushes?" Pound Cake called down from above. The filly's scream echoed up and down the canyon's walls.

With that disaster out of the way, we reached a spot near the end of the canyon. Here the black rock was scoured clean by a torrent of water pouring down from hundreds of feet above. Cool mist played on my hide and dripped off my mane and into my eyes. I wiped the wet strands away and sighed, looking around at the bands of stones in the canyon's walls, shown so clearly with the wet bringing out their colors.

One particular reddish-yellow band of stone stood out above the others. That was because this

one had teeth! The massive fangs of some enormous creature were frozen in place where the profile emerged from the rock. "Whoa, cool!" Pound Cake said as he flew above us all. Whatever the creature was, it'd been two or three times the size of a pony. There were lots of other grayish bones visible in the rock band.

"Thank you, Pound Cake," Goldenblood said as he smiled at the tan pegasus colt. "If you remember our last session, I pointed out how when sedimentary rocks form, they create bands of stone called 'strata'. These strata are usually arranged from youngest rock at the top with progressively older and older stone the further down you go."

"Like your room, Bro," Pumpkin Cake teased the pegasus with a grin.

"What about those, Professor? Are those b... b... bones?" Rampage stammered as she nervously poked one of the shapes embedded in the wall.

"Once they were, but now they've become special rocks called fossils. Long ago, this creature was as alive as you or I," Goldenblood said as he gestured at the cliff wall. "Then it died and was buried in this muddy sand. Over a very long time, its bones were transformed into rocks like the ones you see here." His horn glowed as he levitated out a rock hammer, carefully picked one of the fossils free, and passed it around... or at least passed it around till it got to Boo. The pale earth filly then popped it into her mouth and started chewing on the fossil like it was an extremely stale biscuit.

"How? Was there an outbreak of cockatrices?" Trueblood asked with a skeptical scowl.

"Actually? There're some theories that the transformation occurred with no magic at all," Goldenblood said with a smile. The maroon colt snorted disdainfully. "Yes, that's the typical reaction," the pale unicorn said with a chuckle.

"Oooh! There's another one, Professor! And another!" Glory cried out as she dropped down to the bottom of the yellowy-red layer and pointed her wing at the darker layer below it. "And even more down here! Only... these look like bugs. And there's a fish!" the gray filly said, pointing her hoof at the rock face.

"The magic of pegasus eyesight," Goldenblood murmured, making the maroon colt glower. "Yes, there are an amazing variety. I know that some books and films talk about ancient monsters like giants and trolls, but really, we know next to nothing about some of the creatures from long ago. What did they look like, for example? What did they hunt? How did they live? Were they intelligent, or not?" As he looked up at the rock face, the sun peeked through the clouds and made several gemstones embedded higher up gleam and twinkle like shards of a petrified rainbow.

"Spread out and see if you can find more for your collection. Remember, only one each, and only ones no bigger than your hoof. Leave the larger ones for others to find."

The fillies and colts spread out in little pairs and trios. I made sure that Boo didn't wander too close to the river. The maroon colt grumbled about stupid rock hunters' clubs and joining 'cause Mom and Dad said so. Pound Cake grabbed his sister firmly with his legs and flew off along the rock face, claiming they were going to find the biggest ones of all. I called out for them not to go too far.

Glory, however, was staring at the huge snarling fossil in the cliff face and the others beside it. "Professor... I was wondering... well... there's all these fossils in this band... and the band beneath that..."

and I even saw some in the layer underneath that one. But why aren't there any fossils of these big monsters higher up? I mean... did something kill all of these creatures at once?"

A few that were listening in stopped picking at rocks and straightened. Goldenblood looked at her with a pleased smile. "An excellent observation. That is quite a good question. The honest truth is that we don't really know. History fades and blurs the further back one goes. We're taught the pageant of Hearth's Warming Eve, but what of the countries that we came from? Where did they come from? Or the Princesses? Or ponykind? Thus, when we get to things happening eons ago, all we can do is make educated speculations. Why so many large creatures in these layers and then such an abrupt stop? Something must have happened."

He trotted up to the rock layer and peered closely at it. He hummed softly under his breath, then paused. His rock hammer then picked out a lump of rock. Laying it down, he carefully chipped at the stone till it broke open and revealed a tiny metal fragment.

"What is it, Professor?" P-21 asked as Goldenblood lifted it with his magic.

"Sky iron. Starmetal. Moonsteel. The names vary, but it's a very special kind of iron that is found only in meteorites, what we also call 'falling stars'. It has very special properties that vary quite extensively. Some is exceptionally strong. Other kinds are fairly mundane. It is usually impervious to rust and very difficult to melt or work with. Most ponies don't even bother studying it as it's such a bother. But you can find it wherever falling stars have landed." He tapped the layer. "The upper boundary of this fossil-rich layer is full of tiny fragments of this particularly silvery variety of starmetal, suggesting that once, long ago, a meteorite impacted somewhere in the world. We've found fragments of this particular starmetal all across Equestria."

"And it killed all those... those things?" Rampage asked as she pointed at the fangy fossil with a hoof.

"We suspect it did. Others hypothesize that other changes to the world may have killed these ancient beasts long ago. Perhaps a cataclysmic volcanic eruption. But does anypony notice something else?" He gestured towards the horizontal bands of stone higher up the rock face with his hoof. I stared but didn't see anything standing out. Certainly no other fossils like the others I'd seen. Just the glimmer of gems studding the rock face in little clusters.

"Boring..." muttered Trueblood.

Then Stygius flew up and tapped a ruby with a hoof. Goldenblood nodded in approval. "Excellent. That's exactly it. Above this stratum of rock, gemstones appear all across Equestria, yet beneath it there is virtually nothing we'd call a gemstone." We all looked at him in confusion. He floated his hammer up to the batpony, who took it in his mouth and knocked the gemstone free. I caught it as it fell and levitated it over to the gold-maned unicorn as Stygius dropped down beside me. "Gemstones like this are uncommon anywhere else in the world. Notice its facets? How clear and flawless it is? We see so many bright and sparkly gems like this across Equestria that they're mundane and common. Indeed, we cultivate them inside stones. However, if you were to go to another part of the world..." He pulled an ugly reddish-brown stone embedded inside a rock from his saddlebag. "This is a ruby."

"Um... I'm sorry Professor, but that can't be right. That's a ruby," I said as I pointed at the glimmering gemstone. Everypony nodded in agreement.

Goldenblood chuckled, "I assure you, this is a ruby. Same hardness. Same crystals. Cut and polished, it would look the same. Yet it would have absolutely no inherent magical energy whatsoever. Also, any gemstones below this impact stratum would be equally mundane and unmagical. This is the conundrum. How is it that we go from ordinary, dirty, unmagical crystals before the event to countless gemstones afterwards? And why are these gems so abundant here, but scarcer and scarcer the further one gets from Equestria?"

The pale unicorn poorly hid his smug expression, and P-21 shared a look with me and Glory before he rolled his eyes and said with not so veiled sarcasm, "Gee, Professor. Do *you* have a theory?" Rampage snorted and even Glory fought a smile.

Goldenblood smirked back at P-21 and said, with a touch of singed pride, "Well, since you're so curious, I guess I can share mine with you." He looked up at the gems studding the cliff face. "I suspect that when the meteorite struck, so many creatures died so suddenly that the release of all that life energy condensed in the gemstones that are abundant in our land. We see a similar phenomenon occur when potent magical beings, like ancient dragons, die."

"Is there going to be a test on this, Professor?" Trueblood asked, rolling his eyes. "I didn't think rock hunters' club had marks."

"Just because you've got rocks in your head doesn't mean that the rest of us aren't interested! Right?" Glory asked eagerly as she turned to the rest of us. Boo tilted her head and looked up at her as she chewed on her tail, P-21 gave a shrug, Rampage scratched her head, and Stygius was checking out my rump. Glory drooped in the air. "Well *I'm* interested."

"It's alright," Goldenblood said as he looked at the students hunting for fossils and then turned back to me. "It looks like Pumpkin and Pound have wandered off again. Can you see if you can find them, Dear? They're probably further back along the canyon. Tell them we have perfectly fine fossils for them to pick here." He looked back at the rest of the colts and fillies working on the stone face. "I'll keep an eye on everypony else here."

I trotted away with all due diligence and speed, calling out their names as I picked my way through the canyon that arced along the edge of Littlehorn Valley. Seen from far above, it would have created an image of an immense crescent moon. The river slowed as the canyon widened. While the terrain was rough and wild, unicorns had already put their horns into shaping the stone and molding footpaths, slowly but surely transforming the canyon into an immense garden. Where earth ponies would cultivate the land and pegasi would simply ignore it, unicorns simply had to shape the land to their whims.

What would zebras have done with the canyon and the valley? Would they have molded the dark stone into delicate yet sturdy bridges? Tended to the land so that it was lush and green as possible? Or just ignored it? Professor Goldenblood said that the zebras built beautiful and exotic cities while leaving the wilderness wild, but it was difficult to imagine an entire world that was left like the Everfree Forest.

I came around the bend and could see the school built into the side of the cliff face. In less than six months, with magic from the Princess herself, Luna's Academy for Young Unicorns had been erected. A round curtain wall topped with elaborate towers rose beside a lake in the widest section of the valley. Diamonds enchanted to twinkle like stars would illuminate it once night fell. Built into the wall of the canyon in brilliant black marble was a palace unlike any other outside Canterlot. The structure rose higher and higher till a final black spire soared above the lip of the canyon and into the air over the valley.

"Ma'am?" came a voice from above. I looked up to see Pound Cake fluttering overhead. He looked worried. Not panicked like something bad had happened, but definitely not his usual pugnacious behavior. His brown eyes turned towards a cave in the cliff wall where Pumpkin Cake sat, chewing on a hoof nervously. I trotted my way towards the cave, one of the larger ones I knew of. The canyon was full of little nooks and hidey holes. "We found something..."

I trotted to the cave and conjured a tiny star of light. I looked at the tan unicorn and asked in a cautious voice, "What is--"

Zebras. I knew that zebras were supposed to be terrible, deadly enemies. What I saw inside, though, were not the fiends we read about in the newspaper but filthy, terrified, and above all hungry people clustered together and wearing rags. A half dozen had rifles, but it was all they could do to remain upright. Many looked too weak to even stand. The reek was abominable, and I balked for several moments before I took a step forward. "Hello?"

They shrank back fearfully from one unicorn mare and two young ponies. An elderly stallion dressed in a filthy rag slowly moved to the front of the crowd as they shrank back. One eye was covered by a bandage, and he had more rags covering other injuries. He turned and addressed the others quickly, then turned back to me. "No hurt, pony. No hurt."

Was he saying he didn't want me to hurt them, or that he wasn't going to hurt me? "No hurt. Good!" I smiled widely, backing off a few steps; indeed, the reek coming off him made that easy. He seemed to relax a little as the sickly, starving zebras talked to each other in their strange language. I took in how wretched they were and though how wrong it was given that the school was well stocked and could feed ten times their number. "Food? Help?" I asked as I pointed back in the direction of the school.

I knew we were at war with the zebras, but these people weren't in any condition to be at war with anypony. A few that wore filthy cloaks and stared at me coldly gave me the shivers, but could I really blame them? The chief looked at me and then at the starving zebras. "Safe..." he drawled slowly, pointing at the cave. Then he firmly shook his head as he pointed past me. "No safe! Curse!"

"Please. Let me help," I begged. If I left and got food, they might flee to another cave, or worse, try to leave the valley. "We won't hurt you." I slowly backed away, Pound Cake and Pumpkin Cake coming to flank me. Slowly, the mass of zebras began to move towards the exit. As I continued to move, more and more came out. Where I'd thought there'd been only a dozen or so, in the end I was staring at nearly a hundred filthy and scared zebras. Clearly they didn't like this, but starvation was a powerful motivator for them to trust me.

They moved with grace and care, despite their weakened condition. Some even had wagons of a sort, exotic balanced bisected vehicles with one large wheel in the middle that easily crossed the bumpy terrain. Many more young, old, and sick were loaded on these strange wagons. Other larger two- and four-wheeled varieties carried what meager supplies they had. Most looked fearful, but as they talked to each other in their strange tongue, I hoped my entreaties of 'Food' and 'Safe' were making it across the language barrier.

I sent Pound Cake ahead to the school to tell the dean that we'd found zebras who needed help. With food and help... who knew? Maybe this might be something that they could use to end the fighting! The war wasn't worth it if it hurt anypony like this.

The front gates of the academy stood wide; there wasn't really any need for them to be closed.

The war was as far from Littlehorn as one could get, and the lone old guardsmare just took in the sight of me and a unicorn filly leading in a filthy, starving horde with disbelief. Then she turned tail and scampered inside. Alarm bells started to ring, and the students began to mill about; nopony was exactly sure what to do when the alarms went off. They watched from windows and doorways in nervous anticipation. The zebras were equally terrified as they looked around at the school.

The school dean, a sour-looking yellow stallion with a gray curly mane, poked his head out the front door of the building in terror. His horn glowed a moment, then his voice boomed across the central yard. "Release your hostages immediately and depart! This school is well defended!" From the tops of the towers along the curtain wall, diamond points began to glow an ominous blue. "This is your last warning!"

"Wait! Wait!" I screamed as I raced forward and stopped before the front door. Pumpkin Cake stood beside me, and Pound Cake zoomed out of a window to stand beside his sister as well. "They're not attacking us! They need our help!"

"I tried telling them that!" Pound Cake shouted, waving at the dean in frustration. "He heard the word 'zebra' and went stupid!"

"Help?" The dean gaped at me in shock. "Are you... did you lead them here?! Are you out of your little pony minds!?"

"They're starving and sick! They can't hurt anypony," I said as I stood between the doors and the clusters of wagons and zebras.

"They've got a gun!" somepony shrieked. "Fire! Fire!"

"No! Stop! We need to help them!" I yelled as the Cake twins waved their hooves as well.

"Please, don't shoot!" Pound Cake begged.

"They won't hurt us!" Pumpkin Cake yelled.

"Depart at once! This is your final warning!" The dean's panicked voice boomed over the yard as the zebras started to break apart. Somepony, however, had closed the gates too late, and now the refugees were trapped within the curtain wall with nowhere to flee. The zebras began to cry out as the diamond spires glowed brighter and brighter.

Then a shot rang out.

"No!" I screamed as I turned and looked at the zebras I'd wanted so badly to help.

The spires discharged. Blue-white lines flashed out from the tips of six towers and flashed across the clustered zebras. Whatever they touched simply vaporized. I'd never actually seen magic like this at work; in fact, I doubted anypony at our school knew exactly how the defenses worked. We'd never imagined what they could actually *do*...

A second, and they were being cut to pieces. And it was all my fault. I couldn't think. I could only move, and that was in the direction of the wagons that were sliced to pieces by the dancing blue beams. It was the only way I could imagine getting the beams to stop. At the very least, I would die

beside the zebras I'd foolishly led to their deaths.

"Stop! Stop firing!" the dean stammered as I reached the screaming zebras. I found the old zebra with the one eye lying in two pieces and collapsed in front of him. We may not have understood their language, but screams like that didn't need language to get their meaning across. Young zebras with sliced-off legs were held by desperate parents ignoring their own wounds to tie off spurting stumps. Others cradled loved ones killed under the promise of food and help.

Pumpkin Cake and Pound Cake, to my astonishment and relief, rushed to help me. Despite the blood and smell and screams, those two young ponies raced forward to help with the injured. Pound lifted splintered chunks of wagon from their trapped occupants while Pumpkin worked to tie off injured zebras' stumps with whatever she could find.

Singularly... then in pairs... then in a swarm... the students and faculty rushed out to assist as well. Healing spells were immediately applied as the school tried to undo what it had done. Half the zebras were dead, and virtually all of them were wounded in some way or another. And once the bleeding was stopped, they started to bring out food and drink.

I sat there, blood smearing my hide, emotionally and physically exhausted. Then I became aware of the dean standing over me. Pumpkin Cake and Pound Cake stood behind him, both looking positively grimy. "Well... I hope you're proud of yourselves. I don't know what Princess Luna will make of this incident when she returns from Canterlot, but you three are going straight to Celestia while I try and deal with this mess."

"What? Celestia?" I muttered weakly. A pegasus hooked to a skywagon on the edge of the campus looked on warily at the slaughter. "Now? Couldn't we at least wash the blood off? Take some of the injured with us?"

"Yes, now! This instant!" he shrieked. "I'll make it clear that this fiasco was your fault. I'll leave you to explain to the Princess what madness drove you to be so... so ridiculously reckless!" He snorted and stomped, then turned to some of the other faculty. "No! Don't let them inside! Uggh! Keep them out here! Honestly!" he said as she trotted out where the faculty was trying the help the injured survivors. "Oh, Luna is going to be absolutely furious when she returns tonight!"

"Come on, ma'am," the blue pegasus buck said in a low, deep voice. "It's a long way back to Canterlot." I gathered up Pumpkin Cake with a feeling of dread in my heart. I wouldn't even have a chance to tell the professor what I'd done. A minute later we were airborne, leaving the school behind us. "Well, I never thought I'd see it," the buck muttered.

"I'm sorry... I just..." I said as I shivered. "I wanted to help them."

"Sorry?" The blue pegasus looked over his shoulder back at me with a wry smile. "Girl, you don't got nothing to be sorry for. Young unicorn mare like yourself helpin' refugees like that... jumpin' in to stop the firing? Getting the whole damn school to help, regardless of what that damned nag said? Girl, I think when Princess Celestia hears about this, and word gets back to the zebras, the war will be over. Y'all might have just saved Equestria." The feeling of dread lifted as we soared higher and higher into the clouds.

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I felt wetness on my cheek, then blinked awake. I'd drooled all over my pillow in my sleep, and now it was soaked. I self-consciously wiped my own spittle off with a smooth metal hoof. Huh... no mare in black senselessly butchering ponies... no horrible dreams of my stable or getting ploughed on the *Seahorse*. It was almost anticlimactic. I turned the pillow over to the dry side and rolled onto my back, looking at the flowers and birds painted on the ceiling. The details of the dream I'd had were slipping away. Something about an academy and some zebras and Goldenblood being a teacher there.

My head was... better. The radroach in my skull was gone, and while I wasn't quite at a hundred percent, I was a lot closer to it than I'd been in a long time. I rubbed my face carefully with my forelegs and then slowly sat up. I cautiously activated my E.F.S. and looked around till I found a single blue bar... along with a sea of red bars on the other side of the door. Too much to hope that the killer robots with nothing else to do would have gotten bored and left, I guessed. I cancelled the E.F.S. and sighed as I sat up on the couch.

Now. What to do about him?

On one hoof, he was handsome and fit. He hadn't tried to force himself on me, but he was keenly interested. On another, I had no idea who he really was or what he really wanted. I couldn't treat him as a Stable 99 stallion and just rut him because I wanted to. Besides, even if he had been relatively gallant since we'd met, he might still have an ulterior motive. On another, it would be nice to get a little play. It'd been so long since Tenpony, and since my last decent buck -- U-18, five months ago -- that a pony ride sounded nice. But still, on the other other rear hoof, I really wasn't sure if I should wait till I was with Glory or not. Though as fun and wonderful and dear as she was, she wasn't a stallion. There just wasn't any getting around that.

And on a metaphorical fifth hoof, there was that part of me screaming to kill him before he nailed me to the floor and fucked my orifices in alphabetical order.

"Ugh, I need less hooves," I groaned, shaking my head.

A door opened and I looked over to see Stygius, armor off--what was it about the physique of flyers?--trotting out of the library a fold of papers under his wing. He sat beside the couch and held up his slate. 'Sleep well?' had been written on it.

"You know what's crazy? I actually did," I said as I rolled forward onto my hooves, standing upright and stretching my legs. Okay, technically there weren't very many muscles in them to stretch, but the motion was refreshingly familiar. "It's pretty sad when a decent nap stands out so much. How long was I out?"

He stomped his hoof five times. I sure hoped that that wasn't in minutes. "And what have you been doing?"

He folded his forelegs beside his head and mimicked napping. Then he reached under his wing and pulled out the stack of papers. I took it from him with my magic and unfolded them, reading what he'd written.

You asked where batponies come from. We don't know. We have stories that once we were pegasus ponies who lived in the clouds. Then terrible storm monster came and wrecked home. We hid in deep cave and were trapped. For long time we live

eating magic mushrooms and cave things. We become batponies or...

And here I broke off for a moment and just stared at the paper. νυχτερίδ πόνυ? What *alphabet* was that?

...and live and grow in caves. When we finally escape, bright sun hurt eyes and other pony think we were monsters! But moon and stars are bright and make us happy. We met Luna long ago and she lonely and we lonely and so we say we help her. Then she became ~~NiteMaer~~ Nightmaer Moon! But shes nicer than dayponies so we try and help. She lose, and many batponies die. With no Nightmare Moon, many many batponies were killed and we hid back in caves. Luna came back from the moon so we sent our strongest to be her guard, but keep families hidden away. Canterlot went boom. Luna died. And we go back to cave. Sometimes think mistake ever leave cave in first place...

Other story... Nightmare Moon and Luna made us into Batponies with magic. Turn pegasus pony into batpony. Not know what she did with unicorns and earth ponies. Maybe only need batponies? Dunno. Now we live in caves and fly out at night. Hard to meet pretty mare who isnt family in caves. Very hard. Soooooooooooooo hard. Sister think I am dumb for following you cause your pretty but you are with your shiny legs and tight flank and striped mane and your eyes glow and your...

Okay, now he was getting a little explicit. I didn't see much else beneath that beyond him trying to tell me how beautiful I was. He'd sketched a couple of pictures of caves, some of batponies, and one of me. At least, I thought it was me; I really doubted my horn had magic sparkles dancing around it or that I had a full moon aura surrounding me.

I couldn't help but smile. Back in 99, I'd been a lot like him: always chasing after Midnight or some other mare that I thought I could have some fun with. I'd never been the one pursued by another. I always assumed I was simply too much of a screwup to be worth the trouble. Plus there was Mom, head of security, and all the awkwardness that generated. How bizarre that the first buck I'd ever attract was some strange batpony, but honestly, given all the things that had happened to me since getting out of 99, I supposed I should have been grateful he wasn't a cyber-ghoul-batpony with a mysterious agenda.

"You're sweet," I said, and I actually giggled as he seemed to float with his ear to ear grin. I flushed a little. "But you know... if we did it... it would only be a thing. I have a very special somepony, and I don't think I get two."

He looked a bit confused at that. I didn't see why. It wasn't like having sex with him would make her any less my special somepony. I needed Glory in my life; without her, I was so empty inside it hurt. But it wasn't like she'd be the only source of orgasms. I wasn't the only security mare in 99 that polished the old baton when their marefriend was unavailable. Not that I'd actually *had* a marefriend in 99.

"You also know what happened to me," I murmured as I looked out the window towards the distant river to the west. "I... I really don't want to hurt you, Stygius. I mean it. You're nice to me... and I have to admit, you've really been on my mind since we met... but I don't want to snap in the middle and do something permanent to you."

He looked at me in sympathy before he grabbed his slate. 'I can wait,' he wrote.

I smiled and sighed as I rolled my eyes a little. "Yeah. But I'm not sure I'll be able to." If I didn't get over this... or at least prove I could have some sort of normal physical relationship with a stallion... then those males who'd violated me would have won. I thought how bowel-loosening that ship in the Happyhorn simulation had been, felt the shame that I'd been unable to face it. They'd changed me from who I was. My time in Happyhorn had injected weeks of imaginary time into my consciousness, but imaginary or not, I still remembered those weeks of extra time between me and the boat. That time hadn't stopped me from balking there near the end, and nor had it stopped the memory from creeping around in my mind like a suspicious beast.

I knew what I needed to do. It was just... weird.

And Stygius trotted to a window and wrapped the curtain's drawstring around his forehooves, tugging it tight and looking back at me with a grin. I stared at him a moment and then burst out laughing. It made his ears wilt a bit, but I shook my head with a wide smile. "No! No no no no..." I repeated. "That's more... my thing, actually. At least with Glory." Wow, that sure made his eyebrows arch. "If I do it, I need to do it normally." Or as normally as sex between a cyberpony and a batpony could be. I trotted over to him and magically undid the string around his legs. "But thank you..."

His amber eyes were bright and round as he blushed and sweated nervously. If he was plotting some horrible fate for me, then he was one damned good actor. "You're a good pony," I murmured as I looked into his wide eyes. "I'm going to kiss you now. Okay?"

He gulped as if I'd just promised to shoot him, then clenched his eyes shut and puckered his lips ridiculously. I smiled and lifted my hooves and held his head gently, extending my fingers to hold him still as I brought my mouth towards his.

Then my fingers tightened, my legs jerked, and a resounding snap filled the air.

NO! I stomped on that image and impulse with all the force I could. I wasn't a landmine that would go off. I could do this because I wanted to! I was in control of me. I was...

Please be in control...

He opened his eyes, blinking and frowning in concern as I sniffed and shed a few tears. "Sorry," I murmured awkwardly and he gave a sigh and a resigned smile. He'd said he could wait, and he would.

But he wouldn't have to.

I leaned in and pressed my lips to his. He was so shocked that he simply let me, kissing back as he could. He had such soft lips and a nicely sweet mouth. The kind I could kiss all day.

Too bad I lasted about a minute before I slowly pulled away. I was in control, but I didn't want to push that control too far just yet. Then I blinked at his googly-eyed expression as a slow, almost drunk smile crossed his face. I let him go gently, and he slumped to the floor. "Was that your first kiss?" I asked, a touch concerned. He started to nod and then stopped and touched the side of his face... where I'd laid him flat. Oh, right. I grinned sheepishly, "I mean, the first kiss where you weren't hit immediately afterwards?" He smiled and nodded as he swayed there. I couldn't help myself. I gave him one more firm smooch, and that finished him off. He playfully flopped over completely and lay there as a dusky lump of goofiness.

I smiled and patted his shoulder. Then I trotted for the stairs; we hadn't checked the second floor rooms yet. I got up them and into a bathroom and was closing the door as it hit me. My legs couldn't shake, my heart couldn't race, and my breathing wouldn't gasp, but I could at least sink to the floor next to the toilet and cry as something snapped inside me. It wasn't painful. Quite the opposite. I pressed my face into a fuzzy pink floor mat as that hideous, suspicious beast inside me roared in pain from the wound inflicted by a simple kiss. My tears were of relief. I'd kissed him and not killed him. He'd liked it... liked *me*.

For the first time in a very long time, I felt like Blackjack the mare. Maybe a little wiser, but still Blackjack. Not Blackjack the cyberpony nor Security the madmare of Hoofington. Just Blackjack. Who knew a little normalcy could feel so good?

When I'd recomposed myself, I wiped my eyes and took the opportunity to use the facilities. Functional plumbing and a flushing toilet: another miracle in the wastes. Then I stepped out and saw Stygius coming up the stairs. As soon as he saw me, he immediately smiled, but a touch of concern lingered in his eyes. 'U ok?' he wrote on the slate.

"Yeah. Just not used to it," I said as I stood and looked at the other three doors up here. If I was lucky, I'd find a flicker or something that would help me refocus my mind. I opened the first, looking at a bedroom. Like the rooms downstairs, everything was neat and tidy and gave no impression at all that anypony actually used it. One wall was covered by four tall transparent display cases, each one with a dozen different rocks inside individual glass compartments. There was a little tag beside each of the samples.

Gold nugget, Flankorage River. Purple Fluorite, Las Pegasus. Amber, Stalliongrad. Silver ore, Fancee. There were more unusual names that I guessed were from faraway lands. The crystals weren't like the standard magic jewels I was familiar with. In fact, while there was a selection of magical gems, most of them were strange and exotic-looking. Some were delicate needle-like crystal spires and strange purple cubes that peppered the surfaces of stones. Others were simple rocks, like granite and marble, that I was more familiar with. One section had a dozen different types of ore all arranged alphabetically.

Fossil, Crescent Moon Canyon.

I slowly opened the case and levitated the horn-sized stone out, then turned it over in front of me. The small spiral shell resembled an extremely old tan cookie. I sighed and put it in my saddlebag. Beside it was another curious rock, a flake of silvery metal. *Starmetal, Hoofington.* And right beside that was a strangely glowing milky white crystal. *Moonstone, Moon.* As amazing as that was, it didn't distract me from something else I found very curious.

The glass wall between the two had melted. I opened the door to the case and pried loose the silvery flake and the pale stone. I'd seen these two together before... only they'd been separated by a layer of Flux rather than simple glass. I looked over at Stygius. "Stand back. I think this is gonna do something." I dropped the stone and flake from my hands into my telekinesis, closed my eyes, and carefully brought the two closer together. As I did so, the metal began to glow and the crystal to glow brighter, and instantly my PipBuck began detecting magical radiation pouring from the two. Stygius backed away with me. We stepped out onto the balcony walkway overlooking the great room and closed the door almost completely shut. I peeked through the gap at the two floating rocks.

Holding the two at the furthest distance inside the room I could manage, I forced them together.

The flash and explosion rattled the house, though clearly the building had been built from magically-reinforced materials. The detonation blasted the door right into my face, and only my hastily raised cyberlegs kept the wood from taking my head off completely. The force blasted Stygius into the air as I fell back and nearly crashed right through the balcony railing, chunks of door flying out over me and tumbling down into the room below as I lay there on my back. I had no idea that my radmeter could even click that fast, though the rate was decreasing quickly. Okay, that was a little toastier than usual. When I looked back towards the empty doorframe, I saw cracks spiderwebbed through the walls around it.

"Ow... That was really stupid!" I muttered as I slowly sat up, rubbing my head. I pulled out a pouch of RadAway for each of us, smirking around mine at Stygius's disgusted expression as he drank his, then stepped back inside, looking at the shattered cases and the rocks strewn across the floor. The bed was smoking, and the floor was blackened below where I'd squeezed them together. Embedded in one wall was the moonstone. Embedded in the opposite was the flake of starmetal, still giving off smoke.

I trotted towards the flake's impact dent and looked at the smoking bit of metal. No, not just smoking. It was melting away before my eyes, shrinking as it made a long, low screaming noise. Glowing white smoke curled up from it as it slowly vanished and that smoke condensed into tiny white motes of light. They were exactly like the motes in the zebra ruins. I saw them disappearing one by one and lunged forward to touch one with my horn--

oooOOOooo

The unicorn mare I occupied walked carefully up towards the dark cottage on the hillside overlooking the pouring river and knocked her hoof on the front door. "Princess Luna?" she called out in worry. Then she knocked again, then finally used her magic to open the door. The interior was pitch black. "Princess Luna?" she called in a weaker voice. The light of her horn reflected off countless polished silver stars set in the walls and ceiling. A strange, ominous note rose up from the basement, and she hesitated a moment at the door. "P... Princess?"

The basement door was blown open by a dark wind that scooped the mare up and carried her down the steps into the earth, dumping her in a heap behind the glorious dark Princess. A work table was set up in the middle of the subterranean room. Strange and exotic zebra statues loomed on like silent mentors examining their student's work. Hammers and tongs lay tossed aside next to a cold forge. She shaped the metal with her magic alone. "YES!?" she boomed as the silvery steel twisted in the air before her.

The force of her voice nearly knocked my host over. "P... Princess? Thy... thy sister... she sent us to find thee. She hath been forced to raise both sun and the moon for three days and nights." The Princess flinched at the word 'sister'. The hum grew stronger, and the shadows cast by the pale light of her horn moved unnaturally, as though they were peering at us.

"SO! IT TAKETH HER THREE DAYS FOR TO SEEK ME. And she didn't come herself. Surprise surprise," the Princess said, her boom dying to a normal voice as her horn glowed, that oppressive hum filling the air.

"Princess? Art thou well?" the unicorn asked in fear.

"Nay, we are not!" she said with a stomp of her hoof as her head fell. "She doesn't need us. No pony does." Her eyes glared at the metal as it finished shaping into a helmet. "Well, if she can raise

the sun and the moon, why can't we? Why can't we do both just as well as she can?" she demanded as she whirled, facing me as tears ran down her cheeks. "We don't need her. WE can do it all ourself!"

"Princess!" the unicorn gasped, backing away.

"NAY!" she said as she magically put the pieces of armor in place. She seemed to swell and grow darker. It was as if she were drinking in that horrible humming scream all at once. Her starry mane grew cold and hard. Her coat turned black as pitch. "WE ARE A PRINCESS NO LONGER! WE HAVE NO SISTER! IF PONYKIND HATES AND FEARS US, THEN LET THEM HAVE OUR NIGHT IN WRATH INSTEAD OF BEAUTY!"

And with that she exploded into a cloud of darkness, and everything went black. Beneath it all, the hum persisted in its steady, proud drone...

oooOOOooo

I lurched and shook my head hard. Whoa... that was... interesting. I rubbed my bleary eyes, trying to pull my head into the here and now. I remembered the terrifying statue of Nightmare Moon that'd been in the Hoofington Museum, but that statue had been cute compared to what I'd seen just now. The sight of Luna transforming into that dark shape made me shiver from horn to... shoulder. Really, it'd be nice if I could get some nice goosebumps going.

In a minute the starmetal had disappeared entirely, the white wisps and flickering motes being drawn westward out the cracked window and fading away from sight. I saw the little bots buzzing about on the far side, but it hadn't broken. Stygius flew to the other side of the room and dug at the wall, popped the moonstone free, picked it up in his mouth, and carried it to me. I looked it over closely. Unlike the metal flake, the moonstone was intact. Only a small indentation had been made in it where I'd forced the two together. "Whoa..." I murmured as I looked at the faintly glowing white stone.

He nodded, and I carefully put the crystal away in my saddlebags. I wondered what had happened to the moonstone that'd been extracted from the Folly shell. I supposed it was somewhere in the muck at the bottom of the bay underneath the HMS *Celestia*. It hadn't been among the things I'd gotten back in Tenpony.

Ugh, I came here for answers. Not more questions! Really, wasn't there a quota on mysteries? Huffing in annoyance, I moved to the second door. Knowing my luck, there'd be something horribly vague and terribly nagging that'd go completely over my head. I sighed and looked back at Stygius. He had my back... well, he at least definitely had my backside in his sights. Then his eyes met mine and he flushed, coughing self-consciously as he looked away. Still, I couldn't help smiling.

The door creaked open slowly and a stale, lonely smell rolled out over us. I saw the crib in the corner decorated with butterflies and birds. Gems dangled from a mobile above it. Stuffed animals sat in dusty vigil atop a dresser while toys peeked out of a dusty trailer. There were still diapers stacked up on the underside of a changing table next to the door. I gazed in at a room never used... never even entered, from the dust on the wooden floors. Slowly, I pulled the door closed once more.

There was no mystery after all, and for once I wished there had been.

I made my way into the last room, a bedroom decorated in the twined hard/soft motif of nature

and metal. Like all the rest of the house, it'd been cleaned and tidied up and all but abandoned. Indeed, unlike the library, there were no pictures of any kind in here. No clothes. No personal items. Nothing that suggested that a pony named Goldenblood had lived in here. It was nearly anonymous.

I trotted to the bed and pushed down on the mattress. I had to give Goldenblood credit; he definitely had good taste in bedding. I pressed down with my forehooves and felt it give. I looked over my shoulder at Stygius hard at work looking through the dressers. My eyes wandered along his mane, his exotic wings, and his tail. I didn't know if it was a flyer thing or not, but there was just *something* about his form that made my eye wander from the gothic black shield on his flank down the backs of his legs and up the front.

So, could I do this? Should I?

I groaned and pressed my face into the bed. I just couldn't decide; there were plenty of reasons to and plenty of reasons not to. I didn't want to be defined by what those bucks had done to me on the boat. I didn't want to be defined by that. Didn't want to be a victim. I also didn't want to be set off by any buck that brushed my ass. If I was going to thump a guy like Candlewick, I wanted it to be my choice, not my reaction. But I was also scared to death that if I tried anything, I'd kill another pony who didn't deserve to die by my hooves.

He buried his head into one of Fluttershy's dressers, or, at least, I assumed they were hers from the butterflies carved in the woodwork. I smiled as I watched him over my shoulder... and then I slid my saddlebags to the floor and a moment later sent my combat armor to join them. Please, Luna and Celestia, please let this go right. "Hey..." I croaked, then coughed, and smiled again. "Hey, Stygius..." He pulled his head out of the dresser, a glowing golden memory orb in his mouth. He looked at me stretched half on the bed, his eyes drawn to my posterior. Then I gave my tail a little swish and watched as his eyes popped round. I swished a little bit more, and the memory orb fell from his mouth and rolled slowly along the floor. I picked it up and floated it down onto the nightstand. He slowly approached, looking torn between eagerness and concern.

He lowered his mouth to his chalkboard and wrote briefly, not taking his eyes off my swaying tail. 'U sure?'

"Yeah. I am. If you're still interested?" I asked, half hoping he'd changed his mind. But he swallowed and nodded. I closed my eyes and bowed my head. "You know what happened to me, though... so, if I tell you to stop... please stop. Okay? For both our sakes."

He approached till he was right behind me, then wrote something else as he blushed profusely. 'Virgin', it read, and he smiled sheepishly.

"Well... you can start by touching me," I murmured softly as I closed my eyes. Don't kill him... don't kill him. I want this. I really do.

Then I felt his lips on my cutie mark. His muzzle nuzzling my hide. And never, ever, have I been more thankful for having skin. I felt my body twitch in response, and I smiled as that reactive fear remained at bay. I felt his breath on my hide, his hooves touching me in vaguely reassuring ways. He was taking his time, and I didn't rush him. I needed the time too. Then he moved back further and dared to move beneath my tail.

It was an interesting touch, nothing at all like Glory's. She was soft; she knew what to stroke and

what to avoid. His was firmer and heavier than hers. His lips more hesitant, his mouth stronger. My mind reduced to two thoughts: 'Oh yes', which I expressed in a delighted groan, and 'Don't kill him'. I was in control... and with every minute I felt better and better as he helped me feel like a mare... like a pony. Damn me if I didn't understand Deus now. When you were half machine, you needed something, anything, to remind you that you were also flesh and blood.

Very flesh. Very blood.

And when he entered me, it was all I could to keep myself together. My legs could remember the feeling of the nails, my nethers and throat the burning pain and humiliation. This wasn't that. He wasn't them. I was safe. I was in control of myself. And while every second a part of me screamed to get him out before he started hurting me, to rip and tear and kill... I suppressed it. I refused to allow it to set me off as he pressed above me and moved inside me. He huffed as he increased speed and I tensed. He slowed, and I relaxed.

Before too long he made a series of squeaks and I felt hot wetness inside me. Of course, I was nowhere near climaxing myself, but that wasn't the point. This was about me being able to do this and put what'd been done to me behind me. And as he squirted, I had one more fierce impulse to rip the invading member off. Then his lips met my ears and neck and like that, the impulse was gone. I'd been ploughed badly, but none of them had shown the slightest affection.

I finally collapsed on the bed as he withdrew, an oddly depressing sensation. I crawled the rest of the way onto it, and he moved beside me, his brows furrowing and his eyes concerned. He reached for the chalkboard and wrote 'Good?', holding it between his hooves as he looked at me.

Poor buck deserved better than me hugging him fiercely and sobbing as that murderous impulse broke apart and flowed out my eyes. "Really good, Styggie. Really... really really good..." I blubbered as I curled up against him and let him hold me and curl his wings about me. He might have looked completely confused and worried, but right now he knew exactly what I needed.

When I finally pulled myself together and wiped my nose and eyes, he kissed my horn and then started to pull away. I reached out with my magic for a very specific part of him and froze him in his tracks. "Where do you think you're going?" I asked with a tiny smile. His eyes grew wide again as I gave a careful tug and leaned forward to kiss him again. "We've only just started..."

* * *

I. Liked. Stallions. I liked mares too, but right now, curled up with Stygius on the bed, I had to admit that I liked the boys every bit as much as I liked the girls. I pressed my nose to his chest, taking in his musky, sweaty scent as I felt his heart beating. He'd lasted three rounds and now snoozed next to me. I didn't want to pull away, and for now my itch had been scratched. I'd actually worked up a sweat of my own; even with the metal and synthetic organs, I'd still made quite a workout of it. I probably could have kept going for hours, but why ruin a good time by forcing him to draw it out?

I'm gonna need another bath, I thought, feeling things drying on my hide. Oh well. Showers later. Stygius was smiling in his daze; he'd been good. Not spectacular, but for his first time, he'd definitely put up a good show. I'd even popped once our last round, to my own delight and surprise. I doubted we'd have time for a fourth; we couldn't stay locked up here forever rutting... Okay, for the

Wasteland that actually sounded damn inviting, but still! I felt... good. It was something I hadn't felt in a long time. Good. Not drunk. Not exhausted. Not crazy.

Okay, I felt guilty. I didn't deserve to feel this way... but aside from that lingering urge to kick myself on general principle for what I'd done after Yellow River... and at Yellow River... and every other messed up thing I'd done... I felt damn nice to be held like this. The next time I was with Glory, I would do all I could to make her feel this way.

So... move and wake him... and be tempted into a fourth round... or just rest here? My eyes went to the memory orb on the nightstand beside us. Mmmm... well... it would pass the time nicely. I floated it over and touched my horn to it with a lazy smile. My horn flared and flickered as I worked to make the connection. Come on... get in there... I can't spend all day just lying around on Goldenblood and Fluttershy's be--

oooOOOooo

The rain poured down, a heavy, persistent torrent that could only come from Hoofington's skies. Sometimes I wondered if the sky had some vendetta against the city, doing all it could to drown it and cut off the sun and moon even before the Enclave arose. The pony I was in was a familiar unicorn stallion standing out in the rainy night and looking at a mare isolated in the yellow light of a single streetlamp. She wore a trenchcoat that covered her from head to hoof, and her long black mane hung across her shadowed face from under a dripping cap. All around us were dark trees, and in the distance I could see through the rain the towering city lights of the Core.

Something snapped beneath my hoof, and she squealed as she spun around. "Who's there?" she whispered timidly. There was no answer in the pouring rain. She trembled, hanging her head once more as my host slowly moved closer. The steps he took were slow and tired. She shrank back a little, then cleared her throat. "H...hello? Um... Um... Umgabe bwanka T... T..."

"Trito. 'May peace favor us all'," the stallion murmured softly, barely audible over the pouring rain. "You have the package?"

"Yes!" she said as she turned away and dug a heavy-looking parcel wrapped in tape from her saddlebags. "You have no idea how hard I've worked to get this to you!" she said as she hugged it in her hooves like it was a precious baby. The stallion in the rain didn't reply. "H...h...here! Take it! It's all our notes! Everything you need. Please. I've worked so very hard..."

The male stayed silent. He simply stood there outside the patch of light.

Then he rasped in that unmistakable voice, "I know. First you tried contacting a zebra envoy directly; she met a tragic end with a grenade slipped into her saddlebags. Then you used Nurse Blossomforth to try and get it to a POW who was being sent back to zebra lands in a prisoner exchange. Of course, Blossomforth was a M.o.M. agent, but fortunately she met a bad end with a memory modification spell before she could report in to Pinkie and Luna. You made several subtle overtures to members of the zebra government, all which were rebuffed. So then you arranged a meeting with a member of a zebra sympathizer terrorist cell. At this moment, they're being raided. Your contact will be killed in the firefight. There's no way to extract memories from a dead pony." Her hat glowed gold and lifted off her head; at once the pouring rain began to wash the dye out of her mane. "Hello, Fluttershy." Goldenblood stepped into the pool of yellow light. The rain poured down over him, matting his mane to

his scarred, pale hide.

"No... no no no... you can't," she whimpered as she clutched the parcel to her chest, turned away as if to shield it from him. "Please..."

He didn't say anything at first. He simply gazed at her with eyes that felt tired. "Why are you doing this, Fluttershy? I would have thought that after Blossomforth was exposed, you'd have given up."

Fluttershy clenched her eyes shut and trembled, sniffing. "I have to. I have to do something. Luna won't use the megaspells to heal ponies. She wants Twilight to turn them into weapons!"

"Something Twilight would never do nor authorize," Goldenblood murmured. "You know this."

"Twilight might think it's wrong, but what would stop somepony else from doing it?" Fluttershy asked.

"If somepony else *does* weaponize your creation, I guarantee that the first demonstration will have zebra observers. They'll see what megaspell weapons do. They'll go home and tell their Caesar to end the war." But even he didn't sound convinced.

"Will they?" Fluttershy asked in return. "Or will we just use the war as an excuse to wipe them out completely?" She gave a heartbroken little sob, then looked at him and asked, "Is the only way for this to end to have everyone die? I won't accept that. I can't! Treason is better than that..." Some of the raindrops on her cheeks looked remarkably like tears. Goldenblood reached out to her, but she flinched away.

"I promised I would never hurt you," he whispered gently in his scarred voice as he withdrew his hoof.

"You broke your promise," she replied, her tone quiet yet unshakably firm. "How could you do that to me? Call... call out her name..." She shivered, and somehow he doubted that it was because of the cold or the wet.

"It was an accident," he replied, but she kept her eyes away. "I know that that didn't make it any easier, Fluttershy. But it's true. When I said her name... I wasn't thinking of doing what we were doing with her."

Fluttershy pressed her lips together firmly, eyes clenched shut. "I don't believe you. All those nights you spent with her. All those times you said you were working with her. Alone... and then you do that?" She shook her head and sniffed, "I was going to have a baby... our baby..." She raised her face to the rain, the tears pouring down her face in black rivulets as more dye slowly washed out. "I was going to be a mommy. A real mommy!"

"I know. And you would have been a spectacular one, Fluttershy." He sighed as he too looked up at the rain, but there were no answers to be found in the falling droplets. "But either way, I'm sorry it's come to this. You need to stop trying to get megaspells to the zebras. They're already sneaking around the M.A.S. looking for information. They don't seem to know it originated with the Ministry of Peace." He sighed and shook his head. "You need to give this up."

"I... I can't... don't you understand?" she begged as she looked up at him. "I went with the others

to stop the war! Not fight it. Not to kill. But... but what have I really accomplished? The fighting is still going on! I see soldiers hurt... maimed... dead. I see ponies injured in zebra terrorist attacks. I see zebras being forced to live in Zebratown, and that horrible camp they're making at Yellow River... and I can't seem to do anything to stop it!"

She backed away till she bumped into the pole behind her. "Don't you see? I'm not like Twilight or Rainbow Dash or Rarity... they all want to win! They like being Ministry Mares! Even Pinkie Pie and Applejack are helping to hurt ponies. Did you know that Applejack's cousin made a glass antipersonnel bullet that fragments in the wound? It can take days to get all the pieces out!"

"That's the intention. Tie up their medics with difficult injuries..." Goldenblood murmured, now looking away himself.

"Oh really?" That drew his eyes back to her, and even I was taken aback by the scorn in her gaze. "Do you know what glass bullets actually *do*? The infections?" she asked as she stared at him. "The pieces are almost impossible to detect; they can remain lodged in organs and cause crippling pain. They migrate, tearing holes in tissue as they move! The zebras won't waste time treating injuries like those. They'll just euthanize their injured and keep fighting all the harder!"

"Fluttershy... we're at war..." he said lamely.

"So that makes it okay?" Fluttershy retorted sharply, starting to pace. "We can use glass bullets. We're at war. We can use airdropped mines that'll blow up any foal that trots along, zebra or pony. We're at war. We can kill... and murder... and maim... and do horrible horrible things... 'cause we're at war!" She sat and started to sob, "I hate it. I hate everything about it. And I have to stop it! Even... even if that means giving megaspells to the zebras. If Luna's not good enough to use megaspells to heal battlefields... then maybe the zebras will be better than us!" She finally dropped back to a near whisper. "At least... at least it will help them with dumb glass bullets..."

She just sat there in the rain, head bowed, sobbing. He said nothing. Finally he murmured softly, "I'm sorry, Fluttershy."

She sniffed and drew a ragged breath. "Me too." Finally she straightened. "Well then, let's go."

"Go?"

"To... to Princess Luna... or Pinkie Pie... so they can banish me... or throw me in a dungeon... or... or do the things they do," she murmured as she looked up at him.

He just smiled and shook his head. "Don't be ridiculous. I wouldn't have gone through all this trouble if turning you in had ever been an option." He sighed and looked at her. "I love you, Fluttershy. I know you don't believe that, but it's true. Yes, I care for Luna too. But she never had my heart. Only you ever did. Only you ever will."

She stared at him, shaking, before she looked away. "I'm sorry... I... I don't... sorry..."

"I promised," he rasped softly as he turned aside with a small, sad smile. "I promised I would never hurt you, Fluttershy. I'm sorry I made you doubt me... that I said what I did, when I did. But I won't turn you in. I beg you to stop this, though. Zebras can't get their hooves on megaspells. It'll take the war

to an entirely new level. Please?”

“I can’t. Don’t you understand?” she said, desperation creeping into voice. “If I don’t do something... I think I’ll go crazy. I have to stop it.”

“Perhaps... what if I did something? Made some way for you to help prevent ponies from being hurt?” he asked, then sighed. “You could also take it as a more sincere apology.”

“Goldenblood... you don’t have to do that.”

“I have to do something, Fluttershy. If you keep this up, you’re going to go to prison. I couldn’t bear to see you in such a place.”

“Then help me. Please. If the zebras get their hooves on megaspells, the war will have to stop. If the zebras and ponies both know that battles are pointless, they’ll have to negotiate. Right?” she said with a wide, hopeful, and horribly naïve smile. “I can’t just... just sit on this. I need to do something too.” She smiled slightly. “You can understand?”

“Yes. I do.” He stood perfectly still for a few seconds as the rain poured down upon them both. Finally he said, in a voice barely louder than the rain, “You should write to Professor Silver Stripe. Her father is Doctor Propos at the Zebra Academy of Science, and I know she has some means of contacting him clandestinely. He’s one of a few back channels I use to keep tabs on what’s going on in zebra politics, and he is an outspoken critic of the war. Maybe you two could collaborate on treating the casualties. Try and open up some avenue for peace talks.” He looked back at her, his gaze once again firm. “But please... not megaspells. If you keep trying to pass that to the enemy... sooner or later, Pinkie Pie is going to catch you. Or Luna will. I can’t protect you then.”

“I... thank you,” she murmured as she put the parcel back into her bags. He nodded in acknowledgment, and she said softly, “Goldenblood? Do you ever dream that things were different?”

“All the time. But then again, if they were different... would we have ever had what time together we did?” He turned away.

“Goldenblood?” Fluttershy murmured, and he paused, looking back at her over his shoulder. “Please, get out of the rain.” I felt his lips curl in a smile, and with a single nod, he trotted away.

oooOOOooo

I jerked out of the memory and looked at the drowsy batpony beside me as my brain processed what I’d experienced. Fluttershy had tried to give megaspells to the zebras to end the war? Had she succeeded and been responsible for the megaspells that burned Equestria, or had the zebras developed those themselves because she’d failed to give them an alternative? I supposed that, either way, it really sucked.

And they’d broken up because he’d called out some other mare’s name in bed? It seemed... silly. Who cared who he unloaded with so long as, at the end of the day, he still loved her? Back in 99, I could probably name twenty mares I’d been with offhoof. As long as you were off shift and everypony was happy with the arrangement, why not? Sure, mares could grow close -- though if your fondness for each other impacted your stable duties, there’d be hell to pay -- but I couldn’t think of any mare that would want exclusive rights to another mare. The closest I could think of was the Overmare with P-21. That

was just... wrong. Selfish...

But then, it wasn't just that he'd been seeing somepony else; he'd called out the other mare's name when with Fluttershy. He had to have been thinking of her, whatever he claimed. Sure, if Glory had done that to me, I would have laughed it off. If it'd been the other way around, I'd have a lot of explaining and apologizing to do, but it wouldn't have been the end of the world. But Fluttershy did seem like the oversensitive sort. It would take a lot of care for her to be intimate with anypony, and I supposed that *any* betrayal or injury from him would be more than she could bear. And she'd been *pregnant*...

I reached down to my own stomach, running my mechanical fingers along my hide. What would it be like to have a filly or colt of my own? In 99 we always knew we'd have one eventually. A few lucky mares might get the opportunity for a second if another mare died before she had a daughter or had fertility problems. I always joked that me reproducing would be a crime against Equestria.

Lying here, right now, I wasn't laughing. I was thinking. Did I want to have a child? Here, in the Wasteland? In *Hoofington*? Now? Okay, maybe not here nor now. Maybe if I could scrape together a few thousand caps and set myself up in Tenpony. Have a filly or colt in nice safe medical conditions. Give them a few years and teach them how to shoot and take care of themselves.

Have a family. A real family, something more than life in 99. I did want that. Given everything that had happened to me, despite it all, I wanted a kid. Kids. Plural. When I was done with EC-1101, I could go back to Spike and do everything to get Gardens to work. Clean up Equestria. Have a kid. Or two. Or three. Hee...

It was all just a fantasy, of course. I wasn't going to just run to Triage and have my implant removed. I'd also have to pick the right stud. Talk to Glory. Maybe she'd have one as well. I mean, she might not like stallions, but it wasn't like she'd die if she was with the right one once. Heck, I knew medical ponies could inseminate mares if needed without them ever having to see a stallion during the process. Happened occasionally in 99. Oh, and I'd have to see... well, Triage had said that my reproductive parts had managed to stay functional, but that was before the *Celestia* and my cyberization. The professor hadn't mentioned anything about them, but there were a lot of things she hadn't mentioned. I supposed that, even if something was wrong there, Glory could have the foals or we could adopt... the idea didn't feel as appealing, but it'd work. Something to think about... talk about... I might not be the smartest pony, but this whole subject was definitely something I didn't want to rush. It'd be more than my own head if I screwed it up.

I rolled onto my side and snuggled against Stygius. He was warm, firm, and didn't mind metal legs. I knew I'd be guiltily about feeling this way sooner or later but for now, nuzzling his neck, I really couldn't help but smile. Glory would like him. Not like-like, of course. But he had a gallant idiot streak I bet she could really relate to. Kissing along his chin and cheek, I moved my hoof downward. A few seconds later, his eyes popped wide as his cheeks went red. I gave his nose a little lick as he gave a meek chirp.

Round four...

* * *

Okay. Okay. Enough. There was getting over a bad ploughing, then there was having fun, and then there was just wallowing in it. When I saw Glory next, I was going to make her hooves curl! As I

finally slipped off the bed, I was sore and tingly in all the right places. Stygius... he'd need a little more time to recover, but from the grin on his face I was pretty sure he'd be fine.

Stallions... are... awesome!

Of course, we both needed a shower; we were positively ripe. I trotted into the bathroom with a smile on my face. Maybe I wasn't completely over what'd happened to me; there was still that muttering defense mechanism in the back of my head, but I didn't think that I'd try and kill a male just for making the wrong comment or brushing my rear end. Still... I did a little dance on the balcony. I hadn't killed him and I'd had a good time!

This had to be one of the top five best days I'd had out here in the Wasteland, just behind finding out Glory was alive after Flash Industries and our little concert in Star House before going into the tunnels. Of course, I knew that something horrible would probably happen soon to erase it; my life seemed to inextricably fall into that pattern. But I'd enjoy the great feelings as long as I could.

After a nice hot shower -- Hee! Hot water! Any day with hot water pouring down on me was a good one! -- I emerged, put my armor and saddlebags back on, picked out whatever magical gems I could find in the shattered rock collection, and trotted downstairs. Well... time to start thinking about how we were going to get out of here. I alternated between bites of Cram, chunks of gemstones, and pieces of metal from the workshop as I sat on the desk in the library and looked out the window at the bots milling about outside. We might be able to race past them and out the shield, but that would be iffy. I had visions of one of us ending up as a shower of ash.

I tried to peek around at the main Pinkie box, but the angle from the library window wasn't very good. I needed to get higher. Fortunately, I had freaky zebra balancing legs that let me stand upright on the desk. Ah, there it was. And there were its red eyes. Mhmmm... still not a happy ro-- wait. What was that?

In an upper corner of the library was a tiny black camera sensor. Why had he needed so many? I looked from it to the desk and back again, wondering if I might see something if I could get my point of view close enough to its... well, I not only had freaky zebra standing powers but equally freaky cyber thumb powers. I used them to carefully climb up the bookshelves, and pretty soon I realized I was onto something when I heard a faint crackle in my ears. Yes! Another recording. I lifted my head even with the camera, then turned and looked down into the library.

The change was astonishing, from pristine clean to an absolute mess. There were more books piled in stacks around the desk than there were on the mahogany bookshelves. Papers had been taped to the walls, and the wastebin was overflowing with wadded-up parchment. Only narrow tracks to and from the door allowed hoof traffic. Goldenblood was sitting at the desk, rasping softly to himself and hissing an inhalation every three or four words, "Now... Pertinent to Equestrian Command One and the formation of the ministries, the judiciary shall remain under the review of the crown with judges appointed, monitored, and removed by the crown. All ministries retain the right to exclusive internal legal codes of conduct, but any binding ruling of the ministries shall be appealable by Equestrian court--"

A flash of golden light filled the room, and while I started, Goldenblood remained coolly examining his papers. When it faded, the last person I would have ever imagined appeared. There was absolutely no mistaking that radiant crown or missing that softly billowing four-color mane. Princess Celestia. I only had two memories of her, one troubled and the other regretful. Now I saw another side of the former ruler

of Equestria: anger.

“Director Goldenblood.” Her voice was stern, the type of voice Mom used when I was in deep trouble. She looked at the stacks of papers and books, and her horn flashed once. In an instant, the books were back on the shelves and the papers, including the one he was writing on, were stacked on a smaller desk on the opposite side of the room. “I wish to have a discreet word.”

“I have an office, Princess Celestia,” he replied in his shallow, rasping voice. His pink scars looked wet and shiny, and he sat neatly on the edge of his seat, pressing his forehooves together as he leaned towards the Princess, peering at her over the tops. “There was no need to come here and organize my controlled chaos.” Then he clenched his eyes shut, coughing deep and wet. Despite her ire, the Princess betrayed a tiny concerned look before stiffening once more.

“It seemed to be the only way I could talk with you face to face. You’re a notoriously difficult pony to meet. That seems to be the way of almost everypony around you,” she said firmly. “I was supposed to speak with Twilight Sparkle today, but imagine my shock when I was told she was busy with ministry business. When I pried, I found out that I wasn’t even on Twilight’s agenda today, per *your* orders.”

“Was there a part of that which was unclear, Celestia?” Goldenblood said in his shallow rasp. I would have loved to have known if he was smiling behind those hooves.

“Twilight Sparkle is my most devoted student and dearest friend, and because of you, she didn’t even know that I wanted to see her. You have no right to interfere in our relationship or meddle in our private affairs,” the Princess retorted, her eyes narrowing. If they’d been focused at me, I doubted I’d retain control of my bladder. But Goldenblood looked back with something bordering on contempt.

“Ah, I’m afraid that that is where you are mistaken,” he replied calmly, his wet raspy voice turning sharper. “Twilight Sparkle isn’t your student anymore, Celestia. She’s now Luna’s Ministry Mare. She has a job to do winning the war. Her time is literally priceless, and I take great pains to manage it and her to be as efficient as possible.”

“Twilight Sparkle isn’t your subordinate, Director!” Celestia retorted. Goldenblood didn’t respond, and for an instant, doubt flickered in her eyes. His remained as steady as steel.

“If you have problems with how I execute my duties, take them up with your sister. I’m sure that she’ll be happy to spare you some time, Celestia.” I suddenly realized he hadn’t been calling her ‘Princess’ anymore. He looked at the stacks of papers, magically flipped through them, and then stopped and yanked one free. “I’m sure that Princess Luna would be overjoyed to hear your concerns about the...” His eyes glanced back to the paper once more. “...diamond dog relocation.”

“Those are intelligent, thinking, feeling people. They may not be ponies, but it’s not right to simply take their land because we need it.” She trotted right up to his desk, then sat down and glared at him, reinforcing the fact that alicorns were frigging huge!

He didn’t shrink back, though, nor look away, as he said in that steamy hiss, “Funny. I recall you using the same excuse of ‘imminent and vital manifest need’ when you gave the order to seize the coal fields southeast of Shattered Hoof Ridge eleven years ago. That led to the zebra invasion at Dawn Bay. Which led to attacks across the Zanzebra Strait. And... well... you know the details better than I. But when Twilight gives an identical order to seize Splendid Valley, it’s wrong.” He tossed the paper onto the

desk.

"It was wrong twelve years ago and it's wrong now," Celestia countered, looking anguished. "Don't let Twilight make the same mistake I did. Please... let me speak with her."

Goldenblood frowned as he lifted the paper again. "I'm afraid that's not possible, Celestia. Twilight needs the gems, caverns, and security to test hazardous spells and talismans. The M.A.S. nearly burned down their Manehattan hub testing incineration spells, as you may recall, and given all the zebra infiltrators and sympathizers we've dug out in the last two years..." He sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry Celestia, but as I said... Twilight's time is invaluable. She simply does not have the time to be your special student any longer."

"Goldenblood, you can't let her do this. I didn't step down so my sister and my student could do horrible things!" Celestia objected with a toss of her mane.

"Well, that's funny. I was under the impression that that is *precisely* why you stepped down." His eyes narrowed. "I'd never seen a pony scowl at Princess Celestia like that before. I didn't think it was possible. "With all due respect, Celestia, you quit. And you didn't sue for peace. You didn't negotiate an armistice. You didn't even surrender with honor. You... just... quit. And in quitting, you dumped this entire war, which *you* started, in Princess Luna's lap."

"You think I don't know that? You think I could still rule after what happened at Littlehorn?" Celestia demanded, her eyes blazing like twin suns. "Do you know what I thought when I saw what the zebras had done to my sister's academy? This is my fault! Mine!"

"And you were right. It was your fault," Goldenblood said in low, deadly tones. "You could have silenced the nobles. You could have told Hippocampus to find another way. Put down energy quotas. Worked to overcome the impasse with the zebras. Instead, you decided to go to war. You, Celestia."

"I had duties and responsibilities to all of Equestria!" she protested.

"And now you don't," Goldenblood said flatly. "You should have given Princess Luna a year, at the absolute minimum, for a transfer of power. Five years would have been better. And you should have negotiated peace before stepping down. Even if it came with penalties... we could have dealt with them. But you didn't. You quit, and dumped this entire mess on your sister's back. And now you don't like what she has to do to win the war? To create her own rule? To run Equestria as she needs to run it? Tough." He folded his hooves on the desk before him. "Princess Luna is doing what she must. Twilight Sparkle is helping her by doing what *she* must."

"Even if it's the wrong thing?" Celestia asked with a soft plea in her voice. "I never thought I'd hear a Princess speak like that! "I have to do something! There must be some way I can help them to not repeat my mistakes!"

"Luna is not interested in your help, Celestia. Neither is Twilight Sparkle. There is no place for you in the new government. I made sure of it." From the look of shock on Celestia's face, I wondered if anypony had ever spoken to her like this before. It was a slap in the face.

"I just want to help my sister and my student," she whispered. "Please!"

He sighed and closed his eyes. "I'm sorry, Celestia, but this comes from Luna. She's adamant

on making sure that this is her rule, her land, and her victory. And I am determined to see she gets it." He levitated up the paper once more. "But... I'll see if I can do something for these... erm... diamond dogs, are they? Unofficially and off the record. Just please stop trying to contact Twilight. I think she's trying to use time spells to create a thirty-two hour day just to get more work done."

"Yes. That does sound like her," Celestia murmured.

Goldenblood gave her a sympathetic smile. "Please, Celestia. I know you are concerned, but it's now out of your hooves." He paused, and for a moment his eyes seemed to size up the magnificent white alicorn. "If I can think of some way for you to help, I'll let you know."

"Oh, that's quite all right. I'm sure I'll find something to occupy my time." Celestia nodded and started to turn away. Then she paused to look back at him. "Goldenblood. Do you remember that time when you told me not to attack the zebras twelve years ago?"

"Vividly," he replied.

"Right now, I know exactly how you felt then. I hope that I may be as inspired as you were. Goodbye, Goldenblood," Celestia said with a formal bow of her head. He rose and bowed deeply in return. But when she disappeared in a flash of golden light, Goldenblood didn't smile or sneer. He trotted back to his desk, lifted a brass flask from one of the drawers, and took a pull before burying his face in his hooves.

I stared at him sitting there. Then he muttered to himself in a voice so low that I nearly missed it. His words, however, made my blood turn to ice. "Don't make me kill you, Celestia."

A few seconds later, he rose and trotted from the room. I hung there till my vision flashed and reset. Then there was a chirp in my ear; I flailed with one limb, then slipped off the bookcase and tumbled down, landing firmly on my cybernetic butt. "Owww!" I whined aloud, then winced and rubbed my backside before looking up at Stygius, bathed and back in his armor as well.

'U ok?' he scribbled on his board. Then he pointed at me and stared off into space.

"Yeah. I am. Just... ow..." I stood with a groan and gave myself a good shake, trying to wrap my head around what I'd seen. Kill Celestia? Could anypony do that? I mean, the zebras had, but they'd had their entire war effort to use, and even then they were only able to do it as part of the apocalypse. Goldenblood might have been a sneaky bastard, but he couldn't do that!

Could he?

The discovery of the camera in the library spurred me to search for others, and we spent nearly an hour looking. There turned out to be at least one in every room, and Stygius was kind enough to, flapping as hard as he could, lift me up to the point where I could see more recordings. None of them were as grave as the one I'd seen in the library, though. Threatening Princess Celestia... that was just... how could he – could *anypony* – think that?

The majority of the recordings, in fact, were not just 'not as grave' but fairly odd and often boring. Many of them were silent, like one in the kitchen where Fluttershy was trying to make a meal for an obnoxious white rabbit. Another showed a rather infuriated Scootaloo barging in and fairly screaming soundlessly at Goldenblood. I don't know what he told her, but when he finished the look of horror on her

face had her trotting from the room as swiftly as her hooves could carry her.

Others had sound but didn't seem terribly important. There was one in the guest room where Goldenblood waxed on about the moonstone acquisition for his collection to a vaguely-familiar-looking unicorn and pegasus close enough in appearance that they might have been siblings. They teased him about abusing his authority for a rock. Goldenblood grinned and replied, "Rocks," and the recording ended with him telling them to take care of Pinkie Pie. Another after it had him complaining to Horse about the ugliness of the Core. The yellow pony laughed about how functionality took priority over aesthetics.

In the nursery, though, I found a recording I'd never imagined. Goldenblood was slumped against the empty crib, weeping as if it were the first time he would and the last time he could. He clenched his teeth along with his eyes, hissing as if he were being tortured as he sobbed and choked.

"Here you are," a strange buck said in a reverent tone. It was a blue unicorn wearing a pince-nez. His mane was a luxurious silver-white, and on his flank was a model of an atom like the drawings I'd seen in textbooks. "It's been three days."

Goldenblood turned and looked at him over his shoulder with a blood shot eye. "Am I not permitted to grieve the loss of my daughter, Trottenheimer?" he hissed.

"That requires you to acknowledge that you ever had one," the blue stallion replied. "Four Leaf put two and two together. Don't worry, it won't spread. The M.o.P. is rallying around Fluttershy to protect her. She wants you to come to dinner. No arguments." He watched as Goldenblood pressed his brow to the crib again. "Sometimes I think you're trying to commit suicide by overdosing on secrets. It wasn't your fault."

He made another horrible choking sound. At first I thought it was more tears, but then he threw back his head and I saw his sick grin. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he laughed. Trottenheimer's eyes widened in shock as the scarred buck rasped, "That's just it. *It is* all my fault..."

"What?"

"Fluttershy and I were together intimately," he said as he sat, gazing into the empty crib. "In the heat of the moment... I... called out the name of another mare."

The blue unicorn screwed back his lips in distaste as he scowled, and then he sighed in disappointment. "Goldenblood, really?"

"I know. I know!" he hissed in a rush. "There isn't one part of that stupid thing I haven't analyzed in detail! I don't know why I said it. But I did, and... it was at the worst possible time. She's so terribly sensitive... She'd already had complications... the stress... the pressure... all of it was too much to bear. She left me... then six hours later I got the call..." He started to laugh, but three laughs into it they transformed into ragged sobs. "Ministry Mare Fluttershy admitted to Fluttershy Medical Center for a miscarriage..." And he buried his face in the crib. "I didn't just lose the mare I loved, Trottenheimer. I killed my daughter with a name!"

Trottenheimer stood behind him for a long minute, then finally approached Goldenblood and awkwardly patted his shoulder. "Look... you couldn't have known... and you wouldn't have done it if you did. It's just... just one of those things," he said as Goldenblood wept. "But you know what's going on.

We're barely hanging on. Twelve attacks on Hoofington in the last month, and if Princess Luna changes her mind and moves our research to Manehattan, then things are going to get a lot more difficult. We need you, Goldenblood. Either to step up like before, or to step aside. But not to just sit here."

The words had a galvanizing effect on the scarred buck. "You're right..." he rasped, his voice like a dying breath. "I have promises to keep... and none of them involve a wife... or a child." He closed his eyes again. "Tell the department heads to meet tomorrow. We need to expand our operations. Take a more active role in bringing this conflict to a close in the right way and at the right time." He pressed his forehead to the rail. "That... that will have to do. For now... please give me one more night to mourn Whisper."

That was all I could bear to watch; Goldenblood hadn't just lost Fluttershy to his mistake. He'd lost a child, too... And that bastard Sanguine had kept her survival secret from both of them! If they'd known, would it have changed something? Everything?

Damn it. I didn't want to pity anypony who'd contemplate killing Princess Celestia.

I tried to take my mind off the sight of Goldenblood in such a state, starting by signaling Stygius that we could head back down. The batpony was worn out from being my elevator and landed a bit heavily, taking a moment to catch his breath. I trotted quickly from the nursery down to the living room. He walked after me, his wings dragging along behind him. I sat on the couch, rubbing my face. When I'd discovered that this was Goldenblood's house... well... I hadn't exactly thought that I would find a golden memory orb with all the secrets nagging me there for the taking, but I'd expected to find something.

What I'd found was Goldenblood the pony.

A teacher. A lover. Even a father. I didn't want to think of him like that. I wanted to hate him, think of him as a monster who'd contemplate killing Celestia. I hated the idea of him as a victim. A screwup. ...Normal. I don't know which was more terrifying; a ridiculously intelligent master plotter with a secret ministry under his command, or somepony who was all that... and who could fuck up too.

I was distracted from my thoughts by a bit of movement in the corner of my eye. Looking over Stygius's shoulder, through a picture window, past the long grass out front and the swirling spritebots, I saw something that didn't belong: a pony in Steel Ranger armor. She was just standing halfway through the magic field, the glowing surface distorted around her. The red sparks of light from the swarming spritebots fizzled uselessly against her armor. Then a second Steel Ranger stepped through. A third. A fourth. I rose to my hooves and slowly approached the window for a closer view.

Then a fifth stepped through. He wore on his sides two massive anti-dragon cannons. As he stepped out in front of the rest and they turned to make way, I saw the black towers lined in green on their armored flanks.

You never forgot guns like those.

Steel Rain was here.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: Ugghh! This chapter was cursed. Just CURSED. Everything that could delay me or interrupt our attempts to brush did so. It's also the longest, I think, and I didn't mean to. So sorry. I really

need to keep these to thirty pages or so. Ugggh..... anyway, thanks so very much to Kkat for creating FoE, to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for spending a RIDICULOUS amount of time trying to make this decent. Thanks to Mint Julep again for keeping me on this track. Thanks to Ilushia for helping me try to get Blackjack's psychology down... girl brains are hard... Lastly, thanks to everyone that leaves comments and tips are very much appreciated through Paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Thank you for reading and I am so very very sorry it's taken so long to get out.)

(Hinds: "I really need to keep these to thirty pages or so." You know he's actually serious when he says these things? Yeah.)