

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

Chapter 50: Selfishness

"I am going for a hooficure and that is that!"

"You are not going--"

"I am! I am!"

I have to admit, after dying (again), taking all day to get back, and having more wires and tubes in my body than anypony had a right to, smacking into the far wall upside down before crashing to the floor headfirst and lying there in a heap wasn't exactly how I envisioned my reunion with Glory. It wasn't just that she *looked* like Rainbow Dash; she had every bit the strength and vigor of Rainbow Dash in her youth. Glory herself seemed equally shocked as she hovered there, forehooves pressed to her mouth and rose eyes wide.

"Ohmygosh! Ohmygosh! Ohmygosh! Are you okay?" she asked as she stared across the room at me.

"Glory, you called me a cunt and launched me across the room. Now you're asking if I'm okay?" I groaned as I rolled over and sat up. "Really, what pony would say yes?" I said as I shook the fuzz out of my head. "What's going on, Glory?"

Apparently something really bad, from how quickly her face darkened. She ripped the rag off her head and threw it at me. "I hated seeing you run away like that, even though I understood that you were doing it for us. I was terrified for you. Do you realize that? I didn't know if you were alive or dead. I kept waiting for a broadcast or something telling me you were okay... and when I finally got one, what did I hear? Champion in bed... Champion in *fucking* bed!" she shouted down at me. "I didn't go through all that just so you could go off and... and... fuck whomever you wanted!"

I blinked several times as I looked up at her. "That's what all this is about? That I had sex with a stallion while I was gone?"

She screwed up her face and snarled in disgust. "Yes!" she shouted, starting to pace back and forth in the air. "I shouldn't be surprised, I guess. Everypony I care about always leaves me. Mom did it. Dusk almost killed me. You took off twice, once to kill yourself and once to screw that guy!" She grit her teeth and clenched her eyes shut. "I get it. There's something wrong with me that you don't want to deal with, but couldn't you have told me first? Not broadcast to the entire Wasteland 'I just banged a guy and he was sooooo much better than Glory!' How could you?"

I just stared up at her. "The entire Wasteland?"

"Well, I can't be sure that they heard it in Las Pegasus, but for the last two days I've been enduring the smirk of everypony in Chapel with a radio!" she said as she rolled her eyes. "For all I know, my father heard that broadcast!" She groaned as she covered her face in her hooves. "My life is even more over than it was. I should just turn myself over to the Enclave. 'Here I am, please try me for treason, again, and then shoot me so I don't have to listen to all the innuendo and snickers!'" she said in a hysterical, singsong voice.

I sighed and pulled myself to my hooves. "Glory... I didn't do what I did with Stygius for the sex."

Then I gave a small smile as I rolled my eyes a little. "Okay, maybe a little. It was pretty good. But--"

I think her throw must have given me brain damage... more than just the tumors and like. Five little ponies in my head covered their faces all at once and I heard the Goddess chuckle darkly. Glory's eyes popped wide as if I'd been the one to throw her.

"Pretty good? Pretty good! Blackjack, I am going to spay you!" she shrieked, and then she was on me, kicking and stomping me with her hooves. If she'd been the old Glory, this would have been cute. The new Glory had some serious power behind those kicks! She pummeled me good and hard, and I raised my metal legs and tried to protect my head and midriff.

I remembered how Goldenblood had broken Fluttershy's heart calling out the wrong name when they'd been together. At the time, I'd thought it'd just been Fluttershy being oversensitive. It never really occurred to me that sex might be a serious matter like that. I knew love was serious. Abuse was serious. Rape and coercion for sex were serious. But sex itself was just a means to an orgasm.

Glory, it was now becoming very clear, definitely did not have the same opinion. Then again, though, I was her first mare and serious partner. This was the first time anypony had really fucked up a relationship with her and she was pissed. And while old Glory would have probably beaten me up with big words, new Glory was expressing herself far more directly. I tried to get a word out as she sobbed and raged and stomped me with all four hooves at once.

Then I heard Scotch Tape yell, "Hey, Blackjack. How many times did you have sex with my mom?" I blinked and looked over at the door where P-21 stood with Scotch Tape beside him. Glory just blinked and stared at the filly, as if processing the question was breaking something in her head.

"Now is really not the time to be reminiscing about Stable 99, Scotch!" I called out.

"Actually, I think it is," P-21 said as he closed the door behind him. Glory stared at him, her pupils contracting as her rainbow mane seemed to frizz in growing stress. "How many times?" he asked, cool and calm, as Glory hovered above me.

I looked from one to the other, then spoke slowly and carefully. "A dozen times, give or take, I think. Maybe more. I mean, we were on the same shift and stuff," I said, feeling as though one wrong word would shatter my relationship with Glory forever.

"I know. I remember peeking in on you two once or twice. Did you love my mom, Blackjack?" Scotch asked; her tone said that she knew my answer.

"No. I mean, she was nice but..." I trailed off, not wanted to offend.

"And did you have sex with Daisy and Marmalade?" P-21 asked, making me feel oddly embarrassed.

"Yeah. Like I said, we were on the same shift." I looked at the confused Glory and gave a sheepish little shrug. "Usually with Marm, though. Daisy was always way too rough." Marm had always been a good lick. If it hadn't been for Daisy, who knows what could have been?

"In fact, Blackjack, can you count how many ponies you've been with in 99?" Scotch Tape asked firmly. Glory backed off and sat down, looking at me as if she'd never seen me before.

I hesitated, counting them up. "Twenty or so. I mean, I wasn't like Palette," I said defensively and glanced at Glory. "I mean, she was rutting any second she could!" I'd hoped for a smile, but instead I got a wary look.

"Not counting males?" P-21 threw in, pushing back his wide-brimmed black hat to look at me skeptically.

"Oh, right. Probably about twenty or so of them, too," I said with a growing blush at how the cyan pegasus stared. P-21 himself showed no animosity despite the fact he'd been one of that number at least once, and maybe other times too. I just didn't keep males straight in 99. One a month for six or seven years...

"Yeah. I had three or so myself," Scotch Tape said firmly. Glory gaped at the filly, her final brain fuse completely blown. I couldn't see why. When you were a filly, a little nuzzle and lick was inescapable. It was one of the few fun games to play, seeing if you could do it without people catching you. "Did you love any of them?"

"No. Some of them I didn't even like all that much," I said softly as I lowered my eyes. "Not like Mom and Steam. Not like... how I feel for Glory."

P-21 took off his hat and, with a freaky bit of earth pony skill, lobbed it so it landed on Scotch Tape's head. The hat stayed up for just a second, then swallowed the top half of her noggin. He approached Glory and gently touched her shoulder, making the pegasus jump. "This is what we've been trying to explain to you, Glory. When we said sex doesn't matter, we didn't mean *love*. Mares in 99 had sex with lots of different mares. Kids did. Adults did. As long as it wasn't forced, abusive, incestuous, or disruptive, sure. For a lot of mares it was all they had to look forward to. But it wasn't love. BJ didn't do what she did with that guy because she loved him and stopped loving you. She did it because she needed to."

Glory looked at him, then at me lying there, my new legs already dinged up from her blows. "I... I don't... I can't... oh!" She snapped her wings, flying up to the stairs and into her bedroom.

"*That*... she was upset about *that*?" I muttered, trying to wrap my head around it. It was crazy to be upset about sex. That was like... like being upset because somepony stole your carrot chips in the cafeteria.

"It was hard for us to get, too," P-21 said sympathetically. "We tried to explain it, but she was so wound up she just wouldn't listen. And there *were* plenty of other things. The stress of knowing you were in danger but she was stuck here caring for us. The frustration of not being with you. I think these last four days were hardest on her."

"You were screaming, puking, and pooping yourself for two whole days, Daddy," Scotch Tape said as she pulled the hat off her head and held it in her hooves.

"Yeah, but that was just physical," he said dismissively. "Glory's trials have been of the heart, and that's always harder. The body can endure anything if the heart is at peace." He caught Scotch Tape's uneasy furrowing of her brows. "What?"

"I know you're trying hard to do the father thing, Dad, but could you be a little less... erm... pithy?" Scotch asked with a crooked little smile. "You don't have to sound all wise all the time." She set the wide

brimmed black hat back on his head, and he returned her smile.

“Right. Sorry. New to this,” he said awkwardly before looking at me and continuing, “She’s also afraid of turning into Rainbow Dash.”

I’d forgotten about that. “Is she? Turning into Rainbow Dash, I mean,” I asked in worry.

He shook his head. “Lacunae doesn’t think so. It’s more likely it’s all in her head... but that makes it worse. Lacunae checked her memory and didn’t find any magical thoughts stuffed in there. Just her own fear.”

I dragged myself to my hooves and started up the stairs. “I need to talk to her. I have to make it right with her. Nothing else matters till things are right with her again.”

P-21 looked on in worry. “It may not be possible to make things right, Blackjack. She may never be with you again, like that.”

I snorted, more in disgust with myself than him. “I don’t care about that! I care that she’s hurt and upset,” I said back down the stairs at the pair. “I am not going to let her and I end like Fluttershy and Goldenblood.” If I couldn’t be trusted with her heart, then at least I’d try to be worthy of her friendship.

Somehow.

* * *

I reached her bedroom; she’d left the door open a crack, and I could hear her sobbing within. I pushed the door open and saw her sitting on the bed, facing away from the door with her head bowed. Slowly I walked around the bed, trying to think of what to say at a time like this. I sat beside her, but she turned away from me.

This was stupid. We just sat there together, staring at our hooves. One of us had to say something, but words just weren’t coming out right. As in, not at all. I kept running ideas through my head: apologize, say I was sorry, kiss her, or leave her alone? None seemed particularly adequate, appropriate, or helpful. Glory couldn’t even bring herself to look at me, let alone talk.

I felt a hole opening up deeper and deeper inside me. I was going to lose her, and all because I didn’t even know how to talk anymore. But what could I possibly say to her? What could anypony say? Glory clenched her eyes shut, slow tears leaking as she remained turned away from me. Slowly, with a numb sensation throughout my entire body, I made my way back out of the room. I couldn’t stay with her, couldn’t bear to go back downstairs, either. Instead, I returned to my room, not bothering to close either door. Sitting on the bed, I damned myself again.

Then my eyes fell on the contrabass in the corner. I stared for the longest time at the dark, polished wood. Then I rose to my hooves and staggered over. The finish was smooth and warm beneath my touch as I ran my finger along its -- along *her* neck. “Hey, Octavia,” I murmured as I shifted the instrument and stood behind it. “Can you help me out here? I kinda messed up big time. Please? I hurt the pony I love.” I plucked one string with a finger, drawing out a sour note from the instrument and a little laugh from me. “Yeah, I know, right? That’s stupid, even for me, and I’m the high princess of stupid.”

Slowly, I started to play. Would she hear? Would she listen? Would she care? I tried not to

think of anything. I simply let the music play however it came out. No, not music; just notes.

I wasn't exactly sure how long I played, but when I dared to open my eyes, I saw Glory no more than three feet from me. She stared at the blue starry comforter on the bed, then glanced back at me, then quickly looked away once more. Her rainbow mane fell across her eyes, her expression reminding me of that mare I'd found hiding in that tiny space back in the weather station. No matter how her body changed, she'd always be Glory.

I ran the bow against the strings. I knew it would sound beautiful, because it came from the pony who'd had part of her soul locked within. "Please help me apologize, Octavia. Help me show her how much I love her." I slowly drew the bow, and a low, soft note rose from them. I closed my eyes and gave up control of my hoof to the instrument. It was astonishing how good it felt to simply give in and yield to another that I trusted, to simply stop struggling and be at peace.

The notes rose and fell, searching for a melody and not finding it. They rolled out high and fast and then dropped low to slow, full notes as the bow sawed back and forth. They skipped and jangled in frustration. One thing was for sure: no matter what happened between Glory and me, Octavia wouldn't be left in the corner of my bedroom. She deserved to be around other ponies and inspire them to learn how to play. I'd give her to the Crusaders so she'd never be lonely again.

Finally, I looked up and saw Glory looking back at me as the sad music played. The eyes might have been different, but the feelings were the same. Her love might have been bound tightly, but it hadn't suffocated yet. I set the bow aside and patted the wood paneling, then sat before Glory. The cyan pegasus rubbed my mane and asked in a tiny voice, "Do you hate me for bringing you back? Is that... why..."

"No. I don't," I said. I shook my head. "I did, for a while. A little stupid selfish part of me did, but that wasn't why I was with Stygius," I said. "Actually it's not so little. I didn't want to face it. What I am. When I died, I really thought that that was it, and it wasn't such a bad way to go. Then... then I was back. And... different." I looked out the window with a sigh. "I didn't take the time I needed. I should have waited a week, a month, even... learning about being a cyberpony and making sure I was really over it. I was trying to run myself right into the ground. First with LittlePip... then with Sanguine... and then all on my own." I closed my eyes and placed my hooves in hers. "I promised you I'd never, ever, try to kill myself again. I meant to keep that promise. I did. But I'm afraid some part of me was trying to do just that. I was doing everything I could to tear myself apart."

That was the easy part. My eyes met hers. "I did... bad things, too, while I was gone. I came across a squad of Enclave that tried to fight me, and I just tore them to pieces." I opened my mouth and closed it again, clenching my eyes closed a moment. I had to tell her, but somehow the words got all tangled in my throat. Finally, I managed to get them out. "I... think I hurt your sister pretty bad too."

"What? What do you mean..." Glory said in a tiny, horrified little voice.

I sniffed and shook my head. "They attacked me... and I fought back... but I was completely out of control. You were right... not wanting me left alone." I grimaced, feeling a stabbing pain where my heart used to be. "I hurt her. I would have killed her if... if I hadn't run out of power." I shivered as I felt tears run down my cheek. "And if Lightning Dancer was there... I probably killed her, too."

The haunted look on Glory's face had her staring past me a moment. She focused once more,

but her voice still trembled. "But Dusk is okay? You didn't kill her, right?"

"She was alive when I left her. I told the other Enclave survivors I was with to take her to the Skyport and I seriously doubt they'd disobey my order then. But honestly... I don't know if she's okay." Glory started to tremble as she curled up and hugged herself. I couldn't blame her; like this, she couldn't even go to the Skyport and find out. I tried to touch her, but she smacked my hoof away and curled up even tighter. I just sat there, staring at my stupid metal fingers. I could still see them clutching Dusk's head and slowly crushing and twisting.

She'd leave now. Hurting her was bad enough, inexcusable enough. But her family, too? I bowed my head, waiting for her to leave. "You were right. I should have stayed with you. Without you... without my friends..." The lame words fell from my lips before I ended with a whisper like a prayer, "I'm so sorry." I heard her start to move and clenched my eyes shut, not bearing to see her go.

But she didn't. And when I chanced a glance, she wore a pained expression as she looked at the floor. "Something else happened, didn't it?"

"How... how'd you know?"

A tiny, mirthless smile appeared on her lips. "I didn't. But I've learned by now that, no matter how bad I think things might be, I ought to double it when you're involved." She took a slow breath, as if bracing herself. "What else happened?" she asked as she put her hoof on mine.

She didn't forgive me. Didn't excuse me. But she didn't leave, either. I took several ragged breaths, fighting off the urge to sob as I stared at her hooves, feeling her tremble. "... I wish it ended there. I was attacked again... Harbingers... And then I came across some scavengers. I thought they were with the Harbingers. I killed two... crippled a filly... Thought I killed her, actually. Almost did."

Glory didn't say anything. Her eyes were closed as she wept. But she kept her hoof on mine. As long as she was still here, there was hope. Please, let there be hope...

I moved along while I still could. "I lost it completely, then. I mean... I was *totally* gone. I would have been dead except that I found a place that helped put me back together again. That got me to finally stop running from my problems and face them. To try and deal with my guilt and my shame."

"Did it work?" she finally asked in a tiny, squeaky voice. "Are you... better?"

"Kinda, actually. A little. It was a step towards better," I said with a mirthless smile. "It felt like months the machines kept me locked in my own head. Got me to finally admit... admit that I'm not okay, Glory. I mean, I know I say I'm not all the time, but I'm really *not*. Being what I am was harder than just carrying EC-1101 around. Harder than dying of taint. I was okay with dying. It was a cowardly way out. But coming back as this machine..." I shook my head, sniffing as I stared at my metal hooves.

"And here I thought the sex part was the worst. Why... how...?" she murmured with a blush.

I sighed and wiped my tears away. "Stygus... he was just trying to mount me. He was a good pony, though. And I needed Stygus to try and deal with what happened on the *Seahorse*. To be able to... to be a mare... a pony... a person. It was just sex. Good sex, but sex. I didn't love him, and he didn't love me. It was a way to prove to myself that I could control myself enough to be able to get better." I swallowed and said with every bit of sincerity I could muster, "It never really occurred to me that you'd be

upset. Rampage tried to warn me, but I just didn't listen."

"Did he... come here with you?" Glory asked in dread before giving a snotty little sniff.

"No. He had to go home. With Whisper... er... Psychoshy," I said, and Glory blinked at me in confusion. I filled her on what I had learned about Psychoshy, Glory's eyes widening in surprise as I elaborated on the other pegasus's lineage. It turned out that I didn't have quite as much elaboration to do as I thought, as Glory had already picked up most of it from somewhere (Rampage?), but talking about it served as a nice digression from our own problems.

"But... Whisper?" she asked skeptically when I finished.

"Really. Whisper is what Fluttershy and Goldenblood wanted to name Psycho. I saw it in a recording." I gave a little nod, glad that my digression had moved us to safer ground.

Glory finally grinned a little. "Oh Celestia... that's a horrible name for her," she said with a sniff. "Is she happy, though?" Was that a little wistful envy I heard in her voice?

"She's taking a risk. A big one. But I think so. It's a chance for her." I looked up at her and brushed her rainbow mane back.

"Well... good for her..." she muttered.

I sighed, slumping. Enough about the epic failures of Blackjack. "How have your last three days been?" I asked, hoping this would be a safe change in direction. Instead, her lips curled into a frown and she looked away.

"I'm... I don't know..." she said as she looked at her hooves. "Helping P-21 and Scotch was... good for me. I didn't have to think about things at first. But by yesterday..." She grit her teeth and shook her head. "I don't want to whine about it."

"Hey, I can't be the only pony in the Wasteland who gets to complain," I said, giving her a little nudge. "P-21 said you think you're turning into Rainbow Dash?"

Her face twisted in a scowl and she said in a tone of disgust, "It's this... this *body*. If that damned blue weed had turned me into anypony else, I'd be fine. Annoyed, but fine. But there are pictures of Rainbow Dash in every single history textbook teaching us about how she abandoned us and her many crimes against the pegasus race. I didn't come to the surface as a Dashite. I came as a member of the Volunteer Corps. I wanted to help, but as Enclave. Not run out on my people like she did."

She slipped off the bed and began to turn, looking at herself. "But this body is... ugh! I was never an athlete! That was Dusk's thing. She was the one who wanted to pull off a rainboom. I wanted to be a doctor. I studied. The only thing that kept me from getting all fat was that I'd skip meals when hitting the books. But this body!" She grimaced in disgust. "I wake up and I need to... to do a hundred wing pushups! I could only do one before. I want to go for a thirty mile flight! I sit here and feel... twitchy. I planned on shoving you, not throwing you clear across the room." She rubbed her face and shook her head. "Everything about this body says it's not me."

"I can relate," I said as popped out my fingers and wiggled them at her.

She gave a ghost of a smile. "Yeah. I guess I know better how you feel." She rubbed her face

with a wing. "I also... I dunno... I sometimes feel like I'm losing myself. Like I really am turning into Rainbow Dash. Lacunae says it's all in my head, but the Joke changed my body. What if it changed my brain, too?" She shook her head hard and sighed. "It'd be different if I could blame someone for making me this way, but it was a stupid magic plant!" She went silent and her gaze dropped back to the floor. "Do... do you..."

"I wish I'd known you were doing it, but if I had I would have told you not to and you would have done it anyway. 'Cause you'd never let me die if you could prevent it, just like I wouldn't let you die if there was a way for me to save you." I shook my head. "It took a pre-war brain therapy thingy to finally get me to admit how messed up I was. And how much more help and headshrinking I need."

"So sex with him was some sort of therapy?" she asked with an arch of her brow. "That's not how sex therapy is supposed to work, Blackjack."

I sighed and rolled my eyes a little. "For the Wasteland, it worked okay. I stopped wanting to kill males for looking at my hind end. I think I can handle that now." I just wish I'd understood what that would mean for Glory.

"I guess so. A pony could do some great business being a psychologist in the Wasteland." She rubbed her puffy eyes. "So... what happened next? After him?"

"Then we got to Hightower, and..." I shook my head. "It was rough. Three ponies died." Myself included, I didn't add, and I'd thump Rampage and Lacunae if they said otherwise. "We leveled the building." Then I smiled, "But we also helped a pony who needed it. We stopped a scumbag ghoul from betraying the rest of his town. We managed to do what needed to be done. I still feel guilty, though. I feel like everything I've done since I got back was wrong."

"And I still feel mad at you for leaving. I know I said I was okay with it... but really, ten minutes after you left, I wanted to chase after you. But I couldn't leave P-21 and Scotch Tape... so I settled with being angry you left and worried that you weren't coming back. Then that broadcast... oh that stupid broadcast." She groaned and rubbed her face. "Then I couldn't shake the feeling that you had left us... that you left me. And it was Mom going all over again... only worse."

Now I sighed and stretched out towards her, giving her cheek the tiniest nuzzle. "I still love you. Even if I am a lousy pony."

"No, you're not." She sighed and gave a grumpy little huff. "Well, okay. Maybe a little. And I'm still mad at you." Shaking her head, she glared at me. "I mean... Blackjack... part of me wants to hug you, part wants to kill you, and part wants to run for the hills and never look back. You hurt my sister!"

"To be fair, she and the rest of her team were trying to kill me," I said quickly, "and I didn't know it was her at the time." She still frowned, troubled. "I won't blame you if you do any of those. Even if I prefer the first option."

"Oh no. No sweet talking, Blackjack. You are still in big trouble. I'm still really angry at you," she huffed. Still, I smiled at her; Glory -- who'd had her cutie mark burned off both her flanks and barely said three cross words -- was angry.

"Well, you could always just spank me till you feel better and I wise up," I said in a casual, joking tone. Oddly, it made her ears stand straight up and her eyes widen. Then she started to blush... hard.

"What?"

"Nothing!" she said quickly, but she sure wasn't acting like it was nothing. She met my eyes and went even redder. She pressed her hooves to her mouth, as if physically silencing herself. I just looked at her with a cocked brow. She pulled away, walking to one of the windows. "Look... can we just drop it for now? I need to think and... try to decide what I'm going to do." She sighed and looked back at me. "So... what else happened?"

I told her everything, with the exceptions of me dying again and trying to pull myself together yesterday and the Goddess in my brain. From what I learned about Goldenblood to Psalm being in my dreams to Hightower and EC-1101 to Project Eternity to getting fixed up. She listened, a little distracted, but I couldn't blame her for that. She gasped at my description of the Warden, laughed a little when I told her about Xanthe, and commiserated when I told her about Graves's and Snips's deaths.

When I finished, she looked at me, her expression equally worried and curious. "What are you going to do next? I mean, Shadowbolt Tower... I can't think of any way to get there. It's all controlled by the Enclave Military. Or are you going to go after the bomb? Go to that hellhound base? Deal with the Harbingers?"

I thought a moment, then rose and flopped back on the bed. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" She blinked in confusion. "What do you mean, 'nothing'?"

"I mean that some ponies died and I nearly got a whole lot *more* ponies killed by chasing after EC-1101. I don't care where it wants me to go next; it's not worth more deaths. So for the immediate future, I am going to do... nothing." I folded my forelegs behind my head... hmm, metal limbs really didn't make the most comfortable pillows. "I am going to stay here till we work things out. Till P-21 and Scotch Tape are better. Till Rampage can get the help she needs." And then I frowned at the ceiling. "And if the Harbingers show up, I am going to show them exactly what I did at Yellow River." Okay. If dozens of them showed up, I'd have to do something else, but for right now... no. I was going to stay right here and make sure my friends were taken care of.

For a change, it wasn't going to be about me.

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I trotted downstairs, taking in the chaos. Things were quite a mess; I guessed Glory had tried to clean up some while caring for P-21 and Scotch, but it still looked like a hurricane had blown through. There were dirty plates and cans of food all over the kitchen, and some things were stacked in boxes. P-21 and Scotch sat at the kitchen table, with the filly glaring at a sheet of paper while her lips moved the pencil around to draw on it. P-21 looked up at me with a tired smile, glanced up in the direction of my bedroom, then back at me in concern.

"Well?" he asked as he bopped a wad of paper back and forth between his hooves.

"She's upset," I said. "She's not sure about... us..." Scotch harrumphed and spat the pencil aside.

"I told her she should just paddle your butt till you stopped being dumb," the olive filly said as she

looked at her sketch critically. "But Daddy said you'd just enjoy it."

I rolled my eyes. "It happened one time!" I snorted, with a blush. Then I frowned and thought a moment. "Twice... maybe three times... And anyway, I doubt Glory's into that, or that it would make her feel better."

"You'd be surprised," P-21 murmured. "Why, just the thought of smacking you with a belt has gotten me through some rough patches. Belts. Baseball bats. Crowbars. Anything to get the message through," he teased with an easy smile.

"I don't get why it's such a big deal," Scotch muttered as she looked down at her page. "It's sex. You do it for fun. She made it sound like the most important thing ever." I started to clean up, telekinetically gathering the trash up in a single heap before munching on the empty tin cans. Waste not, want not.

"For her it is," P-21 said. "And she has a point. Where sex can lead to kids, you don't want to have family you're not ready to be responsible for. So you keep it special and reserved to ponies you absolutely want to have kids with." He flushed as he looked away. "Being a parent is a serious commitment," he said with a faintly ashamed look on his face.

Scotch Tape looked up at him and then back at her papers. "Ugh... this is stupid! It won't work!" The filly threw the scrolls away with a flip of her hooves. "I don't know nothing about designing stuff. I was just supposed to fix things." Then she started coughing and hacking, reminding me of another pony with difficulty breathing. Hopefully hers wouldn't last as long as his did.

P-21 patted her on the back. He still wasn't very good at the whole comforting thing. "We decide what we're supposed to do for ourselves now. We're not in Stable 99 anymore," he said with a small frown. He looked at me, as if struggling for what he should say next. He was pretty new to this whole daddy thing, and really I couldn't give him much in the way of advice. My own dad had been 'U-8'. Then he reached over and pulled the scrolls back. "Explain it to me again. I know even less about this stuff than you. Show me why it won't work."

Scotch Tape sighed and glared at the paper. "Well, we need water pressure, and for that we need volume and elevation—or the right kinds of pumps, but I don't know where we'd get those—and for that we need pipe but I have no idea where the pipes are buried or where the shutoffs are or anything." She huffed softly. "I can use the storm drain for an outlet... not quite healthy but better than what we have. Besides, any water that flows through the ground is at risk of radiation and taint."

Flim and Flam really hadn't done anypony any favors making all that Flux and selling it far and wide, I thought as I crumpled up the waste paper and stuffed it into a bag before tossing it into the living room fireplace for eventual disposal. Flux, the blood of Discord himself, didn't seem like it broke down. Dilute it or bury it, it just stayed around poisoning and poisoning and poisoning. I thought of Gardens for the first time in a long time and shook my head. Someday... maybe...

Boo bumped my hip, making me jump in surprise, and I saw the stealthy mare had more papers in her mouth. "You trying to help me, Boo?" I asked, hoping for a nod. Instead she smiled and blinked, setting her things down in my forehooves. Three Fancy Buck wrappers, a few pieces of scrap paper, and a rumpled-up pamphlet titled 'Surrogacy and You'. "Where'd you get that?" Boo just blinked back at me. I supposed it must have come from one of Marigold's old crates.

"You'll find a way to get the water pressure you need, Scotch," P-21 said as I turned over the Ministry of Peace's pamphlet. "Maybe... could you put the water in a barrel or something on a tall pole?"

"Maybe," Scotch murmured as she glowered at the page. "But it would be tricky to build. And there wouldn't be much rainwater collection area for it to use; you'd have to spread things out over the town. And that would reduce the rainwater available for drinking..."

"Sometimes you have to make compromises," P-21 replied. She grunted softly.

I pulled open the pamphlet and saw a slightly crumpled Fluttershy smiling back at me. There were pictures of two mares holding hooves, one with a slightly swollen belly bump, and a diagram of mare anatomy. Some of the words had smeared beyond legibility, but I read what I could.

If you are a mare reading this, it is because you are an eligible candidate to receive the unborn foal of a mare unwilling or unable to carry the baby to term. Allow me to thank you personally for your courage in considering this procedure and to offer you a hug of thanks if you have already agreed. There is nothing more precious to the world than healthy and happy life. Allow me to explain the procedure the M.o.P. has developed so that nopony will have to know the pain of a lost child.

Surrogacy is a complex spell process which takes an eligible candidate, prepares her body to carry a foal, and then teleports the baby from one mother to another. As with any tissue transplant, it is vital that the two ponies involved be as closely matched as possible to prevent the recipient's body from rejecting the child. Perhaps you are a mother, sister, or daughter of the recipient? Even more distant relatives are still stronger candidates to carry the child successfully than unrelated ponies, for whom there is almost no possibility of success.

If your body is not already in its fertile cycle, biological magic will be used to give a little nudge and put your body into that state. I know it's uncomfortable, but it's necessary to prevent shock to the baby and you. Once done, the surrogacy spell will magically teleport the unborn baby from the mother to your own womb. The process will involve some discomfort, particularly if the baby is well developed, but your body should adapt.

Please realize that surrogacy is very stressful on the baby, and as such we cannot remove the unborn child a second time. Understand that while you are a surrogate and may get attached to your infant, the legal rights remain--

The rest of the brochure was too obscured for me to read. I frowned as I looked from it to P-21 and Scotch Tape working at the table. Fluttershy had said that Marigold had been an ideal candidate for the spell. And hadn't she been Twilight's cousin? But... no. That wasn't possible. I hadn't been able to open the door in Tenpony. I'd failed the test.

So... why did I suddenly feel uncomfortable?

I sighed and added the pamphlet to the rest of the trash in the fireplace. It wasn't like I had Marigold's entire genetic history with me. Maybe she'd been Rarity's cousin twice removed? Or had some Apple in her? Who knew for sure? It could all be one big coincidence.

"Hey, P-21. There were a whole bunch of boxes in Marigold's room. Where did they get put?" I asked with a little frown.

"In the basement, closest to the stairs," my blue friend said as he sat beside his daughter, waving a hoof towards the kitchen and a nondescript wooden door in the corner. Whoa... we had a basement? I trotted over to the basement door and looked down the stairs dropping into the earth. Somepony had carved them from solid rock, and the broad steps curved around to my left. I pressed the light switch, and the bulbs overhead flickered to life. I trotted carefully downwards, feeling a strange sense of déjà vu.

Clearly, we weren't the first to put things down here. The amount of stuff crammed in the deep, narrow space astonished me. Old furniture half covered up by sheets. Boxes with bags of ancient clothing. Pieces of worn, manually-driven kitchen equipment. It was one thing to think of Star House being around since the war, but as I looked deeper into the space, I had to wonder just how long ago it'd been built. Even the walls of the basement were decorated with stars and moons.

I checked the boxes closest to the door and discovered lots of the contents were books of all sorts. Most were books on astronomy, astrology, mythology, and pony history. There had to be a few hundred books just boxed up here. I saw a note on the top of one pile, written in Twilight's familiar script.

Dear Marigold,

Please hold on to these copies from the Hoofington Library. I know that Image is supposed to screen all books for inappropriate material, but I just can't stand to think of any of them being 'sanitized'. I don't know what Rarity is thinking some days. She's grown so cold and distant. I don't know if I should talk to her, my friends, or Celestia, or Luna, or... ugh... Goldenblood about it. I just don't know. I want to talk to... somepony. I don't know who, but I want to so terribly. What's happening to all my friends? What's happening to me? What's happening to us all?

I'm sorry that things didn't work out with you and the space program. We're still going to launch rockets to learn more about the moon, stars, and Equestria... until they turn those into weapons too. I think you did a really brave thing keeping your baby. I want you to know that no matter what happens, I'm going to see to it that you and your baby receive the care you deserve. I'm glad you're in grand auntie's cottage. She was always a little nutty, but she loved that house.

Please take care of yourself and your baby. I'll try and make her next birthday. Celestia knows, I feel like I need something to celebrate.

Love,

Twilight Sparkle.

PS: Did you know Cadance had another foal? Everypony's having babies except me and my friends! I'm getting a little jealous!

I looked at the signature: precise and elegant with swooping cursive letters. The script showed all the care of someone who loved the written word. Twilight had wanted a child. She'd been a Ministry Mare, but while all her devotion was focused on Ministry, there was no denying she been a mare too. She'd been together with Big Mac, but... had Goldenblood removed him from her memory? Had this been written before or after Gardens had been completed?

I could have screamed in frustration! Instead, I folded the letter and put it back. I wasn't going to let it get me mad. Nope. Not going to pay any attention to nagging questions.

Especially when it came to my own lineage.

After dying, again, and what I'd experienced in Happyhorn, I put the shame I felt welling up in me on trial. What would it matter if Twilight were my ancestor? Okay, I wasn't nearly as smart as she was, but Twilight hadn't been perfect either. Not after what I'd seen in Hippocratic Research. She might have been the most accomplished magic user of all time, but she was still a mare. She made mistakes. Back in Tenpony, I'd craved normalcy and resented the transformation Glory had put me through. Now I was a twice-resurrected cyberpony with a goddess in my head. All I needed were wings, and I'd be a cyber zombie alicorn! Ministry Mare decendancy would be a step towards normal!

No. Glory forgiving me would be a step towards normal...

Sweet Celestia, Blackjack, when you screw up you really screw up.

"Dealer," I said softly as Boo flopped into a half-empty box. I looked around the dim space. "I dunno if you can hear me, but... I'd like to talk, if we could." The pale blank sat up with a crinkly astronomy magazine atop her head like a hat. Nothing. I wanted to feel... something. A tension or tightening in my chest. A closing of my throat. Instead, all within me was calm and regulated. "I don't know what to do about Glory. How do I make it up to her? How can I make it right?"

I knelt beside the box and gently lifted the magazine from atop Boo's mane. She blinked up at me with her pale, colorless eyes from within the nest of old papers.

My butt hit the floor as my eyes looked up at the stars carved in the ceiling, shedding the only expression of remorse I had left. "I don't know what I'm doing any more. I don't even know about following EC-1101. I nearly killed her sister and betrayed her trust. How can things ever be right between us?" Boo looked at me in bafflement, then stretched towards me, and suddenly the box overturned, spilling the magazines and papers all over the place. I caught her before she hurt herself, smiling despite the worry churning inside me.

Boo gave a smile back, and then I spotted something in the corner of the box. A faint glow...

I extracted the memory orb from the heaps of fliers from the Luna Space Center. The faded papers showed finned rockets blasting off from beside a large slab-sided black building sporting a crescent moon decoration. Marigold's memory? I could use a little vacation.

Old habits die hard. At least right now I wasn't anywhere I'd get somepony killed. I tapped the orb to my horn, closing my eyes and hoping I wasn't going to have a memory of my great grandmother ten times removed getting laid. I really didn't need that right--

oooOOOooo

Okay, not Marigold having sex. The unicorn stood at a window looking out at the rockets that sat on their launch pads. Only one was being worked on by a crew as they attached hoses and booster rockets. Twelve more just stood there like abandoned toys. Far off, I could make out the long, ugly block-shaped buildings of what I assumed was a military base of some kind. Since I couldn't see the Core, I really had no way to orient myself.

The unicorn stood in some sort of waiting room. Through the doors were a number of raised voices. I heard Twilight Sparkle for sure, and once or twice I thought I could hear Princess Luna. Their exact words were muddled, but the tone was hardly good. Then Glory's reflection focused in the glass before Marigold... no, not Glory. Rainbow Dash.

The cyan pegasus appeared a bit older than Glory, and the tips of her mane had started turning a lighter shade of each rainbow color. There were crow's feet in the corners of her eyes. She was tough, but tired. "Hey. Don't worry about it. I'm sure they'll restart the program." As she waved her hoof dismissively, I saw a sleek black Delta PipBuck attached to her left forehoof.

"I wish I had your confidence," Marigold murmured softly as she looked back at the rocket. "Only one launch a month, if at all. This place was supposed to have ten times that. It was supposed to be a way towards a new future. Now it's just a target for the zebras."

Rainbow Dash sighed and said ruefully, "Yeah, the stripes really do like taking shots at this place. Don't worry, though. They'd have to hit this place a lot harder than they have to get through my air defense team." The pegasus gave a little grin. "It's the Hoofington defense all over again, only instead of them wasting their time and weapons on the city, they waste them shooting at this place."

"Wonderful," Marigold said lightly. "I'd be fine with that if we actually had a space program somewhere else. Anywhere!" Marigold said with an aggravated snort. "If it weren't for the O.I.A. sending up occasional missiles, they'd probably just let the zebras level this place." She sighed and bowed her head. "I don't even know why Twilight asked me to come. They haven't called me in for questions or anything."

"Because you're the only pony who's ever walked on the moon... well, except for Luna. Even I haven't done that," Rainbow Dash said, giving my flank a nudge. "Relax. All the ministries want the space program resumed. Only the pencil pushers keep whining about costs." Then Rainbow Dash frowned a little. "Okay. So maybe Rarity and Pinkie Pie just want those Eye-Spy satellite things in orbit. It's still a reason to go up there, right?"

"Ooooh, is somepony talking about me?" squealed an enthusiastic voice as Pinkie Pie appeared from... actually, I wasn't sure where she came from. The pink mare was, like her friend, definitely showing signs of wear and tear. She threw her forelegs around Rainbow Dash and hugged. "Isn't this just great! And soon we're going to be meeting Rarity and Applejack and Spikey Wikey! It's just like old times!" But from the strain in Pinkie's grin and the sickly look on Rainbow Dash's face, this was anything but like old times.

Rainbow Dash mustered an honest smile as she extracted herself from Pinkie Pie's embrace. "Yeah. I can't wait to show you what Rarity's been cooking up for me. It's going to be so awesome!"

"Cooking?! Aw, Dashie. If you needed cooking done you should have talked to me." The pink mare adopted a hurt little pout. "It's been so long since we've been together. I really need to show you some of my latest little surprises. Angel's been helping me with them!"

Looking a little wary, the cyan pegasus leaned away from the pink mare. "Yeah, I keep wanting to see you, but between the fighting, my own projects, and Goldenblood's scheduling, I never get a--" Rainbow Dash was cut off as Pinkie Pie scowled and looked away. The change was so abrupt that it was frightening.

Then, almost as quickly, it disappeared, and the pink mare smiled at Marigold. "Hey, excuse us for a teenie weenie second, will you?" And coiling her poofy tail around Rainbow's throat, Pinkie Pie all but dragged her from the room.

Marigold sighed and looked towards the closed doors and the continued shouting behind them. She stood there for several more minutes as a familiar pressure built in her bladder. Finally, she turned and left the room, trotting down the hall. The massive building was surprisingly tight inside and reminded me of Hoofington Memorial with its dim halls and almost empty rooms. Marigold found a bathroom and did her business.

Then, as she started back, she heard Rainbow Dash blurt, "Pinkie Pie, that's crazy! There's no way in heck that Goldenblood is a traitor!"

Marigold froze in place, then backed towards a door that was open a crack. The office had been stripped of all its former accouterments save the large desk and terminal. Pinkie Pie was typing at it, the green glow of the monitor giving her eyes an almost possessed look. "It's the only explanation, Dashie. Look, somepony is passing tippy-top secret information to the enemy. The megaspells could have only been leaked by somepony with Ministry Mare-level clearance. So either Luna gave the zebras megaspells to make things more challenging, or Goldenblood did."

"Look, Pinkie, I know you don't like Goldenblood, but you can't just accuse--" Rainbow Dash began before getting an angry glare from her friend.

"I remember MMMM, thank you!" Pinkie Pie said as she typed some more. "Look Dashie, Goldenblood is up to no good. I've tracked dozens of little schemes linked to him. He's been getting money from fancy pants ponies all across Equestria. I've got evidence that Hippocratic Research is just a front for the O.I.A. They had basic weaponized megaspells before Luna gave the orders to Twilight to start working on them! There's evidence the O.I.A. is meddling with Stable-Tec and dozens of other businesses. And there's all these other secret projects that might be in the zebras' hooves. This is more than just my Pinkie Sense. He's guilty!"

Rainbow Dash frowned as she looked at the terminal screen. "Okay."

"And I don't care what Twilight says--" Pinkie Pie blinked, then blurted, "You believe me?"

"Let's just say it's worth looking into," Rainbow Dash countered with a wan smile. Pinkie gave a little squeal and threw her hooves around Rainbow Dash's neck in a fierce embrace. The relief Pinkie Pie showed was more than mere gratitude. Rainbow Dash sighed and gently pushed her away before

continuing. "Let's say you're right and Goldenblood really is a traitor. None of this is actual proof! We need somepony to gather evidence that the O.I.A. is passing secrets to the enemy or working behind Luna's back. Something that Princess Luna can't ignore. Maybe I can talk to Sapphire, my liaison."

Pinkie Pie snorted, "If she's anything like Quartz, she's his. I haven't met a single pony who works for the O.I.A. who wasn't more loyal to him than to the Princess." She rubbed her chin. "What we need is somepony who the O.I.A. could use."

Rainbow blinked and then slowly grinned, "Not some pony. Some zebra!"

The pair looked at each other and said in unison, "Zecora!"

Wait... who?

"Dashie, you're a genius! If we can get Goldenblood to think he can use her, then we can nail him!" Pinkie Pie hopped on the ends of her hooves as she bounced around her embarrassed cyan friend. She sat and rubbed her chin. "We'll have to meet with her and work out the specifics. Train her... Maybe we can find some way to 'disgrace' her. He loves using people who've been hurt in some way."

"And once she's in the O.I.A., she can look for anything out of the ordinary. Beyond Goldenblood, I mean," Rainbow Dash amended, cutting Pinkie Pie off before she could retort. The pegasus put her hooves on Pinkie's shoulders to placate her. "I agree there is something really rotten in the O.I.A. If it's Goldenblood... well, Luna won't be happy. If it's something else, he needs to be slammed for letting it pass under his nose."

"Thanks, Dashie," Pinkie Pie said in relief, rubbing her eyes. "When I decided to start stopping bad ponies, I didn't know just how bad some of them could be."

"Don't worry about it," the pegasus said, and then her PipBuck beeped sharply. She frowned and looked away. "Yes? Yes. You know I am." Her frown deepened and then she slumped. "Okay. I want three intercept teams in the air, now. I'm en route." She looked over at Pinkie and gave an apologetic little smile. "Sorry, Pinkie. Looks like the zebras want to play. I'll see you in Manehattan." She paused and put a hoof on Pinkie Pie's shoulder. "Please... try to get along with Twilight."

Pinkie gasped and swelled, gritted her teeth, and slowly swallowed her rage. "I'll... try... She just can't accept she's not the only smarty smart pants. She just can't accept that she might actually be wrong."

"Yeah, well, that's Twilight for you." Rainbow glanced at her PipBuck. "Anyway. We can work out the details at your hub after the meeting with Rarity. Gotta fly."

"Yes you do, Dashie," Pinkie said with a small, sad little smile.

The pegasus unlatched a window and pushed the thick glass open with a hoof, then looked back with her own small smile. "Yeah. I do. 'Cause it will be so awesome." And with that she flew out into the air. Pinkie pushed the window shut with a tired, frayed little smile. Then she paused, her ears flopping back and forth. A second later she sniffled and wrinkled her nose. Finally she hopped twice.

Then she snapped around and looked right at me. Her bright blue eyes flattened as she stared into Marigold's. "Uh oh! Somepony's been baaaaaad!" she said as her lips curled in a grin that spread

wider and wider as she advanced. "Didn't anypony teach you it's naughty to spy on other ponies?" Marigold turned and ran for her life, heart hammering!

"I just have to find somepony!" she gasped to herself as she ran down the empty halls and past the offices. She stopped at a T and looked left and right, glancing behind herself before darting down to the right. Pinkie Pie wasn't running after her, though. She simply bounced along behind on her four hooves. She didn't seem to cover all that much ground. But every time Marigold looked back, the grinning pink mare grew closer and closer.

Marigold burst through an access door into a work area. All the terminals were dark, the desks scattered with abandoned litter and dust. She raced across the room, not daring to glance behind herself any more. Then there was a flash of pink mane in the doorway ahead of her! Marigold dove to the side, racing along towards another exit. A silhouette of a signature poofy mane appeared in the frosted glass window pane. Marigold ducked beneath a workstation and spotted a few empty glass orbs.

"Wheeeeere's Pinkie Pie?" the mare called out as the unicorn lifted an orb to her horn. "Wheeeeere's Pinkie Pie?" the mare called again, her voice echoing in the cavernous space as Marigold's horn flashed. Then... nothing. The orb began to glow with swirling light as she filled it with her memory. "Wheeeeere's Pinkie Pie?" the voice sounded out again, now growing more distant. The mare relaxed a moment, breathing a sigh of relief.

Then two hooves wrapped around Marigold and yanked tight as the mare shrieked, "Here I am!" And then everything fell into darkness once more.

oooOOOooo

I shook my head hard as the memory orb ended. I wondered if Pinkie had extracted the memory from Marigold, or if Marigold had gotten the memory out and somehow it'd gotten into the box down here. I sat down and rubbed my temples with my cool metal hooves. Pinkie Pie had suspected Goldenblood; it gave my sense of right and wrong a little corrective lurch. He'd seemed so slick and manipulative... well, really, how could anypony pull off what he had without somepony catching him?

Who was the zebra they'd mentioned, though? Zecora? It sounded like a zebraish name, sure enough. I wished I had somepony I could ask who... then I blinked and laughed softly. Not somepony...

I opened the little panel on my leg and began to type. Then I leaned back against a worn box and said, "Tin Pony to Watcher. Come in, Watcher. Over."

There was no response for several seconds. Almost a minute. Then Watcher's synthetic voice crackled from my PipBuck. "Tin Pony, go into your broadcast menu, look for a little tab marked 'encryption', and switch it on." Funny how much annoyance one could get into that artificial voice. I did as he said, and a second later, "Thanks, Blackjack. Unlike someone I know, I'd rather not transmit to every receiver in Equestria."

"Oh, come on, it's not that bad," I said with a roll of my eyes.

"Champion in bed," Watcher said at once, making me flush.

"Okay, so maybe it was that bad," I muttered.

"Just a little," Watcher said, then asked, "Let me guess, Glory's not taking it so well?"

"Pretty much," I said with a sigh. "I really screwed things up."

"Oh, I doubt you're doing worse than LittlePip. Why don't you catch me up to speed with what's been happening with you? It's been a while since we last talked. Glory was getting stuff to help you?"

I settled back and sighed. "Okay. You'll probably want to get some paper for notes though." I took a deep breath. "So... it all started with the first time I died..."

* * *

"And then she threw me across the room and into the wall. Now she's not sure and I don't know what to do and everything's nuts," I finished, sighing. My cheeks were all wet from the few times I'd broken down. He'd been a very attentive listener, not interrupting and letting me get everything out. The only time he'd stopped me was when I'd thanked him for his help in Goldenblood's, asking me to elaborate on any other times I'd gotten messages from him. He hadn't said anything besides 'checking something out', so I simply continued to the very end.

The dragon seemed to think that I'd finished. "Wow..." Watcher murmured softly. "And I thought LittlePip had it bad."

I sighed, trying to think of how to add the one part I had omitted in my tale: my new connection to the Goddess. Somehow, I couldn't just spit it out. It shouldn't have been too hard, but I just couldn't speak the words. At his comment about LittlePip though, I dropped it. He didn't need to hear any more of my whining. Really, I was starting to respect her even more than the Stable Dweller. "Eh, she probably has it worse," I said with a chuckle. "How's she doing, anyway?" I remembered what Homage had shown me. "Is she... um... okay?"

He seemed to guess my line of thought. "I still think she's fighting the good fight. Arbu was ugly, though. Turned out to be a whole town of cannibals. Willing, intentional cannibals, not your virus variety." That gave me the shudders. Raiders eating ponies because they were diseased was one thing. But choosing to eat others? "As for right now, I don't know. She's probably outside Canterlot. I'm trying to get some eyes to shadow her, but the last bot I found near their location got eaten by a radigator. If my guess is right, though, she's probably somewhere around the zebra settlement of Glyphmark."

Zebras! I'd almost forgotten. "Spike, who was Zecora?"

"Zecora? How'd you... never mind. I swear, lately it seems like every third band of ragtag misfits is stumbling over all kinds of things forgotten over the last two centuries." The synthetic voice sighed. "Zecora was a friend of Twilight and the old pony gang. She lived in the Everfree Forest and was a bit of a loner till Twilight and the others got her accepted in Ponyville. During the war, though... well... she was arrested for being a spy and traitor. Twilight went all the way to Princess Luna to get her released, but before she could she was rescued by zebra sympathizers."

"Did she ever work for the O.I.A.?" I asked as I looked around, wondering where Boo had gotten to.

"I don't think so. I know Goldenblood talked to her once about being a liaison with the zebras early on. One of his 'back channels'. I have no idea if she accepted or not. After she escaped from

custody, she disappeared from sight. Then one night, a few months later, she got caught breaking into a high-security area of the M.W.T. Nearly killed a guard before she was intercepted and killed by Applejack's colt friend. Applejack never really forgave him," Watcher said with a sigh. "That was just a short while before everything went... well... really bad."

So, maybe Zecora had been freed by the O.I.A. and found something incriminating, or maybe something else had gotten him in trouble with Luna. "How are you doing? Anything else interesting happening in Equestria?"

"You have no idea, Blackjack. Everything out west is so tense that it feels like it's going to snap any second. Raider camps are being hit hard, like Steel Ranger hard but minus the Rangers. There's somepony with some pretty scary skill cutting us off from the broadcast towers. Red Eye's recruiting everypony with a gun and a willingness to die for his cause. The Steel Rangers are in a full civil war. Even the alicorns have been pulling back closer to Maripony."

Suddenly I felt the Goddess begin to press on the inside of my mind. I might not have been a real alicorn, but I had the connection to Unity, and she was trying to take over as hard as she could. I gritted my teeth and gulped, fighting the connection. To no avail. Against my will, I choked out the question, "Do you know if LittlePip is planning anything against the Goddess?" Each word spilled from my lips and I twitched and jerked as I fought against my own body to cut the connection. Push the button Blackjack! Just push... the... button...

"Well, you know LittlePip. I'm sure she's got something planned. Maybe she's going to try to blackmail the Goddess into attacking Red Eye. Or maybe she's got something else in mind. I know she was trying to set something up with Gawd."

Who? It didn't matter. The name set off more and more murmurs of speculation in my mind as the pressure in my skull grew. I felt the Goddess twisting my will and wits as the souls of Unity began to whisper to each other in excitement. The Goddess was speculating what it could be. The Goddess was crawling through my mind, looking for any hint of what I knew about what LittlePip might be up to. My memories of my time with her were little more than an inebriated blur. "Well... if you find anything out... let me know..."

"Sure. Good luck, Blackjack. I'll let you know as soon as I can." I struggled to warn him, but I was helpless. No matter how hard I fought to keep it *open* now, I couldn't stop myself from severing the connection.

As soon as it was broken I grabbed a shelf and smacked my head hard against the metal beam. "Get! Out!" I yelled, trying to think of how to reconnect with him. But I stared at the screen and was struck with the horrifying realization that the knowledge of how to connect to Spike's cave was lost. Was there a button to push, or... what had I done? I remembered the conversation, but how to get in touch again? I wanted to shake as tears ran down my cheeks. "How... Lacunae said you couldn't control me because of the Enervation."

The Goddess laughed softly, cruelly. It was infinitely more intimate and terrifying than the bold shouts and third person references. "Oh, this isn't control. Not yet. This is just finding ways to push through the interference. I'll chip off a little bit here and a little bit there till eventually, there won't be much difference between you and a normal vessel."

Had Lacunae lied, or had the Goddess forced her to deceive me? I wouldn't give the Goddess

the satisfaction of even contemplating the other. I wrestled with her as I tried to get her out, but it was like pushing against a wave of mud. No matter how I mentally shoved, she was getting in. There wasn't a lot of Enervation around Chapel, and the Goddess seemed to be taking the opportunity to creep in as deep as she could, searching for memories and thoughts.

And secrets. Secrets that I couldn't dare let her know about. If she knew about... no, don't think of it. But I was! I couldn't not. I thought about the necklaces and the crown thingy and the maneframe and... no! I could feel her searching. Hunting. Trying to find what I tried so hard to bury in my mind. Don't think about it! Don't!

But I did. I bashed my head against the floor again and again, trying to knock myself out. My augmented body resisted. Worse, it was healing the trauma to my head! If I was going to prevent her from knowing everything, I'd have to remove it the only sure way I knew how. I struggled to levitate out the pistol, feeling tears run down my cheek. My aim struggled. I had to keep her from knowing. I had to... I'm sorry Glory, but if she found out about...

"Gardens of Equestria?" the Goddess purred in my ear, the gun falling from my magical grasp. "Yes. I know about it. That interesting thought on Flux and Spike and there it is. A little treasure just lying there to be seen. *She's* beside herself, at the moment, but once my business with the other annoyance is done and Red Eye put in his place, I think I'll have to reunite Twilight with her assistant."

I stared out into empty space, feeling defiled. The Goddess just laughed in glee as the horror crept through me. "I don't know how. I don't know when. But somepony is going to kill you very soon," I whispered aloud, sounding like a prayer.

The laughter stopped, but the Goddess still chortled in her amusement. "Oh, really? I assume you're referring to LittlePip? Yes, I'm sure she'll try something heroic at the most inopportune moment. You don't know what, but you have guesses: sneaking something into the base. Unknown allies. Using Rarity's zebra magic... might have to kill her just to be safe before she gets here. Maybe... by you." There was a yank and for an instant I was filled with an overwhelming urge to kill LittlePip, but I barely fought it off, focusing on killing the Goddess instead. It seemed to work a little. "If you could contact her, you'd suggest using those silver rings against me. We'll just take that." And with another yank, I felt something go. Something about rings and unity.

Sweet Celestia, shoot me... please...

"Oh no, Blackjack. No killing yourself. No telling anypony either. Neither you nor that garbage bin you call a friend," the Goddess hissed softly in her malice. "No pony has ever insulted me the way you have. No pony would dare. Well, now you're mine. I'm going to tear off itty bitty little pieces of you till there's nothing left but a shell. Then I'll have that garbage bin bring you back for a real transformation to a proper shape. And I'll make sure that all the Wasteland sees what I'm going to turn you into, so none ever dare to challenge me again."

I didn't think of anything except that prayer over and over again. Boo came over and butted my shoulder repeatedly before curling up beside me. All I could do was think and wait for the Goddess to turn her attention elsewhere.

Somepony... anypony... help me...

* * *

I spent the better part of an hour sitting there in the basement, fighting against a Goddess who for all I knew had moved on to bigger and better things. Boo snoozed beside me, bored, before the blank had finally had enough and started butting me towards the stairs. I'd fought giant monster ghouls and other creatures, but I was helpless against a little white pony who stubbornly bumped me to my hooves and then up the stairs. Once I started moving, I could keep going.

I just couldn't stop... but I could run in place till my friends were ready to go. I kept trying to think of ways to tell my friends what had happened to me, to let Spike know I couldn't be trusted. But I couldn't. Something inside my brain had been tweaked. No, I wasn't a puppet yet, but the Goddess was tying strings to me all the same. P-21 and Scotch Tape were both gone. Off doing her project, I supposed.

In the living room I returned to going about the simple motions of cleaning and did everything I could to not think about it. Not the Goddess, not Glory, not EC-1101, not zebra balefire bombs... nothing. I cleaned up like I'd never cleaned before; Mom would have been shocked and amazed. Boo went right to the cupboard; I couldn't find any snack cakes, but I did come across some Sugar Apple Bombs cereal. I filled a bowl for her, then sucked on a ruby as I worked.

Mom. I never really appreciated her as head of security. Had she felt the same way, burdened down by so many things she couldn't control in 99? The Overmare, Rivets, her duties, and me... How had she managed? Had she felt the same see-sawing sensation inside her that lurched from depression to panic and back to depression? I soaked a washrag in the sink and began to scrub the counters, looking at the white stars on the counter tops and smiling a little. Crying a little too.

"Blackjack?" Glory said softly behind me. I didn't face her. I couldn't. I just hung my head a little. The stuff I could speak about, I couldn't bring myself to say, and the stuff I needed to warn her about, I couldn't speak. So I cried and moved the rag in slow little circles like I was determined to get that one tile spotless because it was better than anything else I could do.

"What are you doing, Blackjack?" she asked from beside me. I glanced at her bloodshot eyes; their lids were swollen from crying.

"Cleaning," I said lamely as I looked away.

She reached down and stopped my hoof with her own. I saw then that I'd washed a perfectly round circle in the tile while missing the rest of the mess. "Let me help you," she said simply, then tied her rag over her rainbow mane and starting to clean as well. We didn't talk. I could barely breathe. Together, we straightened up every little thing there was to fix... except each other.

I wanted to talk, but I didn't. I wanted to tell her what I'd just done, but I couldn't. I wanted her to end me, but she wouldn't. And so finally I struck a match from an old matchbox and lit the papers in the fireplace.

Then her hooves reached around me. For a moment I tensed, ready for another throw. But it didn't come... part of me wished it would. I hung my head and said in a wet little filly's voice, "I'm not going to run. I'm not. I'm not..."

That was as much as I could get out, but it was enough as she held me and I fell apart again in her embrace. "Shhh... I know... I know..." I might have gone through hell itself, but that didn't mean I

was beyond needing a simple, sincere hug.

* * *

Side by side we walked together back towards Chapel. I didn't ask why she'd come back to me. I wasn't even sure if she forgave me for what I'd done. All that mattered was that we were together, even if I was the last person in Equestria anypony should possibly be with. The afternoon weather was the Hoof's trademark drizzle. We trotted through the rain towards the budding town below, and I filled Glory in on what had happened to Rampage. Glory'd covered up in a blanket to obscure her famous appearance, and pretty soon she resembled a drowned ghost. Boo folded her ears as she trotted behind us, the pale blank annoyed by the rain dripping inside them.

"So, does this mean that P-21 is it now?" Glory asked as the wet grass clung to her in passing.

"It?"

"Is he the one with the fewest unresolved psychological issues? The one that we go to for help?" she asked with a wan smile. "Please say yes. I'd really like somepony else to be mommy for a while." And though she said it as if joking, I could pick up the sincere tension in her voice.

I rubbed my chin. "I don't know. I always thought of Lacunae as the shoulder to sob on," I said wearily as we walked through the rain. "P-21 still needs to get his strength back. Then we can lean on him some more." I glanced at her and gritted my teeth a moment before daring to ask, "What about... us?"

Glory pulled her wet sheet over her face so all I could see was her cyan muzzle. "I don't know, Blackjack. I know you need all the friends you can get. I know what you're doing is important. I just don't know if... if I can be okay with it." She glanced at me. "Was Stable 99 *really*..."

I shrugged. "I lived there my whole life, so I have no idea. Ponies not having sex except with one... and only one... partner just seems... well... stupid." I winced as I saw her frown. "Not that it is. Just, that's how it seems. I mean, don't you ever look at a mare and want to do stuff with her?"

Glory bit her lower lip a moment, then said softly, "Maybe. There was Caprice..."

"There was?" I blinked in surprise, and she looked at me, the raindrops running along the edge of the fabric as she smiled a little. "I thought you hated her."

"I envied her, Blackjack. There's a difference." She sighed and went on, "I have to admit... she is pretty cute. And the way you and her just... did it. Had fun even when you were total strangers... well, I was a little bit jealous. The Enclave is very strict on heterosexual relationships and reproduction. You just... don't... do that. What you two did." She groaned a little. "Ugh, I can't even say it!"

"You don't have to," I replied, smiling a little.

She stomped her hoof in the wet grass. "You don't understand. I want to. That's what drives me nuts. My sister could just 'do it'. You and Caprice could. So why do I get all hung up on what I want? Why can't I just... ugh..." She slumped. "Just forget about it."

I reached over and patted her shoulder. "What do you want, Glory?"

She frowned as she pulled the sheet off her face and looked away, chewing on her bottom lip. Finally she sighed and said, "Just a thousand different things, and half of them contradict. Mostly, I want to feel like I'm in charge of things. Like what I want matters. Like... I want to be more like Dusk. Confident I can actually do things. That I matter."

"You matter. You matter the world to me," I told her frankly.

"I know. And I know you mean that," Glory said with a sad smile. "I just don't know if I can stand mattering to you and being your very special somepony at the same time." And with that she pulled the sheet back over her head. Then she sighed and said, in a more annoyed tone, "You know, it's times like this I can understand surface ponies' annoyance with keeping the skies covered."

As if sensing her ire, the heavens replied. Soon it was pouring such buckets that we nearly stumbled into Chapel's minefield. We made the detour to the right trying to find our way to the road. We passed the ruined church, and I paused as I looked down the road toward the bridge. I saw a lone pale pony standing in the rain, staring at the swollen, churning river.

"Rampage?" Glory called out.

Slowly, we approached Rampage, the striped earth pony standing as still as a blank. She'd stashed her armor somewhere. Her pale pink eyes looked longingly into the foaming brown water. "It really hurts, you know," Rampage said as she looked down. "Dying, I mean. Blackjack knows. Drowning's not that bad. I once tied half a skywagon to me and jumped off the Hoofington Bridge over by the arena. Spent two whole years down there. Really boring. Then a river serpent gobbled me up and shat me out. I think you can relate, can't you, Blackjack?"

"Yeah," I said as I joined her at the rail. "Did it make you feel better?"

"No," she answered in a low hollow voice I could barely hear over the churning water and hissing rain. "Down there, you just feel... trapped. Then bored. You want to live, but you can't. Time gets funny. I know it was two years from ponies asking where I'd disappeared to, but it felt somewhere between a few days and a thousand years. Sometimes both." She looked over at me. "I really wish that you'd used that super gun on me, Blackjack. Before I found out about Eternity."

"You're a real pony, Rampage," Glory said as she moved beside her on her other side.

"No," she said as she stepped away and pointed her hoofclaw at the pegasus. "You're a real pony, Glory. And so're Blackjack, P-21, and Scotch Tape. You had lives. Family that loved you. Childhoods. You were actually *people*!"

She started to pace. "I don't know if my childhood was growing up as a filly in Ponyville with a crush on Apple Bloom, living as a zebra tribal near Shattered Hoof Ridge, being beaten by my mother in a filthy apartment in Manehattan, or growing up on a military base with a mare who always had better things to do than be my mother! I'm pretty sure now the answer is really 'none of the above'! I have more in common with Boo than any of you!" Her shouts made Boo flinch back and hide behind me.

"Yeah. It sucks," I said as I moved in front of her. "Welcome to Hoofington! Glory's lost her family and her own body. P-21 went through shit. Scotch Tape lost her home. I get it. But we're still your friends, so what does it matter?"

"Because I'm not real!" she yelled back at me. "You at least went through things that made you what you are, Blackjack. You caused some of it... chose some of it... and got dealt some of it." She gritted her teeth and pressed her hooves to her head. "I'm losing my fucking mind here, Blackjack. I want... I've got a dozen different things I want to do, and I have no idea which one is me! Or if any of them are me.

"And I just want it to stop!" she yelled as she tore away and ran as fast as she could down the bridge towards the Core. I cursed, turning to try and catch her. I reached out with my mouth, bit hard on her tail, and was dragged further along behind her. My four metal hooves scraped grooves in the cracked asphalt as the razorwire softened between my teeth.

"Blackjack!" Glory cried as she darted around and tackled me from the side mere seconds before Rampage crossed the 'Mercy' painted across the bridge. The beam flashed once and instantly transformed her into a glowing red statue of herself before she collapsed in a heap. Glory lay atop me in the rain, panting as the downpour washed away the muddy gray ashes. Then the talisman flashed, and Rampage's body rebuilt itself into that of a filly. Her skin hadn't even fully reformed before she started crawling towards the Core. The beam atop the city gate flashed again, and again she collapsed into a smaller heap.

"Stop!" I shouted as she reformed a third time, crawling on her regenerating limbs, her unset flesh sticking and stretching with each step. My magic seized her and pulled her into my grasp like a half-born filly. She thrashed against my embrace as the rain hissed all around me. Finally her striped hide formed and she shook in my grasp, crying and screaming as she struggled to find annihilation. "Please. Rampage."

I did the only thing I could think of; I held her in my hooves and began to rock. Glory sat beside me, humming softly in the rain as Rampage slowly stilled. She broke down in terrible, heartbroken little sobs as she curled against me and let out some of the pain.

Slowly, eventually, she stopped thrashing. She curled up in my arms and pressed her face to my chest. I smiled softly and stroked her mane as the three of us sat together in the rain. I couldn't do anything for myself or Glory, but I would do something for her. Something.

* * *

"So, let me get this straight, Blackjack. You want me to go into the memories of a pony bound in a soul talisman, extract them, and put them into the recollector so that Rampage can discover she is more than the product of the talisman?" Lacunae asked as we all sat on the porch of Sekashi's house. The rain had put a damper on the frantic construction, but now the sewage ditch was overflowing and vomiting its contents all over the road while the hasty additions swayed and groaned ominously in the rain. Some of the fillies and colts were still trying to get them nailed down... tied down... or whatever they were trying to do.

"That's about it," I told the alicorn, who had found another black dress to hide her wings. I didn't ask where, but I assumed Charity had been involved. Thus dressed, she avoided most of the angry looks from the workponies. I supposed when your race is viewed as monsters all across Equestria, it was inevitable that you would get some hard glances by people from elsewhere in the Wasteland. "I want you to find a memory or something that's from a pony that's not shoved in that talisman."

Lacunae knelt, closing her eyes as if in meditation. "There is a problem with your plan, Blackjack.

I can't extract memories."

I blinked, frowning a little. "Excuse me?"

"I cannot perform the telepathic magic your plan requires. I am sorry. The Goddess refuses to grant me such abilities." Out of spite, I guessed. Rampage and Majina were in the house, where the little zebra talked a mile a minute. It seemed to be working; Rampage had gone from sulking and depressed to looking baffled as she tried to follow a tale involving a mouse, three Fancy Buck Cakes, and a carton of milk. While I knew the Angel was inside the small red striped filly, I hoped she couldn't do anything severe to the zebra filly before we could separate them. "I'm sorry, Blackjack."

I frowned and Glory patted my shoulder. "At least you thought of something." Two workers walked by next to the ditch, and she pulled the sheet further over her features, but they were more focused on getting out of the rain.

"No," I said firmly as I stood up. "It's time I gave back to her. She's been following me for weeks; she's suffered for me, and the only help she wants I can't give her." There was just the question of how. "Remember in the Collegiate when I went into your mind to find you?" I asked as I pointed a hoof at Lacunae. "Why can't I try the same with her?"

"Doing what you propose is extremely risky. You could contaminate your own psyche with the memories and personalities inside Rampage. You might put Blackjack inside her. You could forget some critical thought processes, like respiration," Lacunae said with clear concern.

I actually laughed at that. "Lacunae, I've got a talisman regulating my breathing now. Heck, you could blow my head off and my body would probably keep living for a few days afterward. And I already have Psalm in my head. And you-know-who is in there too." I paced a little. "I've got the Dealer passing by on a semi-regular basis. Really, how much worse could it be?" Considering what I'd done to Boing, taking the Angel from Rampage wouldn't be much of a change for me.

Sekashi watched my lips with concern before she smiled and said, "You know. I know a story about a funny zebra back in the homelands. There was a good male, wealthy and powerful and generous. One day he went for a walk and saw many poor zebras in the market. What to do? So he gave them all the money in his purse and they were quite happy. He continued on his walk, and he found many hungry zebras living on the edge of his village, so he gave them his lunch and continued on his way. Soon it began to rain, and he came across some wet and weary travelers along his way. And so he gave them his cloak as well.

"But soon this funny zebra was alone, and hungry, and wet. He found a cave in the woods. There in the cave he found a beautiful zebra from a faraway village asleep in the bottom of a cold pool. And because he was good, he dove in and swam deeper and deeper. And thus, he drowned. When he died, there was nopony to help the poor, the hungry, or the weary. And so, they died too." She finished with a blissful smile, hooves folded in her lap.

We all stared at her for a long minute. "Sekashi... that's a horrible story!" Glory blurted.

The zebra mare rubbed her chin. "Perhaps I should add more description of his cloak? Would that make it better?"

Glory just stared at me. "Hey, Xanthe was worse. She went on and on about being cursed."

"Ahh. Propoli. Them and their silly curses!" Sekashi laughed. She had no right to talk...

I understood the meaning of her little story, though. If something permanent happened to me, what would my friends do? Was this just me trying to find some new and inventive way to hurt myself?

"No," I said firmly, but with a small smile as I looked at Lacunae. "I know it's risky. And I'll try and be careful. But Rampage can't keep going like this. At this rate, she's going to bury herself in a mineshaft or throw herself into the ocean in a concrete filled barrel or... something." Something drastic and so long term I wouldn't be there to save her.

Glory smiled in worried approval. But Lacunae said telepathically to me, "And what if you go into her mind and discover that she is correct? That there never was a mare named Rampage?"

"Then I'll lie to her and be her friend till the lie is real," I replied telepathically. "If I can give her peace and can help her, then I will." And while I had her in my mind, I thought, "You knew the Goddess was trying to take me over, didn't you?"

"Yes. I feared it was a great risk and that she would make the attempt. She knows a pony like you or LittlePip is her greatest threat," Lacunae replied shamefully. "I failed you."

"No. It's not your fault. It's the Goddess's." I smiled at the alicorn. "Don't worry. We'll think of some way out of this. And there's the Stable Dweller out there too. If LittlePip can't do something, the Stable Dweller will. Probably drop a balefire bomb or a house on her or something."

There was a note of disgust in my mind. "You two do realize I can hear you, right?" the Goddess said dryly. "And the moment you do think of something, I'll know it," she added in a mental snarl. Then there was a pause and the Goddess snapped irritably, "And your Stable Dweller *is* LittlePip!"

Oh, sure. Like I was going to believe anything she said! I got the impression of a pony throwing their hooves into the air in resigned annoyance and tried to put killing the Goddess out of my mind for now. Right now, Rampage needed help first.

"I've been in and out of too many memory orbs to count. If it'll help her get answers, I'll try it," I said, then met Glory's worried gaze. I tried to give a comforting smile. "I'm going to be careful. I will." I then looked in the next room where a tiny Majina jabbered to a morose Rampage. "If I can give her peace, it's a chance I have to take."

I caught Glory staring at me with a small smile. "What?" I asked in worry.

"Nothing. I was just reminded about... things," she said, that little smile not leaving her lips.

My spirits rose a little. "Good things?"

"Yes. And frustrating things too," she added, popping that balloon of hope inside me.

"If you are going to do this, you will need a recollector and an empty memory orb. The recollector we have," Lacunae said, reminding me of the strange black circlet I'd found in Vanity's locker. "As to an empty memory orb, I suggest you see the local shop filly."

I felt a cold shiver run down my spine as I suddenly feared for my bottlecaps.

* * *

The post office had gotten a bit cluttered since the last time I'd been in here. The space behind the counter was nearly a solid wall of packing crates and boxes overflowing with plunder from Blueblood Manor. The feral ghoul population had kept it safe from looters, leaving it to be picked clean by Chapel's intrepid Crusaders. Anything of even passing value that hadn't decayed had been brought here. There was a little sign that read 'ring bell if it makes you feel better.' I looked at the brass bell on the counter and tapped it. Nothing. I hit the little button on top repeatedly, but aside from a muted and oddly unsatisfying tapping within, nothing. I sighed and stretched up to try and peer over the crates of silver candlesticks and stacks of porcelain. There was nothing for it. "Charity?" I called out.

There was a rustling, and a mare called out that she'd be right there... or something. Then there was a crash and a yipe, and several seconds later a peach-colored mare poked her head out as asked timidly, "Yes? Can I..." she trailed off as her pink eyes met mine and widened in shock. "Blackjack!"

"Caprice?" I gaped at her. "What are you doing here?" The once-leader of Flank looked as if she were recovering from quite a beating. Her face had the unhealthy blackish-green marks of bruises that were in the final stages of healing. The eyes, however, now openly showed a fear of the world she'd barely kept concealed before.

"I..." She swallowed and lowered her gaze. "I... um... I was thrown out of Flank. My security team... they took over all the chem production and they're using it to make Rage and Dash. Anypony that didn't accept Citrine's rule was run out... most of the working mares and stallions. The Trough is basically gone. The only trade they allow now is buying chem supplies, guns, and food and selling Stampede and Rainboom. They're nothing but a bunch of drug fiends now."

I felt a little bad for her; just a little. She had planned to betray me, but clearly she'd gotten the rough end of the stick. "How'd you end up in Chapel, then?"

"It's just down the road," she replied with a shrug. "Most of Flank went to go work for the Society. The rest scattered. A few came here. They needed help minding the store, so I volunteered."

"Hey!" snapped a filly behind Caprice. There was a smack, and the peach mare jumped with a yipe. "No sexing the customers! Do that on your own time!" Charity called out, then jumped on Caprice's back and hopped over her head and onto the counter top. She took one look at me and narrowed her eyes. "Blackjack! Where's my money?"

I met the yellow earth filly's blue glare and backed away. "I don't know! How much do I owe you? Didn't I pay it already?" I clutched my saddlebags to my chest. "Please don't take my poor bottlecaps. I'll pay it back next time. I swear!" Then I frowned and said sharply, "Wait a minute. Didn't I save your life last time?"

"Oh, crap apples," Charity said as she deflated. "I was hoping you'd have forgotten about that." She sat her butt on the counter as she looked at me sourly. "Fine. What do you want, Blackjack? A nice shiny new gun? Ammo? Something pretty for Glory?"

"Actually, all I need is a couple empty memory orbs," I said with a small look of relief. "Though if you do have something nice for Glory..."

She looked over her shoulder. "Hey, Saucy Flanks! Get me a half dozen memory orbs from the fifth filing cabinet in the third row, bottom drawer in the back. Don't even think of touching the sixth filing cabinet!" she snapped sharply.

"Yes, boss!" Caprice said, scurrying back into the cramped and overstocked work space.

Charity watched her go and then her eyes softened a little. "She's a little worthless, but that's better than completely worthless like most adults. Came here half dead..."

"Don't you think you should treat her better, then?" I asked, and received a cool look from the filly.

"If I let her start using pity as an asset, she's never going to get any better," Charity replied. "I gave her a mountain of debt and a job and an excuse to stay. Till she pays it off, I get an assistant. She gets a place to recover." Then the filly adopted a sly grin. "So. Champion in bed, huh?"

I groaned and rubbed my cheek. "I didn't expect everypony to hear it."

"Duh! That's what makes it funny," she replied with a roll of her eyes.

I quickly decided to shift the conversation away from my sexual experiences. "Listen, can I talk to you about Scotch Tape? She has a bunch of ideas for Chapel."

I expected a snide comment or a smile, but not the dark cloud that passed across her face. "Oh. The stable filly. What about her?"

Stable filly? "Um, Charity... She has a *lot* of *good* ideas for *helping* Chapel," I repeated with emphasis.

"...Great," Charity said sarcastically. "She can *keep* them."

What? "But... you don't want them?" I said with a little frown of concern. "She's a real smart kid, and she wants to help you out."

"Are all stable ponies so thick? We don't want her help," Charity said with a scowl. "If she wasn't friends with you, we'd tell her to take her plans, shove 'em up her butt, go jump in the river, and make like a sailboat." My shock must have been incredibly evident, because she looked away, muttering darkly, "She comes here the first time telling us about her poor momma and how she died. How she's just like us. So we tell her she can be a Crusader. So what does she come trotting up here with this time?" Charity clasped her hooves together and grinned with a leer. "Why, her daddy, of course!" Her eyes fluttered a few times, her eyes wet behind her lids.

The yellow filly slumped immediately like melting butter, her blue eyes hardening as she looked towards the riches stacked up behind her. "I can buy or trade for almost anything I need. There's always somepony that needs something. But there's not a single thing I have to trade that will get me what she has."

"Charity, punishing Scotch Tape won't make you feel any better. You shouldn't spite her just because you're jealous," I murmured to her as I reached up and touched her mane.

She shoved my hoof away with an indignant snarl. "I am not jealous! The Crusaders are for orphans. We're not a bunch of dumb foals spending all day thinking of crazy ways to get our cutie marks.

We stick together because we're all we have. We have standards!"

Suddenly there was a roar from somewhere underneath our feet, and Charity spun. "I told you to stay away from the vault, Saucy Flanks! Eat her, Precious, if she tries to touch our caps!" Charity yelled.

"Vault?" I asked in confusion.

"Yeah. It's a big reinforced room down below for valuable mail and packages. Usually don't keep a lot of stuff in there on account that it's a pain to get it up and down the stairs. I keep our caps and other valuable stuff down there." She screwed up her face in a scowl. "Precious volunteered to guard it. Kinda insisted, actually." The filly sighed and gave a little shrug.

Suddenly a scream sounded from outside and I was moving instantly for the door as a resounding crunch filled the air. Out came Duty and Sacrifice as I thought of who might be attacking us. Harbingers? Enclave? Raiders? I darted out into the rain and paused as my enemy came to light: gravity.

One of the tottering structures had collapsed across the sewer ditch and road, and the colts, fillies, and few adults struggled to free the ponies trapped under the wreckage. Glory flew out of Sekashi's home, followed a moment later by Lacunae. The rain lashed the tiny settlement, and gusts of wind had all the buildings swaying and tugging against the ropes holding them upright. "Look out!" I shouted, but in the bedlam nopony took notice.

Sure enough, one of the ropes snapped in two and the wooden framing and scaffolding collapsed down on the milling ponies. I saw one of Harpica's ghoul fillies staring up in terror at the avalanche of beams about to crush her as I raced down the road. Lacunae beat me to her, flashing beside her and catching the debris with her magic before it could crush the ghoul. Harpica hurried forward to gather the undead filly up and get her to safety before Lacunae dropped the heavy load.

A shrill scream filled the air, and I watched as another fell with a ponderous crash into the ditch, bearing the chartreuse Medley with it. The unicorn surfaced for a second before the debris dammed the brown flow and she disappeared from view. The building settled a little more atop her.

"Get her out! She's pinned!" I screamed as I dove into the flow above the blockage. My metal legs helped keep me from being swept off my hooves immediately, and I felt the trapped filly thrash against the beams crushing her legs and keeping her down. I heaved against them, but rather than lift I simply pushed myself into the muck of the ditch. I raised my head, looking at the beams and boards; maybe I could lift them off piecemeal? But no, that'd take too long. I ducked down again, feeling Medley move slower against me as I gripped the lowest beam I could and lifted. I had to do this... I thought of a pink-maned filly I'd failed so horribly not long ago...

It doesn't matter what you do; you'll never be a good pony. There are no good ponies...

No. I wouldn't accept that. I couldn't! I might have been a murderous fuckup who didn't deserve any of my friends, but I could do better. I'd give all I had to give her a chance. All I had to give...

And because he was good, he dove in and swam deeper and deeper. And thus, he drowned. When he died, there was nopony to help the poor, the hungry, or the weary. And so, they died too.

I couldn't tell if Medley was struggling still or if it was just the current beating us. If I died, what

would Glory say? What about others I could have helped? *Do better...* did that mean letting one filly die for others? My systems were sending all kind of 'low O2' warnings. Just a little harder. A little longer! Do better, damn it! Better!

Then there were hooves pulling me away. I fought with them. Some mare cried out in pain as I kicked out. I had to give her a chance. I had to! Had to! But then my head broke the surface and I was pulled from the filthy water by Glory, P-21, and Lacunae. The ditch flooded out around the blocking debris as I lay there, staring up at the sky as the rain pounded down upon me and my metal limbs.

"Why?" I murmured as I lay there with filthy water sloshing around me as Glory knelt on my right and P-21 on my left. The cyan pegasus clutched her forehoof in pain, and I felt the guilt push me over the edge. "I can... I can take on an army of Harbingers. Kill a ghoulish monster. So why can't I give a filly a chance to live?"

"Because you're a fucking idiot, Blackjack," Charity said as she sat in the doorway of the post office. Slowly I sat up, looking at her as if she were speaking zebra or something. "You don't value yourself," the filly said scornfully. "You put everypony else above you. Your friends. Strangers. Even your fucking enemies. Because for some reason you think that your life is worth less than theirs."

"Medley... she's..." I rasped softly.

"She's dead," Charity said firmly. "She's not the first. She won't be the last. But you killing yourself won't change that. You can't give her life, Blackjack. Not even you can do that." I stared at the spot where the heap of beams and sheet metal lay in a scattered lump and felt something tense inside me. Do better, it insisted.

I tried.

Do better.

I want to.

Do better!

I don't know how!

Do better!

"I can't! I can't do any better!" I shouted as I clenched my head in my hooves. "I try and I try and I do all that I can and I don't know how to do any better!"

They all stared at me. There was no point in trying to get the remains out till after the rain stopped. All the Crusaders. Harpica, the ghoulish pegasus holding the undead filly Lacunae had saved. The workers who were complete strangers looked on impassively as the hero of Hoofington failed before their eyes. P-21 held a pitying Scotch Tape, the filly's designs and plans getting ruined in the rain. Even Caprice and Charity side by side, the former wary and the latter scornful, watched me carefully. Lacunae stood beside Sekashi and the mournful Majina along with Rampage and the stoic Dealer before the zebra's little house.

Then I felt Glory take my hoof between hers. "That's because you're trying to do it all on your own, Blackjack. You try to take all the blame. All the guilt. All the pain and suffering. You're trying to

give us all a better Wasteland on your own... and you can't."

"You can't fix all your mistakes by dying, Blackjack," P-21 said, his voice barely above the hiss of the rain. "You can't fix 99. You can't unkill the people who died. You can't unbreak a pony's heart." Everypony just stood there in the rain.

"Just bad luck," a colt muttered as they looked at the wrecked buildings. "What with the rain and all..."

"No! Not bad luck!" Scotch Tape cried as she stepped away from P-21. "Look, I don't want to insult you after this but... but this is stupid! This isn't how you're supposed to build things! If that building had been built right, then Medley would be alive right now!" Scotch Tape said as she pointed at the tumbled structure.

"Are you saying we killed Medley?" a filly challenged.

"No! But there's a right way and a wrong way to build things. You can't just put beams on a roof, hammer them into the walls, and think it's going to stay up!" Scotch's voice started to rasp, and the filly began to cough and fight for breath in the rain.

"Come on, let's get home," P-21 began, but then Scotch shook her head and pushed away.

"I know this is your home. I want to do better too. I want this to be a better place to live. I want this to be a better world! But if you won't listen to me, then there's nothing I can do. I'm just like Blackjack." She looked at me sadly and then back at the others. "Please. Let me help."

There were angry mutters and shakes of their heads. Talk that she wasn't one of them. Not really. She had her father right there. I looked at Charity, standing in the rain, chewing on her bottom lip as she scowled at Scotch Tape. She looked as if she wasn't quite sure what to do.

Finally, the yellow filly asked in a voice barely heard over the rain, "All right then. What do you suggest we do?"

Scotch Tape looked at her, and a smile bloomed on her face. "Well... first... let's get her out from under there..." The salesfilly blinked, and then her scowl faded and she smiled, giving Scotch a tiny little nod.

And with that everypony except Glory started to move the wreckage. Together they pulled it apart and tossed it into the flooded road. Eventually a muddy little body was pulled from the churning water. I couldn't bear to look at it as it was borne away. Scotch gave a few more instructions like staying clear of the rest of the standing buildings before P-21 put his hoof down, loaded her on his back, and headed for home. Rampage went back inside while Lacunae helped take down some of the riskier structures. With the ditch more or less clear, the water returned to flow unimpeded towards the river.

"I can't love you like this," Glory murmured beside me as she hung her head. "I want to, Blackjack. I do. You're a good pony, even if you're an insufferable screwup. But I can't give my heart to a mare who doesn't think she's worth it. You've got to live, Blackjack. You're so willing to give anypony else help... but you won't let you help yourself."

I lay there, rain falling on my synthetic eyes as I stared up into that endless gray. "I don't know

how, Glory. I know I need help. I know that what I'm doing is wrong... but I don't know how to fix it. I can't trust myself anymore." I closed my eyes. "How is anypony supposed to help me?"

Then I felt her move atop me. Her feathers spread out and shielded me from the rain as she blanketed me with her body. It's not something I could imagine Rainbow Dash ever doing. Maybe that was why. I extended my fingers and reached up behind her wings and held her to me. I knew I should be helping clear the tumbled debris. I should have been helping the crusaders bury Medley. I should've been checking on Scotch or helping my friends or... or...

He dove in and swam deeper and deeper. And so he drowned...

I needed help. My friends needed help. Everypony did. And no matter how I kicked myself for Medley, for not being able to save her... it wouldn't change that. I buried my nose where Glory's shoulder met her neck and held her. She hummed a soft little tune, like a lullaby, and I slowly relaxed bit by bit.

"Come on. Let's go get out of the rain," Glory murmured softly in my ear.

* * *

"Okay. I'll admit it's a little bit kinky, but is this really supposed to help?" I asked, flushing a little as Glory clicked the lock on the collar around my neck closed with a definite note of finality.

"Hopefully, it'll remind you who's going to keep you from flying apart the next time you feel the need to try and save somepony at cost of your own life," Glory said. She tugged on the little heart-shaped lock with her mouth a moment, then smiled. "If I'm going to help you, I'm going to keep you till you accept how important you are to all of us."

I blushed a little more, but really, I had no right to argue. If this was a condition of her staying with me, then I'd have to accept it. And, in all honesty, I was willing to let her do this. I had no idea how I'd make it without her. I needed her like I needed air. "But where the heck did you even find a collar like this?" I asked with a little squirm as we sat together on my bed. I could barely get a finger between the black leather collar and my neck; definitely snug, though not quite cutting.

"Charity. She practically gave it away when I said what I wanted it for. Oh, and she gave me the blank memory orbs you needed, too," Glory said as she rolled me onto my stomach. "I know you want to help Rampage, and I think you should, but right now *you* need a little more help," she said as she stroked my spine. The contact and attention made me groan, but I also felt a little stab of guilt. I'd failed to save Medley. I didn't deserve to--

"Yeouch!" I yelped as Glory whacked my backside hard. Being unaugmented, it was one of the places on me that could really sting! My cheeks flamed as I looked over my shoulder at her. "Glory! You hit me!"

"You were thinking about Medley, weren't you?" Glory asked as she looked into my eyes. Instantly I flushed, feeling very... confused. The cyan pegasus leaned towards me. "From now on, you're not allowed to do that anymore, understand? Not for Dusk. Not for running away. Not for having sex. Not for failing anything. I'm the only one that gets to punish you."

"I... buh... wha... huh?" I blinked in shock and bafflement.

"You heard me," Glory said as she stroked along my spine once more. "Any time you do

something that deserves punishing, then I'll be the one to punish you. I'm not going to let you let it build up until you break down and do something stupid. And yeah, it'll probably hurt. But it's the only way I'll be able to be around you and not worry about the next time you're going to fly completely apart." She closed her eyes and paused, then added, "And I think I need this too. I love you, but you've really hurt me more than once. I don't think I'll be able to get over it if I can't."

"But... I mean... what if I have to..." I asked nervously.

"I expect you to be a good pony," Glory said softly. "And if you have to help... help... but if I think you're trying to use 'help' as an excuse for getting yourself shot, then you're getting punished. And if you do something that hurts me... you are getting punished... and if you start hating yourself and moping... you are getting punished." She hooked her wing in the collar's ring and pulled my face to her. "I love you, but I'm still really pissed, and scared for you. If I can't have some say in keeping you safe and helping you, then I'm not going to bother."

I pursed my lips, then sighed and slumped a little. "I guess I don't have a choice." She nipped my rump, making me jump and look at her in confusion over my shoulder.

"Of course you have a choice. If you really need me to stop, just call me Rainbow Dash," she said as she stroked my mane, making me murr at the contact. "But if we're going to be more than friends, I'm going to have to be in charge for now on." She bit my mane and gave it a tug, making me wince and groan a little. And shiver...

And smile...

* * *

That afternoon, she unlocked me from the bed, and I slipped off the sheets feeling... odd. Not just odd... oddly good. I'd confessed anything and everything that had bubbled to the top of my memory, and Glory had brought out a few more tools to use on me. I'd been spanked two times for Boing and four times for Medley and once for the Fluttershy Medical Center. A blindfold, hoofcuffs, and belt were used when it came to punishing me for Dusk. She'd gotten creative when the time came to answer for Stygius...

Funny. I felt more like a mare now than I had with him, which was odd, as I was with Glory. I never necessarily thought of myself as submissive, but after the long afternoon and night, I had to admit I had some positively juicy feelings inside me. Sure, she couldn't get my heart racing or make me gasp for breath, but she actually made me happy to be alive and with her. Our relationship had taken a sharp right turn into the chaos capital of the Wasteland...

And I couldn't say I minded.

Glory clipped a leash to the ring in my collar and flew ahead of me, and I followed her obediently. I was still bothered by Medley; there was no way I could stop myself from that. But now I had an outlet that was more than just me running myself into the ground trying to atone.

Scotch Tape stared at her plans as she lay wrapped in an old quilt by the fire. She glanced up at the pair of us and rolled her eyes. "Dad, make two more. The sex fiends have emerged."

Glory flushed a little, but also smiled too as she twisted the leash around her hoof and drew out the slack. "We aren't sex fiends," she said primly, then pulled me close for a kiss that had me on the ends

of my hooves. "We just... got creative in our relationship."

"Told you, Daddy," she said, but then she started to cough.

Glory unhooked the leash and then flew to Scotch's side. She pressed a hoof to her brow. "Mmm... you feel a little feverish. Let me get the thermometer."

The olive filly pushed her hoof away. "I'm fine, Glory. Besides, after all you two were probably doing together, I'm scared where you'd stick it," she said, the little filly actually blushing as well before she looked down at her drawing.

"We weren't that bad, were we?" I asked P-21; my smile wouldn't quite go away. The blue buck was actually trying to cook something in the kitchen! To my amazement, it smelled pretty good!

"Well, I don't think quite as many people heard it as the 'champion' comment," he said causally as he watched the pots simmering. "Still, you're loud, Blackjack."

I moved closer, sniffing the dishes that seemed to actually be some sort of pie, tea, and a salad of some sort. "You're okay with what we're doing?"

"You're a grown mare. She's a grown mare. You're both safe and consenting. Beyond that, it's none of my business. Don't involve Scotch Tape, and I'll be happy." He glanced at my rump. "Just a suggestion, though? Go easy under the tail when you're starting out." Wow, look at me blush!

"Oh, Celestia, I hadn't even thought of that," Glory murmured, then silenced Scotch's retort with a thermometer popped under her tongue. I feared for my backside.

"Sexcapades aside, I still want to try and help Rampage. Where is she?" I asked with a little frown.

"Lacunae has Rampage and Boo in her room," P-21 replied. "She keeps cycling through personalities. Lacunae just levitates her when she gets violent. At least she's easier to handle when she's a filly."

"She hasn't tried to hurt Boo, has she?" I asked with a worried frown.

"No. Apparently three of her souls think she's their daughter or something. Of course, as soon as she snaps out of it, she's all confused. Like she remembers some parts of it but not others," P-21 said softly. I remembered how I felt after I'd died, the certainty that something had happened while I'd been gone. Something vitally important and wrong, but that I couldn't actually remember.

"The souls within her have no memory of their own past their death," Lacunae said softly in my mind. "When they manifest, they rewrite a small portion of Rampage's mind. Some of them can re-access it, letting Rampage serve as a proxy memory for them. Some, like the Angel, have somehow learned to go back to that memory and use it to their advantage."

"Lacunae, that made no sense at all," I said aloud, earning a confused look from everypony. Of course, then the Goddess's control in my own head silenced me from explaining further. I forced a laugh and said in embarrassment, "Sorry. Lac's talking in my head." And... that was all I could get out. Glory frowned at me, and I said quickly, "Really. That's all. Just strange alicorny goodness!"

"What it means is, I suspect your idea might work. By examining the memories the souls have of their deaths, we might be able to piece together an understanding of how Rampage came to be," Lacunae said in my mind.

"I've got to wonder how Rampage remembers things when she dies when souls can't," I said, trying to think it through.

"I suspect the talisman regenerates her brain at the moment of death, preserving nearly all of her most recent memories." There was a pause that set my nerves on edge before she went on, "It is also a sign that your theory of Rampage being a flesh and blood mare is..."

"The only theory I'll accept," I thought bluntly at her. "If we don't find any proof, then we keep digging till we do. Like with science. And if we still don't, then we lie till we do."

"That's not how science works, Blackjack," Lacunae told me with an air of infinite patience.

"It's how the science of friendship works," I said aloud in my frustration. "Sometimes, to help a friend, you have to lie to them. At least until they can deal with it." I flushed, rubbing the back of my head. "Sorry. More brain talking."

I'd expected weird looks from my friends. Scotch Tape just frowned. "Yeah, but it still sucks huge butt, Blackjack. I mean, I still got a big old wad of nothing between my ears, thanks to you. I still feel... you know... nervous of machines and stuff. Really annoying." Tell me about it, because the Goddess had made me unable to tell her. Glory and P-21 looked a little more worried, though, glancing at each other. I knew they probably weren't all that keen on being around Rampage when she found out.

Deal with it. Rampage was a pony, and nothing was going to convince me otherwise. I just had to find a way to convince her it was true, too. And if I was wrong... well... I'm pretty experienced with messing up relationships. Maybe she and Glory could tag team or something.

I rose and looked at Glory and my friends, and she gave a resigned sigh and a little smile. "Go on. See if you can help her."

I gave a crooked little smile to her. "And if I mess up..."

She smiled back, her eyes firm but warm. "I think either way..."

Scotch Tape groaned from where she was trying to draw new designs after the others had gotten soaked in the rain. "Could you either go help Rampage or go rut each other again or something? Some ponies are trying to work here."

I laughed and nodded, giving her another kiss and then looking into her eyes. "I really love you."

"I know. I love you too," she said before adding a moment later, "but I'm still plenty annoyed at you. So when you're done..." She stroked my cheek, and Scotch Tape groaned in annoyance.

P-21 just laughed softly. "Just let them enjoy it while it's novel, Scotch."

The olive filly snorted, "Well, whatever. Probably won't take long. Trust Glory to make kinky sexy spanking and whipping boring."

"You're just jealous," Glory said as she hugged me and stuck her tongue out at the earth pony. Scotch's eyes popped wide, and she immediately went scarlet.

"That... that's not true!" Scotch Tape sputtered. "I could have a fillyfriend if I really wanted one and stuff. There's boys here that'd like to be with me, too."

Glory sputtered and looked at P-21. "Are you seriously going to sit there and... and..."

"Why?" P-21 just blinked in confusion. "She has her implant."

Glory then lit off into a tirade about sexual propriety and how Scotch should wait till she was married, and Scotch immediately asked what marriage even was. I admit, even I was a little fuzzy on the concept. I gave P-21 an apologetic smile and abandoned him, slipping over to Rampage's room. I gave a soft knock on the door, then slipped inside. Out in the living room, words were rapidly escalating and reaching a pitch that was starting to make my ears hurt.

Closing the door, I looked at the filly moping on her bed. With her worries exposed for all to see, I just wanted to hug her and tell her it would be alright. Lacunae stood by with the black circlet recollector and a small plastic baggie with a half dozen glass spheres within. "Don't ask how I'm doing. You won't like the answer. What do you want, Blackjack?"

I glanced at Lacunae. "Has she told you?"

"Yeah. You want to try to dig around in my skull and find some memories from the souls in me. Then you want to put them into that recollector thingy. What I don't get is why you want to help me," she said sourly.

"Goodiest good pony in the Wasteland," I answered with a little smile. It didn't last. "Don't you want to know who you really are?"

"No. Not really," she said as she curled up and put her chin on the comforter. "Things are better this way."

"What?" I asked. Lacunae gave a weary sigh.

"Really. Now that I've thought about it, this is the best thing possible." And she actually smiled! "Rampage doesn't really exist. If she doesn't exist, then all the horrible things that happened to her don't matter. It doesn't matter if she killed somepony... or... or anypony..." She sniffed as tears ran down her cheeks. "So you can take your toy there and leave me alone, okay. Because... because this way is better. Understand? Better. And I'll still fight for you and stuff. But you don't have to worry about me anymore. Nopony does."

I looked at her for the longest time. I'd never thought I'd see Rampage on the mattress like this. You could cut the self-pity with a knife. "Are you serious?" I asked with a little frown, thinking of how I'd wanted somepony to buck me off it. Charity's words rang in my ears. *'You don't value yourself.'*

"Blackjack?" she asked with a baffled frown.

"Are you telling me that Priest never loved a Pony named Arloste? That she never had a baby named Hope? That she was never a Reaper or was one of my best friends?" I pressed as I stared into her pale pink eyes. "Well, let me tell you something, miss pony who says she doesn't exist. Rampage

wasn't afraid of anything. She helped me even when I didn't deserve it. Even when I hurt her for giving it. She always helped." I trotted next to the bed, looking her in the eyes as I smiled softly. "So let me help you now."

"You... you don't even know if it'll work," she said in worry. "Do you even know the spell?"

"What do you care?" I replied. "If you really believe this whole 'Rampage doesn't exist' garbage, then it shouldn't matter if I do it or not." I grinned at the uncertainty in her eyes, then put my hoof on hers. "But I believe the pony named Rampage does exist. That she's a special pony... unique... and I want to help her."

She shook her head and sighed. "Just... don't do something that's going to embarrass me. Like take away my bladder control or make me only able to talk in rhymes. Okay. Kill me if you can, but don't leave me lame."

"I'll try," I replied with a gentle smile. "I've got no idea what I'm doing, but... I'll try."

Magic bullet. Light spell. Now I was trying a memory spell? I bit my lip as I touched the tip of my horn to her brow, then closed my eyes and concentrated. This was the first time... no. Not my first. I'd done this to Lacunae, too. I could feel... something. It was like a memory orb, but instead of the world swirling away, it was like looking into a deep pool of flashing, churning lights. So many of them. I tried to push myself into that pool and get closer to the lights. Each one I tried to grab faded away.

No. I couldn't just grab them. I had to be patient. Calm. Fighting the strain in my horn, I kept the connection going and waited. Soon the memories drifted closer. I saw flashes of images in that bottomless, dark void. One that drifted right beside me had flickering images of Twist, and I reached out with my will and touched it...

oooOOOooo

I'd been in so many memories by this point that I almost automatically assessed the body around me: mare... very fit and healthy... earth p-- no... this body was like an earth pony's, but there were several subtle differences with the way her body moved; the breeze around her tail was another giveaway. There was an unusual lightness to her hooves as she trotted along towards several low buildings right adjacent to the Miramare base. As she approached one door, I saw her reflection in the window. Red stripes. Shujaa.

The door opened at her approach, and out stepped Twist. The mare had a tired, resigned look on her face. She closed the door softly behind her and then swiftly embraced and kissed the zebra quite ardently. Even though she was still a young mare, Twist had clear wrinkles in the corners of her eyes. Her chopped mane was a little more frazzled and had pink highlights in it. "How is everything?" Shujaa asked, glancing at the door.

"Fine. Everything's fine." She glanced back over her shoulder and then at the zebra. "She doesn't know. I hate telling her goodbye. I feel like, if I do, I won't be coming back."

"You should tell her next time," Shujaa said as they parted in their embrace, and the Proditor zebra looked up in time to catch a curtain in Twist's room swaying back and forth. She pursed her lips, then looked at Twist. "You should tell her now."

"No time," Twist replied as she turned and trotted towards the airfield where a half dozen skywagons waited in rows, soldiers milling about. "We were supposed to lift off five minutes ago. Did you get the briefing?" Twist asked as she walked briskly in her tan combat armor.

"Yes. A whole legion wishing to defect. It is hard to imagine. I hope that Rainbow Dash's information is accurate this time," Shujaa said as she walked along beside her. Unlike Twist, the zebra wore a sort of harness that was very snug. When I had a chance, I had to ask Charity if she could find one for me. She was virtually unarmed save for a dagger in a sheath on her left forehoof.

As Twist approached, the soldiers around the skywagons fell into two rows, mostly earth ponies in battle saddles with a few unicorns and pegasi. "Sergeant," a few said, while the others stayed silent and serious. She looked over their weapons and equipment as Shujaa followed in her wake. The zebra's eyes lingered on Twist's backside a little more than was probably necessary. Three other ponies whom I assumed were also sergeants inspected other groups while a fourth pegasus sergeant checked the harnesses of the pegasi getting strapped into the skywagons.

Finally, four ponies trotted forward, three in combat armor while the fourth was in a tan dress uniform. "Colonel Cupcake," Twist said with a salute. The hefty brown pegasus looked at her and let a smile curve his lips fondly before he became all business again.

"Still your hooves and open your ears," he said loudly. "Two hours ago, the Ministry of Awesome intercepted a zebra communique about a legion of their warriors wanting to defect. Given that they had a kill order attached to it, we think the communique is pretty genuine. So we're going to find this legion, and if this is on the up and up, we're going to give them a little vacation from the war. Now I'm briefing you personally because the legion named is one of the oldest that had ever fought us in this war. They've been doing this for twenty years. If they're willing to throw in the towel now, we want to know why. That means no itchy trigger bits. No mistakes. Nothing. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sir, yes sir!" the soldiers said in unison.

"Fall in to your transports. Dearest Luna, soft and strong!" he called out.

"Let us honor you in song!" the soldiers called out in unison in return. He saluted them, and they returned it. The other officers snapped out for them to get to their transports.

The ponies and lone zebra rushed to the waiting skywagons, and minutes later they were lifting off and flying southward through the night. The usual Hoofington drizzle hissed against the covered roof as they flew through the darkness. The soldiers waited in rows, occasionally talking in low voices. This was how I learned that zebras also had exceptional hearing.

"What the hell is that stripe doing here?" one soldier mare asked in a murmur.

"Shut your mouth, idiot. That's a Proditor. She's the sergeant's very special somepon... er... zebra," a stallion said darkly.

"Oh, gross. You're telling me that the sarge is rutting with a damned stripe?" the mare said in disgust. "I can't believe I asked to transfer to this unit."

"Transfer out, then. She's the last of the Marauders. Sarge Twist is a fucking legend. I'd rather serve with her than a whiny transfer that hasn't had a dozen of those damned zebra robots hunting her

down,” the stallion grumbled.

“Oh yeah? Well I’ve been hearing folks talk saying they’re gonna give her a retirement pretty quick. I mean, you got to ask yourself, when the horseapples fall, is she going to save us or save the damned stripe?” the mare snorted.

Then every stallion and mare turned almost as one and glared at her. The stallion then muttered softly, “You better shut your mother bucking mouth right now, or you won’t get the chance to transfer. Understand?”

“That’s enough talking. Zip it,” Twist said as she walked along the center aisle to stand beside Shujaa. “They’re chatty...” the mare muttered.

“Is it true?” Shujaa asked in a near whisper.

“It’s not true till they take my stripes,” the soldier said, looking at the zebra with the tiniest smile. “If something should happen out there...”

“Nothing’s going to happen. This is just a wild goose chase with hazard pay. There’s no way the First Legion would defect,” Shujaa replied evenly.

“Then this is probably a trap,” the pale mare countered. “So if anything should happen...”

“I know. I know. I’ll take care of your pet,” the zebra said with a smirk.

“She is not a pet!” Twist retorted.

“I stand corrected. Your feral beast.”

“You’re impossible,” Twist sighed and then shook her head.

“And you’re adorable. Now hurry up, glare, and say something intimidating before I kiss you and make you blush,” the zebra breathed.

Twist did so, barking out instructions, making rude speculation about some ponies’ lineage, warning everypony to check their fire, and making sure their gear was ready. Most of the soldiers were paying attention, but the soldier mare who’d been talking before did so with a poorly concealed sneer.

The skywagons set down into the night in the middle of a barren landscape. The rain poured into gullies and arroyos, and ponies blundered about a bit as they adjusted. Shujaa had no problem moving about, her unarmored hooves barely slipping in the mud.

“Proditor,” a mare called out in a serious voice. Shujaa spotted one of the officer ponies. “I’m counting on you. If the First Legion is out here, you’re our best chance to find them. If this is a trap, you’re the best equipped to warn us.”

“Yes ma’am, Captain Grizzly. I’ll send up a red flare if this is hostile. Green if I find a group for extraction,” the zebra said crisply. The sergeants were all making sure everypony could say ‘surrender’, ‘drop your weapon’, and ‘follow’ in Zebra as I moved out with the grace and silence of a ghost. She leapt across the gullies and skirted around rocks effortlessly. Soon the soldiers were left behind as she moved

through the almost absolute darkness.

Then she came across blasted robots in the muck. They weren't like Protectaponies. These were sleek and black. They reminded me more of the cyberdogs I'd seen in the tunnels. First she came across one. Then three. Then a half dozen. Some were larger than others, resembling mechanical manticores. "What are hunter killers doing here?" she murmured in worry, and proceeded with more caution.

She must have been moving for at least an hour; every now and then she could see the soldiers in the distance trying to pick their way through the rain and mud and making terrible time at it. The rain was letting up, but the water still sheeted down into the muddy crevasses. Even Shujaa had to watch her hooves to avoid sliding in.

Then there were four zebras in the dark twenty feet away. They wore black armor that blended in with the night, and only the stripes on their faces gave any hint to their species. And the instant that Shujaa saw them, they saw her. Almost in unison, they lifted their rifles and they stood like Lancer. The rifles let out a stream of soft trills without even a flicker of muzzle flash.

As quick as a ghost and silent as death, the knife was in her teeth. She moved around and then was on them. A slice disemboweled one. A second was sent staggering back as a double hoof kick collapsed his sternum. A third was knocked onto the wet ground, and then all four of Shujaa's hooves came down on his throat. She closed to the last, shoved his rifle barrel up, then plunged the dagger into his chest. Then there was a trill, and Shujaa's torso exploded in pain. The first zebra, his guts in the mud, was still fighting. In fact, he didn't seem impaired at all.

Then two pale hooves came up from behind him and twisted his neck with a resounding crack. The zebra dropped, joining his entrails in the muck. Twist rushed up to Shujaa. "Are you okay?"

"They make zebras more disciplined than I remember. Most give up the fight when you spill their innards." She pulled herself to her hooves. "I will be fine." Indeed, I could feel the familiar sensation of magical regeneration slowly closing her wounds.

"I guess you were right. Trap," Twist said with a frown.

But Shujaa didn't agree right away. Her eyes focused on the slain zebras. "I'm not so sure. These aren't First Legion." She turned them over so they were all on their backs. Something about them must have struck the mare, because Shujaa kept looking from one to the next. They all looked the same. Zebra stallions. Same black armor. Same weapons. Same stripes... and the gutted stallion hadn't just spilled his organs. There were wires and cables dangling from that gory cavity.

"Now you see," a voice said from the darkness in heavily accented Pony. "Now you see the depths our Caesar has sunk to. First machines without honor, and now these new abominations." The speaker stepped closer, and I was struck by his powerful physique... and just how ragged he looked. More soldiers came staggering out of the gloom and drizzle. All were filthy, bedraggled, and wounded to some degree. The few who had barding and harnesses were in dire need of replacements.

"Legate Honorius," Shujaa said breathlessly. He gave a weary nod.

"What are they?" Twist asked as she stared down.

"We do not know. A year ago, the first came. From a distant tribe, we were told. 'The Children of C6yotl'. They did not speak. Did not laugh. They sang no songs and told no stories. But they could kill. First singularly, then in threes and fours, then by the dozens they took the places of good and honorable soldiers." He spat on their bodies. "We refused to accept them. Then we learned there was no refusal. If we would not, we would be replaced by them." He gestured at the dozen zebra around him. "This is all that remains of the First Legion."

Shujaa gasped something in Zebra. Twist echoed her shocked tone, "This is all that's left of a thousand soldiers?" He nodded grimly.

"We need to get you to safety. I know the Ministry of Awesome is going to want to hear about--"

"Contact!" a mare screamed in the night, and then the air filled with the buzz of two machine guns sweeping across the assembled zebras. Had they not been tired and worn, I was sure they would have been able to get to safety. Exhausted and out in the open, they were torn down by the spray of fire as the mare screamed hysterically. "Contact! Enemy contact! Enemy ambush!"

The injuries that Shujaa had sustained slowed her a bit. Some more of the wild spray caught her, knocking her back. Twist, however, was able to run to the side and keep out on her field of fire. She slid in the mud and slammed into the snide mare from the skywagon. "You fucking idiot! What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

The young earth pony slammed back. Had she been ten years younger, I was sure that Twist would have been able to take her. But with the mud, her hooves twisted out beneath her and she was sent sprawling.

"What am I doing?! Killing the fucking enemy! That's what we fucking do! That's the point of this whole fucking war. To kill them all!" the mare yelled at Twist. "Not fuck them like some sympathizing whore!"

"No..." Shujaa croaked as she struggled to her hooves. "Come on... heal faster..." she panted.

Twist charged; she had six feet to cover. After that six feet, she could take the mare apart in hoof to hoof combat.

But the soldier only had to bite a bit.

The machine guns roared, ripping into Twist before she was halfway.

"No!" Shujaa screamed as she finally rose and charged as well. Blood dripped from the holes as the earth pony swung her barrels towards her and let out another burst of fire. Shujaa was fast, but not faster than a bullet. Bones shattered, flesh tore, but she didn't drop.

"What? Are you upset because I killed your sympathizer fuck buddy?" she sneered and blasted Shujaa again, sending her to her knees. "Fucking Marauders. Only Big Macintosh was a Marauder. When he died, it was fucking over." Shujaa got to her hooves again, and then screamed as more bullets ripped into her body. "Just fucking die already, you stupid stripe!" she screamed as she fired yet another burst. Every piece of Shujaa's body burned as she rose yet again.

"What are you going to do? Huh, Stripe? What are you going to fucking do?!" she screamed and

then bit the trigger once more.

The guns were silent. Then the zebra's bloody hooves lunged forward and grabbed the mare's neck. "Wait till you're out of ammo," she said simply, and then twisted her whole body around. The mare's neck snapped like a gunshot twice and she dropped, belly in the mud, face towards the rain.

Shujaa staggered her bleeding body to where Twist lay in the mud. The pale pony took short choking breaths, one eye looking up at the zebra. "Guess... I should... have told... her...good... bye..." she gasped, blood foaming at her mouth.

"No," Shujaa said as she slumped against her. The machine guns had ripped a hole through her combat armor and punched clear into her chest. I could see bloody black things in the hole, moving and glistening; it was never a good sign to see one's insides outside.

"Remember... re... remember... you promised... please..." she begged, then slowly went limp. The squirming organs began to move slower and slower.

"No!" Shujaa cried, saying something in Zebra before grabbing the knife from her sheath. It was long and curved, with one razor sharp edge and one flat edge. Then she reversed it, closed her eyes... and then... then she plunged it into her chest. The pain was absolute; there was no way I could imagine anypony not passing out. Yet she persisted, and then the tip hit something solid in her ribcage. She gasped, blood pouring from her mouth and nostrils as she jerked the blade back and forth, twisting it, cracking her ribs.

Then the pheonix talisman came into view along with a torrent of blood. The knife tumbled from her hooves as she screamed and tore it from her own flesh. The pain vanished, replaced by a terrible numbness. Shujaa trembled as she cradled the little pink stone, moving it closer to the limp earth pony. With her last ounce of strength, she shoved it into the hole. Then she collapsed on her side in the mud.

"Please..." she whispered... "please..."

Then there was a pink glow in Twist's body. Those wet organs began to move more and more, the wounds closing. But then everything was getting very dark, very cold, and very quiet. "Aeternum vestrum..." she whispered, and then all was silent.

oooOOOooo

I pulled myself slowly from that deep well, leaving the rest of the images behind. When I emerged completely, there was a hazy light sticking to the end of my horn. I fumbled a few seconds, then grabbed an orb with my fingers and lifted it to the light. Some of the glow was sucked into the orb till it was filled. Finally, I relaxed, and the luminescent fog was sucked back into the filly's brow.

"Well... that was... um... interesting..." I said as I tried to look at my own horn. My whole head felt like it'd been ripped open too. I wondered if I had burnt out my horn again, but I was too disoriented to check. I could still feel that knife probing inside my chest. "Okay. Good thing you're used to pain," I murmured.

Rampage swayed and rubbed her noggin. "Did you... was there... I mean..." She bit her lip, her eyes both craving and dreading answers.

"I can tell you how the talisman got from Shujaa to Twist," I groaned. "She put it there herself."

Slowly, I rose to my hooves. "I need to go lie down. Watch the memory when you're ready. Just... it hurts. A lot. Okay?" And with that I turned and staggered out the door and back into the living room.

Where we had company.

A pegasus mare sat calmly in a wooden chair while Scotch Tape and P-21 sat together on the couch. Glory sat perched on a stool, looking utterly petrified, her body completely covered by the sheet. P-21's grass pie was laid out on plates, and they all held teacups, but only the newcomer was drinking. Her coat was a light dove gray and her mane a collection of purples, lavenders, and highlights of pink. Even though she had the ragged look of somepony used to the Wasteland, there was some graceful quality to her I couldn't quite shake. Her flank had a brand on it that was nearly identical to the one that had been forced upon Glory.

"Oh, hello," she said pleasantly as she set her cup down. "You must be Security. Or is it Blackjack? I've heard so much about you."

"Nice to meet you," I muttered in a daze and sat down hard. "Um... who are you?"

The mare smiled gently. "My name is Dawn. I was hoping to speak to you... and I was wondering if you could tell me where my daughter Morning Glory could be found."

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: well folks. I'm sorry for the delay. But my editors put in an amazing fourteen hour long stint to get this finished and to you. So please give them your thanks for their valuable time. I couldn't have possibly done this without them! As some may know, I got a new job teaching 11th graders. I honestly have no idea what my posting schedule will be like. Folks have work and Hinds has classes, but I'm going to keep chugging along for as long as I can and as long as you want me too. Thanks to so many who helped support me and this story. Though I won't be taking down the tip jar, it's just for gratitude now, not paying my bills. More precious is the feedback. I hope this was a decent chapter. As always, thanks and love to Kkat for creating FoE in the first place. And once again, huge thanks to Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for putting in the time and hard work to make this story what it is.)