

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 70: Calm

"Sure, no problem! So long as Horizons doesn't fall before you can get there! Which I'm sure it won't!"

Astonishing how quickly I was marginalized once I stepped aside and let everypony else get busy with the actual organization of the fighting. Goldenblood sighed, levitated over a pencil, paper, and clipboard, and started making notes in tiny, neat little scratches as he listened attentively to the numbers of fighters he'd be able to get from the gangs, the newcomers, and the various mercenary groups. I paid attention to the lowest numbers and made my own mental notes. I could make notes too, though mine tended to be in crayon.

There really wasn't anything else for me to do. Smarter, better-trained ponies were on the job. All that remained for me was to maximize our chances, get what I needed, and focus on finishing off Cognitum and stopping Horizons from killing us all. I found myself smiling as if a great burden had been lifted from my back. Just like that, the important ponies took it from me and I was left almost forgotten.

The Reapers, the Zodiacs, and Xanthe were talking shop about which bunkers each would hit, what they'd need, and who they would take... and making bets on who would blow theirs up first. Even as I watched, ripples of activity spread out from the rotunda as orders were given and dispatched. The only thing omitted was the talk of who would die in the process. It just wasn't discussed.

"Well, if there's nothing else for me to do here," I said as I walked towards Velvet, Calamity, Homage, Life Bloom, and Ditzzy Doo. P-21 trotted at my side, concern etched on his face. "I could use some help, if you're free."

"Well, I got to admit, I was getting a little bored of the vacation," Calamity drawled casually. Velvet shot him a dirty look. "Wut? Come on, Velvet. Even you got to admit it's funner getting mixed up in a good fight."

"No fight is good," Velvet countered crossly, but then she sighed and rolled her eyes a little. "Still, if we work fast, we should be able to save as many lives as possible."

"I've sat back and watched long enough," Homage said with a little nod. "It's time to get back in the battle saddle again."

"That horn for show then?" Calamity teased, and Homage stuck her tongue out at him.

Life Bloom shook his head, but his easy smile faded when he turned to regard me. "One moment of your time, Blackjack?" I blinked, then nodded. We trotted a little ways to the side, and the white unicorn stallion looked at me evenly. "Blackjack, I have a message for you from the Twilight Society. I wasn't sure when was a good time to give it to you, but it seems like now is better than never."

"Okay. What is it?" I asked with a concerned frown.

"They're watching events out east closely, and if they have to, they will act," he said gravely.

"...Okay." I blinked in bafflement. "Well, by all means. Let them. I'll take all the acting I can get right now."

"You don't understand," he shook his head. "When I say act, I don't mean against your enemy. I mean against the Hoof. They'll fire up Celestia One and burn anything that looks hostile to slag. The Core. The Brood. Your forces. With how complicated things are here, telling friends from enemies is too

much trouble and too much of a risk compared to shooting everything that moves. We won against Red Eye and the Enclave, and now they're... concerned... about the events out here and losing them everything they've gained."

"Can Celestia One obliterate an enormous moonstone boulder falling from space?" I asked back. When he balked, I gave a shaky smile. "No, really, can it? Because if it can, then they are more than welcome to fire away, and best of luck to them. I'll take all the firepower I can get right now." He chewed on that, and I added, "Oh, and you might want to let them know that if they do attack the Hoof, they'll incinerate not just the city but Twilight's descendant as well. If that still matters to them, that is."

"It does, and I'm just passing on the message. There are a lot of eyes on the Hoof right now. Just be aware of that," Life Bloom told me. Then he gave a half smile. "So, what next?"

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There was something positively surreal about a bony-winged ghoulish pegasus being able to fly at all. That thought was one tiny voice amidst the rest of my mind screaming about splatting against the ground below as Ditzzy carried us through the sky in her wagon, *Absolutely Everything Too*. Proving herself yet again to be an honorary Finder, Ditzzy had produced both a PipBuck and a broadcaster at my first sarcastic quip. The grin on her face put a smile on everypony else's.

With Unity broken, being in the Hoof was merely unpleasant rather than intolerable for the alicorns. I'd originally thought of using them to teleport everywhere I needed to go. However, the fact that I had no clue where I *specifically* needed to go killed that plan pretty quickly. Apparently pointing at a map and saying 'about here' wasn't exact enough for magically winking across the land when none of the teleporters had even so much as glimpsed 'about here' before. Fortunately, Ditzzy had been generous enough to give us all a ride instead. One purple alicorn had insisted on accompanying us, too, to 'keep us safe', though I'd gotten the impression that she was really only there for Velvet.

The radio was chaos. Pon3's channel might have been down, but there were other operators springing up. The strongest signal was 'Unity radio', which involved the Harbingers urging everypony to join 'the real Security' to pull the Hoof together, or else. The counterpoint to this was Homage's 'Freedom Radio', which consisted of a PipBuck, a broadcaster, and a rather startling selection of music she'd squirreled away on the thing before leaving Tenpony to escape the Enclave. As we flew over the Hoof, a dozen more different stations popped up, each with a range of only about a mile.

One was saying I was a fake. One saying everything was a fake and kill everyone. One sounding like a colt spouting as many obscenities as possible. Quite a few were ripped right out of LittlePip's memoir... really, she couldn't have edited that out? I wasn't sure this kid knew what a clit was... The rest, though, were urging ponies to follow their leaders and get ready for the Battle of the Hoof. "Is that a good sign?" I asked Homage.

"I think so. After Fillydelphia, the Everfree, and the battle in the skies, people have started seeing the value of coming together. The old way of tiny settlements and raider bands scattered everywhere just doesn't work anymore," she said with a smile. She stared off to the west. "I wish she could be here. I wish I could have done this with her at least once."

I sighed, putting a hoof on her shoulder. "I wish she could have been too. It was fun working with her."

"I'm just afraid for her. She's going to live a lot longer than the rest of us. In the S.P.P. hub, with Celestia's soul powering the shield, she might even survive Horizons. I don't like thinking of her all alone," Homage said with a shiver. "I worry about her happiness... her health... even her sanity. How long can somepony stay alone watching without losing their mind?"

Well, Goldenblood, Celestia, and Spike seemed to have managed it well enough. "And I can't imagine Celestia wants to be trapped in there forever either," I said as I looked towards the Core. "That's not life." I shook my head. "Well, cyberponies and blanks live a long time too. So if I live through this and I'm still kicking around, I'll make sure to pop in from time to time and bug her. Have some therapeutic sex. In the name of mental health, of course."

She laughed at that, so I counted it as another small win. "Do you really expect to survive this?" she asked, her mirth melting away to leave that horrible sad smile I knew so well. "I mean, I know you've died... twice? Or has it been more?"

"I've lost track," I said with a grin. Gazing out towards the Skyport, I could see the remains of Thunderhead on the ground. It was half a torus now and looked as if what remained had been gutted and burned by battle. The city in the clouds was acting as a wall, shielding the city from the Brood... but not the Core. "I'm just no good at dying, Homage. So I figure, why not? I'll live through this, stop Cogs and the Legate, prevent Horizons from destroying the world, raise my baby with P-21, and try to have a few more—" *Ugh, sterile body, remember, numbskull?* "Or adopt... adoption's good. I really want lots of babies," I said with a grin. "Help out Chapel and the Hoof in general. Patch things up with Glory and Rampage. Make life better. See tomorrow."

"I hope you get all that," Homage said as she looked out at the clouds as we flew east.

I could see the black castle that had been Black Pony Mountain blocking my view of the Core itself. Down below us was the zebra army. They marched out of the bunker, Brood zebras, Brood zebras with cyberwings... And then there were the cyber unicorn zonies. Even after death, Silver Stripe had achieved a kind of immortality. There was no way to approach that during the day, especially for me. I was a shooty shooty kind of pony.

Besides, my business wasn't with them. My business was far to the east, farther than I'd ever gone before.

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I trotted up the valley, away from the Core, the others following behind me. The loose scree and ancient coal sands made for treacherous footing, more so in the fading light. It was starting to get late. Tomorrow, I'd have to catch Cognitum at the Space Center before she left for the moon. I could feel time slipping away from me. Time. Time.

This was a place that looked as if it'd been skipped by time. Long ago, Equestria had had a technological boom founded on coal. They'd stripped all of their own deposits, then traded with the zebras when the supply ran out. A good arrangement, so long as the trade wasn't interrupted; the rest of the Wasteland, of course, was the legacy of what had happened when it was. All around me here... this was the legacy of what had happened before the trade began. This was a sacrificed land. Draglines perched on the edges of mountaintops ripped flat. Valleys were filled and beaten level with toxic tailings. Rusty rail lines drew over the landscape like the track lines of an addict unable to sate their hunger. Everywhere I turned my eyes were the shells of mills, their smokestacks jutting towards the gray skies. Power lines snaked this way and that westwards towards the rest of Equestria. It only made sense. If you were going to pollute one area anyway, why not concentrate it to spare others? The ponies who didn't live here probably considered it a fine system.

I glanced over at Glory, trying to catch her eyes. She simply trotted on. I peeked at P-21, feeling conflicted... there had to be some way to fix things with us. Or should I even try?

The jingling tune of a banjo floated like a ghost through the valley, the twangy music carrying through the quiet, scarred landscape as if travelling through time. From off in another direction came another banjo with an answering tune. My mane crawled at the creepy yet definitely effective form of

signaling. Red bars danced everywhere in my E.F.S., but I could hear the skittering of scavenging radroaches in the thorny underbrush.

"I just want to talk to Big Momma," I shouted out at the desolation. Mist collected on the edges of broken mountaintops. My voice echoed off the rusting mining lifts and slag heaps. I felt a tremble underhoof and imagined ponies digging deeper and deeper into the earth, no matter how dangerous it became. "I gave back your son's rifle!" I yelled.

The banjos played again, a faint variation of the tune. Then another exchange. It'd be pleasant were it not for the niggling feeling that there were a dozen gun sights trained on my skull as the plinking notes echoed through the valley. Finally, the music stopped, and a blue filly in a dirty and stained sundress stepped out from behind a rusting tractor. "Momma don't want you up here no more. This is our land."

I looked around at all the waste and devastation. I could only assume she could hear me. "There's going to be a fight, Big Momma. A nasty fight for the Hoof. We need your help."

"Told you Momma don't want you up here no more," the blue earth filly said with a nod of her head towards the way we'd come. "Now git." Scotch Tape glowered at the other filly.

I took a step towards the filly, and there was a crack. The ground in front of me kicked up dust from a bullet, stopping me short. I hissed softly through my teeth. "I know you want to be left alone!" I shouted, my voice echoing across the valley. "I can respect that. But now is the time we need you! All of you. There's going to be a battle, and if you don't join, we're going to lose."

"Yer a stupid pony, you know that," the filly drawled.

"Yeah, well you're a jerk!" Scotch Tape snapped back.

"Scotch," P-21 said in admonishing tone that fell on deaf ears.

"Don't y'all call me names!" the blue filly shouted. "I'll sic my big sis on you!"

"Well, I don't need a big sister; I'll kick your flank all by myself!" Scotch Tape boasted.

"No pony kicks my flank!" the other filly shrieked, charging forward. Scotch Tape raced to meet her, and I was too shocked to levitate her away before the two were rolling in the dirt, biting and kicking.

"Baby Blue!" a mare snapped loudly, stepping out from between two boulders, Taurus's rifle at her side. Bluebelle narrowed her eyes at the two muddy fillies. "Y'all were supposed ta tell 'em ta scoot."

"She started it!" Baby Blue whined, pointing a mucky hoof at Scotch Tape. "She called me a jerk!"

"Well, you called Blackjack stupid!" Scotch Tape snapped as P-21 trotted over, grabbed her by the scruff of her stable barding, and pulled her away.

"But I didn't call you stupid, stupid!" Baby Blue yelled back.

"That's it!" Scotch Tape squealed, pulling herself free of P-21's bite and jumping back on the other filly. I stared at Bluebelle from across the scrabbling girls and stepped around them as Velvet and P-21 tried to separate the two without being beamed by a flying hoof. The alicorn watched with an expression of disdain on her face.

I sighed and shook my head. "I noticed there weren't many Highlanders at the meeting," I said to Bluebelle.

"Big Momma's stayin' out of this scrap. It's too big. Too dangerous. We're pullin' all our people back into the mines," Bluebelle informed me.

"You can't stay out of this, Bluebelle. The Hoof needs the Highlanders."

"Mebbe, but we don't need the Hoof," she replied stubbornly. The powerfully built blue earth pony crossed her legs. "We don't need magic or pegasi or robots or nothing. We take care of our own. Piss on the rest of you."

"You might not need the Hoof now, but you will," I said evenly. "There's a storm coming, and if we don't stand against it together, it's going to blow us away."

"Sez you," she countered with a scowl. "What has that pit done but taken our kin from us?"

"Nothing. But if Cognitum or the Legate win the battle tomorrow, how long do you think it'll be before you're next? They won't leave you alone. They can't," I said firmly.

"We got hundreds o' fighters. We'll manage," she said with a worried frown.

"They have thousands." I left out the detail that it was an infinite thousands on top of that. "You've been watching the bunker, I assume. That's one of several. And they don't have children or homes or families. They don't care about their wounded or dead. The only thing they care about is wiping their enemies out." I took a deep breath. "We need your help."

"We don't need your war. Them Brood wanna fight us? Fine. Ain't like we never been outnumbered 'fore. We got holes inside holes we can fall back to. Supplies that'll last us a good long while too."

"So that's how you want to write your epitaph? 'We ran away and hid in a hole while others who needed us fought and died?'" I asked, trying to keep my temper even. "Two hundred years ago, Equestria took this land from you and used it, and you. They did your ancestors wrong, and I'm sorry about that. But I'm not them. I'm not taking it from you. I'm not telling you that you have to come. I'm asking for help. Begging for it, in fact." I dropped to my haunches. "Please. We need the Highlanders. Every one you can spare. When the attack comes, we have to hit them from both sides to have a chance."

Bluebelle actually flushed and backed away a little. "... look, it ain't up to me. Big Momma said she'd never help the Hoof ever again." The mare then paused and blinked. "But... there might be one thing that could do it."

One thing? "What is it? Anything!" I said with a smile as I rose.

"She might do it if Big Daddy asked her for help," she said slowly, as if the big blue mare was unsure. "But he'd have ta ask her *real* nice."

"He will. I'm sure of it!" I said with a grin.

Bluebelle seemed pretty skeptical. "Well, we'll see. Big Momma's always listenin' on the radio. If he asks, she might come. Dunno. Maybe." She turned and trotted away. "Come on, Baby Blue. That's enough playin'."

The two fillies halted their battle to the death, and the blue one extracted herself and trotted away. She paused and whirled, narrowing her eyes. "Next time I won't be so nice, fat head."

"You better not be, 'cause I'm gonna kick yer hind end halfway ta Manehattan!" Scotch replied. Baby Blue stuck her tongue out at Scotch Tape, then trotted away with Bluebelle. Scotch Tape glared after the filly, then realized we were all staring at her. "What?"

"What?" Velvet Remedy asked in shock. "What do you mean 'what'? What was that all about?!"

Scotch Tape picked herself out of the mud and trotted in the opposite direction. "Ain't every day a filly meets her arch nemeswatever-ya-call-it. I'll thump her good next time." Velvet stared after the filly, her mouth working silently in baffled shock.

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"It's simple, Velvet," Scotch Tape said simply and with a prim nod. Velvet had finally regained the ability to ask about the fight after we got airborne again. "See, the second she insulted Blackjack, I knew we were going to be enemies forever."

"But you just met her! Why did you fight her? It doesn't make any sense!" Velvet Remedy lamented. "You could have told her not to say those things. Been the bigger pony!"

Scotch Tape looked at her flatly. "You never had a nem-er..." She glanced at P-21.

"Nemesis," he supplied.

"Right! Them nemesis things growing up, did you?" Scotch Tape asked.

Velvet blinked, taken aback for a moment. "Of course not! Everypony in Stable Two loved me!" We all just stared at her and sighed. "What?" she asked with a baffled frown.

Scotch sighed in return and shook her head. "Blackjack?"

"Daisy," I said with a smile. "Might not have realized it at the time, but yeah. Total nemesis."

"My sister, Dusk," Glory chipped in with a smile.

"Just your sister? I'll raise ya all o' my brothers plus my dad," Calamity said with a chuckle.

"Calamity! Not you too!" Velvet lamented.

"Wut? Just a good old colt grudge match."

Ditzzy turned her head and showed on her chalkboard, 'Pinkie on a muffin binge.'

"Diamond Tiara..." the alicorn murmured softly. "That filly had serious flank issues."

"The Overmare," P-21 said with a sad smile. I put my hoof on his shoulder, glad he hadn't said 'all of Stable 99'.

"My father," Life Bloom said casually. "He didn't approve of my preference for stallions." Well now, didn't that make P-21's eyebrow raise speculatively.

Now, suddenly, all eyes were on Homage, and Velvet Remedy said a touch crossly, "Oh, I suppose you had a childhood nemesis too?"

"No," Homage said quietly. Velvet Remedy smiled in triumph before Homage continued, "I would have loved to have had one, though."

"Homage! Nemesis! Hate! Wastelands! Bad! Want? Why!?" Velvet Remedy sputtered.

"I reckon that's the first time anypony made Velvet skip," Calamity said, giving the fuming unicorn a little nudge.

"Because it would have meant I wasn't alone," Homage said quietly, looking out into the growing twilight. "I spent most of my fillyhood on my own picking through Manehattan, just trying to stay alive. A nemesis might not like me, but at least they would have cared about me, if only as a target. Feral ghouls

and raiders... bloatsprites and bloodwings... I was just another meal to them, another victim, another... toy. Being the subject of somepony's disdain would have been a step up from being nopony at all."

She gave a smile to Life Bloom and went on, "Fortunately, I made some friends. And then met LittlePip, who I think was just as familiar with loneliness as I was."

"As I recall, you robbed Joke and me," Life Bloom said casually. "Took us for every cap we had and left us in just our hide for the bloodwings."

"Yeah. So you two followed me for three days begging for your stuff back. Finally I returned it just to keep your whining from giving us away," Homage replied with a small grin. "I guess I was your nemesis for a little while, then."

I grinned at Homage. "So you were a bad mare back then?"

She blinked, then gave a sly look to the west. "I'm even worse in other ways now, but I was a survivor and a scavenger... just two steps above an animal, really, and one above a raider. It was Jokeblue always trying to cheer me up and Life Bloom with his endless optimism and smart pony talk that made me better. Eventually, we had a dream of getting into Tenpony. An impossible dream for three wastelanders, but it was a start." Trying to imagine a serious and brooding Homage was tough to do.

"Of course," Life Bloom added sourly, "it would have helped if we'd known it was impossible from the start. Tenpony says that if you gather a hundred thousand caps, you can join their community. That's horseapples. They're after 'civilized' ponies who are 'interesting' and 'valuable'. Not just thrifty wastelanders."

"Then DJ Pon3 took me in, and just like that I became civilized, interesting, and valuable. Imagine that." Homage shook her head. "I called them on their double standard so often they finally honored it... not that many could reach that amount of caps anyway, but still..." She sighed, pensively, "Too late for Jokeblue..."

"What happened to her?" Scotch Tape asked in a worried voice, then glanced around and lowered her eyes. "Nevermind. I don't wanna know."

Homage smiled wistfully as she stared off into the night. "That's the reason I want the Wasteland ended. So that nopony will have to go through what we did, and the biggest worry a pony would have is a grudge match with another young pony." That killed the mood for further silly arguments.

We were making our way south, giving the Luna Space Center a wide berth. Looking to the southeast, I could see the massive buildings and the four Raptors hanging over them. I'd guessed that Hoarfrost and Afterburner had gotten some more help on their side. Did they know Cognitum's full plan, or were they just signing up with the stronger pony? Below us, I could see a trail of activity stretching from the mounds of refuse at Scrapyard to the long L-shaped building I guessed was Paradise Mall. Sitting directly between the Luna Space Center and the rest of the Core, it looked like Big Daddy was going to be turning it into a major fortification. At least some good would come from it.

I looked at all these ponies and swallowed. A battle was coming. It was inevitable. I wasn't scared for myself; I'd lasted this long and hadn't died yet... well, stayed dead... but I didn't like that so many others were in harm's way now. I was the kind of idiot who would take bullets, but I couldn't take them all. And while I was sure of myself in a fight, what about everypony else? I stared at my friends, new and old, and felt a growing anxiety inside me. Worse, I could tell everypony else was probably thinking similar thoughts. Calamity and Velvet sat a little closer together in the back of the crowded wagon. P-21 put a hoof around Scotch Tape. Glory sat on the opposite end of the seat from me, but I caught her glancing toward me.

I opened my mouth, wanting to say... well, I didn't know. Something. Anything! But that sad smile appeared in the corner of her mouth, she turned her purple eyes to the sunset, and my words shriveled in my mouth.

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"Are you sure about this?" P-21 asked as he frowned down at me from the wagon.

"Yeah. I'm sure. If all of you are down here... yeah. I need them to know it's me," I said with a half smile as I looked around the blasted plains.

"I... some of us should come with you, Blackjack," Velvet began. "I've advocated for--"

I shook my head. "It has to be me."

"And if they decide to kill you anyway?" P-21 asked with another frown.

"Well, keep the cart still and hope I can teleport back to it faster than they can grab me," I answered with a toss of my mane. There wasn't much to say beyond that. Slowly, Ditzzy hefted the cart back up into the sky, and I surveyed my surroundings. The blasted landscape appeared to be nothing more than an arid desert at first glance. Then little things started to stand out, like the fact that many of these rocks resembled melted glass. That others were arranged in the shapes of charred foundations. And who could ignore the steady *click-click-click* of radiation?

Oh. And the nearly solid band of red surrounding me in every direction.

I walked slowly through the irradiated blight, knowing that they were following me. I kept my horn illuminated, ready to wink out. To the north of me, on the edge of my vision, I could barely make out the lights of Grimhoof Army Base. I should have realized that the Remnant were there for more than just the missiles. The bunker housing their Tree of Life was practically right underneath it. It'd probably been built into the superstructure of the base as another line item by zebra sympathizers. And I'd helped them to secure it...

I found a hole in the irradiated landscape. All I could hope was that a combination of interest in the novelty and suspicion of a trick was keeping them from tearing my head off. But with a naked, unarmed unicorn dropped in the middle of their territory, it was only a matter of time before they acted. I crouched at the edge of the hole but didn't shine my light in. "I came here to talk."

No answer from the hole. None but the steady ticking of my PipBuck. "A few months ago, one of your kind came to ask my kind for help with the Enclave and their control helmets. Gnarr, I think his name was," I said as I felt the ground vibrate a moment. "Now I'm back to ask you for help."

Nothing. I could imagine ears twitching in the dark. "Tomorrow, the Brood that drove you out of Grimhoof is going to attack Hoofington. They outnumber us several times over. They'll probably kill all of us in a few hours. A day at the most." I closed my eyes. "I know your kind and mine don't have a good history of helping each other out. I know a lot of you want to kill me just for being here. But I want you to know that right now, we need you. We need your people. I know that most folks see you as monsters. I know you've suffered. I know what it means to suffer. I know you're more than they think you are.

"I can't offer you anything for helping us. I really can't think of anything we can give you that you don't already have. The only thing I can say is you'll have our respect. I don't know if that means anything to you, but you'll have it," I said as I rose. I had no idea if they were listening. No idea if they cared. For all I knew, they were laughing at our impending slaughter.

I took one long look back at the hole and then teleported up to the wagon. Time would tell if they would come or not.

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The return to Star House was a solemn one. No debates or discussions about childhood rivals. Everypony knew that in a few hours, we'd hit the space center. I'd get my body back... I had plans for teleporting in and dropping a spark grenade covered in Wonderglue on her back and hoping that'd do it... but there was no guarantee. And once Cognitum was down, or worse, gone, the Legate would stop pretending to fight and tear the Harbingers to pieces. And there was a very good... very *real* chance that one of my friends...

Losing Lacunae had hurt, but it was a death I could handle. She'd chosen it in order to save others. Painful as it was, I could rationalize and understand it. But I remembered reading about Steelhooves's abrupt demise. What if something like that happened to Glory? P-21? Scotch Tape? Boo? We'd been at risk before, but I'd always been able to throw myself to the front practically screaming 'shoot me first'. And they had. And I'd been tough enough or lucky enough to survive it.

Now?

"Cap for your thoughts?" P-21 asked as he held his dozing daughter in his forelegs.

"Just... nervous," I confessed. "I'm thinking about this too much. We should just go straight to the space center and go for it!"

"Sure. The eight of us versus a small army of Harbingers and Brood, plus your old body and the Legate. Why not?" he said, so straightforwardly that I immediately flushed.

"I'm serious," I said, running a hoof nervously through my mane. "The more I think about it..."

"So am I. I haven't stopped thinking about it. So let's go," he said with that casual smile. It actually turned teasing after a few seconds. "Let me guess. You realize why we shouldn't?"

I groaned, leaning over and burying my face in his shoulder. "Maturity sucks. When did I get to be so old and worried about consequences and plans and stuff?"

"I think it was when we lost Lacunae," he replied calmly. "I know for me it was when I almost got Scotch Tape killed. After that..." He shook his head. "None of us are who we were anymore, Blackjack. The stupid but kindhearted security mare... the bitter and resentful breeder... the lonely, orphaned filly... even the naive pegasus scientist," he added, regarding Glory grudgingly and getting a thankful smile in return. "Knowing you... being with you... has helped make us better, Blackjack. Better ponies. Better people."

"I didn't do anything," I muttered, embarrassed.

He shook his head. "More than you realize," he said with a kind smile.

Ditzy kicked the cart, rousing us, and then pointed ahead with a scarred-up undead hoof. We peered forward into the open land around Chapel and...

That was a lot of people.

I mean, at the amphitheatre there'd been a lot of people, more than I'd ever seen together in the Wasteland before. But now there were dozens of fires all around the small community. The people around them milled about like a kicked-up radroach nest. I hadn't thought that there were that many ponies in all the Wasteland, let alone the Hoof. As Ditzy set us down on the roof of the post office, I

gaped at the sight of them all. Most of them appeared to be scavengers, but I also saw clumps of families. I'd always kind of imagined the Wasteland as just raiders, bandits, scavengers, punctuated with a few normal people just trying to survive. The reverse was true. And war had finally brought them together.

"Crap. I didn't expect so many to come so fast," Scotch Tape muttered. "I got to get out there and make sure we've got water, food, and some decent latrines going. With the rain stopped, water's going to quickly become an issue, and we don't want it getting contaminated because someone's pissing upstream," she said as she scrambled down the stairs into the building. We quickly followed her down.

"How are things?" I asked as I spotted Charity, Bottlecap, and Keeper amidst so many boxes it was hard to move through the post office.

"Could be better," Charity muttered as she scowled at a clipboard. "We need to charge these Talons an extra ten percent for bullets. They got the caps to cover it, and I think some of those featherbrains are 'overstocking'," Charity said to a small purple unicorn filly, who saluted and ran off quickly through the stacks. Charity shuffled another clipboard to the front. "Make sure those Society assholes don't try and stiff us more than five caps per pound of produce. They got it in spades and if things pan out, we're not feeding people past two days," she said to a red earth pony colt who followed the unicorn out.

"You're charging people for ammunition and food?" Velvet Remedy said, aghast. "At a time like this?"

Charity didn't look up from her boards. "Yep," she said in a level tone that made me stand back and smile.

"So you're making a profit off this crisis," Velvet Remedy said in angry, accusatory tones. Charity didn't answer, but I spotted the vein pulsing in the filly's temple. "How could you? Those ponies are scared and helpless, and you're charging them for what they need."

Charity slapped the board down flat on the table. "Look! There're fifteen hundred refugees out that way. I didn't ask them to come here, but here they are. So we're taking care of them. Do you know what happens when you say the word 'free' to somepony scared and helpless? They get stupid. They get greedy. They load up on as much as they can carry, nevermind most of it will spoil before they can eat it, and then they get killed by the equally stupid, greedy pony who figures out that there's not going to be enough for them, so better kill them and take what they can. And since everypony who happens to be a merchant knows this, the ones that really are out for the profit will be sure to cash in on the one giving away shit.

"Oh, and in addition, most scavengers don't work for free, and we need every bullet, gun, suit of barding, and chem we can get, so I need to bring in some caps to buy it. Otherwise my stock is gone, my caps are gone, and we're all up shit creek. If well-off groups like Talons and heroes like yourself pay more, then I can subsidize the ones who can't. Which I do," Charity snapped, pointing a hoof at Velvet. "One hundred caps for wasting thirty seconds of my time." She thrust a hoof at a large, half-filled jar of caps on the counter; the label read 'Blackjack's Stupid People's Comments Fee'.

"What?!" Velvet stammered, waving her forehooves wildly at the jar. "That's outrageous! You can't..."

"Pay the filly, Velvet," I advised.

"Why?" she asked, glaring at the little yellow earth pony.

"Because if you don't, I'm pretty sure you're not buying anything in the Hoof," I answered. I didn't know if Charity could actually swing that, and I really didn't want Velvet to find out the hard way.

Velvet narrowed her gaze, but then opened her saddlebags after a few seconds. "You are a horrible, detestable pony," she almost growled.

"Then you have no problem with me leveling a ten percent surcharge," Charity countered. "Since I'm so horrible keeping everypony fed, armored, and armed to save their lives." She pointed towards the door. "Now, if you're not going to buy anything, there's the door. I got way too much going on to deal with ponies who don't have a clue about basic business."

"Fine! We'd never, ever shop with you in the first—" Velvet began to say when Homage popped in.

"I really need something decent if we're going to be in a fight. How are you lined up for energy weapons?" Homage asked.

"I'm also gonna need ammo fer Spitfire," Calamity said.

Ditzzy held out a grimy purchase order that had every line filled in.

I trotted up next to the speechless Velvet. "Come on. Let the evil necessity of capitalism commence." I guided her outside.

"That... she... how could... I can't... ugh!" Velvet Remedy stammered, glaring at me and then back to the post office stacked high with stuff. I gave a sympathetic nod as she turned and gestured at the hundreds of ponies camped around Chapel. "That filly is deplorable. I'm going to see if I can't heal some injuries and raise some spirits with a few songs... for free!" she shouted back into the post office.

"Don't care!" Charity called back, the filly sounding almost happy. "Have fun!"

Snorting, Velvet Remedy stalked off into the crowd. I watched her go, marveling. Sometimes you met your fillyhood nemesis a little late.

Left alone, I walked through the crowd. Most didn't notice me in the black operative's armor. Just another wastelander who'd come to fight for my survival. A few caught on to the Security written upon it. Those that did mostly stared as I passed. Some scowled. Others smiled. I guess it depended on how much pain I'd caused or spared. I'd have liked to think that I saw more frowns than scowls, but I couldn't be sure.

Nothing was certain anymore. Everything was tense and energized. Part of me wanted to hide, become anonymous behind the helmet of the operative barding, but I knew the last thing ponies needed to see was a faceless enemy. So many eyes staring at me. So many lives depending on me. I swallowed again and again, the fear chewing up the back of my throat.

"Walking among the troops, eh Blackjack?" a familiar mare said, and I whirled around and saw the Steel Ranger Crumpets. The toasty-yellow-brown mare with the freckles wore her armor casually. "Very regal of you. Just need to give you a cloak for proper brooding and I think we can write a play."

"I don't want to be in a play. I just want everyone to live past tomorrow," I said with a sigh.

"I imagine so, girl. Hope I'm there too. Be a bloody nuisance to clean out Stable 99 only to have the whole world go kablewy," she said with a mirthless smile. "Stronghoof told me all about Horizons. And the bugger who designed the damned thing is calling the shots? Bloody brilliant."

"It was the only way to keep everypony together. Or do you think you'd be happy taking orders from Big Daddy?" I asked her. She shrugged, conceding the point.

"Goldenblood will succeed," a familiar mare said as the throng around us gave way. The purple alicorn glanced at me, then away, rubbing her legs together awkwardly. "Failure would kill him."

Several snappy retorts died as I stepped towards her and gave her a hug around her neck. "Psalm," I murmured as she stiffened beneath me. "I'm glad you're okay."

"Okay... is relative. You know that better than anypony," she said hesitantly, constantly looking around. "How's the barding fit?"

"Like I was dipped in a vat of badass and wired to a neon sign saying 'kill this one first'," I replied. I stared into her mournful purple eyes. The spark of Unity between us was long dead, but I felt as if we were both trying to awkwardly probe each other's minds so we knew what not to say.

"No," Psalm murmured, barely audible over the crowd.

"Beg pardon?" I blinked.

"No. I don't have anything of Lacunae in me." She dropped her eyes. "I have her memories, but they're not the same thing. I could never be so strong. So compassionate. I'm sorry."

I sighed, slumping a little. "That's okay," I said, digging into my saddlebags.

"No. I don't want it back," she said a moment later, and I froze and withdrew my hooves. "Penance... no. I don't deserve it."

"I'm not a sniper," I told her. "I can never use it like you could. And Calamity already has a supergun."

But Psalm shook her head again. "I don't want to be a murderer again," she whispered. Crumpets sighed, rolling her eyes and looking clearly annoyed. Psalm caught her expression and seemed to shrink into herself. "I know... I was a soldier... but, I shouldn't have been. That was a mistake... killing for Luna."

I smiled at her. As much as I knew she could be important in the battle, I couldn't make her take up a life that had done her so much harm. "I'm sure you'll find some way to help." I stretched up and brushed her mane out of her eyes. "You have a second chance."

"Thanks to you and LittlePip," she murmured as she nuzzled me.

I sniffed, rubbing my eyes with a hoof. "Did I make a mistake with Goldenblood?"

Psalm shook her head slowly. "Goldenblood strives for success, and he manipulates people like an artist manipulates pigment on canvas. He will achieve what you want, but you may not like how he does it. Maybe you convinced him to try a better approach... I hope so. But he won't betray you, unless he feels you've betrayed yourself and everypony else."

"We need to get going," Crumpets broke in. "Some nut with the Harbingers keeps insisting we give him 99 due to eminent domain, and we need to make sure we get the ammo we need. Trading chems and healing potions for it." At my shocked and baffled expression, she quirked a grin. "What, did you think your stable just recycled organic waste into food? It recycles nearly anything you put into it."

"I'll be around," Psalm murmured. "I can't... be... Lacunae... but if you need help, I'd like to."

I stretched up and gave her another hug. "I'd appreciate it. Thank you." I watched the pair trot towards the post office.

Behind me, a musical note struck me like a shot. A voice rose above the babble of the crowd like a breaking sunrise and silenced the camp. The ponies moved back to give room to Velvet Remedy. No stage. No lights. Not even music, and yet with her voice alone she released a melody that rippled through the massed people like a wave. The song sounded like something Sweetie Belle, but I didn't recognize it. Within a minute, a red middle aged earth pony mare missing a hind leg bravely joined her, backing her up. I'd read Velvet could have done that herself with her magic, but her singing alone seemed to pull at the crowd. A purple unicorn filly, Sonata, clambered up next to Velvet. Her trilling soprano rang out; she didn't even seem to know the words, but the three legged mare and the beautiful unicorn mare adjusted to her inexperience.

A glowing smile rested upon her lips as the audience put aside their worries for a moment and stared raptly at her. I spotted a purple earth pony stallion with dirty bandages wrapped around his limbs watching with his mouth hanging down. Here, she gave a little bit of kindness and beauty. It was such that I spotted Charity watching from the door of the post office. The filly twisted her lips sourly but gave a little nod of acknowledgement.

As much as I'd love to sit and just listen to Velvet's beautiful, impromptu little concert, I tore myself away and made my way towards the bridge to the Core.

Down by the river, I was astonished to find the *Seahorse* tied up to the underside of the bridge. The pilothouse was gone and the deck and cabin roof slightly scorched, but the boat was still seaworthy. The crew were in the midst of hammering planks to the roof. Thrush lay draped across the bow next to the battered gun turret, hat covering her head, a trio of rum bottles collected around her.

"You survived?!" I shouted at the ship.

She jerked upright, scattering bottles every which way as her head turned wildly with her captain's hat still covering her face as it dangled from her horn. "I fully reject the false equivocation of that statement!" she bawled out. "That's unfair profiling of the nautically challenged, and I am offended, sir! Offended!"

"It's me, Thrush," I said as teleported over in front of the inebriated green mare. "Blackjack. Security." I pulled off the helmet and grinned at her.

She pulled the hat off and arched a brow as she eyed me suspiciously. "I've heard that often of late. Some say they are. Some say they aren't. How am I to know this isn't a highly elaborate scheme to confound and disabuse me of my dignity and high character?"

"I... uh..." She'd missed the meeting, it seemed. Then I picked up one of the empty bottles, stuck it on my horn, and grinned at her.

"Well," she said formally. "That changes things." And she pulled the bottle off my horn, looked at the others arranged around her, and lifted up one with a few dregs, downing it.

"How are you still afloat?" I asked. "I saw the *Seahorse* get hit."

She scowled at her crew. "Did not. You saw the *Seahorse almost* get hit." She spat at the city.

"Captain, we nearly got blown out of the water!" a teal mare objected.

"Not even close!"

"It nearly burned the roof off the ship! We were almost cooked in the steam," a red pegasus objected.

"Just a graze," Thrush said, adopting a stoic pose.

"Didn't it vaporize those bottles of Luna's Moonrise Rum, Captain?" a third crewmember asked.

Thrush's bottom lip quivered, and then she grabbed me and sobbed into my shoulder. "It was a disaster! A catastrophe! If we hadn't of turned towards the city at the last moment, I would have lost the last bottle too!"

"You nearly lost your boat, Captain Dodo!" the teal mare yelled back.

The water beside the boat splashed as a pink mare poked her head out. "The bottom is patched. Any more leaks, Seabiscuit?" The teal mare poked her head into a hatch at the front of the boat, then shook her head. "Good," the swimming one said before her eyes turned to me and she broke into a wide grin, waving a fin. "Hey, Blackjack. Wait, you are the real Blackjack, right?"

Thrush levitated a bottle over and stuck it on the end of my horn. She then gestured to me with both her hooves and an arched brow.

"I'm the real Blackjack," I assured her. "It's good to see you, Pisces. Is Capricorn around?"

She shook her head. "Capri's over on the northwest side. There was a barge loaded with munitions that sank there, and she's helping the Finders and Reapers pull out the crates." The pink mare cocked her head. "Finders, Reapers, and Zodiacs working together. That's just..."

"Weird. I know," I assured her with a smile.

"No. It's good." She smiled back at me. "Brutus is really cute," she said, flushing a little.

"He's... well..." My face reddened as I remembered my close brush with him. "Shiny. Very shiny."

"Do you even have a port for his ship?" Thrush taunted with a grin.

Pisces went from pink to scarlet. "Yes! I do. Not that it's any of your business!"

I shook my head to refocus off shiny, buff stallions and seapony reproduction. "What are you doing with the *Seahorse*?" I asked Thrush.

"Well, that's quite a question. What to do with the fastest boat on the river, a bit of scorching aside?" Thrush rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"We're running cargo and getting refugees to the Ironmare naval station," the teal mare answered for her. "The Steel Rangers have a ship they're going to bring to try and get ponies clear of the battle. No idea how many trips their ship can make before the shit hits the props. If we all live through this, we'll have enough caps to rebuild the *Seahorse* completely."

Well, that was promising. I didn't know how many the *Seahorse* could move either, but even one was better than nothing. "I'm glad you're not running."

"Thought about it." Thrush frowned. "Honestly, egress would be the smart thing to do. Digression and valor and all that. But this city's kept me here this long. Leaving it just feels... eh." She gave a little shrug. "Currents keep bringing me back here."

I thought about the Tokomare and how its Enervation field drew souls to it. These ponies might not be losing their souls, but I thought of the attraction. Maybe it was affecting all of us on a level that we couldn't quite perceive. A kind of soul gravity, pulling us in. I'd returned. So had others. Until this was finished, one way or another, I didn't think I'd ever be able to leave this valley.

"Blackjack?" Pisces asked in worry.

I shook my head. "I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm glad you're okay, Pisces."

"I am too. And I'm glad you're the real one. The other you... the armored one... really scared me," she admitted, dropping her eyes to the brown water as she tapped her fins together. "I thought she was going to shoot us even after we got that gun for her."

"Gun for her? What gun?" I asked with a worried frown.

"Well, it was something that Steel Rain guy had us look for months ago after the *Celestia* blew up. A really weird gun. We found it a few days ago and delivered it to her. I've never seen a gun like it before, but she had ammo for it and everything."

My body felt cyberponyish once again. "This ammo... was it great big silver bullets?"

"Yeah. You know what it is?" Pisces asked.

"A gun. Folly. I killed a battleship with it," I said absently. "I need to find the jackass that asked for the damned thing to be built in the first place." I had other reasons, too, but if Cognitum had Folly... I had a sudden image of a beam obliterating me from a mile or two away. "I'm glad you're both still okay. Stay—"

My words were drowned out by an enormous booming thump coming from the Core. The babble of thousands of ponies died down to a crackle as a great metallic groan rippled over the valley. Slowly, I climbed up the slope to the bridge above us as the thumps were replaced by more softer, quicker thuds and more moans. Deep thuds sounded somewhere far below. I saw ripples dance in puddles left on the road. More ponies were following me up and on to the bridge.

I stared at the Core and saw that the beam turrets atop the wall were dark. How long had they been off? Slowly, I walked along the bridge towards the open gate. I reached the word 'Mercy' painted across the bridge, balked, and then took a tentative step forward. Another. Another. No beams lanced out at me to render me to ash. Slowly, I continued forward as the groans and moans of metal continued, punctuated by thuds and shivers under my hooves.

I glanced back and saw not a single other pony advancing past the Mercy line. Smart. Any second I expected the beams atop the wall to light up and dust me... but why would they? Cognitum wasn't connected to the Core anymore. The stallion she left behind was dead. Goldenblood wasn't wired in through his pod, so... who was left to turn the guns on? I swallowed as I reached the massive gate.

Ahead, the Core lay still. The green glow radiating from the cracks in the streets had dimmed. Hundreds of tiny robots lay scattered about in motionless heaps like so many unwanted toys. I stepped forward, unable to hear even the faint whisper of Enervation. Only the metallic groans sounded. The thumps. The deep thuds.

Wait. I froze, staring ahead. Did that skyscraper just... move? I stared up at one of the shorter, sixty-story-tall black towers laced with wires and cables. I saw several of the cables go taut, accompanied by a moan of metal and a great thump. The tower swayed, and slowly moved upright. Then it went still. A second thump and other cables off to the side went taut, and the tower shifted ever so slightly in that direction. My eyes followed the hoof-thick cables to immense wheels exposed by torn

away siding. I had no idea what those immense motors had been for. Elevators? Power cables feeding directly into the machines gave the city a sharp reek of ozone as the wheels turned to take in the slack, thumped to a halt, strained, and then went slack again.

"Do you—" a stallion rasped from beside me, making me almost jump out of my hooves. Goldenblood looked at me flatly, then at the Core. "Do you get the feeling that something bad is about to happen?"

"You mean something bad isn't *already* happening?" I answered with a grim grin. I looked out at the moaning city. "I've been having that feeling since I first saw this place." Then I blinked and stared at him. "Wait! You're not melting!"

"No. I'm not. The Enervation is gone," he said quietly. "Why do I feel that that's a bad sign too?"

Because if there was no Enervation, no killer robots, and no beams of death, then there was nothing to keep everypony in the Hoof from flooding into the city for protection or loot. "It's Silverstar Sporting Supplies all over again. Lure everypony in... turn the Enervation back on... kill us all at once and harvest our souls." But why? What did the Eater get from pony souls? What did it want?

"I'll pass on word to seal off the three bridges into the city. Hopefully that will keep everypony out," he said grimly, tapping buttons on the broadcaster-equipped PipBuck he was wearing. He reached over and did something to mine too. "There. Tags of every PipBuck we have. You can listen in with that Perceptitron device."

I nodded, not taking my eyes off the tower that slowly crept back into a vertical position. "Cognitum has Folly. Any advice on how not to get annihilated?"

"Don't sit there while she fires it. It does have a ridiculously long fire delay, and only a ten or twelve square foot area of effect. Rather idiotic to use it against anything smaller than a building," he murmured, also staring at the tormented city.

"What were you going to fire it at?" I asked with a wry smile.

"Tom," he answered quietly. "I realized something was manipulating me into creating Horizons a short time before the bombs fell. I wasn't precisely sure what. Pinkie's warning had... shaken me. Deeply. But was it Luna manipulating me? Horse? Twilight Sparkle? I couldn't be sure of anything anymore. I realized Horizons was a mistake, and so I had Trottenheimer make a weapon that could destroy the moon rock." He chuckled and shook his head. "I have no idea how he pulled it off. Maybe he'd already been working on something similar..."

Wait. Barring instant vaporization... "Could I use Folly to stop Horizons?"

"I don't see why not. Granted, destroying Tom as it falls would probably cost you the valley. Instead of one immense stone, you'd be showered with thousands of smaller ones... but none of them would be caught by the system that would turn them into starmetal or penetrate the mile of stone and interact with the Tokomare directly."

"Still, it's a plan B. But what about my body? If she fires it, the Flux..."

"Will start mutating her badly. Multiple shots will accelerate the change, of course." He closed his eyes. "Folly was my other suicide. Dying destroying my greatest and most terrible creation seemed... fitting."

I stared at him flatly. "No offense, Goldie, but I think a good therapist would have probably helped you out a whole lot more." I sighed and looked out at the city once more. "If she does fire, and she's

pregnant, how long could she last before the baby..." I choked. If it was immediate... there wasn't much point to taking my body back alive once she shot Folly.

He stared at me in shock, and then his eyes softened in understanding and he gazed out once more. "I'm not a doctor. I believe the placenta would offer a tiny amount of protection, but no more than a day. Flux is... fickle."

"Right. Right," I muttered. "Just more incentive to get moving and finish this. When do we move on the space port?"

"Tomorrow morning at dawn. Big Daddy and the teams are getting what they need. Mare Do Well has a squad to tap into their control network. Everything is getting staged at Paradise Mall. We'll storm in and hit Cognitum hard before they launch." He sighed. "At least, that's the plan. You do have an idea how to stop her?"

"Spark grenades and Wonderglue. Glory and Homage distract her with distance fire, protected by Velvet and her alicorns. Calamity snipes her floating weapon pods. I try and teleport onto her back. She expects the move and gets really pissed and focuses on me. P-21 sticks a spark grenade on her butt with Wonderglue so she can't teleport out of range or levitate it off." He gave me a funny look, and I sighed and rolled my eyes. "Yeah, I've been plotting how to take myself out. Sad, huh?" I sighed and went on, "Zap knocks her out. Scotch Tape takes off her legs and wings. Brings her back here. Triage and smart ponies take Cognitum out and put me back in. Take rocket to stop Horizons and deal with Brood or, if too late, you get to use Folly and blow it out of the sky while we run for the Highlanders' mines."

"You'd let me do that?" he said, sounding oddly touched. His broadcaster let out a squawk, somepony requesting confirmation of moving refugees through Burner territory, and he said, "Yes. Survivors from Flotsam. Let them through and don't waste time shaking them down. They're refugees." He took a deep breath. "I'm honored you'd grant me such a death."

"You have issues," I said flatly. "Anyway, once Brood are done, find surrogate for my baby, transfer back into this body for good. Stick the original in your stasis pod to keep it safe. Get Snails to put my soul back together. Then spend many long years being a mommy with P-21 and either patch things up with Glory or make sure she has a mare worthy of a girl like her. Spend the rest of my existence making things better 'till a raider is luckier than me and call it a good life."

"I see a gap in your plan," he said softly.

"I know, but unless I know for sure how Boo thinks of me, I can't really work her into the equation, now can I?" I asked with a feeble stab at humor.

"Not that," he countered, the voice of reasonable concern.

I shook my head. "Yeah. Getting to Cognitum through the Harbingers, Brood, and Legate. Amadi isn't going to make this easy. He wants her to go." I sighed and rubbed my face. "Maybe Charity has a crate of StealthBucks lying around and we can all just cheat our way through."

"The ones she has are going to the infiltration teams," Goldenblood said with a half smile.

"Figures. What I need is firepower. Vigilance is great for close-in work, but I need something more on the kinetic killing machine scale." I rolled my eyes with a sheepish smile. "What I really need is a... ah, forget it."

"What?" he asked in bafflement.

"It's stupid."

"What is?"

I rolled my eyes again and said with a touch of sarcasm, "You wouldn't happen to know where I can get my hooves on an IF-88 Ironpony, would you?"

He smiled. Of course he smiled...

* * *

"This is a bad idea, Blackjack," P-21 said as we teleported to the east side of the Miramare Air Station. The alicorns had deposited us outside the base; apparently alicorn fast travel wasn't precise enough to get me into the room I needed. I was glad they'd agreed to transport us, given Velvet was helping out the refugees. Homage and Scotch Tape had stayed behind as well, the former to work with Mare Do Well on how to return control of the MASEBS and the latter to prevent the refugees from spreading disease.

"What's new about that?" Glory asked with a smile.

"Nothing. Just like to be on the record, that's all," he admitted. In every direction were countless red bars. The base was awash in crackling gunfire as dozens of Harbinger defenders attacked the swarm of Brood to the west of the base. I lifted Penance and sighted through the scope, assessing things. Calamity did the same through Spitfire's Thunder. I lingered the crosshairs on the back of a stallion's head and shivered. No matter what, I'd never be a sniper. Even if these were technically the enemy.

I sighted on several of the combat-armor-clad Harbingers blasting away with markspoon carbines, assault carbines, and anti-machine rifles. I watched as cybernetic Brood made lazy attacks on the base, standing out in the open and letting themselves get shot to pieces before falling back. Out of sight, I knew their repair and healing talismans were restoring them to full. Repeat ad nauseam. "That is one hell of a turkey shoot," Calamity said flatly. "Barely any fire control at all. Did these idiots just raid an arms storeroom, put on the same outfit, and call themselves an army?"

"Some of them have training, but for the most part, yeah. That's the Harbingers," I replied.

"That's a joke. Sick, sad, deadly joke," Calamity replied.

"Is there a plan?" P-21 asked me with a smile.

I thought about teleporting in, getting the stuff, and getting out again. What if there were guards? They'd probably blast anypony who just teleported in next to them. "Get into the crater, up the pipes, in through the command center, and up into the building. Extraction the same way. Calamity and the alicorns will stay here and provide cover fire if we need to bolt," I said, getting a surprised smile from P-21. "What?"

"Nothing. That's just much more of an actual plan than you normally have," he replied. "I remember when the plan was 'run for our lives'."

"The good old days." I chuckled and then looked at Glory with her wistful smile. "Just the three of us again. Been a while, huh?"

"Yes," she said with a happy sigh.

Together, the three of us waited for a rise in firing, then rushed to the tank lying near the crater. I gave a few seconds' consideration for the bones of the mare I'd seen so long ago. Now they'd been scattered by some reckless looter. The pictures were gone. She only existed as a person in my memory.

No time for that now. We each took some Rad-X, dropped into the crater, and made our way through drainage culverts and up into the base. I didn't think the Harbingers would be using this area. Without power, I recalled how dark, hot, and stuffy it was down here. This time, I was surprised. The utility room the culverts connected to was well-lit, and there were red bars moving around. It looked like the Harbingers had some decent technicians with them.

And guards. One unicorn spotted us coming around a corner, levitated up an assault carbine, and opened her mouth wide. Glory's beam pistol sent a line of oscillating rainbow light into her head. The light spread along her body, turning her into a glowing mass that disappeared in a flash when it reached her hooves. The armor and gun clanged to the floor of the hall. She spat out the pistol, turning it over in her hooves. "What setting was that?"

"Awesome, I think. Or is that Cool?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at a little dial on the side, looking at the various settings.

P-21 sighed and retrieved the combat barding and guns. "You should put this on, Blackjack. That operative barding stands out way too much." I had to agree. Better to fit in.

On mostly silent hooves... why couldn't I be all sneaky sneaky like LittlePip?... the three of us prowled through the halls of the command center. We had to hide in the interrogation room to avoid a patrol. I stared at its smashed-out window and the dark stains still covering the walls. I glanced at Glory, shifting over and hugging her as she trembled. So much pain had started here, some of which I contributed to. She gave me a smile and stilled.

As we passed by the command center, I heard a familiar stallion say, "Tell them to stop firing! Stop! Until we get a resupply, I want them to hunker down and only attack if the Brood cross the fence into the base proper. We're going to be fighting them with hooves soon, and I've seen cyberponies in action."

I wanted to stay and listen more, but every second we did increased the chance of detection. Upstairs, the plan was seriously straining. I hadn't expected there to be this many Harbingers inside. The cafeteria was filled with injured Harbingers. Dozens lay on bloody mattresses set out on the floor. Clearly, the Brood were whittling away at the ponies without internal healing talismans.

"You!" a mare snapped at us. "What do you think you're doing?" I whirled to stare at a gaunt lavender unicorn with a white mane and a pair of crossed scalpels on her flank. She seemed familiar. Her eyes stared hard at Glory and P-21. "If you two aren't injured you need to get your gear and get on the roof," she snapped.

"Right. Gear. They just got here," I murmured.

"Hurry up," she snapped, pointing towards the back towards our destination. "Get some barding that's not too bloody and get shooting." And then she returned to casting healing spells. Either she hadn't recognized us, or she had and assumed I was just another impostor.

Either way, I wasn't going to question my luck. In the barracks were more Harbingers trying to sleep. One rocked back and forth muttering to himself, "Security will save us. Security will save us. Any second." I wanted to reassure him. To let him know I was trying my best... but the Security he prayed to couldn't care less if he lived or died.

In the locker room filled with boxes of combat barding, a haggard stallion stared desperately at the three of us. "Reinforcements? Say you're reinforcements!" he begged.

I shared a look with the other two. "We're here to help," I finally said.

"It's been a nightmare. Just a nightmare," he muttered as the earth pony pawed through the barding looking for a complete set. "At first it was a joke. Like that fake Security saying she was the real thing. But the attacks never stopped. They just let us shoot them and fall back. Shoot them some more and fall back. And for every twenty we shoot, they shoot one of ours. Like clockwork."

As he worked, I moved over to the back row of lockers, gesturing for them to keep him occupied. I got to the ones used for the Marauders and tapped the control panel. It flickered to life. Somepony had apparently tried to rip them open, or maybe, from the scorch marks, blast them open. I brought up the locker of Big Macintosh.

Password Clue: Where the heart is.

Carefully I entered in the obvious ones while the old stallion with the armor blathered on about the constant casualties, the gangers refusing to help like they should, and low ammunition. Family. Home. Sweet Apple Acres. Applejack. Apple Bloom. All failed. Twilight Sparkle. I sighed... if this didn't work... I tried my last one. Maripony.

The locker clicked open. Inside was a large black case with a note on the top. I leaned over and read it. *Thought you should have the prototype, Cupcake, since it was made for him. Sadly, anti-machine rifles are more effective against zebra robots and infantry. Might roll out a model for power armor. Hope you can use it to inspire others to follow in his hoof steps. Braeburn.*

I cracked open the case and was immediately struck by the smell of gun oil. The twelve gauge barrel was thicker than a riot gun, and about four inches shorter than usual. The full automatic action had a select fire for single, burst, or fully automatic fire. On the lid of the case rested the magazines, two double drums, each capable of holding fifty twelve gauge rounds and fitted with selector switches allowing different types of ammo to be used. There was also a feeder chain connected to a two-hundred-round ammo drum. The latter could only have been intended for use with a battle saddle.

Inscribed on the barrel was a simple word: 'Ayup'.

"I think you're gonna need more shotgun shells for that thing," Glory said over my shoulder.

The grizzled stallion realized we weren't listening to him ramble on as he held the combat armor out to P-21. "Wait, did you get those lockers in the back open?"

"Um. Nope," I said with a bald-faced lie, trying to hide the gun case behind my back, closing the locker with a hindhoof as carefully as I could.

"Anything there is the property of—" he started to say with a frown. P-21 charged him, pinning him against the racks of armor and glaring into his eyes. "Y'all!" the stallion yelped. "Nine tenths and all that."

"Good," P-21 said, then met my gaze. "What?"

"Nothing," I said as we turned to go, shaking my head. I couldn't fault him. I wanted to trot the heck out of here, but as I looked out, a gray stallion with bars on his helmet was trying to rally more soldiers to get up on the roof and fight back the enemy. There were at least a dozen armed Harbingers in there. Oh, to just teleport out. "Stay close," I told them, and concentrated. I could do this. I could teleport my friends with--

Flash, and I appeared next to Calamity. "Yes, I knew—"

Next thing I knew I was flipping sideways through the air in a whole heap of pain, landing in a heap with my whole body alternating between pain and numb. "Aw horseapples," Calamity said as he rushed up, setting down Spitfire's Thunder and immediately pulling out freshly brewed healing potions. "Why can't folks send me a memo when they're gonna dress up like the bad guys? That too much to ask?"

I chugged down half a dozen healing potions, thankful for their potency. That rifle hurt! "Don't worry. You're just the latest in a fine tradition." I looked at the hole punched through the ceramic composite plate in my barding, then at my side, then out the opposite side. I gulped down another healing potion for good measure. If Calamity had taken a second to aim rather than shooting in reaction, I'd be dead. "I need some whiskey. Then let's get out of here."

He demonstrated he was the best of ponies by pulling out a half full bottle of amber intoxicant and passing it to me. I wasted no time taking a hearty pull. "I'm sorry about your friends," he murmured, taking off his hat. Then I blinked and realized there were only the two of us and the alicorn here.

I upended the bottle.

My bloodstream charged with healing potions and happy juice, I focused and teleported back where I'd come. The grizzled stallion fell back again. "Gah! What's with the flashing and the popping in and out and..."

"Where are my friends?" I demanded. He blinked at me several times, as if trying to figure out what I was asking. In the cafeteria, the lavender doctor was peering at me with a sharp scowl.

"On the roof? Where else? The Brood are picking up the attack! I'd get out of here myself if they wouldn't shoot me for trying!" he said.

"Right. The roof." I trotted out and made my way to the stairs, past the second floor offices into the third floor quarters. Most of them had been broken into and looted long ago. I was depressed to see that Colonel Cupcake's was one of them. There was an injured soldier holding her guts in lying in the hallway. "Roof?" I asked, immediately passing her my last healing potion. She drank it at once and pointed to the end of the hall.

As I walked down, a pink pony in my head immediately began waving a red flag, and I paused, considering one of the closed doors. Then my eyes were drawn to the nameplate, the letters on it obscured by accumulated grime. I reached up and wiped the film off the metal. *Sgt. Twist*. The door was locked, and I mentally kicked myself... If only I had the time and skill. Friends first, though.

At the end of the hall, a stair continued up and the chatter of bullets became louder. The roof was awash with brass and confused heaps of discarded ammo boxes. Sandbags along the roof's edge afforded some protection from the ground as the Brood continued to press in from the west. The momentum had changed, too. The peek and retreat tactic I'd noticed earlier had transformed into a more steady push. Dozens of augmented zebras were now out in the open, laying down a steady cover fire as they advanced. Fifty ponies in battered combat armor milled about returning fire, some just hopelessly spraying their weapons into the advancing throng.

Now was a time I really would have loved to have Calamity or Psalm with me. I drew out Penance and searched my inventory for armor piercing rounds. Two dozen, better than nothing. "I need AP ammo," I shouted to the pony next to me, who was firing bullets wildly with a levitated sniper rifle.

"What?" she screamed, staring at me.

“AP! Armor piercing!” I yelled.

“What’s that?” she asked, blinking at me in bafflement.

I levitated out three bullets. “Hollow point. Standard jacket. Armor piercing! These! Use these on their heads!” I waved the third at her before loading and shoving out two sandbags, giving myself a firing hole. These weren’t real zebras. They were organic killing machines... not ponies. No souls... still, I felt a squirm of unease as I aimed the crosshairs at the nearest zebra.

It took two headshots for me to drop it. Then over to the next. Two shots. The next. Two shots and a reload. I glanced over at the other Harbingers. “Aim!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “You won’t kill these without a headshot. Use spark grenades if you have them!” Still, there was chaos. One stallion seemed to be dumping brass in ammo crates, duct taping them shut, and tossing them at the enemy!

A trio of cyberwinged zebras dove in a wedge straight at me in a strafing run. I levitated as much brass as I could and flung it up at them, ruining their shots and breaking their dive in a moment of confusion. Their programming probably didn’t account for this. Nor did it account for me drawing Vigilance and teleporting in a flash onto one’s back. I unloaded the magazine into the nearest one, the heavy bullets ripping through wings and hide and sending it crashing to earth. The last in the wing turned and opened fire on the one I rode, and I flashed off my current mount and on to the diving one, switching to Duty and Sacrifice. The old dueling pistols boomed in unison as I blasted it, and then I put the last two bullets in the head of the already-injured last one just in case. I teleported back to the roof, popped open the revolvers, and started reloading; the click of the cylinders closing was accompanied by the thump of a dead cyberzebra hitting the roof behind me.

A dozen Harbingers had stopped fighting to gape at me, the corpse, and the air where I’d been. “What?” I asked in annoyance. “Fire! They won’t stop just for that.” Galvanized, the fight began to shift. Less panic and more discipline. I moved up and down the line to make it harder for their zebras to hit me as I looked for my friends. I spotted a pegasus firing an anti-machine rifle with no heed for the recoil, the muzzle waving all over the place as she struggled. “You’ve got to compensate for the recoil! Slow down!” I bellowed at her.

“I’m trying! Energy weapons are easier!” she yelled back at me in frustration. Then Glory looked up at me, her purple eyes widening in surprise. “About time you got back!”

“Sorry. Teleporting is funny like--”

At that instant, six cyber unicorns flashed in around us, each with a pistol and, of all things, a sword. The six moved at me with terrifying swiftness and sureness; so this was what it was like being on the receiving end of augmentation. I lifted Duty, Sacrifice, and Vigilance and got ready to kiss my ass goodbye.

But Glory was faster. Abandoning the huge rifle, she drew the rainbow blaster and, with the smoothness of S.A.T.S., transformed one into a glowing bright nimbus of light. I gritted my teeth, preparing for pain as I fired the dueling pistols and my magic bullets at a pair. The barrage slammed into them, not fatally, perhaps, but enough to ruin their shots.

But the other three... they rushed in as one, pistol shots sending Harbingers diving for cover as they stabbed at me in unison, their blades precisely aimed to pierce my heart, throat, and eye. I did the only thing I could and jumped away as hard and fast as I could. Unfortunately, the only direction of ‘away’ was over the sandbags, and I found myself flipping into empty air.

Did I mention I was on the roof of a three story building? With a whole bunch of Brood advancing? Maybe that Wild Pegasus wasn't the best idea...

I tumbled through the air for a few seconds, then teleported back to the roof. I had enough velocity that I slammed down on one of the cyber unicorns with a crunch that was only partially from me. The ones I'd missed wheeled about without the good manners to be marginally impressed, but now the soldiers had gotten over their shock and came to my rescue, mobbing them and joining Glory. I staggered to my hooves as the remaining unicorns were dispatched. "Get back to firing! That was a distraction. Go!" I croaked, waving a hoof to the west. The soldiers rallied, fighting back with more vigor and determination.

Glory knelt beside me. "Have any healing potions?" she asked as she poked my side, making me hiss in pain.

"Used my last on a mare downstairs," I confessed.

"Me too," she answered. "Just take it easy."

I scanned the battlefield and then gave her a sardonic grin. "Sure. I was thinking of taking a little nap. Sounds good. Wake me when it's over." She sighed and shook her head. "Thanks. I appreciate it." Then I looked over at that crazy pony throwing ammo crates over the edge and shouted at him. "What are you doing?!" My side gave a twinge of pain. Okay, shouting bad.

Then P-21 regarded me flatly, a detonator in his mouth. He bit down hard and from the west came multiple sharp explosions as the ammo crates exploded, peppering the enemy with countless spent shell casings. Even cyberponies were staggered by that. The stunned Harbingers recovered and finished picking them off before they could retreat and regenerate. "Sorry, I didn't realize you were enjoying yourself," P-21 said as he trotted to us and pulled out a healing potion for me.

The Harbingers began to give little cheers and shouts of joy. I wondered how happy they'd be if they knew that there were more coming. Still, a little hope was better than no hope. "Let's get out of here," I said as I started for the stairs. If I was lucky, I'd be able to make it out of here without any more trouble—

Down in the third floor hall, a solid wall of soldiers faced me. As scared and shaken as they were, they had more than enough force to liquefy us. I blinked at so many red bars, and one yellow. "Hi," I said, giving the yellow bar a wave. Fortunately, it belonged to the pony with what I suspected was Colonel Cupcake's combat helmet on his head. Hopefully that meant he was the pony in charge of this firing squad. "Let's not anypony do anything they're going to regret."

"I told you. P-21 and Morning Glory and the impostor we were warned about," the gaunt lavender doctor said. "I remember them from Flank. Not many stallions with dots all over their flanks."

"Yes, I recognize both of them. You're the mare calling herself Blackjack, then?" the officer asked in that tantalizingly familiar voice. I tugged off the helmet, tossing my mane before staring evenly into his eyes. P-21 scowled at him and gave a low growl.

"You!" he spat. "You raping bastard!"

"P-21," I said evenly, my hind end clenching at that word. I kept my eyes on his, stepping closer. "So... you were one of the four on the *Seahorse*." He didn't answer immediately, just gave a little nod.

"Captain Nails," he replied evenly after a moment. "Thanks for helping out with the attack."

"I was in the neighborhood. It's sort of a thing I do." I swallowed hard. "I spared your life," I said, hoping it was still possible for all three of us to get out of here. Why didn't I have alicorn teleportation that could yank a half dozen ponies where I wanted?

"And I yours. Happyhorn, remember?" he said as he kept my gaze.

"I'm so glad you two are acquainted! She's wanted by Security!" the doctor said with a roll of her eyes. "Dead, as I recall. Her friends too."

Nails didn't answer. Now that I could get a better look at him, I took in his brown and black mane. Earth pony, bigger than P-21, with a steady and thoughtful gaze. "You spared my life," he said finally. "The mare... that cyber thing... never would have. She'd have been creative with killing us." He closed his eyes. "You're the real Blackjack."

"Who cares!" the doctor scoffed. "The mare calling the shots wants her dead."

"I care!" Nails snapped at her, making her back away. He frowned at me. "If you're really Blackjack, then it's as he said. So I have two questions to ask: is Steel Rain dead?"

I could have denied it. Remained vague, but really, I was just tired of lies. Tired of so damn much. "Yes."

"Did you kill him?" He asked me.

"Actually, it was his own damn treacherousness that killed him, but yeah. I guess you could say I did," I replied. I glanced back at P-21 and he gave the tiniest of nods. I glance out the corner of my other eye and Glory gave a sad, resigned smile.

"I see," he said and then looked at the soldiers and then back at me.

"What are you waiting for?" the lavender nag demanded.

"Making a decision," I murmured.

"Ha... bu...gah... wa?" the mare – Scalpel! That was the name! From Flank! – blustered. "Are you insane? She just said she killed him! Shoot now!" Her magic glowed around the gun of the pony next to her.

Nails fixed her with a cold, hard glare. "Shut up. That cyberpony nag would shoot you without a second thought." His hoof smacked her horn, and she sat hard on her ass, holding her horn as her focus was shattered. More and more guns lowered, red bars changing to yellow as he advanced on me. "Steel Rain gave us a recording for if he died and you killed him. We haven't heard from him in over twenty-four hours. That's unheard of for him." He lifted his leg and accessed a scratched-up PipBuck. I guessed that after LittlePip and me, they were all the rage.

From his hoof came a familiar, warm voice that made me shiver. "Hello. I don't have much time. I'm taking a squad of soldiers into the Core and there's a good chance I won't make it out. I hoped that I could work the angles and take the Core for all of us, but if you're playing this then that's just not going to happen. So if a pony comes out of the Core that's not with us, I'm probably dead. You need to know that the Harbingers are a trap. All of it. That Dawn and her goddess, Cognitum, are using all of you as chumps. Just like they used me.

"Nails, you know Security. You'll know the real deal. I put you in charge of the Harbingers. If you meet her and she's killed me, I want you... well... fuck... to be honest, I want you to nail her to the floor and fuck her ass a dozen times. Set up a conga line. I want you to chop her head off. And if her friends

are there, kill them first.” The recording laughed. “Then kill that cybermare. The Legate. The whole damn Hoof. Kill ‘em all!

“And Blackjack, if you’re listening to this, I’ll be waiting for you!” the stallion on the recording said cheerfully. Then it clicked off.

A loud sneeze might set things off. I didn’t want to blast these guys, but I didn’t see much choice. Everything hinged on a stallion who’d nailed my hooves to the floor and raped me. Scalpel looked from Nails to me as we stared into each other’s eyes, her head jerking back and forth so quickly, I thought the snapping of her neck might set everyone off. “Well?” she shrieked.

Nails kept his eyes on mine. I knew that P-21 somehow had a grenade ready to fly and Glory was set to start blasting, but so were they. It felt like I was back in Happyhorn, and I mentally begged him to be the better pony. “Keep your guns down,” he said in a low but sure voice.

“What!?” Scalpel said, her voice sharp as griffin claws on a chalkboard. “Cognitum—!”

“Is not here! This mare is!” he snapped back. “Cognitum gave her orders for us to fight to the last. Well, I will fight to the last, but only for a mare who deserves it.” He faced me again. “Can you help us any more? We’ll be out of ammo in an hour or two and overrun if we can’t get some reinforcements and resupply. I know a dozen other squads that are just as bad off or worse.”

I activated my broadcaster and found the tag. “Goldenblood?”

A minute later, he rasped, “Blackjack?”

“I’m talking with an officer in the Harbingers at Miramare. They need our help. I want you to tell Big Daddy to reinforce them and Keeper to try and get them more ammo. Lots of them are shot to hell, too,” I informed him. A tiny smile formed in the corner of Nails’s mouth. I regarded him a moment. “Will you follow Big Daddy’s orders?” The smile disappeared. “He’s calling the shots in the fight for me. Can you?”

“He obliterated my gang a year ago, the Nightmares,” Nails said darkly, then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “You forgave me. I can work with him, at least.”

“You... you... you...” Scalpel’s eyes bulged. “She’s going to kill you. All of us.” Was she talking about me or Cognitum? In the eyes of my enemies, was there really any difference?

“No she’s not. Because I’m trying to help,” I told the old mare.

“Help?” she screeched. “I remember the help you gave Flank! It was my home. Then you showed up, and it all went to shit. All because of you! Everything you do gets everypony killed. You’re a fucking menace! You’re a plague! A fucking monster!”

I stood there, hollow. “I’m trying to do better,” was all I could say.

“Ever think the whole Hoof would be better off if you didn’t?” She hissed the question like acid.

“No,” Glory said immediately, stepping forward. “I know it wouldn’t be.” Scalpel balked as she went on. “This valley is like an infected wound. It’s full of poison and disease, so twisted up that you can get killed just by stepping hoof in it. But Blackjack didn’t cause that. She’s lancing this boil, draining the pus, debriding the wound, and giving us all a chance at survival. It’s not easy, and even she can’t force the healing that it’s going to take. But it’s better than slowly dying.”

"Cognitum's going to kill us all for this," Scalpel said quietly. Then, without another word, she turned and walked down the stairs.

P-21 looked at the rest of the Harbingers. "I know you're scared. I know you're angry. I'm an expert on fear and hatred. And I know how difficult and hard it is to change. Steel Rain, Cognitum, and Dawn don't change. They just want to go back to Old Equestria, with the power and the war machines and the facade of normal life. Well, we don't. We're trying for a New Equestria. And we, all of us, need each other to do it. I know you're scared. I know you want to fight and kill and hurt those that hurt you. You can't. These Brood aren't zebras. They're killing machines, and they're infinite. We have a plan to stop them."

"Do you really think you can?" Nails asked.

"We stopped them now. We wouldn't be here if we didn't think it was possible," I told him.

He shook his head. "After what we did... I just wanted to die. Planned to. Then I heard that Dawn pony talking about becoming a part of something bigger. But we weren't. We were just a collection of smaller pieces. Steel Rain talked about being a part of something stronger. But we weren't. He just worked for a pony that knew where the arms caches were. You're the first pony I've ever met who wants to make things better and get nothing for it."

"Cause I'm stupid," I laughed, a little forced, as I blushed in embarrassment.

"No," Nails said with a shake of his head.

"Here," P-21 said as he pulled the broadcaster off his PipBuck and gave it to Nails. "If she's set on giving you another chance, I will too." He paused as Nails took the broadcaster, then fixed him with a look that portended a certain, cruel death. "One. Chance. Don't waste it."

There wasn't much to say after that. We stepped past. I hoped Big Daddy and the other Harbingers listened. I also realized something else: if Nails was no longer following the script, it wouldn't be long before Cognitum knew I was undermining her control. Would she tell Amadi? Maybe. The Legate wouldn't want to act till she was off the ground. He needed her to change Tom's entry angle if the Eater was going to get its feast. He'd probably tell her about using the Core to squash me like a bug when she returned. Would she move up the timetable? Maybe. Apparently it took a lot of time to safely fill up a rocket full of highly explosive chemical and magical propellant. Rushing it tended to result in explosions, as I'd heard from Stronghoof in the meeting.

As we started for the exit, I paused. "Wait," I said to P-21 as I looked at Twist's door. "Can you open this?"

"I got it." He got out his tools and started to work on the lock.

Glory frowned at the door. "What is it?"

"I'm hoping to find something in here for Rampage," I said as he worked the lock with a bobby pin and screwdriver. A second later, it popped open.

Twist's room was spartan, as I expected. The windows were obscured by a thin veil of grime, and dust covered everything. There were two bunk beds in the corner, and on the top one rested a teddy bear. On the computer desk were a burned-out terminal... and pictures. Twist and the Marauders. Twist celebrating atop Big Macintosh with a grin from ear to ear. Twist and Stonewing laughing at a soaking wet Applesnack sitting in a doorway with a bucket atop his head. Twist cuddled up with a red-striped zebra.

And Twist with her filly.

I'd seen her several times; it was the same filly Rampage reverted to every time she was disintegrated. In the pictures, she went from a tiny foal to a tiny filly. In another, she suddenly had red stripes too, and a little note on the picture read 'Shu needs to hide her magic zebra dyes better.' The last picture was Twist embracing her striped daughter.

This was it. Proof that Rampage wasn't just some mix of souls. She'd been a real filly once. The talisman might have prolonged her life, but the grin on that painted filly almost matched the one on my friend for eagerness and energy. I levitated the picture...

And spotted the memory orb behind it.

"Blackjack, you're not thinking of going into that thing, are you?" Glory asked.

"I need to. If I can give Rampage a reason to live, she won't have a reason to help Cognitum anymore," I said. "If I'm out for too long, carry me back, please." I touched the orb to my horn before there could be any further argument.

oooOOOooo

I was thrust into the body of an earth pony mare. Twist, I guessed. Her hornless body felt tough and strong; how much of that was due to her earth ponyness and how much was from the talisman inside her, I couldn't say. As she raced down the hall of the base, sirens wailed outside. Muted explosions sounded in the distance. She ran into the command center, starting to speak before she was all the way through the door. "Lieutenant Flash and Captain Grapevine are down. Zebra snipers. I got the snipers, but..." she started to say, and then she spotted the rotund Colonel Cupcake slouched in a chair. "Sir?"

"They've gotten Canterlot," the overweight brown stallion said in a hollow voice, a pained smile on his lips. "Some kind of chemical weapon like the one deployed at Littlehorn." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "And the bastards claimed they weren't behind it."

"The Princesses?" Twist asked.

"Presumed dead. It's not clear. Cloudsdale Command and Control is gone. Earth Pony Command is gone. General Steelspire gave orders for megaspells to be deployed as fast as possible, but her command went silent ten minutes ago. The MASEBS is up, but patchy, and there's no word from any of the ministries." He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Pegasus Air Command is ordering all pegasi to pull back to the clouds and seal the skies."

"They can't do that!" Twist shouted. "We need them!"

"They're doing it. Rainbow Dash gave orders to help us, but they were countermanded. Since the military doesn't answer to the M.o.A.... we're on our own." He sighed and closed his eyes. "Twist, you need to evacuate."

"Evacuate?" she stammered. "Evacuate where? With the skies closed, there's nowhere left to go! The stables are sealed. Hoofington is silent. I can't reach anyone there. The lines are open, but everypony is gone!"

"Go to the Highlands. I doubt the zebras will waste a missile on played-out mines. You might have a chance if you go now and hurry." He gave a sad smile and saluted her. "It has been an honor, Sergeant Twist, but I must relieve you of your duty. Your final orders are to get your daughter out of here and keep her alive at all costs."

"Sir..." she began in a broken voice.

He looked over at the consoles and terminals, the speakers crackling with static. "I'll remain here. Maybe we can get some organization out of this chaos. Go."

Twist stiffened and snapped a stiff salute with a tear running down her cheek. He stood and returned it with a kind smile. "Permission to... to..." He gave a little nod. She rushed forward and gave him a quick, fierce hug. "It all turned out wrong, sir..."

"It may work out in the end," he replied and released her, regarding a radar display peppered with little flashing dots. "Now hurry. There's another wave of balefire missiles inbound. They might be hitting Grimhoof again, but they might be heading here."

"Goodbye, Colonel. I hope..." but she didn't finish the statement. Instead, she turned and rushed away from him, back the way she came.

In the front entrance, behind sandbag barricades, were a few soldiers making a feeble, futile defense. They had to know it was doomed, but what else did they have? Twist scampered up to the third floor. "Peppermint? Peppermint!" she shouted, looking around the room.

"Mommy!" the filly shouted as she scampered out from under the bed and hugged her fiercely. "I'm scared! What's going on?"

Twist's body shuddered as her lips curled in a smile. Her limbs tightened on the red striped filly's form. "It's okay... I'm going to take care of you... take care of you..." she murmured.

"Mommy! You're squishing me!" Peppermint squealed.

That seemed to shake Twist out of it as she released her. "I'm sorry, Mint. Get your gear, baby. We need to go. We're going on a camping trip in the Highlands. It'll be safe there." Mint nodded once and ran to the closet, pulling out a filly's saddlebags and immediately wiggling into them. Twist rushed to the desk and pulled out a pack of photographs. Her eyes lingered on the larger pictures in the frames, but she just stuffed the pack into her pocket. "Come on. We have to hurry, honey. It's not safe here."

"I thought you said you'd keep the bad zebras away, Mommy," Peppermint said as Twist scooped her onto her back and started from the room. "Wait! You forgot Mr. Ripper Killer Death Machine!"

Twist didn't stop. "We'll come back for him, Minty. Hold tight," she said as she raced down the stairs. "Now, what do we do if we're attacked?"

"Get off your back and hide," she replied at once.

"And if I'm attacked and you see an opening?" Twist asked briskly.

"Knees. Eyes. Private bits. Hit 'em as hard as I can!" Peppermint replied fiercely.

"Good girl," she said, reaching into her pocket for a tin of Mint-als. She popped two into her mouth and chewed furiously. The world became sharper and clearer she trotted down to the entrance of the command center and froze. The ponies that had been at the barricade were now dead. "Trouble, sweetie," she murmured. Without a work of argument, Peppermint slipped off her back and backed up as Twist stepped forward, all her senses on high alert.

Twist immediately froze, her ears twitching a moment. Then she lunged to the side, her hooves wrapping around thin air that immediately shimmered and manifested into a zebra. He shouted something at her in Zebra, and her hooves twisted with incredible force, snapping his neck. Something

screamed behind her, and kicks designed to shatter bones slammed into her back, driving her to the ground. Twist turned to look at a second zebra draped in a mistcloak.

Then Peppermint dove at the zebra, wrapping her limbs around one hind leg and biting down hard on the ligament attached to his hock. He cried out, turning away from Twist for a critical second to deal with the nuisance. Twist turned, hooked a hoof around his neck, and pulled his head back sharply, nearly making his ears touch his rump. A vicious blow to his throat crushed his trachea and sent him down in a gagging, gurgling heap. Peppermint extracted herself from the leg, grinning up at her with bloody lips.

"Aunty Shu Shu taught me that one!" she said brightly.

"Come on, Minty. On my back again," she said as she scooped her up and went running out into a world of chaos. Several long buildings were ablaze. Wagons lay scattered over the field, and several hangars had collapsed. Missiles streaked overhead from the east and south, trailing smoke as they slammed into more buildings beyond the tree line. Far to the south, there was an immense red glow, like a piece of the sun resting on the earth. A megaspell?

"We got to hurry, Minty. We're going... somewhere. Somewhere safe," she said as she rushed across the field towards a smoldering tank. Ponies lay scattered about as bullets zipped back and forth, buzzing like deadly lead bees.

"It's okay, Momma. I'm not scared," Peppermint said in her ear as they fled. "Aunty Shu said not to be."

As they were passing an abandoned tank, a zebra with bat wings strafed the ground, machine guns chattering as lines of bullets tore through the field. One pierced right through Twist's leg, but as she put her weight down, I could feel the muscle and bone shifting to heal the injury. The bat zebra wheeled back around, and Twist ducked inside the tank.

"It's okay... not scared..." Peppermint whimpered on her back.

"That's right..." Twist began, and then she felt a hot, wet wash on her back. "Peppermint?" No answer. Carefully she slipped the filly from her back and saw the hole punched from spine to chest, right next to her heart.

"Peppermint!" she screamed. "No... no! Not you too! Peppermint!" She shook as she saw the blood leaking out of Peppermint's mouth. "No. Please no..." she wept. Then her eyes focused on the hole in her hind leg closing before her eyes. "Peppermint..."

She reached down and seized a combat knife that had fallen on the floor and turned it towards herself. "Peppermint..." she whispered, and then she rammed the knife into her chest with a scream. As the blade passed through her flesh, it began to heal immediately. Tears running down her cheek, she cut again and again, struggling to excise the device implanted within her chest. The tip of the knife scraped against something, and she pressed deeper. "Hold on, Peppermint... hold on..." she whimpered. She pried hard, levering against her ribs. Something tore, and a glowing glob connected to tendrils of flesh came free. Gasping and whimpering, she cut the very last connection to the heart.

Abruptly, I was plunged into darkness. Then, slowly, I came to... only now I was in an aching filly's body. Peppermint groggily got to her hooves and saw her mother as she lay there on her back, looking at pictures. The sounds of shooting had softened a little, and a terrible calm was filling the air. "Mommy?" Peppermint asked, her eyes wide and fearful at the weak way she slumped back against the wall of the tank.

"You're okay," Twist whispered, stroking her mane with a bloody hoof. "You're going to be okay..."

Peppermint stood up and saw the horrible hole in her mom's chest. Her eyes rose to Twist's as tears ran down her cheeks. "You're not. You need medicine, Mommy. You're hurt."

"Shhh... I'm fine," she whispered. "Such a brave and strong girl. I want you to promise me. Promise me you'll live. That you'll have a house and a family and a life. Please..."

"I promise Mommy. I promise. But you need a doctor, Mommy!" she begged, sniffing.

"Shh... shh... it's okay..." she whispered as she kept petting her mane.

"It's not okay. You're hurt!" She sniffed. "I don't want you to die!"

"Shh..." Twist said quietly. "It's okay. Sometimes mommies get hurt to save the lives of their babies."

Peppermint hugged her as she wept, and then the hoof stroking her mane stilled. "Mommy?" She pulled away, looking at her still form. At the other hoof holding photographs to her chest. "Mommy!" A smile lingered on the corner of her mouth. Then there was a colossal roar and a terrible pain in her head, and everything returned to black.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory weeping. It hadn't been a long one, a few minutes at the most. "I'm getting too old for this," I muttered, remembering the feel of that probing knife. But now it was clear why she couldn't remember who she was: that memory had been removed. I could only imagine the anguish Twist must have felt at Shujaa's death, only to carry her inside her. But what guilt had Peppermint felt, promising to live to a dying mother, and then wanting to end it after she killed her own baby? But it was as Rampage herself had said: not knowing sucks.

"Rampage... needs our help," I muttered as I looked around the tight quarters. Of course Twist would want her daughter close at hoof and in a safer home than that little outbuilding towards the end. And Cupcake would let her keep her here, as the last Marauder. I didn't even know if it was possible to help Rampage at this point...

But I had to try.

* * *

We returned to Star House. Charity had delivered several cardboard boxes of supplies. Healing potions, 12.7mm and 12 gauge ammunition in a variety of flavors, food and bottles of water, spark grenades and Wonderglue. And, of course, a bill. 'To be paid if you live' was scribbled at the bottom. Charity might have only been a filly, but she'd helped with this fight more than I suspected she could imagine.

Glory, P-21, and Scotch Tape all had similar packages waiting for them. Glory was using some spark batteries to 'optimally charge' her gem cartridges. P-21 was inspecting each 40mm shell for Persuasion. Scotch Tape examined her array of tools, spanners, hammers, duct tape, Wonderglue, turpentine, and other equipment. No pony talked.

P-21 cleared his throat.

"I'm coming with you, Daddy," Scotch Tape declared flatly. "Don't tell me to stay where it's safe, 'cause nowhere is. I'm coming and I'm helping and that's that."

P-21 froze, mouth open, then closed it again. He glanced at me, but all I could do was smile and shrug. Send her away or take her with us, either way was risky. "Stick close to me," he told her. "I don't want anything to happen to you." The words hung over us like a shroud. I could only focus on loading twelve gauge slugs into the ammo drums.

Then the door opened, and Boo sauntered in. I immediately smiled. "Hey! There you are. I wondered where you'd got off to."

Boo beamed a smile and then turned and said outside, "Come'n!"

"What...?" I began to say when Homage, Calamity, Velvet, and Ditzzy sauntered in. "Oh, um, hi," I said weakly. "Is something the--"

But they weren't the end. After them came Big Daddy, Brutus, Candlewick, Dazzle, and Storm Front. "Where do you want us to put this grub?" Big Daddy asked as he gestured to boxes of food carried casually on Brutus's back.

"Um... over there," I murmured, gesturing at the long dining table. "But we have more than..."

Again my words died out as Triage, Sagittarius, Virgo, a red earth pony mare with a flame cutie mark I guessed was Aries, and a griffin I guessed was the new Leo trotted in. Triage and Sagittarius levitated a wooden tub with Capricorn and Pisces waving at me. "Tell me where I can set them down. They're heavy," Triage grumbled. Thrush staggered in after them with her crew carrying boxes of sloshing bottles.

"I... ah... what are you?" I stammered. But there were still more ponies. Grace and Splendid followed with a protective Pain Train and a worried looking Charm, her head still bandaged. Stronghoof, Crumpets, Psalm, Chicanery, and Farsight funneled in after them. Storm Chaser, Mare Do Well, Twister, Boomer, Doctor Morningstar, and Lightning Dancer entered along with Dusk, Moonshadow, Lambent, and Lucent; the latter four immediately went to Morning Glory. Charity, Bottlecap, and Keeper arrived with even more food on their back, and behind them was a horde of colts and fillies, Sonata and Adagio bearing Octavia on their backs.

The house overflowed, and so the crowd spilled outside. I saw Whisper and Stygius, Tenebra and Persephone, and the still blind Hades clustered together with the yellow pegasus trying to get the four close to the others. The ghouls Windclop the mayor, Willow the security mare, and Velvet the... what did you call a pony who made naughty underwear anyway?... along with Boing. Harpica and the ghoul fillies and colts immediately joined them in polite and civilized conversation. Rover, Gnarr, and Fifi kept a little pocket of clear space around themselves as still others arrived. Silver Spoon, Xanthe, Carrion, Cerberus, and Snails trotted and floated up to the house as well. I spotted a restored Sweetie Bot alongside a holographic Apple Bloom whose appearance flickered in and out to reveal the mechanical filly beneath. Applebot? But they...

Horrible images of Cognitum packing them with balefire eggs and detonating them in the crowd or spying through their mechanical eyes to find the perfect time and place to fire a Raptor's guns swept through my head. "It's okay, Blackjack," Triage said from beside me with a nod to Rover off in the crowd. My fears must have been apparent on my face as I gaped at the pair of machines. "We checked them as soon as they showed up. They're not broadcasting to anyone. No nasty surprises, either. Some funny tech in the white one, but if they get out of hand..." She casually checked the pack on her beam pistol, and Rover scraped his formidable metal claws together. "They won't be any trouble."

That was a little bit of a relief, even if it didn't explain where they came from. Definitely something I should ask about, but if they were safe, it could wait. More urgent was the question of where...

everyone here came from. Almost everyone I knew was gathered around us. "What's..." I looked down at Boo. "What's going on?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Big Daddy said, "Tomorrow morning we're going to battle."

"So we have two choices," Storm Chaser said deeply. "To ponder the imminent battle ahead with sobriety and grim contemplation."

"Or get shitfaced drunk and spit in the face of Death and enjoy ourselves 'cause tomorrow we're fucked!" Thrush exclaimed.

"And while we know you might prefer the former," Homage said with a sad smile.

"The latter will probably do you a whole lot more good," Triage commented around her cigarette. "Us, too."

"So..." The white blank grinned eagerly, then leapt up in the air and yelled, "Leeeeet's... party!"

Once again, Star House was home to a celebration grossly inappropriate to the Wasteland. It was a rude gesture at despair and sober reality. Any second, the nightmare might begin. Heck, if I were Cognitum and still in the Core, I'd incinerate the whole house and all of us in one blast. But none of that seemed to matter here. People needed celebration and joy in the Wasteland. And so while I tried to smile and enjoy myself, I kept turning a wary eye out for a flash of silver or an ominous red alicorn shape.

But that didn't mean others couldn't have fun.

The two strange ponies from Flank had set up a table and plugged cables into Applebot, who'd deployed two large speakers from her sides, and begun to play thumping, lively music with Sweetie Bot providing 'live' vocals. I just hoped they were waterproof in case the Hoofington weather decided to join this party too. Whisper tried to drag Tenebra into the middle of everyone to dance, but the batpony pulled free and made off into the crowd; instead, Whisper returned to Stygius who, to his credit, gave as good as he got on the impromptu dance floor. Was it just me, though, or was Whisper a little... well... *radiant*? It was probably just me. Storm Front and P-21 sat off to the side, drinking beer and nodding to each other. Brutus, Stronghoof, and Pain Train engaged in a flex off. Charity and Bottlecap abstained from the festivities but seemed to enjoy keeping the food and drink flowing. Repeatedly, Charity tried to tally up the drinks and meals served, and repeatedly Bottlecap stopped her, reminding her sibling that this was on the house. It seemed to cause Charity pain.

Calamity, Chicanery, Mare Do Well, and Storm Chaser talked about the future of the Enclave and Thunderhead. Homage and Velvet chatted with Grace and Splendid; what did you call a collective of unicorns? Boing and Charm sat off to the side, looking dour, before Harpica brought over some of her ghoulish children to talk. Hades almost appeared to be having a taste test wearing his bandages as he sampled dishes provided by his wife. Being beaten in his own throne room seemed to have done wonders for his disposition.

As I wandered around, I kept hearing bits of conversation. Things were so crowded and wonderfully chaotic that I could eavesdrop on them without even trying. What did they call it? Mingling? Something like that.

When they were between songs, I trotted over to Applebot and Sweetie Bot. "You... the two of you... I thought you were scrap, and you... well... were scrapped too!" I couldn't believe it. Sweetie Bot was in bits! But now there wasn't a mark on her. Did Horse have a spare or something? And Applebot... Even ignoring what happened to her body, wasn't she just Cognitum in disguise?

"We are happy to see you again, too," Sweetie Bot said with a smile. The imitation was uncanny. Now that I wasn't fighting for my life, I could appreciate the job Horse had done. Bar the synthetic warble in her voice, she was almost indistinguishable from the real thing. "Though I was deactivated for several hours, my repair talisman was intact, and, barring problems with some improperly installed hardware, I was able to recover enough system integrity to leave the Core. Without the sexy, splendid Mr. Horse, I found myself with a complete lack of purpose. I had no driving goal, only fragmented data of Sweetie v1.0." She nodded to Applebot. "Fortunately, I recovered engrams of the previous imprint accessing her system." If only I spoke smart pony...

"Sweetie Belle got me fixed up right proper. 'Course, there was a little problem with my operatin' system. Thing was buggier than an anthill. But I got a new system installed and backed up." She frowned, looked around the party, and leaned in with a conspiratorial whisper, "Has Goldenblood told you anything new yet? Have you changed your mind on this whole 'execution by mercy' hogwash?"

"Ah... no?" I said as I gaped at her.

"Hokey Dokie!" Applebot said, beaming at me. "Just let me know if you need me to take him out. I can't do it as creatively as I could in the pod, but I'll try my best!"

"You... installed the megastable interrogation program into her?" I asked Sweetie Bot.

"Yes. It was a challenge, but the program was remarkably stable," Sweetie Bot said brightly, as if I'd just paid her a compliment. "And it had all of Applebot's old files. I think the two integrated well."

Applebot hung her head a little. "Darn sorry for the fibs I told, but I didn't have no choice. I had ta do what she wanted."

I sighed and shook my head. Robots. "Well... I'm glad you two are free now. Are you going to help with the fight?" I didn't see a lot of weapons on either of them.

"Well," Applebot began, "if she tries to use that PipBuck to access the MASEBS, we can try and mess with her. But otherwise, I don't think we'll be able to do much. Sorry." She sounded a touch down, but then she brightened. "Instead, I'm going to do my best to find out every dirty and underhanded secret in the Wasteland. And we're going to need a Scootabot... maybe one of those sentry robots!"

I had images of a bright orange sentry rolling along praising Rainbow Dash. "And I have a sample of super sexy Horse's DNA," Sweetie Bot gushed. "If I can get one of those cloning trees, we'll be reunited!"

"Sweetie... he'll be a mindless, soulless blank," I pointed out.

"I know. He'll be perfect!"

"Okay... well... good luck with that!" I said as I stepped away from the pair. Robots...

I spotted Crumpets and Lacu- Psalm. She was Psalm... I spotted them off to the side and tried to approach. "...still loves you, you know," I picked out Crumpets saying as I drew closer, feigning interest in the music. "I know it's a ballache listening to him going on about *love everlasting* and all that, at least for me, but he means it."

"He loves a mare who's gone. A mare who was better than me," Psalm said, and I had to drift closer to pick up her soft words. "I don't deserve his love."

Crumpets shook her head. "How'd you get so bloody fucking lucky and so sodding leatherheaded at the same time?" The yellow mare thumped Psalm's chest. "He. Fackin'. Loves ya. You have any idea how bleedin' rare that is? Not 'likes ya'. Not 'wants to mount you and shag you

proper'. Love. Real fuckin' deal. But you're standing here saying you don't deserve it. What's wrong with you?"

"I don't deserve it! Don't you understand?" Psalm said, flushing. "He's... he's so much better than me..."

"He's not a saint, you right big purple pillock. He's done things he ain't proud of. So have I. So have you. So what? It's not about what you *deserve*. Name me one geezer in this world who deserves love after all we do to survive!" Crumpets demanded jabbing the alicorn in the breast again. "Deservin' it don't come into it. What matters is whether you get it."

"It's not..." Psalm stammered.

"Do you love him too?" Crumpets asked. "Are you only into mares? Just not interested right now?"

"No! He's wonderful. He's caring. He's... noble..." Psalm replied.

"Then take what he's giving you and enjoy it as long as you can! Sure, you did some grim shit, but so what? You ain't special there, darlin'. If he forgives you and accepts you, then that's all that bloody matters, you dozy git." Crumpets sighed. "Some of us would sodding kill for what you've been given." She turned and trotted away.

Psalm started away in the other direction, but I trotted up to her. "She's right, you know."

"Eavesdropping is a bad habit," Psalm said with a grumpy little pout.

"Yeah. I'm full of those. Setting off balefire bombs. Wanton megaspell-assisted vandalism. Eavesdropping. If we get carts running on the road again, I can add jaywalking to the list, and then I'll have the full set!" I said as I walked in front of her. "She's still right. Stronghoof is a good pony. You're a good pony. You'll be better together."

"How can you say that? Blackjack... you know what I did," Psalm said with a touch of anguish.

"You killed Big Macintosh," I answered, making her flinch. "We all make mistakes, Psalm. Some of them huge. Some we can never forgive ourselves for. But..." I turned and looked at the huge, strong, tiny-horned unicorn and paused. "He reminds you of Big Macintosh. That's what's wrong." Psalm closed her eyes and gave a little nod. "Did you love Big Macintosh?"

"It was... more a crush. I never spoke of it. Never acted. We all thought he had a mare somewhere, secret. But still... I dreamed of being with him. And then I killed him. As good as he was. As much as I... loved... I killed him. How could I dare to love again after doing that?" Psalm said, striding from the party to hide her anguish.

"You dare because you can. Because love is so rare that when you have it, you hold it as best you can. Because losing it..." I sighed and shook my head. "I wish it was about deserving. It would be so much easier if it was that simple. Love is... precious. Fleeting. Frustrating. Wonderful. Terrifying. And above all... worth it. Besides, after tonight, there may not be a tomorrow."

Psalm wiped her eyes and stared across the party at where Stronghoof laughed jovially with the others. "Perhaps..."

I opened my saddlebags and pulled out Penance's case. "I want you to have this back, Psalm. I can't use it like you can, and in the upcoming fight, I think you'll need it."

She froze, staring at it. "How... how could you... how can I..." she muttered, half in horror.

I stood and held her shoulders, gazing into her eyes. "I can because I know you're strong enough to carry it. And I know you're strong enough to use it, because you don't want to repeat your mistakes. Forgive yourself, Psalm. I know that Big Macintosh would forgive you if he were here." I pushed the case into her hooves. "If you can't, or won't, give it to somepony who can. But it should be a better pony than me."

"I... will think about what you have said," Psalm murmured, barely audible above the noise. Then she turned and walked away, floating the case beside her. I hoped she came to terms with it. Hating and denying yourself happiness because of past mistakes didn't do anything to help overcome pain like that.

I kept mingling. I overheard Velvet, Homage, and Grace talking about babies, with Splendid looking like he was contemplating chewing his leg off to escape the conversation. Off to the side, Xanthe pranced quite happily to the music. Then she spotted me watching her and immediately flushed. "Hiding now," the suit piped, and when I blinked, she was gone.

"The griffins are sitting this one out," Carrion told General Storm Chaser over by the door to Star House. "The Talons came because of money, but most of my people remember the great war. They won't get involved this time."

"That's too bad. We're going to need all the help we can get," Storm Chaser said with a frown. "You'd think that with the end of the Enclave, they'd be glad to get involved again."

"You would think that," Carrion countered. "You're a pony. But two hundred years of battle has left a bitter taste in our mouths. Our people lived in Equestria, were even a part of it, but we aren't ponies. There's some that just want to watch the battle play out and then finish off whoever wins."

"They think they can?" Storm Chaser scowled.

"Their leaders do. Time will tell if they can pull together the support to actually make it happen," Carrion said with a shrug. Then they spotted me and looked at me coolly. I gave a sheepish smile and pretended to be interested in... a whiskey mixer... actually, nevermind the pretending. The whiskey helped me think about what I'd just heard.

That was a depressing thought. Winning the battle tomorrow just to have another battle. And another. And another. But why should our fight tomorrow be the end of all fights? That was hardly realistic. There would always be conflict and strife of some sort or another. Twilight had Nightmare Moon. The Princesses had struggled with Discord. The ministries with the zebras. Who knew what battles would come, who would face them, or how they would win?

Face the battle in front of you, Blackjack, I thought, and make sure the world gets a chance for those battles tomorrow.

I continued through the celebration. Velvet Remedy was now having an argument with P-21 about whether it was appropriate for Scotch Tape to fraternize with Adagio and Allegro. P-21 asked if there was an age at which a filly could give fellatio to multiple partners without parental approval that he wasn't aware of and if Velvet would instruct her own child of such. I stayed clear of that one. If Scotch Tape wanted to fool around and had her implant, good on her. Ambitious to tackle two at once, though; I'd never have had such an opportunity at her age.

Then I spotted Candlewick and Dazzle talking, the scarred stallion in the red fire coat giving awkward smiles as the mare remained polite... maybe even a little interested. Good for— then Toaster

approached the pair and Dazzle immediately backed off and moved away. I headed closer, pretending to be interested in the music again as I listened.

"What is the matter with you, Candle? Getting sweet on a Flasher? Bad move, Bro. Bad move," Toaster said as he leaned towards him.

"We're going on a mission tomorrow," Candlewick countered with a scowl.

"Yeah, yeah. No doubt. But you got to be thinking about things after the mission, Bro. 'Cause if you're smart, you'll make sure that you're the only pony that walks out of that bunker. Things are gonna change around here, Bro, and you can't be thinking with your dick over some mare that doesn't give a fuck about you," Toaster said with a dark chuckle.

"It's not like that!" Candlewick protested.

"Oh, but you wish it was!" Toaster leered at him, leaning in. "Look at you. You're a fucking steak, well done. You'd like her to do you a little more though. It's fucking branded on your face. Get a clue. Flashers fuck who they want to fuck and that ain't a pony who looks like a ghoul. Little bitches give a 'I was raped' sob story and then shoot you in the back for your caps. Well, the Flashers are done. They just don't know it yet. They still don't have a new leader since Diamond got squashed flat. Psychoshy's more interested in fucking that batpony. Blackjack's way out of their league. They're gonna be toasted. So don't get too attached, Bro."

He trotted away, leaving an anguished Candlewick as he stared across the party at where Dazzle was talking with Whisper. "Asshole," a stallion muttered beside me, and I jumped, the navy blue Storm Front having snuck up beside me. The pegasus glanced at me and then in the direction Toaster went. "Toaster has more ambition than's healthy for him. Dreams of seeing himself in Big Daddy's position. He keeps the Burners together, but that's about all the good you can say about him."

"Is he right?" I asked the Halfheart, who gave a noncommittal shrug.

"Big Daddy's old. No question about that. Question is if he's old enough to be taken down. If Brutus dies in the bunker, I think Toaster might just try it. Or were you asking about the Flashers?"

"Both," I said with a small half smile.

"Flashers always have it rough. East side of the river has always been tough. Flashers are used to fighting for their lives. Toaster thinks raped mares are funny. Halfhearts know better. Pride keeps the Flashers going after they've been hurt. They're like us. Desolate, but still trudging forward, even when you know the most sensible thing to do is eat a bullet," he rumbled. Wow, melodramatic much? Wait, was that what I used to sound like? No wonder ponies liked to shoot me. "Losing Diamond Flash was a blow, but they'll continue on. Maybe Dazzle will take over. Maybe somepony else. Maybe Toaster's right. Time will tell."

I regarded him. "Do the Halfhearts have a leader?"

"Heartmender. You won't meet her. She's scared to death of you. M.o.P. ghoul. Used to be a caseworker. She keeps us all from doing something permanent to ourselves. We keep her sane. Good arrangement," he said in his short, clipped sentences. A caseworker? Well, at least somepony in the Wasteland was getting therapy. "Toaster thinks Halfhearts are weak, but then, Toaster thinks everypony is. Probably even you."

"Is he going to be a problem?" I asked with a frown.

"Of course. But if you try and do something to him or get rid of him, you'll lose all the Burners' fighters and turn their territory into a great big hole for the Brood to pour through," he answered.

I groaned and rubbed my face. "Why is all of this so damned difficult?"

"Because it's life. Life is a struggle. Killing is easy. It's why Toaster is doomed to fail; he only wants to do what's easy. He doesn't have the strength for a real struggle," Storm Front said, then patted my shoulder. "Don't worry about Toaster. We've been dealing with him for years. You worry about your battle. We'll deal with ours."

That... cheered me up a little bit. It wasn't all my fight. Maybe I'd have to deal with Toaster later... but that was something way down on my list.

I spotted Glory disappearing around the back of Star House and blinked, then trotted after her. Behind the building, I spotted the gray mare sitting next to Tenebra. The charcoal batpony wept as she sat on a rock. "It's hard. I try so hard to be like... like Stygius. Father. Even Whisper. But I can't. Every time I get into a fight... everything goes wrong. I just... I'm a liability. A joke. Whisper thinks it's funny."

"Whisper has her own issues. She can be cruel," Glory said as she put a wing around Tenebra's shoulders. "Epilepsy isn't a joke. For fliers, it can be fatal if they have an attack at high altitudes and can't recover in time."

"I'm just... I want to be like her. I want to be... strong. Dangerous. Confident. All my people were supposed to be fighters, so a pony who can't fight... is nothing," Tenebra said with another sniff, wiping her eyes. "Ignored. I know Father is ashamed of me."

"I know how you feel. It's rough when the expectations of others aren't in accord with our own," Glory said.

"I don't want to be useless. I'd rather die than be useless," Tenebra said as she pressed her face to Glory's mane.

"You don't have to feel that way. Blackjack blinded Hades, and he seems... okay," Glory said awkwardly.

Tenebra sighed. "If we survive the battle, Triage will give him robot eyes to restore his sight. It's only a temporary uselessness... unlike mine."

"You're not useless. You just have to take your weakness and work around it. Just a guess, but I suspect your attacks are the result of adrenaline. Whisper and Stygius focus on close in attacks, right? Have you considered focusing on more long-ranged weapons? Rifles? Something that will keep you out of imminent harm and still let you fight."

"Rifles? I don't... traditionally, we use hooves and blades, not guns," Tenebra said as she wiped her eye. "Do you really think so?"

"I think it'd be better than hating yourself because you can't be like someone else. Believe me, I've been guilty of that lately too," Glory said as she held her.

"I... heard you and Blackjack..." Tenebra began.

"Mhmmm..." Glory answered.

"I'm sorry," Tenebra said.

"I am too. Blackjack is... Blackjack. I can't hate her. It'd be so much easier if I could, for both of us. I've tried hating her, and it's just so hard. Soon as I ended it, she went and had marathon sex with another pony. I thought I'd be hurt by it... but I was glad she did. Loving Blackjack is... hard. I know she wants to accommodate my feelings, but in the end, she is who she is. A wonderful, self-destructive, self-sacrificing, determined, lecherous, loving mess of a mare." Glory and Tenebra were silent for a moment, and I considered sneaking away before I was caught. Then, "I also wonder if she was right."

"About what?" Tenebra asked, and I did as well.

"About the marathon sex being good for getting over a breakup," Glory said with a smile. Tenebra immediately flushed and squirmed a little.

"Do you think it would be okay?" Tenebra asked.

Glory then turned and regarded me with a cool smile and arched brow. I immediately stammered, "Um... Hi. I just... saw... and... um..." There wasn't any animosity in her eyes though. Friendliness. We were friends... just friends now.

"Hey, Blackjack," she said, and then she returned her attention to Tenebra. "I think, if we take it slow, it'll be just fine," she said as she rose to her hooves with the batpony beside her. "Let's go to my room." Together, the pair walked past me, Glory giving a warm smile to me and the mare beside her.

I watched them disappear around the corner, my last sight of them being Glory nibbling Tenebra's ear.

What a night.

Though... there was one pony I hadn't seen yet. I checked my PipBuck and found his tag. There he was. I trotted to the edge of the party and up the hillside into the still woods. Goldenblood sat alone, looking down at the festivities with a longing, pained look. "Hey. This is *my* brooding spot," I said as I sat down beside him.

"I've never been good with social functions," he answered. "Besides, I was here first."

I watched the party as well. For several long minutes, we just spectated. Neither of us were particularly happy. We'd been through too much to ever join in like everyone else was. But we could find comfort in the happiness of others.

"What are our chances?" I asked him. "Seriously?"

"Seriously... I don't know. We're outnumbered, outgunned, and there're too many ways this can end disastrously. Horizons will fire tomorrow afternoon and impact at midnight. If the trajectory isn't altered, sooner. We may all die. But I do know that there is no way to calculate success at this point. We will win, or we will lose."

Twenty-four hours. I should have been shocked... but really, considering how my life had gone... "When will Cognitum leave?" I asked.

"It takes a lot of time to fuel a rocket safely. Dawn, at the soonest. We're trying to keep tabs on her, but between Harbingers still loyal to her at the base, the Brood, the Remnant, and any Enclave that are throwing in with her... well, it's been difficult."

"It seems wrong to have a party now," I said.

He checked his PipBuck. "It doesn't matter. We won't be ready to attack until morning either. So folks may as well be happy." He nodded towards the celebration. "You should go. It's not good for the leader to hide during events like this. Luna always made that mistake."

I rose, extending a hoof to him. "Only if you come with me."

He stared at it for a long moment, then reached out and took it. Life was messy. A tangled perplexity that kept you constantly wondering what came next. Even in a moment where people weren't shooting at each other, you couldn't escape the rushing, twisting, churning, chaos of it all. Boo'd been right. A party was exactly what we needed right now. Life was a party, and while you may not always have fun, it was still preferable to the alternative. So together, Goldenblood and I rejoined the mess, as the celebration pressed on towards oblivion.

(Author's notes: The universe hated this chapter. It did everything it could to conspire against me getting it out. I had writers block and frustration. There were huge banal scenes. People got sick. There was lightning storms knocking out power and fire drills going off and just everything went wrong. This chapter was really a continuation of the last chapter, getting things set up for next chapter, and just kept growing and growing... it's like in FONV where you're about to go to the Hoover Dam and the game asks 'Are you sure you want to go, because you can't resolve any more quests from here on out if you do!'

Anyway, finally got the thing written and edited. It's horrible... so sorry. I'm sorry it took so much longer than I intended. I wanted to thank Kkat for creating FoE in the first place, and Bro, Hinds, swicked, and Heartshine for their hard word in making this a better story. Even if we had to add in seven or eight pages... seriously. It was crazy.

Anyway, I hope folks leave feedback. I really do like reading if I do things right or not, even if I'm quiet about it. You can put it on Reddit, cloudsville, or on FimFic's blog. Also, if anyone wants to donate, it would be *incredibly* welcome this month. I haven't gotten much subbing work, so bits at David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal would be hugely appreciated. I wish I knew how to set up a Patreon thing. Anyway thank you for reading. Next chapter is going to catch Cognitum and... stuff...

EDIT: Oh! About Homage! I spoke with Kkat about her origins. It was actually different than what I had in my head, so I'm very glad to have gotten her input. This wasn't something I just made up.)

(Bronode: I was responsible for 1 and a half-ish pages of the new growth. Blame swicked for the other stuff. And friendly synthetics that show up and don't immediately get ganked! Finally my wish came true!! ...Well, I kind of *made* it come true, but it still counts!)

(swicked: Huzzah, the chapter is complete! And gosh, wasn't it grand? That Twist saving Peppermint scene had me in stitches!

And also I'd like to extend a personal thanks to Bronode for helping edit in an accent he absolutely hates.)