

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 37: Winning and Losing

"Clock is ticking, Twilight! Clock! Is! TICKING!"

Sanguine grabbed the bleeding Charity by her mane and leapt out through the hole in the wall. I looked over at the struggling Glory and shouted over the din, "Lacunae! Get those off her!" Five words. Five little words. Then I was off, racing through the rainy night towards the bridge as fast as my cyberpony legs would carry me. I didn't slow, even as he did ahead of me; he turned to face me, but I didn't let him get one word out before I tackled him away from the prone filly. Smashing and kicking with my metallic limbs, I drove him back.

Pink vapor erupted from his mouth, but I knew that trick now. I held my breath and leaned my head away; it burned. Burned like nothing I'd ever felt before. But I couldn't worry about that as I kept focusing on moving him back and away from his hostage. Glory landed and immediately put a healing potion to the filly's lips.

"You fool! Give me the program!" he screamed in maddened fury.

"Only thing you get... is... mercy!" I shouted as I gave him one final applebuck that sent him flying across the word painted on the bridge. There was a red glow from the wall, then a blinding flash, and Sanguine was reduced to so much ash and washed into the river. "And you don't even deserve that, you undead fuck."

I limped back to where Glory was getting Charity to her hooves. "Took you long enough," the filly said, still a bit weakly. "I should be chargin' you a hero fine for taking so long."

"I... I came as fast as I could!"

"Yeah, yeah... sorry, not buying it. Five hundred caps."

"Oh, come on!" I whined. Glory smiled and we trotted back towards Chapel together.

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Yeah... why hadn't I done that?

I lay on my back on Marigold's bed, staring at the stars painted on her roof as I held the Rarity figurine to my chest. Right this second, Sanguine was doing whatever nefarious thing he'd been planning. Some horrible monster in the Hoof had woken up, and it was apparently my fault. Priest was rotting. Scotch was way more traumatized than she showed. P-21 was in shock. Glory was trying to hold us all together like a great big dysfunctional surrogate family. Even Rampage was hurt badly by the loss of Priest.

What does it mean when the sanest one of us is the alicorn who's the depository for Celestia-knows-how-many-ponies' unhappy memories?

I knew I shouldn't do this. I knew that I should be talking with my friends... or working towards

something... or... something... but not this. I couldn't help myself. I closed my eyes and sighed.

I'd failed.

That in itself wasn't anything new. In fact, I was quite the expert at screw ups, fuck ups, and various associated mistakes. But something about what had happened on that bridge bothered me in ways that failing to get out of hoofcuffs didn't. It was sticking with me, and I couldn't just shake it off. I lay there, knowing what I needed to do. It was just me having to get off this mattress and do it.

But I couldn't.

I needed to chase down Sanguine. I needed to be there for P-21 and Rampage. I needed to make sure Scotch was okay. I needed to take some of the weight off Glory's shoulders. I was drowning in all the things I needed to do. And all I did was shift on to my side and curl up. I wanted the Dealer to appear and say whatever I needed to hear to get moving again.

I had to get moving again. Because, as I lay there, I felt my mind sinking into memories. Scoodle torn in two... why hadn't I listened to her? Why hadn't I been more cautious? Going into the tunnels and ignoring the risk... why didn't we try and go around? Wait for Lacunae to fly or teleport us across? Convince Rivets... stop the Overmare...

Failure was my special talent, and I was doing it right now.

"Blackjack?" Glory said in her tiny voice. Brittle. I slowly lifted my head and saw her with a plate of blackened food. "I made you something... in case you were hungry." She trotted over slowly and put the charred Sugar Apple Bombs and Sparkle-Cola RAD cakes on the mattress beside me. I suspected that the four forks were part of the meal. I closed my eyes and lay my head back down.

"I'm sorry," Glory said softly behind me. "If I hadn't broken my rifle... you can't really snipe with a gatling weapon... and he had the gun to her head..." She finally went silent. "If I'd jumped when P-21 did... gone left instead of right... I wouldn't have gotten pinned. It's my fault."

Don't let her do this. Don't let her hurt herself. Hug her. Hold her. Tell her it was your fault. Try to make her laugh. Do something other than lie here! Move your ass and do something. Anything! But I couldn't. Sanguine had won. I'd lost. I might have saved Charity, but somehow I'd lost what I'd been fighting for. Somehow, it'd torn all the guts from me and left me hollow.

"I'm sorry..." she repeated, then trotted from the room. I clenched my eyes shut. I knew I wouldn't sleep. I couldn't use my horn to get away into a memory orb. Every second, Sanguine was getting farther and farther away and I was just lying here! Move, you worthless piece of shit! People need you. People believe in you! Do it!

I moved. I carefully pushed the plate into the garbage bin beside the bed and then curled back up. I looked at the Rarity figurine. She seemed to understand wallowing in... whatever ponies wallowed in. She had wanted a different life; had things been different, would she have wed Vanity? Become a mother? Been known for her fashion rather than for being a Ministry Mare? But she had done what she had to do. She'd toughed it out. I closed my eyes again, pressing my face into my pillow.

What was I doing? Moping in my room. I wanted P-21 and Rampage to come in here and kick my ass. Get me off this bed. Get me moving again. Something. And then, as if reading my mind, I

heard a soft knock, followed by, "Blackjack?" Rampage's voice. I didn't even take a look at her.

Things I should be doing right now: not lying here. Helping my friends. Hunting down that murderous son of a bitch. Something! Every second I lay here, he was getting farther away... making new monsters... about to flee to Red Eye... something. Get me up, Rampage. Get me drunk. Something. Anything!

Instead, she stood there for the longest time, and then she closed the door again. I guess there were some things Rampage couldn't do after all. I curled up till my nose touched my hind knees. I felt like I had at Star Point, only not capable of blowing my brains out any longer. I didn't want to die. I didn't want to do anything. I just wanted to get off this bed and go do what I had to do.

The Hoofington rain was pouring on the roof again. I was warm and dry, thanks to this gift from Priest. And here I was, moping and letting his killer get away. I thought of Dusty dying in my hooves and how disgusted she would have been. *What is wrong with me*, I thought as I clenched my eyes shut. Get up! Move your legs, you fucking loser! You fucking reject! You couldn't save Scoodle! You couldn't save 99! You can't save anypony lying in bed, you dumbass! Move! Move! Go! Do what you have to do! Do it!

Instead, I started to cry.

It'd been too much. Too much too fast... Not just my arrival back in the Hoof... but in Tenpony. And before that... on the boat... and then when I was trying to stop a war because I only had a few weeks to live. And the tunnel... P-21's suicide attempt... Star Point... For the last month, I'd been hit again and again, but no matter how horrible it was, I'd always felt like I was keeping on my hooves.

Of all the things I'd been through... this was what broke me? A bed?

Then the door opened a third time, and I felt his eyes on me. I knew they were hard and scornful. Hateful, even. I'd killed his first lover and now lay here crying when I should be going after the pony who'd killed his second. Do whatever you have to do, P-21. Anything. Yell at me. Hit me. Shoot me.

"Blackjack... we're going after Sanguine in the morning," he said in a voice infinitely softer than I deserved.

I just sniffled like a loser. "I'm sorry. I keep thinking about what I should have done."

I wanted him to hurt me. I knew the perfect line: 'Gee, Blackjack, I keep thinking about what you should have done too. Maybe... I dunno... not gotten the pony I loved killed? Again. That might have been a good idea.' Perfect zinger right now.

"We all are," was what he actually said. He sat on the edge of the bed. Maybe he'd shove me off and beat me while he was at it. I hated myself so much that I'd beat myself if I could figure out how to move. Instead, he simply rested his hoof on my shoulder. "You don't have to come with us."

I froze, my eyes opening to stare at the wall. *What?*

"Scotch has your Delta's PipBuck tag. Lacunae's going over to the manor to soak up enough radiation to teleport us to Zenith Bridge to try and cut him off, and as soon as we get there, she's going to find Stronghoof while Rampage rounds up whatever Reapers she can. We'll get it back." He patted my

shoulder. "Rest. We'll be back in no time."

I shook under his hoof; I didn't think I could tighten up any further. "I'm sorry, P-21." Come on, P-21. 'I'm sorry too. Sorry you're a failure. Sorry I didn't realize how weak you are. Sorry I never appreciated what a fuckup you are. Sorry you keep killing ponies I care about.' Come on, P-21! Say it.

"Don't worry about it," he said as he patted my shoulder again. "Rest up. We can take care of one ghoul."

Rest? Hadn't that been what Tenpony had been for? Or was that just an opportunity for me to make a jackass of myself? Talk to him! Speak, Blackjack! Tell him to drag you along. Tell him to beat you with a stick. Get out of that bed!

Instead, I closed my eyes. "Sure." Damn it, P-21. You promised...

He left, closing the door behind him. Maybe he was right. Maybe without me charging in all the time, they'd be better off. Zodiac had given her organs to the wrong pony. My mental paralysis fed my hate and my hate fed my paralysis. I had to move. I had to act... but I'd just get them killed. Hurt.

Because I was a fuckup.

A failure.

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I had no idea how long I lay there. I had no clock; my eyes were empty, familiar E.F.S. and annoying alert boxes alike gone. Scotch had tried to wire Marmalade's PipBuck into my leg, but it'd produced some sort of feedback that felt like a drill was going through my skull. Glory could make better use of it anyway. But, eventually, all my hating and loathing was boiling down to one simple, fundamental truth:

I had to go pee.

And that caused me to lift my head and slowly step off the bed and drove me... one step after the next... downstairs. The living room was empty save for Scotch and the strange dragon filly Precious curled up on the couch together. The dragon hybrid opened her purple slit-pupiled eyes and looked at me with cool detachment. I looked back a moment, and then she shrugged and lowered her head again.

I stepped out into the drizzly, wet night and trotted away to do my business. The cold air was sharp on my skin, and I had to admit that I found the chill refreshing. It didn't do much to get my mind off my problem, but as I looked up at the clouds over the city, their bottoms lit in that sickly green glow, I felt some of the weight on my mind shift. I didn't feel any better, but at least for the moment I'd beaten myself up so much that I'd worn myself out.

Stepping back inside a moment later, I looked at the strange unicorn filly. She looked back at me. "Can't sleep either?" I whispered, glancing at Scotch. The hybrid gave a little shrug. "Don't talk much?" She resumed staring at me. I couldn't help myself as I gave a little half smile and said, "Got some zebra in you?" That got me a sullen, half-lidded look. A little tongue of green flame was snorted in my direction. "Right. Good talk." She lowered her head back down next to Scotch's.

I trotted back up to the room. There was the mattress. It seemed to be pulling me towards it. Lie

down, give up, give in... and I wanted to. I'd failed Dusty, Priest, and myself by letting Sanguine get away. Why hadn't I tried to drag P-21 along? Why hadn't I simply gone back for my bags? Said something to get him to take the gun off Sonata? The questions kept piling up and piling up; they made me want to scream. I looked at the mirror in the corner. At myself.

I felt such an absolute loathing just then. Not of myself, oddly enough, but of my cutie mark. An ace and a queen. What did that mean? That I was three cards short of a winning hand? That I was better off with card tricks? Was that my special talent? I should have a cutie mark of a dead pony... no... a dead filly torn in two. That would sum me up perfectly. ...Actually, no, this worked: even my cutie mark was a complete failure. I didn't deserve it. It was all wrong for me and I hated it.

There was a soft thump in the corner, making me jump a little. I looked at Octavia's contrabass for the longest time; I supposed that, when I'd shut the door, it'd shifted and thumped against the wall. I walked towards it with hesitant steps and gently plucked the strings. I could almost imagine my heart, or whatever lump of machinery I now possessed in place of a heart, twanging in response. Another string. And another. I wasn't really playing anything as I looked at the gleaming wires. Slowly, I stood it upright and reached over with my hoof to pick up the black-haired bow, still holding it as I had when I was all pony. I rested my cheek upon the knob of wood at the top for one moment, then started to play.

I didn't have a particular song in mind, just letting the deep notes rise and fall however seemed natural at the time. It was sad music, but that seemed appropriate. I imagined that Octavia had always been a serious pony. Fussy. Like Velvet Remedy and P-21 combined. I imagined her practicing just like this; had she loved it? Hated it? No... I smiled a little to myself. She might have hated making music into a career, but she'd never hated the music itself.

Closing my eyes, I could imagine myself on a stage in front of thousands. Sometimes alone, where every note was criticized and analyzed. Sometimes with others, where the whole became so much more vital than the individual. I thought that Octavia would have preferred playing alongside others; I remembered how rich and how beautiful the instrument had sounded with Lacunae, Medley, and... Priest.

For a moment, I stopped and just held the contrabass as if it were all that kept me upright. Right now, it probably was. The smooth wood was warm against my cheek. I hurt so damn much. I'd done worse than failed... I'd lost. But the cost of winning would have been two lives, not one. Couldn't I take solace in that? Shouldn't I? I felt an overwhelming urge then and there to put the instrument away forever. Give it to the Crusaders, who could appreciate it. Not me. Not now. Not ever...

My hoof must have slipped, because the contrabass gave another sour thrum as my hoof brushed it. I sniffed and, stilling a little, I straightened and lifted the bow once more. Again I played, and I imagined Octavia playing later in her life, after her peace concert ruined her career. I imagined her playing to smaller and smaller audiences. Dingier and plainer theatres. Then, one day, she was alone in her tiny apartment above Mixers.

Had she looked at herself then, seen her own cutie mark and felt the same sense of failure? So much work, time, and suffering, now all for nothing? I suspected she had. I suspected that she'd looked at her musical cutie mark and felt the same disgust I did. Had she raged? Had she wept? Or did she simply, silently, quit inside? Like me?

I wondered if that was when Rarity had found her. Lost and alone and at her worst, Octavia had probably been thankful for any help that could be extended to her. I imagined her leaving with Rarity and,

when she returned, struggling to make her music work. Hoofing it back and forth from Flank to the manor in the rain, taking the bus wagon whenever she could. Not giving up. Because as long as she was playing, there was hope. She was still Octavia.

In those final minutes in her apartment in Flank, with radiation poisoning her, what had she played? I tried to imagine it, and my hoof moved accordingly. Regret came off the strings. Frustration marred the notes. But finally... *finally*... peace. Even as her body sickened and failed... peace. And then she'd neatly put her instrument away, sealed it up, lain down, and died. The last note seemed to echo forever in my heart long after my ears stopped hearing it.

"It's not time to give up," I whispered, not sure where the words were coming from as I rested my cheek on the strings. "You've come so far, and you have so much farther to go." I stared at my reflection, at my cutie mark. "Priest wouldn't want you like this. He knew you shouldn't be here, alone, hating yourself. You know what you need to do... so... get off your rump and do it," I said to my own reflection as I held the contrabass in my hooves.

The question was... how? I set the instrument in the corner and sighed. I wanted to just grab a bag of gems, climb up on the bed again, and munch on them till I didn't feel anything anymore. I was a little snacky... then, as I started to suckle on a cinnamony ruby, I wondered if Spike liked rubies as well.

I spat out the gooey, half-dissolved gem and stared at it a moment. Then I looked back over my shoulder at the door. What if... no, it was stupid. It wouldn't help... wouldn't work... but...

I trotted back downstairs, my bag of gems tossed over my shoulder. Carefully, I fished out an amethyst and extended the purple gem towards Precious. She looked at it skeptically, her horn glowed, and the purple filly floated it to her. She looked confused. I hoped this would work. I lifted my half-ingested ruby and popped it into my mouth. For a moment, she looked at me like I were crazy, then put the purple gem in her mouth. At once her eyes popped wide in shock.

Apparently, giving fillies mildly addictive substances was really effective! In another life, I must have been a Dash dealer or something. Two more gems later and she followed me back up into my room. "So... Precious... can we talk?" She gave me that confused and slightly guarded look. "I mean, can you talk? You seem to be understanding me so..."

She swallowed the emerald she'd been chewing on, then replied in a surprisingly soft voice. "Yes. I talk."

"So... how'd Sanguine turn you into... this?" I asked as I gestured to her. She drew back, frowning. I raised my hooves. "Not that there's anything wrong with you. I'm just wondering how it happened." That mollified her enough that she relaxed.

"Born sick. Bad bones. Doc made me part dragon to make me better. Ponies thought I was a freak. I am. Got in a fight. Doc put me to sleep." She looked to the window. "Woke up... told me I had to help him... said no... he said he'd make me normal pony again."

"Well... that was nice of him," I said, but she looked sour once again. "Saving you, I mean..."

"The pretty yellow pony lady talked him into it. I guess ponies and dragons don't mix." She looked at her spade-tipped tail. "When I got into fights with some ponies that teased me, I got put to sleep

with the others.”

“How’d you get to Chapel? Did you walk or fly or…”

“We went through tunnels. Bad scary tunnels. When we got outside, we met those kitty birds.” Tunnels. Crap. “We were walking a long time, though. Had to hide lots.” If my friends planned on tracking my PipBuck, then it would mean going back underground. Nothing good came from going underground in this place. Knowing Sanguine, he’d be setting up all sorts of traps and nasty things.

Theoretically, I knew where Hippocratic Research was from the tag the professor had given me. Between Zenith Bridge and Toll on the east side of the river. Realistically, there were several square miles it could be in, and who knew what we’d face in that bombed out and blasted ruin? If Sanguine was taking tunnels, then they wouldn’t be able to cut him off at the bridge. It could take another day of searching to find more Reapers or Rangers…

“Precious, do you have a lot of memories of the building and stuff?” She scowled, but nodded. I felt a little surge of triumph! If this worked, then when Sanguine got back home, we’d be waiting for him!

“Yes, some.” Clearly not happy memories. “I was normally kept in my room. I wanted to go around outside, but Mister Sanguine told me I wasn’t allowed to go ‘cause the trees were bad.”

“The trees were bad?” I echoed with a frown. “How so?”

“They try and eat you.” She gave a shrug, then blew a little tongue of green flame. “Can I have another?” she asked as she pointed at my stash of gems. I pushed the bag at her, and she picked out another amethyst.

“So the trees are bad. Anything else?” I wanted to take notes.

“Monsters,” she said simply.

“Erm… what kind of monsters?” Given what I’d seen so far, that really didn’t narrow things down.

“Just monsters. The bad kind all over the place. Bugs. Plants. Doggies,” she said simply, as if I were stupid for thinking there were any other kinds. “There’s also the fatties… they look like ponies, but they’re all big and dumb. Lots of fatties working for the Doc. Cora always likes killing them. She’s creepy.” I’d noticed. The filly rubbed her chin again before adding absently, “And there’s the poison stuff.”

“Poison?”

“Well, there’re two kinds.” One wasn’t enough? “One is all rainbow goopiness… doesn’t do much to ponies like me and Cora, though. Sometimes the fatties get in it and it makes ‘em even weirder. Those red ponies once fell in some and got all mutated up. Doc put ‘em down with his poison breath. That’s this nasty pink gas… There’s clouds of it way down in the bottom. Only Doc goes down there.” She smirked, her pointed teeth glittering. “Doc said I wasn’t supposed to wander around, but I did anyway. Broke a bunch o’ stuff, too.” She gave a little shrug. It seemed to be the filly’s default gesture.

I actually laughed a little at that. Then I thought a little more about what Psychoshy had said. “Hey, Precious? Psychoshy said that there was something bad after Sanguine… and he said that I’d

woken something in the Core.”

“Oh... well, yeah, he was screaming about that. I dunno what started it. I was asleep then. But I guess when some big ship blew up... well, he went crazy. He said that if some program thingy was blowed up, then nothing would stop some bad thing in the city from coming out and eating everypony or something. I didn't really pay attention, though. A whole lotta ponies wanted to hurt him.”

I wonder why. “Did he ever say anything about why he wanted the program?”

“Just that he needed it to fix things. I dunno what, though... nothing I broke, I think.” I frowned... that sounded a lot different from what I'd heard before: making monsters and using the Wasteland as his own personal laboratory. Or selling Chimera to Red Eye.

I took a stab in the dark. “Did he mention a pony named Goldenblood or any special secret project?”

“Oh yeah! He called him every name I knew and a whole lot of other really bad things. He was going on and on about that Goldie pony screwin' everything up 'cause of something he did. Said it was gonna kill us all.” She looked out the window again towards the city. “Dunno how bad it is. Good strong fart would kill most of this place.”

I nodded and sat there. I was still feeling that lethargy, but now that I was moving, it began to fall behind. I'd blown a hand, but I wasn't busted yet. Almost... but not quite yet. I was ready to ante up once again. “Thanks for talking to me, Precious.”

“Sure,” Precious murmured. “You sure you're not going to do anything?”

“Mhmmm...” I said with a nod, then walked her back downstairs. Scotch Tape blinked owlishly at our arrival.

“Oh, you were talking to Blackjack,” she said softly as she rubbed her eyes with her hoof. “Hey... Blackjack? Do you have any more of those mint candies? They were really good.”

“Ah... no. Sorry Scotch. Afraid we'd have to go back to Tenpony to get some more. Or you can try and take Rampage's,” I suggested with a smile. She didn't return it.

“I was just hoping... if I took it... maybe P-21'd talk to me,” she said. “They made me feel like... I knew... like... just what to say. Now I just feel like one big lump of stupid.”

I sighed and sat beside her. “You're not allowed to think of yourself as a big lump of stupid till you get somepony who doesn't deserve it killed, okay young lady?” I asked in mock sternness. She still wasn't smiling, and I shook. A part of me... a big part... wanted to just curl back up on that bed. I was just going to screw her up even more. I mean, I'd given her drugs to try and win... and sure, it'd worked, but now she was paying the price for luring Precious away from Sanguine. Paying the price for my mistake.

I felt it; it was almost like gravity pulling me down, but it was all inside my brain. And it would be so easy just to give in and let it sweep me away. But Scotch was here, and she needed help. I could give her that. “Come here, Scotch,” I said as I pulled her into a hug and patted her mane. Precious just looked on silently, wistfully. I lifted Scotch's chin and looked into her green eyes. “It's not you, okay? It's

not. It's not that you're not smart enough or nice enough."

"But I don't understand why he won't talk to me about it. About Momma. About anything!" She sniffed as she looked away.

"Listen," I murmured softly. "When a pony gets hurt really badly... it changes them. The flesh and blood heal... but some things we experience stay with us. And we stay hurt. It makes us angry... and scared. Makes us hate ourselves for being weak. You remember what happened on the boat?"

She cringed. "I... I heard what they were doing. I wanted to help but you told me to hide and you were screaming and... and... they nailed you to the floor!" She looked anguished. "You were doing all that to... to save me. To keep them from doing that. I heard the noise and what they called you and you screaming. And then they were beating you and all I could do was cry... I was useless."

"No, Scotch. No," I said as I held her in my hooves. "You weren't useless. You kept me going. As long as you were okay, what they did to me didn't really matter. It hurt... hurt a damned lot... and I think it'll always hurt. But so long as you were okay, I was able to take it. If something... anything... had happened to you, then I wouldn't have been able to go on." I brushed her mane gently. "You're the one I saved, Scotch."

"Twice," she murmured. Then she looked over at P-21's room. "So... he was once hurt like you were?"

"Something like that," I said softly. "But where I was only hurt for an hour or so, he was hurt his entire life. It's hard. That hurt doesn't go away. He has to carry it wherever he goes. But he wants to talk to you, Scotch Tape. I know he does. He's just scared... and that makes him angry. It's easier to push everypony away and bottle up what he feels inside. It's not you, Scotch. It just isn't."

"I guess..." she said, still not convinced. "Are you sure you don't have more of those Mint-al thingies though?" She flushed at my look, then stammered, "For him! Not me... though... I really liked them."

"Like I said. You want more? Get them from Rampage," I said, and I just hoped that the Reaper had the sense not to give her any!

"Awww... okay..." She nodded and started back towards the couch, but I cleared my throat. She looked back at me, and I nodded to the front door. She looked from me to the door, then blushed bright red, nodded, and trotted out.

I turned and walked quietly to the door to P-21's room, knocking with a hoof before I pushed it open. I knew he'd be awake; after what had happened to Priest, who could sleep? He lay on his bed with Priest's sketches spread out before him. At the sight of me, he gave a look of surprise followed by the smallest of smiles. "Hey, you're back." I was surprised to see Rampage with him; but then, she'd loved Priest too.

"I went somewhere?" I said as I trotted towards him.

"For a while, you were back on that mattress right after Scoodle died," he murmured softly. "Less shit and vomit and radiation poisoning... but still back there, all the same."

"Yeah. Had to go pee," I murmured.

"I thought you wet the bed," Rampage teased with a little smirk. It didn't reach her eyes. Her cutie mark was that strange amorphous roiling blob.

"These days I don't even want to imagine what comes out my rear end. Think it might be somewhere between magical waste and flamer fuel," I said as I glanced back at my rump. Then I saw the concern in his eyes and sighed. "It's been a crazy month, hasn't it? Who knew life outside the stable would be like this?"

"Sometimes it doesn't really seem so different," he replied.

"You should have been here thirty years or so back. You think it's a mess now? Imagine every block being held by a different gang or tribe. You couldn't piss without somepony blowing your flank off," Rampage replied. "No Finders. No Reapers. No Eggheads. Just ponies killing ponies for a few more blocks to scavenge."

"It must have been a trick to start Chapel in the middle of all that," I murmured softly. "Just the two of you."

"Originally it was just Priest, this scrawny little black unicorn looking to avoid being pressed into the Halfhearts. He was actually trying to fix that ratty church up; it seemed crazy to me. Why build in a wasteland where everything was dead and falling apart? The world was pain and blood and hatred, yet there he was trying to help me. I didn't get it... couldn't understand it. I thought, when he brought me home to Star House, that he was going to just fuck my ass like every other stallion. But he wanted to help. He really did. Like Scalpel and Bonesaw, the wandering miracle doctors." She sighed and shook her head. "I fell in love with him, and he was young enough and good enough to think he was in love with me. Had to get him drunk our first time, though. It was nice for a few months... but he was faking it. And so was I. But by then I was pregnant." She sighed and gave me a sad, regretful smile. "I wouldn't recommend it, personally. Threw a whole world of awkward into an already weird thing."

"And then what happened?" P-21 asked in quiet, polite tones. I winced, but she simply smiled; maybe a little sadder.

"When we realized that it wasn't working out, I thought of leaving, but... even if I hadn't been pregnant, we already had a dozen fillies and colts living in the post office. Pilgrims came to off themselves at the bridge, and they'd give Priest their caps and supplies. He'd give them a friendly ear. Halfhearts tried to take the town, but I convinced them not to. I think it was Priest they respected, though. They really go for the whole stoic thing." She nudged P-21. "They'd love you."

He flushed and looked away. "I just... wish we could have been more."

I sighed softly. "I'm sorry about Priest. I thought when I trotted in that I'd see Sanguine and just... blam. Or that I'd get the ghoul talking and jump him... or insult his mother and get him to shoot me instead. Or something." I closed my eyes. "I just kept seeing him blowing Sonata's brains out... Charity dying... him hiding behind Priest so I couldn't get a good shot. And then Vermilion was there threatening to blow everypony up." I shivered, continuing, "I was so certain that he was going to kill her. I was positive that, any second, I'd see her die. That the price to beat him was her death."

"I think Priest saw it too," P-21 said quietly. "He knew that, if he didn't act, somepony would die,

and so he had to stop him. It was the kind of thing he'd do..."

I patted his shoulder. "Sorry I fell apart like that."

"Why did you?" Rampage asked softly. "You've been through more in a month than... anypony, I think. Was it Priest dying? Losing EC-1101? What I did?" That got a look from P-21.

"Ugh. You want me to be introspective?" I groaned, but they kept looking at me, expecting an answer. I looked away, to the drawings that Priest had made. Why did he have the cutie mark he did and not a pencil or sketch or something? Was it because his talent was believing in Celestia? In acting as kind and understanding as she had been? "I don't know. It was like... like suddenly, all I could think about was that I'd screwed up. That I'd blown everything. And I felt like I was absolutely the worst pony for trying to help anypony." I shook my head. "It was Scoodle and 99 all over again."

"It's just a setback," Rampage said with a smirk and a shrug. "The important thing is that we keep going. Right?"

"Right," I said. Then I looked at P-21 and smiled. "By the way... when are you going to talk to Scotch Tape about... everything?"

He sighed, his smile sliding away. "Eventually. Not right now. Not with everything. But soon."

"She's kinda already figured it out. She's a smart kid like that," I said with a smile. "Gets it from her parents."

"Ughhh..." He looked at me with his grumpy frown. "Parent. I hate that word."

"Why?" Rampage asked in amusement.

He looked at his hooves. "Because, back in 99, we weren't allowed to be parents. I was told I impregnated twenty-nine mares in ten years, but I was never told which ones. Sometimes I'd be walking to an assignment and pass by a filly or see a new colt brought in and wonder... is that mine? Did I help make that? We were never 'daddies' or 'fathers' or anything like that. We never got to be part of our children's lives... We were..."

"Studs?" Rampage suggested with a grin.

"I hate you, you know that?" he muttered.

"No you don't," she replied. "You don't like that I don't take what happened to you as seriously as you do." I covered my snicker behind a hoof, and she thumped my head with her own. "And don't you think you're off the hook, either. I swear, the three of you..."

"We're from Stable 99," he said with a little shrug.

I sighed and I looked at him. "You know what I think? I think that you're just like me." He leaned away from me looking vaguely insulted and suspicious. "I think that you've got something no stallion in 99 had: a chance at knowing your own children. And you are terrified of fucking it up. And as one expert on fuck ups to another... you are fucking it up. She's a smart girl. She knows you're her father, and she wants you in her life. But a few more months... maybe even a few more weeks of you ignoring it... and

she won't want you anymore."

He looked at his hooves, ears drooping. Rampage sighed sympathetically and patted his shoulder. "Not easy, either way."

I stood and shook myself. "Anyway... I have a mare I need to apologize to. Think it over, P-21. And if you want my advice... and I can understand if you don't, but... don't wait."

I left them to talk and trotted back upstairs. No pony was getting any sleep tonight. I knocked on Glory's door. She opened it almost at once, her eyes wide and fearful. She mirrored my apologetic smile. "I hope my playing didn't wake you up."

"No... not at all," she murmured softly.

"May I come in?" I asked, hoping my sheepish smile overcame the immense awkwardness I was feeling. She stepped back from the door, and I stepped in. I was guessing that this had been Tarot's bedroom once upon a time; there were still quite a few boxes of old toys and the like.

"Are you feeling better?" she asked as she led me over and we sat on her bed. She looked at me curiously, cocking her head. "You look a little better."

"Yes." I looked at her a moment. "Kinda..." Another moment, and then I sighed and looked away. "Not really... but I'm moving again. And as long as I'm moving, there's hope. So, kinda better..."

"You're sure?" She stroked my cheek in concern. "Really really sure?"

I nodded. "Yup."

"Good. Then I don't feel quite so bad for this," she said as she looked me in the eyes with a loving smile, pulled back a little, and hit me so hard upside the head that I went flopping clear off the other side of the bed. "What in Equestria were you thinking? Giving highly addictive mind-altering chemicals to a filly like that? You know, there was a time when I thought that Med-X was bad. And I squirmed... *squirmed*... at administering a dose of Hydra. Now it's chems chems chems! And I actually sat by and let you! What in Equestria was I thinking? I'd be stripped of any medical license for the rest of my life if any pony back in Thunderhead found out!"

I blinked up at her and couldn't help laughing as she looked down at me. "And now I'm hitting you! And you're laughing!" She looked down at me sternly. "No more chems unless the pony at least has his or her cutie mark! I mean it!"

I reached up and pulled her off the bed and onto me for some snugglage. I knew that what she wanted was the right thing to do, but a nasty little part of me muttered in the back of my mind, insisting that giving Scotch the PTM was also the right thing to do. And no matter how much I tried, I couldn't quite shut it up.

* * *

Contrary to what some might expect, we didn't engage in lecherous activities. Neither of our hearts was in it. We lay together, cuddling, till she nodded off. Since my body didn't really have to sleep, I got the primer and went through the magic exercises. They talked about imagining your magic as a breath pushing against a leaf; I was at least not a complete failure at that one. Then as your magic like a

mouth closing on something to move it. I had to admit, even this old book with its cute little pictures and bold print was better than weeks of listening to Textbook drone on about simply 'doing it right'. I'd never thought of magic as something I could do. It was always something somepony else could do better.

By the time morning arrived, I was able to turn the pages of the book consistently... half the time. Hey, it was still progress.

Glory was quite happy to discover that Precious was every bit as appreciative of her cooking as I was. Only Glory would be considerate and determined enough to smash up an emerald and mix it into an omelet. I wondered where she'd gotten the eggs for it, then decided against asking her. Rampage chipped a tooth and promptly went back to her raw bloatsprite; an acquired taste, to be sure.

P-21 and Scotch Tape were playing the look, look away game. One would look. See the other. Both would look away. It was all I could do not to scream... but, considering how I'd been last night, I supposed that I was the last person to have a right to criticize anypony needing time and space to themselves. Still, both of them got put on washing the dishes; quite a chore after Glory's cooking. Maybe that'd help P-21 overcome his reticence.

Talking with Precious, it was clear that she didn't know where she should go, only that returning to Sanguine with us was last on her list of interests. "You know, Precious... I can't say for sure, but I know that the Crusaders could certainly use your fwoosh around here." The purple dragon filly blinked at me in confusion, and I looked over at Scotch. "And I think that you should stay too, Scotch. Just so nothing goes wrong."

"You want me to leave?" she gasped, her bowl of Sugar Apple Bombs forgotten as she stood on her seat.

"No, I think it'll be better for Precious and Charity if you stick around and help out," I tried to say as reasonably and casually as possible. I looked over at Glory and P-21 for help.

Of course, Rampage didn't help any as she gave a bloatsprite-flavored belch and said, "Eh, let her come if she wants. She's a tough kid."

Glory smiled at Scotch. "Don't you want to try see if you can make that toilet idea of yours work?" I blinked at the two of them in surprise. "It'll be a big improvement for the town over... using the ditch beside the road." She actually shuddered! Huh? What was wrong with the ditch? I mean, I loved plumbing as much as the next mare but... wait... suddenly, that thought led to the question of how Thunderhead handled its sewage. Now I was shuddering... I'd never look at the rain the same way again.

"Sure... after I get my cutie mark!" Scotch said very matter-of-factly. "Face it, no pony wants a toilet cutie mark. I mean the only thing worse would be like a pile of poop cutie mark. That's about it."

"I think any cutie mark is fine, as long as it's yours," Glory said quietly as she glanced back at her flank and the scarred patch where once she'd sported a sunrise. Then she sighed and pushed on. "In any case, Precious has told us about the numerous threats around and under Hippocratic Research." Scotch had confirmed that my PipBuck tag was still north of us.

"Monsters. Poison. Long as none of them are machinery, I'm fine," Scotch said dismissively as she pinched the bowl in her hooves and lifted it to her lips to slurp down the sugary sludge left at the

bottom. When she finished, she smirked at me with a milky mustache. The source of the milk was another thing I'd decided I might not want to know. "In fact... Precious actually gave me an idea of how to take care of it. Both the rainbow stuff and the pink stuff can get washed out with rain."

"That's a trick underground," Rampage murmured. "Not a lot of rain clouds down there."

"No, but if it's anything like a stable, it'll have fire prevention systems. If you set those off, then it'll wash the rainbow junk down the drain and clear the pink junk out of the air," Scotch said with a smug grin. "You know how to do that?"

"Provided they work and you can get to the control system, I'd test purge the whole system," Glory replied coolly.

"Oh yeah? And if the controls don't work? What then?" Scotch asked with a challenging frown.

"Use incendiary rounds to set them off one by one or zone by zone," Glory retorted.

"And if they've been manually shut off?"

"Look for big red valves, naturally. Standard colorization for fire systems."

"And if they're corroded shut?"

"Oil, a wrench, and a good hard knock," Glory countered without missing a beat. "Can *you* tell *me* how to set up an IV drip system into the subclavian vein?"

The filly blinked. "That's not plumbing!"

"Pipes are pipes, in a stable or in the body."

Scotch was silent a moment, pursing her lips, and then said grudgingly, "Yeah, well... you're still boring."

"Just because I've--"

Scotch folded her forelegs on the table. "Nope. Boring! Putting me to sleep." She started to snore loudly.

"Look, Scotch, I'm not saying--"

"Bor... snnnnrrrgg... ing... Skrrrrrkkk..."

"Blackjack! She's from your stable. Tell her I'm not boring," Glory whined as she batted her eyes at me.

I put my hooves around the gray pegasus's waist and tugged her close. "Honestly, considering what's happened to me so far... I'm glad you're on the calm and rational side of things." I pressed my lips to hers, and she made a delightful little murr in the back of her throat.

"Ewww!" Precious wrinkled her nose in disgust, then looked at Scotch, who blinked at her in confusion. "Aren't you grossed out?"

"Huh? What's gross about that? I always saw mares kissing mares back in the stable." She crossed her hooves. "Now kissin' stallions... that's gross."

"Oh, it isn't so bad," P-21 murmured idly. Then he blinked and looked at Rampage grinning ear to ear at him. "No... no no..." She pounced at him kissing wildly, and he barely leapt onto the table and off the other side in time. Rampage made the whole table bounce as she dove beneath it and chased after him. He dove to his bag and dug out a magic grenade. "Back! Back I say..." He waved it at her.

"Shouldn't we all be really alarmed by this?" Glory asked with a concerned little frown.

"Bor... ing..." Scotch sang out. But the two fillies took cover under the table all the same.

"I swear to Celestia, if you try and kiss me, I will give you a second childhood! Or fifth... or whatever childhood you're on!" he said as he kept the grenade outthrust in a hoof. But, more than anything, he was smiling. Maybe it was a little manic... maybe his eyes looked a touch sad... but he was smiling.

Rampage rubbed her chin. "Probably be worth it..." She leaned towards him, kissing the air, and he pressed the grenade to her lips.

Then the door opened and Lacunae walked in. Her purple eyes widened at the mess on the table, the girls peeking out from under it, Glory and I cuddling, and Rampage kissing the green-banded apple. She nearly glowed with power... strike that... she was glowing with power. I heard the clicking going off on the PipBucks on both Glory and Scotch's hooves. "Am I interrupting?" Her purple magic surrounded the grenade, plucked it from P-21's hooves, and gently put it back into his saddlebag.

"Yes, and it's probably a good thing you are," I replied.

She looked right at me and smiled, her voice speaking softly in my mind. "I knew you only needed a little time and you'd be back. You never lose."

"I did this time. Look, I talked with Precious, and Sanguine is using the tunnels to travel." Then I looked at the little dragon filly and smiled. "But Precious here has been all over Hippocratic Research. So if you take a peek inside her noggin, we can teleport straight there! We might show up before he has a chance to do anything bad!"

"You want her to do what?" Precious said as she jumped to her hooves, a plume of green flame flashing out of her mouth. "Forget it! I don't want anypony poking around in my head. That's what the doctors did after I got in fights!"

Lacunae looked at me and I felt a stab of irritation. "Precious, we really need this--"

"Don't care," the filly said. "That's what the nurses did! Kept messing with my head to make me happy and feel better. Tried to make me think everypony was my friend. Well, they're not. And you're not either!"

"Look!" I smacked the table with my hoof. "You were working for our enemy, but we took you in. I even shared some gems with you. All I'm asking for is enough memories of that place so that Lacunae can teleport us there. We don't care about what happened to you two hundred years ago!"

A strange silence filled the room, and I suddenly became aware that everypony was staring... at

me. "Blackjack..." Glory said in soft concern. "It matters to her."

A part of me wanted to scream. This was what we had to do to win! I knew that Sanguine was probably rigging as many traps and perils as he could in the tunnels. Maybe if we gave her some Moon Dust or something we could make her tractable enough that she'd cooperate. I really didn't want to have to pin her down while Lacunae dug around in her head for... what we...

What the *fuck* was wrong with me? Seriously... what the fuck?

I had to close my eyes. What part of my brain contemplated pinning a filly down or drugging her and forcing her to give up memories... traumatize her to get what I wanted? Was any wrong permissible so long as, in the end, I won? If that were true, then there wasn't a difference between me and Deus or Sanguine, now was there? He'd taken fillies hostage... killed Priest! Was all that okay simply because he wanted to win? Should I have taken Psychoshy hostage? Killed her just to beat him?

But Sanguine had won... and I'd lost. It was like a splinter in my mind. I needed to win so badly... to make all those deaths matter. To make everything I'd sacrificed matter. If I couldn't...

"Precious, I'm sorry I said that," I said softly. "We want to stop Sanguine and get back what he took from me. I was hoping we could teleport straight there and be waiting for him. I shouldn't have tried to use you like that."

The purple dragon hybrid glared at me hard. Clearly, I wasn't going to be on her 'Friends' list any time soon.

"Precious... can you give us a memory that will put us close?" Scotch Tape asked. Precious gave the concerned filly the same steely stare for a moment, then softened and dropped her gaze.

"I remember a park. I wouldn't mind remembering that place," she said softly as she looked up at the large alicorn. "Can you just look at that one memory? I don't want people to see... see anything else." Lacunae gave a gracious nod, and together they trotted outside.

"What was that all about?" P-21 asked me. "'I don't care'? Since when do you not care?" Rampage seemed equally shocked. Glory simply looked concerned. "You cared about Psychoshy, for Luna's sake! How could you care about her and not what's happened to Precious?"

I closed my eyes. "I want to beat Sanguine. Pay him back for all the shit he's done." I needed to win! Didn't they understand that?

"Well, not much point in beating him if you turn into him," Rampage muttered as she trotted away to her room. "I better go get into my armor. I can just tell it's gonna be another shitty day in Hoofington."

"Blackjack, Priest wouldn't want you to hurt Precious just to get Sanguine. Please... try to keep it together," P-21 said as he returned to his room as well.

Keep it together, he says. Wasn't he supposed to be the angry one? The one who wanted revenge? I shook my head. I didn't want to mess with foals and the like. I just wanted to win.

* * *

Once Lacunae had the memory of the park, I'd introduced Precious to the Crusaders. The

interview consisted of the question 'got any folks or anypony else you can stay with?' After that, Charity suggested that Precious help out cleaning up some of the mess from the fight. We didn't really need any more supplies yet, but I bought a Sparkle-Cola anyway. Charity looked at me a moment, rubbing her chin. "Twenty percent, I think..."

"A twenty percent discount?" I grinned in response. I should have saved Charity's life ages ago!

She smirked as I took a drink. "Naw. Twenty percent Chapel reconstruction tax. Twenty-four caps. Pay up!" she said as she held out a hoof.

Every single cap would be hers someday. Every... single... cap...

* * *

A flash later, we were back on the north end of the Hoof in the middle of a rusted and smashed playground. I was glad there weren't a lot of little pony skeletons lying around; I guessed everypony here had cleared out at the sirens. The park was little more than a dead square of trees and benches overlooked by a large billboard of Pinkie Pie. 'Come on, everypony! Smile! Smile! Smile!' read the caption beneath her huge grinning head. Her eyes seemed to add 'or else'.

Looking north, I could see the bow of the *Celestia* pointed out of the water. It was still smoldering; I had to wonder what was left of it days later. The *Applejack* was nowhere to be seen; had it returned to Trottingham? The naval base still smoked as well. I borrowed P-21's binoculars and I looked more closely; sure enough, there were scavengers picking through the remains of the base. Worse, I spotted two groups with those black and green tower banners.

Something I'd have to nip in the bud later. Looking west, I could see a thick tangle of dead, gnarled trees. Briars and brambles snaked between the hard, cracked branches. I didn't have an E.F.S. -- I wanted Glory and Scotch to have the advantages the PipBuck offered, even ignoring the feedback from trying to wire another PipBuck into me -- but I knew that, if I still had one, these woods would be one nasty mess of red bars. Something inside the forest let out a screech. I could make out, on the other side of the trees, the distant, and intact, roof of a single large building. It had a far more classical look than the rest of the Hoof, with a central peak that rose far above the treeline. It had to be three stories at least. From the way the trees burst through the thick, rusty bars surrounding the property, I suspected that the woods had been one of the few places to grow despite the radiation.

"Right! So, Lacunae flies us over onto the roof! Good plan!" I said as I clapped my hooves together.

"Not so fast," Glory said as she peered at the sky. "We're a lot higher up than usual. I don't think Lacunae should fly anywhere." I looked at her flatly, and she pointed up at the sky. Nothing... clouds... She tapped my binoculars, and I had a second look. Through them I could see a black, tapering spike. She pointed out a second... and a third. "I really don't think we should take the risk."

I sighed. "Okay. So, then, Lacunae teleports us all onto the roof."

"That is a possibility," Lacunae said, and I wanted to give a little cheer. "However, it will utterly exhaust my magical reserves. We won't be able to teleport out if something goes wrong."

Urrgh... "Maybe a tunnel?" They all looked at me like I was crazy. We'd have to go

underground anyway... ugh, but they were right. There wasn't anything good to be gained from going underground unless we absolutely had to. "Okay... Scotch, on my back. Rampage, up front. P-21, watch our backs. Lacunae on the left and Glory on the right. Let's try to get through this without anypony dying."

"Yeah, that'd be a good thing," the olive filly said with a pleased smile.

I looked up over my shoulder at her. "Seriously, Scotch. I know you really want to come with us, and I know you want to show how tough you are, but I can still have Lacunae poof you back to Star House."

She sat up. "I solemnly swear that I will do everything in my power to not die." She crossed her chest with her hoof before dropping the serious look and smiling again.

I sighed, muttering, "Better not. You do and you're grounded." After Dusty and Priest, I didn't want to think of anything happening to her.

"Don't worry. I'm tough, just like Security!" she said with a grin as she looked down at me, "Now, let's get going!" she said brightly. Great... now I was a role model!

Glory checked to see P-21 talking about something with Rampage before she looked at me with a smile. "She wants to prove herself to him. You know that's why she's here," she said, keeping her voice down. Scotch pointedly ignored both of us after that.

"I know, Glory. I just don't want her ending up a corpse in the process." One day I'd grow enough of a spine to tell her 'no' despite her big, tear-filled green eyes.

We found the front gate. The trees had bent and twisted the metal bars as they'd grown around them, and the road had been reduced to a single crumbled asphalt track. A large concrete slab stood beside it, a thick thorny root splitting it right down the middle. 'Hippocratic Research: Bringing new discoveries effectively, efficiently, and ethically to you.' At the bottom: 'M.W.T. Subsidiary.' On a hunch, I stomped down the weeds and brambles at the base. There, stamped in letters almost obliterated by the passage of time, were the words 'O.I.A. Affiliate'.

Yeah. This place looked right up Goldenblood's alley.

"Come on," I murmured as we moved into the dead trees. The forest appeared to cover only a square mile or so... not that far to walk to the center, right? As we slowly walked along the trail, the normal Hoofington gloom was cut down to a hazy twilight. In the distance there were crunches and pops and a strange growl. "How much is red, Scotch?"

"Everything..." she murmured softly. "Everything's red." And from the slow tick of radiation, unhealthy too.

The trees cut right across the road. The branches didn't just intertwine; they looked as if they had stabbed right through one another; splitting the trunks and branches of their neighbors. Any gap between them was occupied by the twisted brambles that corkscrewed their way into the trunks. I heard a wooden groan and saw something move in the distance. "These trees are dead, right?" I asked as I looked at the leafless branches. From the way they curled up, it looked almost as if they were ready to stab us.

"Well, they appear... I mean... they..." Glory stammered as she stared at one trunk. "I think so."

"Well, if they're wood, then they burn," P-21 said. He pulled out an apple with a red band, tugged out the stem, and tossed it into the trees blocking our path. There was a loud 'fwoosh' as a ten foot patch of tree burst into flame. The wood popped and crackled... and smoldered... smoked... and not much else. The smoke blew back in our faces, the gray cloud stinging my throat fiercely. The woods around us crackled even more loudly.

Then I saw one of the thick branches above me slowly turn. It pointed its jagged tip right at P-21. "Look out!" I shouted as the entire branch stabbed down, and only my warning and his agile hooves kept him from getting speared. Another chorus of creaks erupted as the trees stabbed hoof-thick branches at us. Lacunae was able to deflect one with her shield and teleport a few feet out of the path of another. Glory leapt in time to avoid being skewered by one shooting in from the side, landing neatly on the still-quivering branch. Scotch held on for dear life as I made like a zebra and reared on my back legs, barely deflecting one branch with my forelegs. Rampage's armor rang like a bell as she was knocked off her hooves by an impact.

As abruptly as it started, the attack stopped. We were frozen with a dozen branches all around us. Touching them didn't provoke any kind of response, thank goodness. We looked at one another. "Right. No trying to burn the nice not-dead trees." If you could even call these things trees...

Since we couldn't follow the road, we had to squeeze through gaps between the splintered trunks. More than once, Lacunae had to teleport through. Twice, Rampage had to hook her hoofclaws into the hard, waxy bark and force a gap wide enough to pass through. The trees had other peculiarities, strange cysts and growths that put out a sickly green and yellow light. I'd accidentally brushed against one, and it had popped, spurting a foul fluid that smoked on contact with my foreleg and blackened the enamel.

Wow... out of all the sucky places in the Hoof, I think we'd found the suckiest. From the depths of the woods came a long, low howl that made my mane crawl.

There were also rusted metal drums all over the place; most had split open long ago, but more than a few were still oozing rainbow-colored gunk. We tried to avoid any tree that had the rainbow gunk on it; it seemed to create even larger and more bizarre versions of the strange leafless plants. One actually appeared to have slices of cake hanging from the ends of its limbs. From the number of waxy and warped bones lying at the base of the tree, I suspected that the cake was a lie.

"How'd they even get this far?" P-21 murmured in confusion.

"I... don't know," I said just as quietly. We looked at each other and at the creaking forest around us, the creepiness jumping up another notch. No pony wanted to speculate very much on how they'd gotten just far enough to die.

We reached a track of sorts, running back along a retaining wall that, while buckled, still provided chunks of concrete above the leafless brambles. Suddenly, there was a crackle overhead, and I stared in shock as a lumpy, rainbow-colored apple appeared on the end of a branch overhead. More crackles and flashes signaled the appearance of dozens more above us.

"Oh... this can't be good," I murmured as I watched the rainbows start to squirm and glow brightly. "Shit... look out!" I yelled, then started running as the first apple fell towards me. It hit the ground

with an explosive flash and sprayed stinging bits of seed at us. Lacunae's shield spell blocked four detonations, but collapsed as three more exploded simultaneously. She screamed as two more exploded along her spine, tearing her flesh and singeing her wings and tail. Rampage, her armor blackened, leapt upon the alicorn's back and started to swipe at the falling apples. Any injuries the detonations gave her started to heal almost immediately, allowing Lacunae to recover enough to restore her shield.

Then, as abruptly as they appeared, the exploding apples vanished. Once more the trees resumed their slow groaning and popping noises. I stared as I saw one trunk split in two by the branch of a larger tree, the smaller tree being torn apart.

I really hated this place. We let Lacunae heal herself and then tend to us... and suddenly Glory screamed. A gray wooden shoot was growing out of her foreleg! Scotch wasted no time, jumping off me and racing to where it was sprouting. She bit down, set her forelegs, and pulled as hard as she could. There was a horrible wet noise as the bloody seed was ripped out. As she spat it aside, I watched in sick horror as another waxy tree began to grow before our eyes in the dirt beside us. P-21 and Scotch also had pieces of apple seed shrapnel that had to be dug out even as they started to sprout. Lacunae had the easiest time; though she'd been hit by more seeds than any of us, none of them were sprouting. Maybe it was the radiation... or just more of her freaky alicorn cheating powers.

"What kind of apples appear from nowhere and then blow up?" Scotch asked after yanking the last sprout from her flank.

"Hoofington apples," I muttered as I glared at the tangled mess of wood and tree.

After healing the gouges left by ripping out the seeds, we set off again. If it hadn't been for Scotch pointing out north and Glory's sharp eyes spotting the steeple of the building through the gloom, I'd have had no idea where we were heading. We passed several rusted wagons that made Scotch Tape cringe, and even I balked at the sight of the twisted, rusted metal and grotesque plant life growing amid the toxic sludge. The splintered trunks resembled gaping maws... and for all I knew, they *were* mouths!

"There's too much red. Everywhere I look is red!" Glory whimpered as she looked around.

"Don't focus on the red bars. Keep your eyes open for anything else," I murmured as I kicked an ugly log with my rear hoof.

The log's eyes opened and it lunged, biting my ass hard and driving splintered fangs deep into my haunch. It snarled like some sort of maddened canine. It was a good thing that my hide was tougher than the usual mare's -- otherwise it probably would have torn my flank clean off. Another of the things tore itself off a gnarled tree and leaped at Glory, while a third sprang from a thicket at P-21.

Glory turned, pointed her gun unerringly at the plunging log, and unloaded a stream of energy that transformed the entire beast into a flaming torch. It slammed into the gray pegasus, but she kicked it away before it could do more than singe her barding. Then there was a loud crack as four tree limbs speared out at once and crushed the flaming wolf log into pieces.

As smoothly as if he still wore his PipBuck, P-21 brought Persuasion up in his jaws and fired a clean forty millimeter grenade right into the gaping maw of the one bearing down on him. As it slammed into him, he rolled smoothly onto his back and kicked it over and away. The wooden creature scrambled up, and then the grenade exploded and blew the snarling head into so many toothpicks.

One burst half-buried from the ground and sunk its fangs into Lacunae's belly, tearing a jagged wound. Alicorns could bleed just like anypony else, and they could scream, too. As the wolf-log readied a second bite, Rampage launched herself underneath the purple alicorn and grabbed the beast. Its jagged edges tore at her striped hide, but she simply kept bending until the log split in two.

As for me, I was a bit in a predicament, as the one attached to my ass was doing everything it could to tear said area off and was about to accomplish exactly that. I drew Vigilance, but with the monster almost directly behind me, I couldn't draw a bead on it. I spat Vigilance into the air. "Scotch!" I yelled, and the perceptive girl spotted the weapon and caught it in her hooves. She aimed right at my butt, and I shouted, "S.A.T.S.!"

She snorted and sent three bullets into its head, blowing it into pulpy pieces of wood.

Lacunae groaned as she fell over, giving us a really good look at the grievous bite to her gut. Glory raced to her, and P-21 fished out a healing potion. "Hold still! Let me get your insides... inside."

"And if you hold still," Scotch chuckled, "I'll get the splinters out of your butt!" She bit the largest and tugged it free; I winced, closing my eyes as it was yanked out and spat aside. "Funny, I would have expected Glory to be the one with a stick up her--"

"Just pull them out please, Scotch," I groaned. I'd have to wait to regenerate, like Rampage. More healing potions for the rest of my friends.

* * *

"We're going in circles," Rampage declared. It'd been more than an hour, and we'd been bombed once more, nearly speared when I tried incendiary bullets, and suffered two more attacks by the timber wolves. We'd encountered other weirdness too, like a tree with drooping branches that cried rainbow gunk. And a -- was it a pine tree? -- covered in steel pins! One tree looked perfectly fine and leafy but made P-21 violently ill when we approached. Another had watched us with dozens of eyes that looked oddly just like P-21's... weird. Glory came across an apple tree, but at her approach the luscious red apples revealed themselves to be red chitinous monsters that scuttled after us, snapping pincers. Then there were some thorny branches that barely scratched Scotch... but once she started bleeding, she didn't stop! The filly's blood had soaked my pack before Lacunae could administer healing spells.

I might have hated the Hoof in general, but I really *loathed* this place.

Rampage was pointing at some spatters of blood in the dirt. "Unless we're not the only dumb ponies in this place, we've been here before."

"We can't! We've been going north pretty consistently..." Glory said as she looked over at the spire. "But there was that time we had to double back. And then we went southeast for a time and... have we been here before?"

"We have," P-21 confirmed gravely. He picked up one of my shotgun hulls in his mouth and passed it to me. "Twelve gauge explosive. That's what you've been using on those wolf things, right?"

It was. They didn't have any vitals, per se. You just had to blast them apart. I looked around, spotted the remains of one timber wolf, and scowled. "I remember this place. But there was a gap to the

north!" I said as I pointed at the solid barrier. "It was the thorny one that got Scotch scratched up!"

"It appears that this maze is cheating," Lacunae observed softly. The alicorn was clearly exhausted; being the largest, she'd received more attacks than any of the rest of us. "The trees are moving to keep us trapped."

"Are you telling me these things are intelligent?" Rampage asked as she pointed a hoof at the trunks.

"Perhaps in a feral, primitive sense. It would explain their cat and mouse antics," Glory said as she glared at the twisted wood.

I sighed. It was a setback, but only a setback. As galling as it was, I wasn't going to let it drag me down. Not back to the mattress. "Alright. Get us out of here, Lacunae. Maybe you and Glory can teleport up and disable the lightning rods or--"

There was a resounding creaking sound, and I got ready to blast again. All of a sudden, a dozen thick branches curled around two trunks. The trees sounded like they were screaming as the branches twisted against them and pulled the trunks wide with a resounding wooden crunch. Then another pair was ripped apart. And another. Another. A path, straight as an arrow, led directly towards the building. P-21 looked at the stunned Glory. "Pretty smart cat."

Scotch gulped. "Well... well I'm not afraid! So let's go," the filly said as she pointed down the path that had been opened. "Um... after you?" she asked Rampage.

"Buc- buc- bukaw!" Rampage clucked as she trotted ahead.

"Of course, you know this is a trap," Glory asked, looking over at me as we walked along after the striped Reaper.

"Course. It wouldn't be Hoofington otherwise," I answered, looking through the gaps between the trunks. I saw gray trees that seemed to bear apples and oranges and other fruits, but sprawled beneath them were more and more jumbled bones. It was another Silverstar Sporting Supplies... just a more vicious version.

The trees were closing the path behind us with the grinding creaks and groans of tortured wood. And then the foliage ended abruptly, the transition as sharp as if there were some invisible line. Spread out before us was a huge lawn of blue-green grass. It was covered with strange train-like engines and wagons, and heaps of barrels loomed like oozing encrustations, slowly dripping their congealed contents like colorful pus. Most bizarre of all were the statues. One showed three foals frolicking, another was a mare looking impressive, rearing with a flag clutched between her forehooves... There were dozens of them scattered across the strange grass. A few had tumbled over and others were covered in creeping blue vines, but most of them were just... there.

Scotch leaped from my back onto Lacunae and stared at one of the strange engines. "It's gonna eat me. It's gonna gobble me up!" I had to admit, with its rusted grill and the two domed lamps beside the massive drum on the front, I half thought it was going to eat me!

"I'll keep you safe, Scotch," Lacunae promised softly, lifting her wings to shield the filly from the

sight.

We started to walk between the vine-covered hulks, and then I saw the blue vines start to creep. My mane started to do the freakiest things as the plants rasped faintly against the hulls of the machines. I'd already seen trees rip a path in front of me, though, so... this shouldn't have been that frightening, in comparison. Rampage scowled at the vines. "Huh... this can't be..." Then her eyes popped wide. "No way! We're nowhere near the Everfree Forest!"

"Can't be what?" I asked as I saw her pupils contract in terror.

"Run!" she screamed, "Killing Joke!"

As if waiting for just that, the ground around us exploded with snaking blue vines. They slithered out of every hole, seeming to make a horrible chuckling noise as they moved lightning quick. One popped up in front of me and tapped my nose. The vine made the creepiest hissing laugh as I felt a tingle run through me. And then, just as suddenly as they'd attacked, the vines pulled themselves back. I felt a strange wooziness running through my body.

"What just happened?" Rampage asked, and I reached out a hoof to her to steady myself. And just like that, Rampage exploded. The striped mare blew apart in a cloud of shrapnel, her metal barding smashing into me and sending me flying into one of the tractors. Which exploded, showering us all with debris. A large chunk of rusty metal fell upon me and I heaved it away... only to have it explode as well. I staggered to the side, my body battered and my legs wobbling beneath me. I fell, and the ground beneath me exploded like a landmine. I finally just curled up into a ball, feeling battered and broken and terrified to take another step.

Then a glow surrounded me and lifted me into the air. I looked weakly at Lacunae levitating me through the air towards the building. "I... hate... blowing up..." I moaned. But then I looked down; P-21 and Glory had grabbed the regenerating chunk of Rampage and were struggling to keep up as the slithering blue vines pursued them. P-21 now tossed incendiary apples every way he could to try and drive back patches of the noxious blue plant.

The ground heaved beneath P-21, and he dropped the filly Rampage in a heap as Lacunae landed on the vine-free concrete steps. She set me down... and the stone exploded under my hooves! At least this time the blast was a little less energetic. I was gonna have to chow down on some serious scrap metal soon or start losing legs. Lacunae frowned in concern as she looked at me, then at our friends. She couldn't set me down and get the others without the ground exploding underhoof, but she couldn't manage me and pick them up at the same time either.

Suddenly, Rampage screamed as the ground beneath her opened up into a deep pit of earth. Her hooves scrambled at the edge of the hole as it filled with wiggling blue vines and gnarled roots. It was as if the earth itself were creeping away under her hooves to dump her into the depths. P-21 reached in and bit her mane, hauling the thrashing, muddy filly back up over the edge.

A blue vine darted towards the distracted buck. Green beams sliced the vine into quivering lengths as Glory leapt in place behind him, covering him as he hauled Rampage out. Then I saw it. It was just a moment when she took her eyes off the vines to look at the pair. In that moment, the vines struck. They shot out and coiled around her. "No!" I screamed as a blue flash engulfed her body.

Then I blinked as I stared in shock. "Oh my..." Lacunae murmured in my mind. What the heck...

"Come on! Move!" Glory shouted as she strafed the vines with her gatling beam gun. But P-21 and Rampage gaped at her. "What are you staring at? Move!" Finally, the pair began to run towards us, leaving the vines hissing and rubbing together. Glory turned and shouted, "Aw yeah!" And then she froze. She touched her throat with a bright blue hoof, then turned to stare at a stunning rainbow-colored tail. Where once she'd had a brand, now she had a vivid rainbow lightning bolt and cloud on her flank.

The killing joke had turned her into Rainbow Dash.

"Ah... what? No... no no no... they turned me into a Dashite... a Dashite! Not a Dash!" she said in her higher, squeakier voice. "This is impossible. There must be some kind of mistake!" She sat down hard and wailed, "My life is ruined!"

"Wasn't it ruined already?" Rampage said as she stepped on to the concrete and winced, then said in relief, "Okay... no burying alive... good..."

"It's better than blowing up," I murmured weakly.

"You don't understand! It would have been better if I'd blown up. You remember how some of the Tenpony ponies acted when they thought you were related to Twilight? Well multiply that by a thousand and that's the Enclave's reaction!" Glory began to pace back and forth. "Even if my family could somehow be okay with it... there's no way Thunderhead would... I mean... I look just like her! The most infamous pegasus in history!"

"Glory... calm down," I said, taking a little step. There was another loud bang that left me sprawling and put a large crack in the concrete. "At least... you're not... a walking bomb..."

"Yeah. You actually look kinda cool like this," Scotch said as she hopped off Lacunae's back. "Not nearly so boring!" Rampage looked out at where she'd exploded and sighed. Lacunae flew over to retrieve the new filly's saddlebags.

Glory pressed her hooves to the sides of her head. "Oh my gosh, what if the change isn't just physical? What if there's some kind of mental contamination? I was slated for a fast track medical career! Rainbow Dash was an idiot!" She clenched her eyes closed. "Hydrogen. Helium. Lithium. Beryllium. Boron. Carbon. Oxygen... wait... no... I forgot nitrogen!" she gasped. "I forgot nitrogen!" She grabbed P-21 and shook him in panic. "How could I forget *nitrogen*? Any second now I'm going to be obsessed with racing and the Wonderbolts!" she cried as she hovered in the air.

"At least you're flying again!" Scotch said with a grin. Lacunae returned with Rampage's blasted bags; the little striped filly dug through them for a moment, pulled out Psychoshy's power hooves, and started to strap them onto her little legs.

"I'm flying?" She looked back over her shoulder at her restored wings. Sure, they were bright blue now, but they were also holding her aloft. She grinned. "I'm flying! Flying! Woohoo! So awesome!" she cheered in glee as she looped and whirled above the steps. Then, suddenly, she got a haunted look and landed. "No, Glory. You are an Egghead. Egg! Head! I mean... an intellectual!"

"Relax. I think any pegasus would be glad to get her wings back," I said as I walked gingerly, like I was treading on a bed of landmines, towards the door. Every third step resulted in a sharp detonation

underhoof that knocked me about. Still, I couldn't stop now. I just needed to get inside. Generally you could tell how important a place was by how trashed it looked. Hippocratic Research was one *reinforced* building. I couldn't see a single broken pane of glass or missing tile off the roof. It might have looked like an old, classy-style building, but it clearly had to be built like a fortress.

There was no way I was going to open these doors. "P-21... I think we're going to need your..." I started to say as I looked back and saw a blue vine snaking out of the crack split in the concrete slab and creeping towards Scotch Tape. "Look out!" I shouted, but all that did was make her look at me.

The vine curled around her rear hoof.

Scotch immediately shuddered, her eyes clenching shut as Glory severed the tendril with a precise blast of S.A.T.S.-assisted gatling fire. "Burns..." she whimpered, and then she fell over as a jet of yellow-green gas sprayed from her mouth. She started to thrash wildly, a horrible noise coming from her throat as she flopped and fell to her side. But worst of all was the smell. It was a smell I could smell in my sleep, and it came to me now in horrible freshness: the acrid stench of chlorine.

Rainbo-- Glory! Glory fanned her wings to blow the clouds back and landed next to her, pressing an ear to Scotch Tape's chest. Her rose-colored eyes were wide in fear as more chlorine gas trickled from the filly's lips. "Lacunae!" The purple alicorn touched Scotch's side with her glowing horn as Glory scrambled for a healing potion... but then she dropped it. "No! We don't need healing now. The joke is making the gas inside her lungs!" She grabbed Lacunae, "You've got BJ's memories and stuff, right, and still a lot of radiation energy?" The alicorn nodded warily. "Teleport us to the Fluttershy Medical Center! The surgical room! Now!"

"Wait!" P-21 started.

"What--" Rampage began.

"Didn't--" I started to say.

"Now!" Glory shouted, grabbing Lacunae and shaking her.

There was a purple flash, and all three vanished. I sat down hard in shock. Then there was a bang under my backside and I leaped to my hooves, looking back at my blackened and frayed tail. P-21 also sat down with a shocked expression but without, fortunately, an explosion. I looked blown half to hell, he looked like he'd been smacked between the eyes with a plank, and the freshly re-foaled Rampage was trotting along on the power hooves, wearing the one saddlebag like a school knapsack.

"So... all in all, pretty good day in the Hoof, huh?" the striped filly said with a smirk.

* * *

"So... is this shit permanent?" I asked as I sat by while P-21 worked on the lock. I was absent-mindedly chewing on bloody pieces of shrapnel that I'd plucked from my hide.

"It's Killing Joke. Who the fuck knows?" Rampage responded. "Normally it's found around the Everfree Forest, but you hear rumors about it in other nasty tainted parts of Equestria. Usually fatal, always inconvenient." She looked out at the rusty drums and trailers covered by the faintly snickering

weed. "Who knows how there's so much here?"

In one fell swoop, we'd lost our medic, our teleportation escape plan, our magic support, and our moral support. All in all, I thought Glory getting turned into Rainbow Dash was pretty... weird. A little light. But given what it could have done... I supposed that it was far more preferable to... say... killing her outright. I guessed that there wasn't much fun in just killing her outright.

The ninth bobby pin snapped in P-21's hooves. "Oh, come on!" he shouted spitting his screwdriver to the ground. "What, did they put the most expensive lock in all of Equestria on this place?"

I scowled. "Stand back."

He sighed. "If I can't pick it, I don't see how you're going to."

"Didn't say I was going to pick it," I said as I gave the door a shooty look, furrowing my brows as I backed away from the entrance.

"Oh..." he muttered, his eyes getting wide as I charged the double doors. He jumped aside as I slammed into them. A moment later there was another throaty blast that nearly knocked me back out into the squirming blue vines. I lay there on my back, closing my eyes. Oh sweet Celestia, was I sore.

"Hey, nice job!" Rampage cheered.

P-21 didn't look quite so enthusiastic, dragging me to safety before the vines had even more 'fun'. "Well, if you ask me, that was cheating." He gathered up his things and then looked back at me. "You coming?"

"I just need a second. Collect my thoughts..." I groaned as I closed my eyes. Yup... there it was. Lying on top of my jumbled thoughts was the certainty that if there was a nexus for suckitude... it was Hoofington.

* * *

The front doors, still mostly closed even with a charred hole where the lock was, creaked open at my push. We had no idea when Glory and Lacunae would return, no idea if Scotch would be okay. The blue stallion clearly looked concerned, glancing back repeatedly. Rampage's power hooves made little click-clack noises on the tiles as she trotted along beside me. I had such a need for scrap metal to repair myself that I was raiding the garbage cans by the entrance for tin cans to chew on. I even tried gnawing on the lid, but the metal softening spell didn't activate.

That left me slowly regenerating as I walked carefully inside. The detonations were becoming fewer and weaker now. I supposed the joke just wasn't funny anymore, not since I'd used it to my advantage. Looking around the two story foyer of the building, it was clear something nasty had happened here. There were bloodstains on the wall... but surprisingly little damage. Then again, maybe not so surprisingly, if the inside of this place was as hardened as the outside. In the center of the arched entry was a golden statue covered in cobwebs. Two unicorn bucks grinned out as they lifted an apple in seeming tribute. 'Hippocratic Research', read the plaque on the base. 'A trusted friend in science!'

I scowled at the pair, then trotted to the statue and rubbed away the grime at the base. It was a tiny stamp, but I could see the O.I.A. symbol at the bottom. I looked around at the dusty walls and

scattered papers and junk and imagined I could smell Goldenblood in the musty reek in the air. No bodies, and lots of bloodstains... "Stay close. No E.F.S., but I just know that there's something nasty in here."

Sanguine's lair was probably somewhere underneath the building. I walked as silently as possible, wishing we had rags to make Rampage booties once again. From somewhere... above... behind... there came a snarl that echoed in the halls. "Ooooh, I hate it when I'm right," I murmured as we moved towards an elevator. After mashing the buttons several times, we finally forced the doors open to reveal a half dozen bony ponies curled up in the corners. Somepony had scraped 'Dear Celestia, let us out!' in the wood paneling.

The lights flickered to life, and a slurring music began to play. "...opportunity... ery community..." Then the speakers crackled once more and went silent. The snarl sounded again... along with a dry rattling noise. And was it just me, or did it sound a lot closer?

We moved into the offices with me nervously chewing my bit -- okay, whoa; had to be careful with that, or I'd be eating it! -- while keeping an eye out. Oh how I missed my PipBuck right now. EC-1101 aside, it was an advantage I really could have used. "Brings back memories, doesn't it?" P-21 said softly as he tapped at the keyboard of a desk terminal. I blinked and glanced back at him as Rampage went through file cabinets for errant trash and potential valuables. "The Fluttershy clinic?"

I grunted my response. Why did he have to bring that up now? I frowned... had I just seen movement down the hall? No... just empty hallway. He tapped away and swallowed, "Let's hope this turns out as well as that did."

I blinked in shock. "Well? I was strapped to a table with my guts hanging out and had to pull the plug on forty foals. If that was 'well', I'd hate to imagine lousy!" He gave a sheepish little smile as the terminal beeped, but he frowned when he looked back at it. "Garbage... garbage... garbage... no mention of anything, except... Twilight Sparkle visited a week before the bombs fell."

Really? I backed past the desk till I could see the terminal without losing sight of the door, and there was the date, just before the bombs fell.

Internal Memo: 10-16-11: Twilight Sparkle's visit> Thankfully, we got warning of the Ministry Mare's 'surprise' inspection. Now I want all of us on our very tippy toppest best behavior while she's here. Give her the tour, stretch things out, and hope to Luna that she runs out of time before she gets too nosy. If all else fails, have the show ready. F&F.

I tapped a little further down. Apparently, Twilight's inspection had not gone well. The memos were all about being swamped with returned and contaminated products.

Internal memo: 10-21-11: Storage> For Celestia's sake, we have to do something with all these returns! I don't care if you have to dump it down the drain, do something with all this extra flux before something bad happens. I don't like how gidgy things have been. Who the hell is in charge of the O.I.A. now? They need to do something! F&F.

And the last:

Internal memo: 10-23-11: Goodbye> Well, dust off your resumes, because you're all fired effective tomorrow! That's right. Let Applejack or whoever the hell is director now deal with this mess.

My brother and I are off to sunny Porca Porca where the beaches are warm, the local swine friendly, and the extradition treaties nonexistent. So long, suckers! F&F.

Funny... hope they had an early flight.

We left the blood-spattered offices and carefully made our way into the first few labs. At least, I thought they were labs. After seeing Horizon Labs, I expected to see more in the way of terminals and equipment. In one room were a half dozen chalk boards covered with '_____ X _____' with every critter I could imagine written in the blanks. Most of the combinations were crossed out, but a few were circled, like 'Cake X Tree' with 'Genius!' written next to it.

Okay. I guessed that that was a *type* of genius...

Carefully, we threaded our way into another lab with more chalkboards and one large bare gray tree in a reinforced box. As we passed by it, the rainbow apples appeared on the branches and fell against the box's walls. Seeds ricocheted wildly inside. 'Zapapple Bombs! Plant these around your property, and not only will you be safe from intruders, you can make your own Zapapple Jam! Problems: Uncontrollable and inconsistent appearances. Explosive Jelly. Solution: drop explosive PBNJ behind enemy lines! Profit!'

I shook my head and walked to the door, pushing it open and stepping into the hall.

The only warning I had was the shimmer in front of me. My jaw tightened reflexively, guns blasting at the air and knocking back a creature that seemed like a strange fusion of dog and snake. It started to shimmer back into invisibility as it fell back, but I didn't waste any time blasting it again, then again until it finally collapsed in a bloody heap and stopped blending in. I looked at the rattlesnake tail and four legs and once again wished for a time machine so I could smack whoever made such a thing!

Of course, I should have been keeping an eye out for more shimmers.

The snake-dog thing crashed into me from the side, nearly knocking me off my hooves as it sank its fangs through the leather armor and into the meat of my withers with a shriek. I really did not get how anypony was supposed to fight in a battle saddle as I thrashed to shove the shimmery abomination back. Rampage leapt atop it with an electric crackle, the power hooves discharging and scorching its shimmery scales. She bit into its ear to anchor herself as her hoof smashed against its skull again and again. Finally, it let me go, and I kicked it away enough to turn and blast it with two shotgun rounds.

"Ouch! Don't shoot fillies!" Rampage protested as it went down from the buckshot.

"You're an immortal death filly! Don't tell me you can't take a little lead," I laughed.

Once more... I should have been keeping an eye out for shimmers.

The pair of us were slammed not by one but a whole pack of the hissing, snapping creatures. I went down, thrashing as I rolled onto my back, and kicked my metal legs as hard and as wildly as I could. Most of them tried to bite my legs, to little effect. Then one got clever and chomped down hard on my belly. I might not have been strictly biological anymore, but I did not want my guts, such as they were, ripped out and strewn all over the place! I heard Rampage scream and smelled blood.

From the office behind me came a firm 'Thump'.

Did I mention that I was really tired of getting blown up today?

The grenade's shrapnel tore into the abominations swarming us, and the group milled back in pain and confusion. P-21 poked his head into the hall and fired a second grenade right into the mass of shimmery dog-snake things. The blast sent body parts flying, and those creatures still able to run did so. I hugged the jagged wound in my gut as I sat up, looking around and making sure there weren't any more shimmers. "Rampage?" I asked as I looked where the filly had fallen.

She sat up and then pointed to the mangled hole in her throat. "Thank goodness for regeneration, huh?" I said with a wince.

When her throat closed, she croaked, "Still fucking hurts!"

We stood, Rampage helped herself to a high protein diet, I helped myself to a high iron diet of office scrap and a few gemstones, and P-21 kept an eye on the hall and pointedly ignored both of us. Just in case, he popped a grenade in the direction the abominations had fled.

"Think Sanguine knows we're here?" Rampage asked with a frown once we started moving again. It'd been half an hour, and there'd been no sign of anypony.

"No idea," I admitted. I really didn't see Sanguine working in this place. Aside from those things patrolling the halls, none of the labs looked... well... lab-ish. We went into another room half filled with smashed open cages and a blackboard that read: 'Dog X Rattlesnake. All the loyalty of a dog. All the viciousness of a snake. Pro: loyaltyishness. Con: Ugly as sin. Pro: Natural camouflage makes ugliness moot. Con: Name?' And beneath that was a list: 'Sogs. Dakes. Hissypups. Nightstalkers.' The last had been circled and 'Genius!' written beside it.

A little board next to the cages read 'Feeding Duty'. There was a list of pony names, each one crossed out. The last one had 'I fucking quit' scrawled next to it. Smart pony.

"We need to find a working elevator or stairs down or something. I just know that if Chimera is here, it's somewhere down below." All the nasty projects had to be down below.

We left the cages and found some stairs down. They led to a heavy, substantial steel door. No lock, and no matter how I jerked the handle or beat my hooves against it, it wouldn't open. "Powered door. Probably need a passcard or something to open it," P-21 said. I glared at the door a moment, then tried to bite it. Maybe I could gnaw my way through! After several seconds of scraping paint with my teeth I coughed and gave up.

"Okay. Passcard, then," I muttered as I stared at the door.

That meant going back up. On the second floor we entered a large, long room half filled with machinery. 'Super Speedy Cider Squeezy 9000' had been written on one side, but the metal plaque had been scratched out and a sign reading 'Super Speedy Flux Mixer 9000 X Turbo' had been painted above it. There was a hopper on one end that was half filled with glittering gems and a keg marked 'Biomagical Delux Flux' on the far side.

As I dug out the gemstones with my hooves, Rampage fiddled with a projector on a small table in the middle of the other half of the room. Suddenly, the lens lit up and crackling music filled the room. A flickering square appeared on the wall, and two unicorn stallions trotted into view. If one hadn't been

sporting a mustache, I'd never have been able to tell them apart.

"Well, how do you do? How do you do!" the smooth-lipped one said with a cheery grin. "I'm Flim!"

"I'm Flam!" said the other.

"And we're the world famous Flim-Flam Brothers, welcoming you to Hippocratic Research. A place where science is pursued effectively..."

"Efficiently!" piped the twin.

"And ethically," they said in unison with a solemn nod of their heads.

Flim gestured to a cartoon drawing of the building. "I'm sure that you're familiar with a great many of our products."

"What kind of world would we be living in without Sparkle-Cola?" Flam asked, pressing the back of his hoof to his eyes. A little note popped up in the bottom of the screen, barely caught by the pink pony in my head. 'Not affiliated in any way shape or form with the Ministry of Arcane Science or its Employees. Any resemblance is strictly coincidence.'

"And how could we get through life without Wonderglue?" Flim asked as he held up a tube in his hooves.

"Well, you need not wonder any longer, dear consumer, because these are just a few of the many products brought to you by the hardworking ponies at Hippocratic Research!" Flam said as the other pony shook hard to free himself from the bottle of glue. Then he looked out, smiled sheepishly, and stepped back as the mustached pony gestured to his side. "While dozens of our end user products like Abronco Detergent and Sugar Apple Bombs cereal are familiar to you, our most important product is a material you may not be very familiar with."

"Or maybe you are, in which case, what are you doing wasting time watching this?" Flim interjected as he reappeared beside his brother. "So, by now you're probably wondering 'What is this amazing mystery product that brings so much joy and wonder into my life?!'"

"Flux!" they declared proudly as a smiling cartoon barrel filled to the brim with rainbow goo appeared between them.

"Now, if you're a clever pony, you're asking yourself: 'What is Flux and just what can it do?'" Flim said as he nodded his head.

"And if you're not asking that because you already know, then why aren't you working for us?" asked Flam with a cheeky grin.

Flim put a pair of thick, nerdy glasses on. "Flux is the simple term for Bio-Arcano-Chemo Flux. You might also hear it referred to as 'Biomagical Flux' or 'metacatalyst', but those are just simple terms for the wonder substance of our time," he said with a nod as the barrel was replaced with a tree. "What does it do? Why, what *doesn't* it do?! You see, think of Flux as raw magical goo. You can use it to make all kinds of magical effects!"

The barrel moved on top of a machine. "Take an example of our good friends at Robronco. All you need is the proper equipment and some scrap metal..." Flam crowed. A heap of scrap metal moved into the machine. The smiling barrel dripped one rainbow colored drop into it. There was a flash, and a smiling toaster rolled out. "Amazing! Science!"

I had to admit, I was impressed. P-21, not so much.

Flim appeared with a wide grin. "So, where does this magical mystery substance come from? Well, the exact mixture is a closely guarded secret."

Flam frowned sternly. "Very closely guarded. We wouldn't want any nasty stripes getting their hooves on it." Then he suddenly grinned, "At least not for less than a bajillion bits!"

Then they said in unison, "Just kidding!"

Flim pointed to a cartoon copy of the machine occupying the room. "Well, wonder no longer! Here at Hippocratic Research, we put science and technology to good use!" A stack of gemstones appeared over the hopper end and poured in. "With our own special blend of quality Equestrian gemstones..."

Six bottles of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple poured into the middle as Flam went on, "And our own domestic rainbow colorant..."

"And our own special patented super spell!" they proclaimed together, and shot cartoon lightning at the cartoon machinery from their horns. The machine began to flash and flicker, and suddenly a rainbow sludge poured out the far end and into a drum. "We create our one-of-a-kind, cannot be duplicated, manipulated, copied, or knocked off Flux!"

The image then showed the building and, leaving it, wagons being pulled by train tractors heaped with smiling barrels. "And where does it go when it's done? Well, where doesn't it go?! Flux is used in everything from abdominal braces to zippers and everything in between. Hundreds of products you use every day either were made from, with, or by Flux!" Flim said offscreen.

Flam then appeared looking sad. "Now, we want to caution you that something as super amazing, one-of-a-kind as Flux is not something you should play around with."

Flim appeared next to him and gave a solemn nod. "Absolutely." They vanished as Flim's voice went on, "No doubt you've heard about some poor pony playing around with a barrel of unauthorized, tampered, or used Flux and suffering some horrible accident." A smiling pony wearing a bow trotted along and inexplicably tripped and fell into an open frowning barrel. She popped back out, but a wing sprung from her left side and a cow's horn sprouted out of the right side of her head. She looked like quite the sad pony.

"For which Hippocratic research denies any and all liability," Flam muttered softly.

Flim continued, "We want to assure you that, used properly, Flux is a valuable... nay... an essential part of our modern world!"

"So we wish to thank you for your interest in coming to tour Hippocratic Research," Flam said with a grin. "Talk to your parents about taking one of our patented Nightstalkers home; at last, a pet you can

count on to keep you safe from nasty stripe infiltrators! Bred and trained to attack any and all zebras at first sight.”

“Or perhaps you’re more interested in our scorposprites! If you have a sibling or neighborhood bully you want to get even with, then there’s nothing better!” Flam proclaimed.

“And if you’re looking for our legal department, they’re located on the fourth floor... office hours eleven fifty eight to eleven fifty nine, Griffin Standard Time!” Flim added with a wide grin.

The pair then sang out, “So we’ve got opportunity in each and every community! He’s Flim! He’s Flam! We’re the world famous Flim-Flam Brothers!”

Then the projector flickered and died. The three of us stared blankly at the wall and I murmured softly, “Well, now I have a better idea why the world blew up like it did.”

* * *

“What harebrained idiot would think of taking a scorpion and putting wings on it?!” I yelled before yanking the bit in my jaw and sending up another cone of lead, shredding a buzzy, filmy wing and sending the insect scuttling along towards us, oozing green goo.

“To be fair, it’s more like they gave a bloatsprite a stinger!” Rampage squealed as she pounced atop the maimed bug, her four power hooves flashing and splattering me with its sludge.

“I don’t care!” I yelled as more of the gray spherical bugs came flying out after us. Was there any end to the things? We’d found a lab with the walls and ceiling covered in their nests. One had stung P-21 right away, and now the rest were looking to finish the job. “It’s stupid... stupid... stupid!” I shouted, punctuating each ‘stupid’ with another blast of buckshot. I didn’t even have to aim; I just fired as quickly as I could down the hall and hoped enough shot hit.

“I’m more interested in if you have any of that antivenom Glory made...” P-21 said weakly. “Really really really interested.”

I ripped off another half dozen shots as rapidly as I could, and Rampage squished the fallen bugs with the enthusiasm only a filly could muster. “Reload!” I bellowed, knowing the belt was almost spent. Rampage scrambled back, grabbed another belt of shotgun shells, and slammed it home. “One condition!”

“Condition?” he said weakly. “I’m dying of poison and you’re giving me conditions?”

“Loaded!” Rampage yelled, then immediately sprang back to squashing the scorposprites.

I ripped out three more shots. “When we’re done... you’re going to Scotch... and you are going to tell her you’re her daddy. And you’re going to say nice things about her mom. And you’re going to hug her!” Another five swarmed out and I jerked the bit as rapidly as I could. The blasts shredded their flapping wings, and a few were pulped outright by the impacts.

“And if I say no?” he panted as I backed towards him.

“Then I’ll give it to you, but with a *huge* guilt trip attached,” I countered. One arched high above

its fellows and plunged towards me, its stinger oozing venom as it drove the poisonous spur at my eye. I swung my foreleg and knocked the head-sized bug aside. Rampage pounced upon it and popped it under her power hooves.

He didn't answer, and I looked back at him lying there unconscious. "Cheater..." I muttered. "Rampage! Antivenom!" She leapt on my back and dug through my saddlebags again for one of the vials of antivenom that Glory had mixed ages ago. She poured it into his mouth as I blasted at the swarm.

He stirred as consciousness returned just as the last few bugs were blasted and stomped. I blew the smoke away from my shotgun and trotted to him, kneeling and helping him sit up. "You'll do anything you can to get out of talking with her, won't you?"

He looked at me, then dropped his gaze. "I don't want to talk about it."

"Oh no. That might have worked a month ago when I was fresh and new to the Wasteland, but now I am a grizzled Wasteland veteran and I will not wait for--"

There was a flash and I was knocked sprawling on my side, my head spinning. Rampage grinned down at me. "Whoopsie. Sorry. Thought I saw another scorposprite, but it was just a big swelled head." She trotted over to P-21. "Of course, a grizzled veteran of the Wasteland would have seen that one coming."

Once P-21 was back on his hooves and the building stopped spinning, we found a large office with two identical desks, an enormous portrait of one of the brothers behind each. A counter along the far wall held dozens of different products made by the brothers, including a tiny model of the Super Speedy Cider Squeazy 9000. Two skeletons wearing fancy business suits lay huddled together surrounded by four suitcases. One had split open, spilling countless gold bits across the floor of the office.

I saw a pair of tickets clutched in one brother's hooves and flipped them open. "Hoofington to Porca Porca... departure time, 2 PM." I patted the skull sympathetically. "Should have gotten a morning flight."

Rampage pointed at Flim's desk as P-21 started to work on Flam's terminal. "Hey, Blackjack. Isn't that one of those figurine thingies you collect?" For an instant, I imagined I heard five little ponies in my head gasp in excitement... or maybe it was just me!

I blinked and stared. There, smiling brightly at me, was the vivid purple figure of Twilight Sparkle. Slowly, I approached with a smile. Could it be? Was it possible? I carefully scooped it up in my hooves and hugged it to my chest. "At last! It's Twi--" I frowned and pulled it away, looking down. A wide, cheesy grin met my eyes; her pupils were different sizes and pointed in opposite directions. 'I'm an egghead,' read the plaque. My eyes narrowed as I tapped the figurine's head, making it wobble and bobble around wildly. It wasn't a statuette, just a cheap plastic knockoff.

With a sour grunt, I chucked it into the garbage bin.

P-21 looked up from the terminal. "Well, bad news. Looks like they erased everything on their computers, filewise... but I also have some good news." He tapped a button, and part of the wall opened up to reveal an elevator car. "What do you want to bet this elevator goes somewhere special?"

I grinned. "I love smart ponies." Then I frowned. "But you're still going to talk to Scotch... I mean

it.”

He sighed. “I know... I know. I’ve been trying not to think about it. About... about everything I might have missed if she’s dead. I’ve been a royal ass putting it off for so long.”

We trotted to the elevator. Rampage put a hoof down, and the car gave a soft groan. “Whoa... what corners did they cut installing this thing?” I had to admit; it looked like the elevator was definitely not built to the same code as the rest of the building.

I snorted and stepped in. Okay, it was a little wobbly, but I needed to go down and had no doubt it would take me where I needed to go. “It’s fine.”

“I’m not sure it was even fine two centuries ago,” P-21 said sourly. He dug around in the desk and pulled out a yellow card. “Look. We can just walk back down to the door.”

I rolled my eyes and started jumping. “Look! It’s fine! Just fine! Nothing’s happ--”

With a roar, the floor exploded beneath me, tossing me into the ceiling... which also exploded! I plummeted down the dark elevator shaft, and with a shriek of twisted metal the elevator broke loose and plunged down after me.

Ha... ha... ha...

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author’s note: As always, heaps of thanks to Kkat for creating FoE. I’d also like to thank Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster. Though they may occasionally drive me crazy, they work their tails off making this story as good as possible! Also, tons of thanks to ponies leaving feedback... though I have to admit some of the comments are just a little scary, better to have them then not. Lastly, thanks to everypony that helps out with donations at David13ushey@ gmail. com through paypal. without you this would have ended a while ago.)

(Also, two special thanks: one to Rainbow Yoshi for helping me with some idea problems I had. The other to VozDeSuenos for pointing out the song to me. I thought I’d thanked him personally, but I hadn’t. Sorry, and thank you!)