

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 39: Wages of Sin

"I hope you're happy! Both of you! You've ruined my very first slumber party. The makeover, the smores, the truth or dare, the pillow fight! I mean, is there anything else that could possibly go wrong?!"

Twilight stared up at the massive silver statue, her eyes wide in horror, then turned to Goldenblood and pointed a hoof back at the strange amalgam creature. *"This is Project Chimera?!"*

"I know, I know," drawled the nasal, sarcastic voice. "But I suppose 'Project Discord' or 'Project Draconequus' would have been too much of a giveaway."

Twilight's eyes went flat as she looked over her shoulder at the statue, then back at Goldenblood. "What is Discord doing here, Goldenblood? How could you put those two in charge of... of this! Luna will be informed..." she began when she was cut off by the low snicker of the statue.

"Oh, I wish I could see your face right now, Twilight. I really do," Discord cackled. "Well, actually, I really wish I was out of this damned silvery suit Goldie dressed me up in. Oh the fun we could have, Twilight. Fun..." He hissed the word long and low.

"Luna knows. Celestia knows." Goldenblood slowly trotted up towards the statue, and now Twilight didn't look certain of anything anymore. "When the war began, Celestia knew that Discord would be the greatest threat to Equestria. If three squabbling fillies could break him loose, even though that was long after the sealing spell was cast and after the Elements changed hooves, how long would the magic hold when ponies and zebras were killing each other on such unprecedented scales?" He gazed at the statue with a long, baleful look as he added, "Worse, zebra lore knows of Discord... trickster of the stars."

"It does?" Twilight asked in shock.

"I try not to boast," Discord said in feigned modesty.

I trotted closer towards the statue, getting out of her way, and was suddenly seized by an incredible vertigo that ended abruptly with a sharp pain in my tail. I felt distinctly nauseous, but then moments later it passed. Okay. I didn't know what that just was, but no more trying to move. My poor tail was one of the few original bits of me I had!

"Indeed. Ponies aren't the only people he's manipulated, tormented, and hurt," Goldenblood replied evenly. "Spirits of chaos like him are well known in their culture, and of them all, Discord is the strongest and worst."

"Thank you for the compliment," Discord interjected with mock sincerity, "But really, I must admit that I'm nothing compared to you, Goldie, when it comes to manipulating, tormenting, and hurting others. How's Fluttershy?" Goldenblood's face didn't change a bit, but his horn flared, pushing a button and turning a dial. The metal began to hum, and the hum became a scream. Discord's manic laughter grew into a manic scream as well.

"Goldenblood! Stop!" Twilight shouted, her horn lighting and turning the dial back the other way.

Discord panted, chuckling a low, slow, pained laugh. "Too soon?"

Goldenblood glared up at the statue as calm reasserted itself. "Even before Luna assumed the throne, zebra agents attempted to capture Discord. After what you and Celestia did to him, everypony fairly assumed he'd focus mostly on us if he got free, and that made the zebras think that they might be able to use him as a bargaining chip or deterrent. Celestia's original solution was to have him buried here; there's a special ore underneath Hoofington that counteracts his powers. But as the war escalated, we knew the enchantment wouldn't last even there. His size had already increased fifty percent in just over ten years, and the petrification spell was already in doubt."

"Well, when you have a steady diet of war, chaos, and uncertainty with zero exercise, you tend to pack on the pounds," Discord murmured.

"It's hard to believe our efforts were so weak," Twilight murmured, hanging her head a little. "What he did to my friends, and bringing them back together... Now it looks like it was all for nothing."

Goldenblood stared at her for a few inscrutable seconds, then looked back at the statue. "It's not your fault, Twilight. Celestia had many centuries of relative peace after Discord was trapped; the closest he came to release was during Nightmare Moon's bid for power, and that still wasn't enough. Had things remained as they were, he likely would have stayed in stone for at least another millennium. But this war... so much confusion and hatred, widespread violence and turbulent emotion, and for nearly twenty straight years now... It was the perfect diet to set Discord loose."

"And given how exciting everything is, can you blame me for wanting to get involved? I was so looking forward to seeing how much *more* interesting I could make things for everybody! Being a statue is so boring, you know... oh, wait, you don't. You have no idea what that's like, do you?" Discord said with the sound of a sneer. "And you called me a villain."

"We had to contain him quickly. Fortunately, Luna recommended utilizing the ore we were excavating in the reconstruction, and it has indeed proven quite effective in keeping him trapped," Goldenblood explained, not taking his eyes off the statue.

"Funny how she suggested it," Discord said in a faintly hurt tone. "And I'd always had a soft spot for little Luna. I never appreciated how much potential she had."

"How does this metal work? Why can't Discord just teleport out of it or turn it into cheese?" Twilight asked with a frown.

"This metal," Goldenblood replied, "Unique in all our experience, resonates at only one magical frequency. Not 'effectively' one like some of the experimental materials we've developed, but truly only one single pure tone; it fully ignores all other magical effects. Discord, being a creature of chaos, can't focus his power to such a narrow degree."

"And I'm not stupid enough to try and play that note," Discord muttered, and my ears perked. There was a definite undercurrent of deadly seriousness in his voice.

Twilight sighed softly. "All right. I can understand containing him, but how did you go from that to... pulling Flux out of him?"

Goldenblood smiled that humorless little smirk. "Do you really want to know, Twilight?" She

glared back at him, and for a moment their eyes remained locked. Then Goldenblood gave a little shrug. "It was my idea. The raw magical essence of Discord was simply sitting there, unused, gaining power all the time, and the potential for his magic was mind-boggling. Once the research was begun, it actually didn't take that long for a method to drain it in a usable form to be developed." Goldenblood pointed at the hoses with his hoof. "Needles were drilled into the stone and hooked up to extraction lines; to create base Flux, the metal is resonated, liquefying portions of his essence."

"You drilled into him?" Twilight gaped. "You drilled *holes* in him?!"

"Don't worry. It's *exactly* as painful as it sounds," Discord said in a sarcastic mutter.

"Yes," Goldenblood said without taking his eyes off hers. "And we suck out his magical essence, mix it with gems to stabilize it, and ship it all across Equestria. A portion of the sales goes to covering the O.I.A. operating budget, which is substantial. The rest is given to the ministries."

Twilight shook her head. "Torturing him... sucking his essence out... and you sell it to fund all this? I thought your funding was through the kingdom!" she said, looking startled and disgusted.

"Not exclusively. The O.I.A. goes through a lot of bits in a year," he said as he gestured down at the production room with his hoof. "Even with our secondary and tertiary sources of income, projects like Chimera are horrifically expensive. And it benefits us to keep some expenditures off the books."

"How much money could you possibly need?" Twilight asked with a scowl.

"Our budget exceeds those of the M.A.S. and M.o.A. combined," he countered, and that set her back a step. "Possibly even the M.o.P. as well." I had no idea just how much money that was, but I thought of all the money Goldenblood had bilked from the nobility for Project Redoubt. Add in the proceeds from side projects like selling Flux... and, actually, I still had no idea just how much money that was; I wasn't sure I could count that high. Twilight's jaw dropped as Goldenblood said softly, "Of course, as I'm not the director anymore, that information is strictly hush hush."

"I'll have to remember that next time I approach Luna for a budget increase," Twilight murmured as she stared up at the statue. "So, why in Equestria did you put *those two* in charge of him?"

"To be fair, this is an O.I.A. facility. They are simply the face company, selling and distributing Flux and a sizeable number of spinoff products. But really, can you think of anypony better? The pair are natural obfuscators, entrepreneurial in the extreme, and unscrupulous but cowardly. They embezzle wherever they can, and I let them get away with a certain amount to keep them working. Their utter lack of political ambition combined with their goal to excel makes them diligent in their complicity. After all, they delayed you for more than a year while you were trying to make your alicorn potion work."

"They weren't the only ones," Twilight said, frowning again. "Remember, your stonewalling cost you your position."

But Goldenblood didn't look upset about that. If anything, he looked sad and so very tired. "Well, we do what we must for love."

"Excuse me? Doth mine ears deceive me, or did you say 'alicorn potion'?" Discord chuckled. "Oh... Twilight... you're making an alicorn potion? As in a potion to *create* alicorns?" The silver statue

began to laugh. "Oh I just bet the royal duo absolutely *love* that idea!"

Twilight scowled up at him. "I have the full support of Luna!" If anything, that made Discord laugh even harder. "Shut up!"

Goldenblood twisted the knob once more, and the statue began to hum. The laughter rose higher and higher until it became a scream of agony, and then the knob was turned back down. "Oh, I do so love all you little ponies. Even when I'm sure you're all going to be so boring, you find ways to surprise me..." Discord said with another quiet chuckle. Goldenblood looked away, sitting on the edge of that narrow bridge. "Well, I do hope that works out well for you, Twilight. A step up in the world."

"It will make us win this war," Twilight answered, but I could see she was shaken. She looked at all those hoses snaking out of the silver statue. "I'll talk with Luna. She'll put a stop to this. She can't know exactly what's been done to you, Discord. You're imprisoned. There's no point to torture as well."

"Oh, Twilight. You always were such a good little pony. Always surrounded by loyalty, honesty, kindness, generosity, and laughter," Discord said in a voice that was almost pitying. "What are you surrounded by now?"

Twilight stepped off the bridge, back onto the catwalk, and a moment later Goldenblood's horn flashed and the bridge slowly rose back up. A moment later, the central pillar's doors swung back into place and sealed with a faint hiss. The purple unicorn adjusted the glasses she wore as her magic brushed her mane back into place, but her face was troubled and haunted. "So... that's why my potion wasn't working. Why it kept going unstable. It'll likely need that magical resonance to stabilize it... possibly a pinch of that metal as well."

"Possibly," Goldenblood replied. He turned and started to trot away, but then he paused. "So, you mean to continue?"

She looked at him in confusion. "Of course. This is why the M.A.S. was established. I swore to Princess Luna that I would find her a magical solution to the war, and the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion will do it. We'll be able to turn hundreds of ponies into alicorns. Earth ponies will be able to do magic and fly for the first time. We could make thousands. End this war once and for all!"

"Even given the cost? You'll use Flux, knowing where it comes from?" Goldenblood asked. She looked away, and he sighed. "I see."

"I have to do this. I promised Luna that my friends and I would win this war," Twilight Sparkle said quietly, keeping her eyes away. She stood and started away, but then she too paused. "You promised something similar, if I recall." She started off without looking back, steps slow and heavy with the burden of knowledge.

"Something like that," he said softly, then he looked around a moment, and his eyes suddenly locked on mine. The side of his lip curled in an expression of mixed annoyance and amusement. "Cute." His horn flashed.

Suddenly, the world darkened and my head spun; my... dream-delusion-hallucination-thing faded away, and the room returned to the normal grime and spotty emergency lightning. The machinery below stopped humming, and pink fog swirled around it. I swayed on the edge of the platform, then shook my

head as the vertigo passed. "Huh? What just happened?"

"You're back?" Rampage asked.

"I went somewhere?" I replied, rubbing my head.

"You walked right off the edge," the striped pony said, then nodded over at the brooding yellow mare. "Psycho caught you."

"She did?" I asked, not able to hide the surprise in my voice. "Why?"

Psychoshy snorted. "In case you forgot while you were out of it, we need you to open up this Chimera thing. Since I can't..." she added bitterly as she lowered her head.

"You're still helping him?" I asked sharply as I looked at Sanguine sitting away from the rest of us. His face had pulled itself together, and the rest of his injuries were rapidly healing. Was this a ghoulish thing? ...Maybe he hadn't really been hurt at all? A ploy to trick gullible, softhearted Blackjack? I snorted hard. Maybe P-21 was right all along, and I should just smash him now to make sure he couldn't stab me in the back.

Be kind, a little pegasus begged me. Uggghhh... easy for Fluttershy... But Scotch needed help, and if he did have an innocent family...

"No!" Psychoshy snapped, then grit her teeth. "I mean... not once we're done here. I'll help him here, and then we're done." She looked over at the undead pony and slumped a little. "I mean... he still needs my help... if I help you, that is." She tried to sound tough, but she looked listless and confused, her eyes glancing every which way save at me and Sanguine.

"You don't need him," I said, trying to give her an encouraging smile. "I mean, you're a kickass Reaper pony, yeah? You sure kicked my flank all over that cage, remember?"

"Don't try and make me feel better," she retorted bitterly. "Just... do whatever you're going to do. We need to get out of here."

Good point. I had no idea how long we had. "Right." I looked up at the metal cylinder with its engraving. "Right... so... Chimera. How long would it take for you to make a copy of my friend, Sanguine?"

Sanguine blinked a moment, then answered slowly, "An hour or so to grow a healthy blank. The process can be rushed, but the results of that are... substandard." Ugh, did we have that much time?

"Does this place have some more automated defenses like those turrets we ran into earlier?" Rampage asked.

I looked sharply at Sanguine, my eyes trying to pick out some sign of betrayal. He'd been beaten, but that didn't mean he'd given up, and automated defenses could be turned against us. The ghoul stared off for several seconds before answering, "It does, but they're only active in a few places. Besides, with what's trying to get in here, I doubt that they'd be much help."

"What is trying to get in here?" P-21 asked in a low, even tone. He hadn't moved from where he'd

been when I'd gone out. "What's behind those robots?"

"Hoofington was a crown jewel of technological development. It was designed to be the perfect city. A city that could, and did, house hundreds of thousands of ponies. It was the dream of visionaries like Horse and Apple Bloom to create a city that could manage and police itself. Automated systems are in place to handle security and defense, even two centuries after the bombs. Those systems are effectively responding to an intrusion."

"So you're saying that there's a crazy computer in Hoofington fighting us?" I asked, perking up. I imagined a rogue Crusader Maneframe, or something like it. "Well, that's not so bad. I can smash a computer."

"Unless it has some tragic sob story about how its vacuum tubes were molested or it just wants to save its motherboard," Rampage snickered. I glared at her; I wasn't that bad, was I? Rampage wasn't having any of it. She tapped my chest. "Softest. Heart. In. The. Wasteland."

"I don't have a heart. I have a cold machine of steel running inside me," I huffed indignantly. Everypony looked at me with expressions ranging from scorn to pity; Boo was the only one looking around in baffled confusion. I snorted. "Okay, my heart aside, how do we turn on those defenses?"

"You need to turn on all the systems. You need to unseal Chimera," Sanguine replied in a low, distracted voice. He pointed at the central pillar. "The access point is there."

I looked up at the massive pillar. I could just leave it sealed up; presumably, Discord was still alive, or at least alive enough to suck a few tanker trucks out of him over a few weeks. If I talked to him, he'd try and trick me. He was dangerous; I'd seen the look on Twilight's face. I looked at my PipBuck with a small frown. "Dealer?"

"Dealer? Is that what you call that thing?" Psychoshy muttered.

"I know you're not my crazy, Dealer. I want to talk to you," I said. Then, as I slowly turned my head, I spotted him shuffling his cards. He kept his eyes hidden behind the brim of his hat. "I need to unseal Project Chimera."

"So? Unseal it," he muttered, his eyes locked on the cards. He turned over a Joker, showing me in a clown suit. "You don't need me for that."

Huh? "I don't? But then why couldn't Psychoshy do it?" My question set the yellow pegasus's teeth on edge.

"Because she's as thick as you are, Blackjack," Dealer muttered, rolling his eyes. "I'm not EC-1101." He spoke the words like a guilty confession.

"But you're also not my crazy," I replied firmly. "There's way too many lapses, times you should be there when you're not. Times you do show up when you shouldn't. You're something outside me." I frowned at him, narrowing my eyes. "Who are you, Dealer?"

"Somepony who never mattered. I'm just a ghost along for the ride, seeing that EC-1101 gets where it needs to go. That's all." He nodded towards Psychoshy. "She did the same thing you did. Yelled, threatened, growled, begged, and finally cried to try and get me to open it. And I just told her 'no,

not going to happen', and described all the ways you were going to kill her when you caught up with her."

I thought about that a moment. "Dealer? Are you Goldenblood?"

He looked at me pityingly. "Did you miss what I said? 'Never mattered.' Not before the bombs dropped and not now. Trust me. Don't worry about Goldenblood. He's dead as a doornail."

"Why do I have trouble believing that?" I muttered, glaring hard at him. "You've been screwing with me from the start, Dealer. When did it all begin? When I found out what EC-1101 was? Back in Stable 90? Miramare?" Then I frowned. "The first time I fired Folly."

"Folly?" Sanguine asked, and I glared at him. No no, mister nasty ghoul. You do not get any more toys to play with! Heck, even I shouldn't have a weapon like that!

The pale image gave the slightest little twitch of the corner of his mouth. "Yeah. Before that, you were just another mare, as far as I could tell. One stupid and reckless enough to keep getting ponies killed with your good intentions. That kid. Those zebra. You spared a slaver... I honestly didn't know what to make of you. But when you fired that weapon, I knew there was something more to you."

"Because I have Ministry Mare blood in me," I said, and he gave a slow nod. "Even if it's not Twilight Sparkle, that meant I could access EC-1101."

"Might," he countered, looking angry, "And that meant that I might be necessary after all. When you fired that weapon, systems from Trottingham to Fillydelphia to Hoofington lit up like a Hearth's Warming log. Nopony was listening, of course. There's maybe a half dozen ponies left across the Wasteland with the access capability and a clue as to what those systems actually do and how to make them work; maybe a dozen with the Enclave. And since meeting you, I've bumped into others who could get access. That mare Velvet Remedy might have gotten the program to work. Psychoshy would have figured it out, too, if she'd had enough time."

"But why does it matter?"

"Something I've been asking all month," P-21 said under his breath.

"Look at this place, Blackjack!" He gestured around us. "Mass cloning facilities! Biological fusion. Even Flux production. Discord! Sanguine's own knowledge and expertise. This is perhaps the greatest treasure trove of wartime biological technology in all the world! Do you have a clue what a pony could do if they really applied themselves to it? Monsterponies by the thousands! Possibly even an alicorn assembly line, if a pony knew what they were doing. You're lucky Red Eye or the Enclave doesn't really know what's going on here, or they'd actually be applying themselves to get you to unlock it."

"How do you know all about Chimera if you're not Goldenblood? Who are you, and why should I trust anything you say?" I asked with a scowl.

"Goldenblood. Every time she says that name, I want to kick somepony," Rampage said.

He pressed his lips together, then finally said, "What choice do you have? You don't exactly have time for twenty questions. I can help you, Blackjack, but I want to make sure that this place isn't used by anypony else."

Urrrh... he had a point. "I don't want Chimera to be used by anypony. Not by Sanguine. If I can

save Scotch, I'm happy. If I save Sanguine's family to do that, that's good too." It wasn't their fault that they were related to this... this thing. Speaking of which, it would have been nice if said thing would gasp or something, give some sign that he was going to work with me on this. Instead, he just stared off into space. Was he trying to work out how to best cooperate or how to best betray us?

"And letting him trot back here ten, twenty, or a hundred years from now?" Dealer asked firmly. He shook his head. "I'm not going to turn this place over to just anyone who walks in once you leave. Watching you unseal Steelpony was hard enough. I only let you have that because you needed it, and if the Enclave hadn't already been in possession of the raw data, I would have tried to keep it from you."

"Wait, I thought you said I didn't need you to open the Project?" I looked over at the yellow pegasus, but she was simply passing time. Sanguine looked over too, a feverish kind of hope dancing in his eyes.

"You don't... if you know the proper place to access. Otherwise, you can have fun trying to figure out how to make it work all on your own," he replied with a smug smile.

That would take time I didn't have. "So... what do you want?"

"Less Blackjack talking to herself would be nice," P-21 muttered.

"I want this place destroyed," he replied evenly.

"You want *what*?" I gasped, making Boo jump away.

Rampage winced. "Oh, that can't be good."

"You heard me. I don't care about what you use it for right now, but I want this place gone when you're done. No more Flux. No more fusion megaspells. No more hybrids. Nothing. I want this mistake reduced to a crater," he said with a wave of his hoof.

"And Discord?" I asked with a frown.

He laughed briefly. "Discord? He can be buried along with the rest of this place. Discord was an enemy to ponykind centuries back, and he'd be our enemy today." Dealer looked down the catwalk. "I think Red Eye's forces are clear now. They'll be coming in soon, if they're not here now. So... do you agree or not?"

I imagined that I could hear them, too. The clicking-clanking hoofsteps of Protectaponies, the rolling treads of sentries, the levitation talismans of Mr. Handys... "Fine. You help, I'll destroy this place."

I probably shouldn't have said that last bit aloud...

"What? Destroy what?" Sanguine shouted, Pink Cloud spurting out his nostrils. "I'll not see this place destroyed for any reason!"

"Of course..." P-21 groaned. "The mine was just a warmup..."

Psychoshy gaped at me. "You're insane!"

Rampage just fell back laughing. "Oh Luna, I fucking love you, Blackjack!"

And Boo blinked in confusion.

I whirled on Sanguine. "Your family, or this place? Choose!" If I was going to have to figure this out without him, then best find out now. I couldn't keep working with him like this; not with the worry that he could backstab me at any moment.

His cloudy eyes popped as they looked at me and then out at production. Then back at me. "I... my work... my family... Blackjack, I can't. Don't you understand? This place was the culmination of my entire life's work! Years of research and study. I can't just throw it all away!"

"You're going to have to," I replied. "Your family or this place, Sanguine. If your family really is all that matters to you, I'll help you save them. But for me to pull this off, I'm going to have to destroy this place so nopony can use it. Otherwise, you better just kill me now." I took a gamble, hoping he truly meant it. And I got ready to jump aside from a plume of pink poison.

Sanguine closed his eyes and stepped away. He stood there for a few seconds, and then nodded once. "Very well... if you must."

I let out my breath, surprised. I wasn't the only one, either. "Right." I turned to the Dealer. "So, how do I unseal Chimera?"

"The access is inside Discord's chamber. To open it, you say 'Project Chimera containment open. Password--'"

"A wonderful, wonderful thing," I finished for him, and was rewarded by his momentarily stunned expression. I tried not to act too smug as he recovered. "Surprised?"

"Apparently you don't need my help as much as I thought," he murmured.

I stood at the edge of the catwalk and said the phrase and password from the vision, and the pillar gave a massive groan and shudder. The mechanics squealed as it slowly ground open; two centuries of little to no maintenance hadn't done it any favors. The drawbridge slowly dropped down in front of me... revealing Discord.

Or something that had once been Discord.

The statue of the immense hybrid creature now appeared shrunken and crumpled. The serpentine body was now contorted into a spiral, his limbs twisted and pinched. The wrinkled silver casing had formed creases and spiny ridges. The expression of fear was now one of agony. The hoses that once connected to the walls had stretched and deformed, pinching off or becoming jagged wires. Only a few still resembled tubes. The interior of the chamber was warped and melted, the smooth surface forming countless spikes all pointing in on the distorted form. The array of dark rainbow balefire eggs had been reduced to a flickering dozen. Instantly, my PipBuck began clicking like mad from the magical radiation.

"Discord," I breathed, and the others backed away. Even the Dealer looked horrified at the sight.

"The one and only," rasped a low, hollow voice.

"The internal failsafes went off?" Sanguine gaped at the contents.

“And off... and off... and off... and off. Never enough to kill, but always enough to hurt.” Discord laughed softly. “It’s been a long time since I had anypony to talk to. So fill me in? I’ve got two centuries of hoofball seasons to catch up on. Have the Canterlot Cavaliers finally won the playoffs? Are stripes still a fashion faux pas? Oh, and are you people all a bunch of little monsters still?” We just looked at each other as he laughed. “I imagine you want to do something horrific to me too...”

“Why would you think that?” I asked as I took a few cautious steps forward.

“Because that’s what ponies do,” he muttered in that pained, hollow voice. “To diamond dogs, to buffalo, to dragons... griffins... minotaurs... Oh, I know you all look so cutesie wootsie, but deep down you’re all monsters. Turned me into stone... twice. Locked me up... drilled into me... You have to admit, that’s a little excessive for a couple of bad jokes and some screwing around with folks.” He sighed. “You make it rain chocolate milk once or twice and turn a few roads to soap, and suddenly you’ve crossed a line.”

“You did more than that, Discord,” Sanguine rasped as he stood and approached the statue. “Your antics nearly overthrew the kingdom. You targeted Twilight and her friends; turned them against her.” Honestly, I wasn’t hearing the part about Discord throwing ponies through a rock crusher.

“Oh yes, and Twilight and her friends didn’t harm Equestria in the slightest,” Discord drawled softly. “You know, even at my absolute worst, I never killed anyone. Toyed with... manipulated... teased... oh yes. But kill? There’re few things more boring than a corpse.”

Dealer looked at me and tugged his hat down over his features. I realized it was the exact same style as P-21 now wore. I wondered if, eight or nine generations removed, the bucks could possibly be related. “The Project’s main interface is there. I’ll make sure your PipBuck connects straight to it.” He then frowned at me. “Remember, Blackjack. Crater.”

“Yeah, yeah...” I muttered as my vision began to scroll funky data. I started to hear a rhythmic banging from the direction of distribution. I looked at the terminal and the dial and buttons that Goldenblood manipulated. I gaped at the knob twisted all the way over. “You... he... two centuries in agony?” I asked, gaping at the dial and then at the crumpled statue. At once I twisted it to zero. I heard him let out a long groan of relief.

“I think you could summarize that as ‘Oopsie’,” Discord snickered. “The more the metal resonates, the more Flux one can slurp out of me. Of course, even I have limits.”

“What with the fighting and all you must be feeling better, though...” Rampage said as she stared at the statue.

“Right. Murder, rape, and mass mayhem... yawn. You know, eventually, even wanton slaughter and war gets boring. Not that it matters much. It won’t be long before there’s nothing left of me but metal... As Goldenblood intended, I suspect. A permanent end to a threat to the kingdom. Oh so practical and useful. Such a dull pony.” Discord snickered sarcastically. “How about you, Trueblood? What do you think; what makes ponies do monstrous things?”

“Losing the things we love tends to strip away reluctance,” the ghoul murmured.

Crimson beams flashed up the catwalk towards us, one passing so close to my head that I felt the heat from it! Okay, Discord or Sanguine or -- no. The robots were here. The Protectaponies clomped

slowly and inexorably along the metal walkway towards us, and down below I caught sight of a sentry rolling through the pink fog. "Intruders detected. Surrender yourselves immediately and face disintegration."

My friends jumped into action, and Psychoshy snapped her wings once and launched herself into the air. The yellow pegasus arched high along the domed ceiling, nipping behind the warning signs as six Protectaponies blasted away with their crimson beams. Then, suddenly, she dove and corkscrewed down at the robots, hooking up at the very end and smashing into the row of robotic ponies. Metal bits went flying as she climbed back to the ceiling.

Before the still-functional robots could rise and resume attacking, Rampage was dancing on top of them, hooves flashing and blasting the machines to pieces. Then the sentry below began to spray the catwalk wildly with its gatling gun. Persuasion thumped, and suddenly a section of the Pink Cloud geysered. The trail of gatling fire swung wildly around as P-21 shook out the spent shell, calmly slapped a fresh grenade in the breech, clapped it shut, and patiently aimed once more. The spray chewed along the catwalk towards him. The grenade launcher 'pomf'ed once again and lobbed the explosive in a perfect arc into the mist. The Cloud geysered again, and the robot went silent.

I looked around, but that seemed to be all of them. For the moment. But if that group had found a way in and radioed it to the others... I tapped the terminal a few times, then smacked the monitor with my hoof, and the screen slowly glowed to life.

Project Chimera Primary Interface

Project Chimera sealed per Equestrian Royal Command.

I looked down at my PipBuck, and the arcane device mirrored the terminal. However, there was an additional box at the bottom of the PipBuck screen.

Unseal Project Chimera per EC-1101 authority: Y/N?

I glanced at the Dealer, then hit Y.

More data flashed across my vision. Now that I had my PipBuck again, I had to admit that it was refreshing to have those images. Reassuring to see the radiation meter crawling upwards in my E.F.S. Finally, the screen flashed up a number of menu options. I ignored the files and records and the like; unlike Twilight, I had no interest in reading bajillions of pages of information. Instead, I went to 'Facility Status'.

The Dealer suddenly frowned. "Shit."

"Huh? What?" I asked, looking at the not-so-figment-of-my-imagination pony.

"Somepony's accessing this place now that it's unsealed... and somepony else is trying to cut off that access," he said with a scowl, his eyes staring off into space.

"You can interface with the facility?"

"Your PipBuck is in command of every functional machine on this place's network now, so yeah." A diagram popped up in my vision full of flashing green and red lights. Orange lines kept trying to creep into the diagram... they had consumed the hexagon marked 'Distribution' and were spreading into the rest

of the facility. A green line was wiggling in from the security hub. I couldn't make heads or hooves of it, but he seemed to understand what it meant.

I nodded. "Okay. Your job is to cut off that outside access, then get us locked down and close the doors. Just don't blow the facility up till we're out of here."

"She says it so casually," Discord murmured.

Dealer looked at me, then nodded. Blue lines radiated out from production, intercepting the orange and green intruding into the facility. They cut off the creeping orange lines and drove them back, stabbing into distribution. The green line snaked around, as if evading the Dealer's efforts to push it out. "I can't seal off the doors to distribution. Looks like they cut through the drive systems to get them open. I can seal off the other sections, though, and activate what turrets I can. But they're going to get in eventually." From throughout the facility came the distant booming of mechanized doors closing.

"Right," I nodded, waving my hoof in front of my face to try and banish the diagram. One way or another, it disappeared, and then I looked at the remaining glowing balefire eggs. "P-21, Psychoshy, Rampage... you three are on our defense. P-21, can you use those balefire eggs? Let Psycho do some bombing runs when they get close?"

"Maybe," he replied as he looked at them skeptically.

"My name is Fluttershy," the yellow pegasus said with a scowl.

"Fooled me," Discord chuckled. "But you never can be too sure of the quiet ones."

"You're not Fluttershy," I retorted. "You're not quiet and nice like her, or scared of your own shadow. But you can kick flank a lot better than she could. That's what we need right now." That seemed to mollify her a bit. "Now, help P-21 get those bombs down... without blowing yourself to pieces."

The mare grimaced, then finally nodded. "Are you going to kill Sanguine?"

I frowned, not sure of that answer myself. "Only if he forces me to." Psychoshy looked at me the same way Rampage did when she talked about my softheartedness. "You think I should?"

"I know he still plans on killing you. Just because you spared him... don't think he's planning on sparing you." She scowled, looking at the ghoul who was standing apart, looking impatient. "Part of me wants to kill him myself. I let him use me... but... I didn't expect him to throw me away."

"And the other part?"

"Wants to tear your head off and hope that's enough for him to... to care about me," she admitted as she frowned and shook her head. "Just... do whatever it is you're going to do." The yellow pegasus started to pace. "I need to kill some things. A whole lot of things. I just wish I had something a little more meaty than robots to crush." Then she pointed at Rampage and snarled, "And I want my power hooves back!"

"Yeah, yeah. And I want a lifetime supply of Party Time Mint-als. Forget it!" the striped filly said as she admired the devices on the ends of her legs. "These things are great! I can kill things as a kid with 'em!"

"Can we shut up and get these bombs out?" P-21 grumbled as he dug out a tablet of Rad-X. "I just want to blast this place to the moon and get out of here."

The silver statue sighed. "Sure, Discord. Mess around with the little ponies. They're so cute and cuddly. What trouble could they *possibly* be?"

I stepped back from the alcove, letting them work. The Dealer frowned as he looked at Sanguine. "How long do you think we have till we're overrun?" I asked before he could start questioning my decision to help the ghoul.

"An hour or two," Dealer replied. "Blackjack, about Sanguine... the things he's done..."

"Damn it, I get enough of this from P-21!" I hissed in frustration. "I know he's done messed up things. I get it! And I wish that I could be the Stable Dweller and just shoot him dead for doing it! But I need him to help Scotch, he needs me to help his family, and you need me if you want this place blown up. So just drop it already."

He finally sighed and nodded. "Very well. Then hurry. They're in the loading docks and are shooting their way through the hatches. It'll take them a while to get into production; this place had the thickest doors installed."

"Right." I trotted to Sanguine. "Let's go. I need a Scotch copied, and you need your family saved."

He stared at me for the longest time, as if he couldn't exactly believe this was happening, and then nodded once. "I'll meet you in the copyroom. I hope you have a blood sample of the pony you want copied. Otherwise, this is all academic."

I frowned, then nodded in return. "Scotch got cut out in that wood. She bled pretty badly on my barding a few hours ago. Will that work?" Hopefully putting the environmental suit on over it had preserved the blood.

"It should," he said as we walked along the catwalk, him leading the way. One sign of a trick, and I'd be into S.A.T.S. and ready to see how hard my cyberlegs could kick. He turned his head to glance over his shoulder at me. "I am sorry, Blackjack. For what I did to you."

"Sorry?" I gaped at him a moment. "You killed everypony in Brimstone's Fall and left Dusty Trails alive in a crusher and you're sorry?"

"I am. If you'd died... if EC-1101 was destroyed..." He shook his head. "We'd all be doomed."

"Why?" I asked with a small frown. "You mentioned something about Horizons back in the arena. Fill me in now?"

"We really haven't the time for details," he said with a huff, paused, then answered, "When Twilight Sparkle thought that Goldenblood was impeding her research, Luna had him stripped of his directorship. To be honest, I felt the Princess's response was somewhat... lacking. It was a slap on the hoof, really. Still, she appointed Horse as director of the O.I.A., and I supported him."

"It got you put back on Project Chimera," I replied.

“Yes. But in the weeks after he was appointed, Horse discovered disturbing things about Goldenblood. Very disturbing things. There were projects in place that the Princess hadn’t authorized. Projects like Chimera, Steelpony, and Starfall were clearly for war usage, and projects like Eternity were old news. Other projects like Partypooper and Redoubt were highly classified, but Luna approved of them... or at least she didn’t disapprove of them. But Horse found two projects that directly challenged her rule. One was a project called ‘Gardens of Equestria’, which seemed to be designed to restore the country in the event of a truly overwhelming defeat. The suggestion that such a thing could happen and the waste of resources creating it were bad enough. But Horizons...” I leaned forward, nearly salivating. “Horse said it was a weapon of some kind, capable of utterly destroying the zebras in their entirety. I suppose it was some sort of super megaspell.”

I blinked... that was it? Fun. As if regular megaspells weren’t enough! “And it’s tied into EC-1101?”

“Luna couldn’t even find Horizons or Gardens... so she closed every O.I.A. project she could, hoping that that would work. Goldenblood refused to help, of course...” He shook his head. “Really, I think the fact that he was keeping secrets from Luna angered her far more than the projects themselves.”

“She trusted him that much?”

“Yes. I think she finally realized just how far Goldenblood had strayed in his loyalty. She was infuriated that he would waste staggering resources on those two projects without her knowledge and approval. She insisted he disclose everything he knew on Horizons and Gardens. He refused.” The ghoul hesitated, then laughed mirthlessly. “Luna did not take it well.”

“What happened?”

“He was sentenced to execution... after being mentally rendered by M.o.M.’s finest interrogators, of course. That was when he finally cracked. He screamed and railed about conspiracies and deception as he was dragged away. I wasn’t there, but I heard that he was ranting about Horse and the Ministry Mares and ancient zebra plots and Nightmare Moon. Completely spit his bit.” Sanguine chuckled, grinning at the memory before he sighed and added, “Unfortunately, I had an important meeting on the same day of the execution and couldn’t find a way to get out of it and attend. The meeting didn’t end up mattering anyway; the bombs fell the very next day.”

That was some interesting timing... and I wasn’t capable of believing in coincidence anymore; not with anything involving Goldenblood. Sanguine reached some stairs dropping down into the Pink Cloud. “I have blood samples in my lab downstairs. I’ll be right back.”

I waited, wondering if this was some sort of deception; maybe he was getting a gun? Maybe. If this place was working, then he could just shoot me now and get what he wanted. He had to know that he couldn’t hold the complex against all those robots, though... but just in case, I kept my gun loose in its holster and practiced trying to control it. My magic was getting stronger, but I was still a long way from wielding a shotgun again.

The left side of my face was all twitchy; I frowned and reached up, feeling the rough and jagged edges of melted hide. Did I... no. I couldn’t look that bad. I just needed more time to regenerate. Somepony would have said something... I swallowed hard; nothing I could do now. I just had to hope that, whatever Sanguine’s breath had done, my body could heal it. Dealer had vanished again; was he

watching me now or supervising the facility?

Sanguine returned wearing a pair of saddlebags. "You keep your stuff down in that Pink Cloud?"

"Can you think of a more secure location?" he retorted. "You've seen how effective it is."

I scowled. Don't smash the ghoul, Blackjack. He's going to grow you another Scotch Tape. You need him, Blackjack. "Yeah. Look what it did to my face," I said as we trotted back towards the copyroom. A door had closed across the pipes, but as we approached it hissed open again.

"Yes... well... I was trying to win," he said defensively. We entered the room with the golden tree, and he shrugged off his saddlebags and levitated out four small glass ampoules filled with a dark maroon substance. The blanks just milled about. Even a fatty just stood by. I supposed that, when not loaded up with Rage, they were just as docile as the rest. Boo found a seat and watched us both.

"You're making four?" I said with a frown.

"Yes. Four healthy bodies. I'll fuse my family to them... and then myself," he said as we trotted down the stairs. With Chimera active, it was now studded with tiny lights and hummed faintly.

"A ghoul fused with a blank?" My mind tried to wrap my head around that one. "Would that even work?"

Sanguine laughed. "Blackjack, I am so far into hypothetical guesses that I might as well just be throwing reagents against the wall and hoping for a beneficial reaction." He lifted the ampule to a hollow in the tree's trunk. There was a soft hum, and a red vein crept along the bark to the branches overhead. Instantly, a small growth began to slowly swell. Unlike the others, it was a rich orange. The next was a light beige, and the one after that a deep red. Finally, a tan pony began to grow.

Then I reached down to peel away the tatters of the hazmat suit and froze. "Come on... get off..." I muttered, scraping at the tape. Funny... my hoof couldn't find an edge. Not... not anywhere. It was like the tape wasn't simply stuck to me but rather was fused to my legs! I grit my teeth, frowning as I tugged... and tugged...

"Ah... yes. That can happen on exposure to Pink Cloud," Sanguine said delicately as I jerked at the suit's neck connection and felt the exact same thing!

"Get it off! Get it off! What the heck did you do?" I gasped as I tugged... The suit felt loose on most of my body, but at the seams...

"Your pegasus friend can handle a scalpel, yes? My sources suggested she had some medical background. Ah, and something stronger for your enhancements?" Sanguine asked. I swallowed and nodded. "Good. She's going to have to cut the suit off your hide. I'm afraid that, otherwise, it's a permanent addition."

* * *

There wasn't much to do for a bit. I wanted to talk to him... but it was all just one great big thorny mess in my head and he was fussing with the pods as they grew. One of them 'popped' early on and he'd gone into a rage for five minutes before adding more blood and starting over. Rampage, Psychoshy, and P-21 were taking care of our momentary defenses. I was doing all I could to not pick at where the

suit had fused with me. My legs I could probably free with a belt sander and scrap metal, but my skin? The itchy sensation was driving me right up the wall. Sanguine had cut a hole in the hazmat suit and scraped enough of Scotch's congealed blood off my leather barding to set an olive pod growing... and a milky white pod next to it. That'd better have just been a coincidence! ...Well, there were a lot of white ones... calm down, Blackjack. At least for now.

Finally he seemed to calm enough that I could ask a question. "So... how'd you hook up with Goldenblood in the first place? I mean, I know that Silver Stripe faced all kinds of flak for being half zebra, but you were full pony."

"I... made a mistake," he admitted after a moment. "I was just out of medical school and was drafted. I got sent east of Hoofington, near the Zanzebra Strait. The zebras had a number of forward positions and were digging in, so the army was called in to blast them out again. This was... five years after the start? Cannons were a big new addition, and firearms were issued for the first time ever. New wounds and injuries required whole new medical procedures on the battlefield."

"So what happened?"

"It was a mess. Twenty-four-hour surgical sessions. Amputations were common. Unicorn medics like myself were constantly burning out our horns trying to heal; there were so many! Surgery on gunshot or heavy shrapnel wounds was untried and suspect. An officer came in with a bloodied flank... superficial injury. He could have waited, but he insisted. I should have made him wait... but he was an officer and promised me a rotation back to Manehattan. So I helped him. When I was done, I was burned out. Couldn't even lift a scalpel." He sighed and shook his head, staring off into space. "A dozen ponies died while I was dicking around with a stupid flesh wound."

"He honored his word and put in a commendation for me, but it didn't matter. My superiors had faulted me for violating triage procedures. When I was pulled off the line, my record came with me. I had skills, but the word in the profession was that I was an opportunist, willing to let a dozen ponies die just to get what I wanted. I finally got a position, but I faced that attitude. So... finally, I embraced it. Anything to get ahead. To get what I deserved."

"So when Goldenblood came along with an offer, you jumped at it," I replied.

"Yes. He played me perfectly with an alternative route to advancement. I should have known better, but it seemed too good to pass up. The precise mix of an opportunity to prove myself and all but guaranteed personal advancement and prestige. I should have realized what a thorough manipulator he was," the ghoul said bitterly, and I had to remind myself that he was just as guilty as others. "All I had to do was keep my mouth shut and take care of Fluttershy's pregnancy."

"But something went wrong."

He nodded and sighed. "Some mares are ill-suited for pregnancy. Fluttershy's was... difficult. The pressures of being the Ministry of Peace's leader and mascot were coupled with a real sense of responsibility for injured ponies, not to mention the secrecy of the pregnancy itself. I recommended she take a leave of absence, but apparently that was unacceptable." He paced back and forth slowly. "There were a number of small alarms, and I was tasked with coming up with contingencies. Stasis was one such contingency, and we investigated technological methods of saving premature foals. Rarity and Goldenblood squashed rumors right and left, kept the truth concealed from the public and most of her friends. Finally, one night, she was brought in in a hysterical state. Something had happened and she

was in premature labor. There was nothing we could do to halt it.”

I pressed my hooves to my mouth as I listened. That it happened at all was horrible, but it happening to Fluttershy of all ponies was almost too terrible to contemplate. “What happened?”

“At first, we thought the foal stillborn. No heartbeat. No breathing. Fluttershy was inconsolable. She was taken out, and I rechecked for a heartbeat. To my shock and amazement, it was there. I put the foal in stasis. It was such a fragile life, barely there at all. I couldn’t risk telling Fluttershy only to have the infant die. It would have devastated her. No matter my differences with Goldenblood, I couldn’t do that to her. I kept it secret from everypony. Reported the foal as being born to an unknown mother who died in an accident.”

“And you never told Goldenblood?”

He snorted. “Why would I? Goldenblood was no friend of mine; he should have died at Littlehorn.”

I stared at him a moment. Didn’t he know? “Sanguine... Goldenblood was her father.”

“What...?” He stared at me, then blinked once, in a perfect imitation of Boo. “They told me her father had been a patient injured in an attack. Are you telling me...” And then he started to laugh, the boiled, wet noise sounding like he was choking to death. “That... would have been good to know two centuries ago. I’d never have had to go to Twilight Sparkle with the potential of alicorns if I’d known that!”

“So... you just kept her in stasis for years?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Yes. I built the first stasis pod prototype myself, in my garage actually, just as Chimera was set up for Fluttershy... so that nopony would ever have to go through what she did. I don’t know what happened between them; he was always so cool around her that it never occurred to me they were in a relationship. We perfected the stasis pods, so we thought; I should have been rich from the invention... but ah well. Then came fusion spells to improve on ponies. Blanks were introduced last as a source of organs and test material. I was able to fuse the infant with a healthy pegasus blank of her own body, and that stabilized her enough to survive.”

Then Sanguine groaned. “Suddenly, I had a treasure that I dared not use! Fluttershy’s child... yet it had been years since her miscarriage. Fluttershy was up to her wings in duties and responsibilities. I couldn’t add to that. Plus, as much as it shames me to admit it, I liked having her child as an ace in my pocket. Goldenblood was on his way out. Horse became director... why take her out of stasis? I could just hold on to her until the opportunity presented itself. Wait until the opportune moment... perhaps when an opening at the Helpinghoof clinic presented itself. Or even... perhaps if Fluttershy wanted to retire and had to name a successor?” He licked his lips, making my mane creep. Right, wanting to use a foal to blackmail for a position. Nothing off about that! “So I put her back in stasis... the only life she’d known.”

“And then the bombs fell and she was left in there.” Just like at the Fluttershy Medical Center.

“Yes. I have to admit, with my own problems and preoccupations after the apocalypse, I forgot about her. I tried to use this place and my limited access to ensure my own survival. Once that was established, it was a constant struggle to keep my sanity intact. Saving my family... Project Chimera...

they were anchors. I experimented with the stasis pods from time to time out of boredom, but my meddling usually resulted in the death of the occupant. Then, quite by accident, I successfully opened one, and the occupant survived."

"Let me guess. Psychoshy?"

"Yes," he replied. "But... I discovered something about stasis... while it does preserve the body, it does not necessarily preserve the mind. She'd been a foal when she was put in. She didn't have any life experiences; that endless stability was simply the world as she knew it. Her emergence into the real world, on the other hoof, was terribly traumatic." He closed his eyes. "But a colt or filly, trapped in place for centuries..."

I saw 'PLAY' painted on the walls.

"So... when you realized that, it lit a fire under your ass to get your family restored?"

He nodded slowly. "Perhaps not exactly like that, but yes. You have the crux of it." Suddenly there was a sharp detonation that I felt through the floor. One of P-21's balefire eggs going off. I really hoped that that wouldn't set off other things before we were ready. Once we had our stuff, we were going to be out the tunnel to the river. Then I'd wish him the best of luck... he'd need it, given how many ponies wanted him dead. The ghouls seemed to read my nervousness. "Relax. The only way this place blows is if Discord breaks free. And even you aren't dumb enough to do that."

Oh, he really didn't know me that well, did he?

"So... Discord. How'd he get tied into Chimera? What's his story?" I asked softly.

"He's some sort of manifested spirit of chaos, but his magic... his ability to do wild and unpredictable magic at will... was the cornerstone of Chimera. By extracting his magical potential and stabilizing it, we were able to create persistent magical effects that would have otherwise required an army of unicorns to perform. Few ponies realized or appreciated how Flux advanced the war effort."

I nodded. "But is he dangerous?"

"Incredibly," Sanguine replied, but then he frowned. "Or... at least he was. Seeing him like that..." Then he shook his head. "No. It must be some kind of trick. He's the sort to try and deceive others for his own benefit." I gave him a flat look; he was one to talk. Unfortunately, he couldn't take his eyes off the swelling 'fruit' of the copy machine.

"But can he die?" I asked tentatively. He could hurt. That was for sure.

"I'm not sure. Not in the conventional sense, certainly. Shoot him full of holes, turn him to stone, or cut his head off, and he'd simply pop out from behind the friend you just killed by accident to have a good laugh at your frustration. The only substance we ever encountered that could stop him was a special meteoric iron found beneath the city. Indeed, its very nature seems almost hostile to Discord. Goldenblood used it to trap him, and Horse discovered how to resonate it, increasing the Flux yield by ten times."

"But why... I don't understand." He looked at me flatly, and I said, "I shoot things, remember?"

"Clearly Stable-Tec was terribly negligent in your education," he muttered, then sighed. "Arcane

science 101, then... magic resonates at a wide variety of frequencies. Everything in the universe has its own set of wavelengths. In nature, most of these waves harmlessly clash with each other... like static, if you will, but intelligent beings and certain magical organisms can focus this magic to specific effects. Unicorn craft, dragon fire, pegasus flight, earth pony mudloving, diamond dog digging, and so on. Races have similar frequency patterns, and every individual has their own unique spectrum. Your soul, some might say. These unique frequencies become more or less fixed as you age and, in ponies, manifest as a cutie mark." He paused, his lip twitching as if wondering if I knew what a cutie mark was.

"Signifying our special talents. That much I know," I said with a huff. "So, everything in the universe vibrates, then?"

"A simplification, but yes. Normally little happens; the waves cancel out one another in nature. But when intelligent creatures start to work together, then the frequencies can align on large scales. The magical potential of one pony is amplified by the magical potential of others. They build and support each other. Conversely, they can interfere with each other, leading to aggravation and anger. That interference releases energy, usually in very small amounts, that feeds and empowers Discord. But the meteoric iron beneath Hoofington has a far more potent effect on the resonances of others: it destroys them."

"What? But didn't you say that that's what happens in nature?" I frowned, feeling like I was back in school. Being taught by a murderous mad undead pony was, at least, a step up from my old teacher.

"Cancellation is not destruction. The waves are still there, they're just not expressed. But the meteoric iron doesn't cancel; it somehow eliminates the waves of others. You can cast every spell you want at it and it will simply destroy the magic, releasing great amounts of energy as it does so. The only way to affect it at all is to use magic that vibrates at exactly the same frequency as the metal. I could never do it..." he said with a small frown. "It felt... wrong." Coming from Sanguine, that sounded significant.

"That's the only way?"

"Well... the only way that I know of. I know Trottenheimer experimented with the metal quite extensively for Project Starfall. Trying to make a mostly nonmagical means of mass destruction more powerful than our greatest megaspell or the enemy's balefire bombs. Quite outside my field of expertise. I always wondered what happened to him; he disappeared quite abruptly. Goldenblood probably had him killed." He caught my confused look. "Our wives were friends."

"He was working at Ironshod R&D, making a gun," I said. Sanguine looked like I'd just told him that Trottenheimer had been cleaning sewer pipes.

"A gun?" Sanguine asked flatly, as if he couldn't quite believe it. "Goldenblood had Equestria's finest megaspell researcher... making a gun?"

"Yep, but it's a hell of a gun. Actually, it's... not really a gun, you know. It's more like some kind of super bomb or something that points the blast in one direction. I mean, it should blow me or itself apart with that much force, but it uses magic fields to keep me from becoming a missile." He looked at me in confusion. "What? Just because I don't know squat about magical junk, I can't comprehend something like recoil?" I rubbed my chin. "What was Project Starfall? That's another one I don't know anything about."

"In a nutshell, weaponizing megaspells. The specifics were all grossly classified, of course."

I frowned. "Why wasn't that done by the M.A.S.? Why'd the O.I.A. have to do it?"

Sanguine blinked. "I really have no idea. The M.A.S. debated megaspell weapons use for years. Fluttershy, of course, was adamantly against it. She constantly implored Twilight not to pursue the research. I suppose that's why the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion was so appealing to Twilight."

"Too bad the zebras made balefire bombs with them," I muttered sullenly.

"Yes. One of the greatest failures of counter-intelligence in history. No pony knows how the information got into their filthy hooves, but once it was, balefire bombs were inevitable. And thus so was Project Starfall. I understand that there was a standing execution order for the pony responsible for the information being stolen. Goldenblood of all ponies publicly called for a ceasefire when it was revealed, saying the war had become too dangerous. Almost cost him his directorship." Sanguine shook his head. "Luna wanted to win the war. The zebras wanted to win. Everypony simply was too focused on victory to care about 'impossible hypotheticals' like balefire bomb armageddon."

"You don't think that Goldenblood leaked them, do you?"

Sanguine shook his head. "Why would he? With megaspells under our control, we would have been able to systematically blast the zebras to pieces. Handing them over simply prolonged the war." He sighed and shook his head. "Zebras excelled at espionage. Robronco robots turned into zebra battle machines. They even had operatives magically transformed into ponies as deep moles towards the end of the war. It was a nightmare for Image and Morale."

"Image? Why would Rarity care about zebra infiltration?" I frowned. "Wasn't that Pinkie Pie's thing?"

"Oh, she wasn't nearly as blatant as Pinkie Pie, but Image were masters at surveillance and information management. No pony knew more about what was happening in Equestria than Rarity... except perhaps Goldenblood. Image constantly filtered publications, spun stories, sponsored works to keep everypony working together and on message. When there was a disruption, she usually had it managed by the time Ministry of Morale arrived to deal with the perpetrators."

I frowned at that thought, remembering Goldenblood threatening Rarity to get her to cover up the projects. Why? What leverage could you possibly have on a pony like her? I shook my head. Secrets and lies. Closing my eyes, I imagined Equestria as a tangled knot with more and more stress and tension, pulling tighter and tighter. Then something snapped... Goldenblood going crazy? Had that been it? Or had something else come along that blasted everything apart?

What in Equestria did Goldenblood need a gun like Folly for? He wasn't a soldier. Why would he need something that could pack the punch of a megaspell?

No, not just a megaspell. A portable megaspell. A single pony megaspell, one that would kill the shooter. Goldenblood had shown Twilight the origin of Flux to try and convince her to abandon her research... but had he needed to? Twilight had been honestly shocked to discover the source; had he wanted to, Goldenblood might have stalled her for months. Years, maybe. If he'd died, would Twilight have ever found out, or would Discord have been buried under O.I.A. bureaucracy? He'd chosen to show her. Had it been because he wanted to stop the alicorn project and couldn't think of any other way to do

it, out of guilt for Gardens, or something else altogether?

Maybe he'd planned on doing something that resulted in his own death... only he'd been arrested and sentenced to execution first?

What would you need a gun like Folly for? Luna? Celestia? Discord? A dragon, maybe? Spike?

"Ugh... why can't a smart pony figure all this stuff out?" I whined as I thumped the side of my head with a hoof. "It's simple... smart ponies work out this mystery crap and tell me where to shoot, I shoot, we win! A round of Wild Pegasus to celebrate afterwards. This should not be so complicated!"

Boo bumped her head against my side, then looked at me with her wide, vacuous stare and a small smile. I blinked in confusion, and she bumped me again. "Wha... what do you want, Boo? Are you hungry?" I started to dig out another snack cake, but she just nudged me again. Finally, I sighed. "Sorry, I dunno what you want..." I reached down to rub her ragged milky white mane, and she closed her eyes, smiling and sighing. I caught Sanguine staring at me. "What?" I asked, a touch defensively as I scratched her ears.

"Nothing. I'm trying to hypothesize why she is so different from the other blanks." He rubbed his chin, narrowing his gaze. "She might have stepped in some Flux, I suppose, though that tends to create gross physical changes. She looks a few weeks older than most blanks, too."

"You don't have to talk about her like she's an animal," I said as kept scratching. She lay down beside me, resting her head against my shoulder. "Maybe she just figured out how to survive?"

"She *is* an animal, Blackjack. And a stupid one at that. Blanks will starve to death if you don't feed them." He sighed and shook his head. "Now, speaking of blanks... it looks like ours are almost done. If you don't mind, I'd suggest letting me harvest the organs you need here and then treat them for preservation during transport. As I recall, your filly has been exposed to chlorine? That means new lungs and replacement eyes. Potentially hide for skin grafts if the exposure is severe. It'd be far simpler to transport the parts rather than hauling around three blanks."

"Three?"

"Yes. Your friend there, your filly, and yourself." He pointed up at the sac hanging next to the olive bag. It... did look a little different from the rest of the white ones; it might have been a little dingier and pinkish than the others. "It looks like blood contamination has provided you with a spare."

"A spare? You made a copy of me?" I gaped. "I don't need any spare parts!" I looked at him, about to begin the smashing. Did he really expect me to believe that making a spare of me had been an accident?

"You might want to look into a mirror before you say that," he rasped. "I know you probably have some sort of regeneration talisman built in, but the scars I'm looking at... and with what she's going to have to cut off you to get that barding off... well... trust me. You'll need a few spare strips of hide."

I also thought of Glory having to harvest organs from a filly... it wouldn't be pretty. "...Okay. Pack in there whatever you think she'll need." I frowned. "Is it hard to do transplants?"

"With the proper healing facilities and an auto-doc, not at all."

"Did you leave proper healing facilities when you trashed the Fluttershy Medical Center?" I asked in return.

"Please... I might be a monster, but I had nothing but respect for Fluttershy. We shot up the guards at the entrance and then moved on," he replied. Oh, was that all? Suddenly, the orange sac ripped open and deposited a slimy orange mare onto the grimy floor. The ooze covering her rapidly evaporated off the mare's body, leaving her sitting there dully.

Sanguine froze, and Boo and I were completely forgotten as he slowly approached her. "Sunflower..." he murmured as he stretched out one of his boiled-looking, split hooves towards her pumpkin mane, brushing it out of her face. The limb trembled as he pressed it to his lips and let out a choking noise. Then he made it again and again, bowing his head.

Sanguine was crying, as much as he could cry. "I'm so sorry. I'm sorry I didn't fix this sooner... I'm sorry I couldn't save you..." he croaked as he reached forward to hold her as his entire body shook. "I'm sorry, my love. So very sorry." There was no forgiveness from the orange unicorn though. No smile of reassurance. No returning that gesture. He might as well have been apologizing to a doll.

There was another detonation... and another. They sounded closer. A moment later, the olive pod ruptured and dropped Scotch Tape on to the floor. I trotted over towards her, but she didn't even look at me. Then the white pod popped open and my copy fell in front of me, landing on her head. She sat there, blinking but not looking around.

I stared at her a moment, watching the magic goop covering her vanish. She looked... healthy. Complete. I sure hoped I didn't share that expression, though. No taint mutations, no cybernetics, no scars, no barding fused to her hide... Sweet Celestia, in another month, would there be anything left of me? I tore my eyes from her, trying to crush down those worries and fears.

"We'll go to Friendship City... maybe even Tenpony if I can pass for mortal again! You'll be safe. You'll be healthy. I promise, Sunflower. I promise," the ghoulish rasped as he pressed his face into her chest. "Promise..." he hissed softly. There was another detonation.

"Um... Sanguine... maybe you should... um... go do what you said you were going to do?" I asked, not looking at the copies of myself and Scotch. Did I really want to imagine what he could be doing with them when he was harvesting the 'parts' we needed? Calm down, Blackjack. A copy of you wouldn't do much good for Sanguine. He'd had a pony with Ministry Mare blood, purer than mine, and she hadn't been able to get EC-1101 to work. A blank wouldn't either.

"Ah... Ah, yes. I'll go and take care of that. The preservation talismans will keep the tissues viable for a day or two. It's the same technology as used in the stasis pods. Just don't take too long before getting back to your friend," he muttered as he tugged at the copies of myself and Scotch's manes. Obediently, 'I' was led off to slaughter.

I really, *really* didn't like this place.

There was another explosion I felt through my hooves. "Dealer? Dealer? Can you hear me?" I asked, looking around. Nothing. Ugh, I hated waiting! I wanted to go find P-21 and the others, wanted to make sure Sanguine wasn't trying anything funny with my body. Instead, I just sighed and stroked Boo's

ears as an army of robots slowly chewed their way through this place.

The remaining three blanks plopped out one after the next. I found an extension cord in a maintenance closet and led them slowly into the fusion room. They simply stood by, blinking and looking around dully.

"Blackjack!" Rampage squealed as she ran in, her hide marred and power hooves blackened. "We got big trouble. Tell me you're almost done." P-21 and Psychoshy followed after her. "We're down to one balefire egg, and they've brought a robot that's just sawing its way through everything in front of it. They're chewing through the doors that've dropped."

"How long do we have?" I asked.

"Before everything's overrun? Twenty minutes... maybe?" P-21 replied as he looked the way he'd come. "We decoyed them into the security wing. They're picking it over now. The distribution area is completely gone. They're probably carving their way into the harvesting area now."

"They're what?" I gasped, and turned to race after Sanguine. I didn't have time to explain things as I backtracked to the room with the bloody tables. Acrid smoke filled the room from the far door, where a prismatic beam was slicing a circle through the thick metal. I saw still forms on the bloody tables... mostly still forms... one flayed-looking unicorn still drew breath. Okay... suddenly the whole spare parts thing went from 'stuff I needed' to 'what the fuck!' He'd skinned my copy alive! I tried to think of some way to kill 'myself'... Psychoshy would take care of it, right? First things first, though. There were two blood-smeared white crates at the feet of the tables. "Get those, P-21!" I yelled, pointing at the white crates. They had straps that would go around his neck. Not ideal, but I'd rather he had them than Psychoshy.

"Where's Sanguine?" Psychoshy yelled as she flew into the center of the room. I was glad the massive manticore had departed.

"Getting his family," I yelled back, pointing a hoof through a door at all the pony-sized stasis pods. Now would be the time to tell her to... maybe Rampage could do it? Then we heard a mare scream, shared a look, and darted inside.

"Sunflower! It's me! Trueblood! I'm here to save you! To save you!" the ghoul cried desperately as he tried to hold the thrashing mare. She didn't look that far from a ghoul herself, her orange hide mottled and burned-looking. Near the pods were three yellow hazmat suits, long ago discarded. In two other pods, one unicorn colt was curled up in a fetal position, his eyes wide and staring. The other cried and screamed for his mommy and daddy. They weren't much better off.

"Get away from me! Get away!" she screamed as she beat on him with her hooves. "Trueblood!" she wailed. What had she experienced, waiting for two centuries?

"Ma'am! Please! He's trying to help you!" I yelled. She took one look at me and let out another scream of horror. All four hooves kicked out at once, knocking him away as she jumped out of the pod. She was coughing and choking, but hysteria had given her the strength to fight and to run for safety.

Too bad we were the safest things in this place.

She levitated up the fetal foal who trembled in shock and the other jumped to her side. Together

they ran for the door, yelling for Trueblood and their daddy. Then they caught sight of Rampage and P-21 lugging two bloody boxes and skidded to a stop.

"Hi," Rampage said, waving a sparking power hoof. P-21 nodded, tugging the brim of his hat. Sunflower just gasped as she slowly moved around them. Her breathing was becoming even more ragged, bloody froth creeping down from the corner of her mouth.

"Sunflower! We're here to help you! Please!" wailed Sanguine, plaintively. "I love you! Please!" he begged. Psychoshy just turned away as she hovered there, clenching her eyes shut as her hooves shook.

"P-21, dart them!" I said; we had no time to waste. But the blue buck looked at the bulky containers and his saddlebags and then gave me a look asking exactly how he was supposed to do that. Then the trio scampered past him into the organ collection room.

"Oh for the love of..." I growled as we raced after them. We didn't have time for this. I had no idea if we'd have the time to fuse even one of his family at this rate. From my memory it didn't take long to combine a cockatrice with a pony, but wouldn't we need more unicorns? Or maybe they'd streamlined the fusion process? I spilled out into the harvesting room and the mare just sat there, staring in shock at the bloody tables. "Look, you need to calm down..."

"Stay back!" Sunflower sobbed as she hugged her colts close. "Trueblood! Where are you, True?!" she wailed. I glanced at the door... that prismatic beam was almost through.

Suddenly the glass separating the pods from the harvesting room shattered as Psychoshy flew through and pounced on the sobbing Sunflower. "You stupid cunt!" the yellow mare snarled. "There is your Trueblood! There!" she said as she pointed a hoof at the ghoul. She grit her teeth as she trembled, clenching her eyes shut as tears ran down her cheeks. "He's fought for two centuries to bring you back and heal you and you are fucking it up! He loves you that damned much! More than anypony else! So calm the fuck down... let him help you... and... and... have your family."

Sunflower stared at Psychoshy a few seconds, blinking and then coughing before she looked at the ghoul. "True? Is it... it is you... isn't it?"

Psychoshy flew away, turning her back to the scene. I couldn't blame her.

"Sunflower..." Sanguine breathed... and for a moment he wasn't a monster. He was just a pony, an old and tired and desperate pony whose long nightmare was about to be over. Maybe he didn't deserve it; maybe he'd bought that happiness with misery and blood... but he had it.

Then the door gave way; the slab of steel fell into the room with a deafening clang that made us all freeze and in rolled a four-legged, rainbow-painted behemoth. It was almost as big as the tank we'd faced earlier! A beam cannon pointed at us, glittering and flashing, while on its other side whirled a gatling gun that looked more sized to firing grenades than bullets.

When you see an Ultra-Sentinel you'll know it... and then you'll die.

The prismatic beam sliced diagonally towards Sanguine, and I magically yanked him back to prevent him from turning into magical vapor. I had no clue how my horn had just managed that without popping like a five watt bulb, but I didn't have time to contemplate it. I was running on little but panic now.

“Out! Out! Get back to the fusion room!” I screamed. Rampage and P-21 wasted no time running for safety. “Get to storage! There’s a tunnel out of this place there!”

Sunflower was another story. She stared at the machine in horror, holding her children to her in terror. I tried to hold Sanguine back, but he thrashed free. The ghoul raced forward towards his family as the Ultra tracked his motion with the gatling grenade launcher. I extended a hoof in a futile gesture, as if I could somehow magically pull them all to safety. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t do anything.

The grenade launcher began to boom, firing a burst less than a second. I swore time seemed to enter S.A.T.S. as Sanguine held Sunflower. At least they had this moment to go together.

Then a yellow flash dropped down and grabbed him tight. Wings lifted and pulled and tore him away as the microgrenades struck the family. In an instant, just an instant, they exploded in a cloud of shrapnel and transformed into three bloody lumps.

Sanguine stared down as she hovered there, then let out a scream only an undead throat could make. It wasn’t a word; it was a single jagged note of utter despair. I’d never seen a ghoul go feral before, but I was pretty sure it was just like this.

Psychoshy and I raced back, the pegasus struggling with the wildly thrashing ghoul. I saw the Dealer standing beside the door that led to the fusion chamber and yelled, “Close the door!” as we passed through. The door immediately hissed, the two sides sliding horizontally towards each other in the middle as the Ultra rolled after us. It fired its prismatic beam into the wall where the door emerged, and there was a mechanical squeal of tortured metal. The door halted, leaving a hoof wide gap in the middle. The Ultra proceeded to slowly cut and bend the metal away.

“Sanguine, please!” Psychoshy begged as she faced off with the deadly undead monster. He spewed noxious pink streams at her that she barely dodged. “You don’t need them! You can start a new life with me! Please!” she begged as she backed off. The ghoul simply hissed as he drew in his breath... She closed her eyes, her yellow hide blotchy in places where his breath had burned her.

But Sanguine wasn’t looking at her any more. The ghoul stared at the four copies; himself and his family. Psychoshy was forgotten as he stepped towards them, his eyes wide and cloudy. He sat down, staring at the four. Boo left them, rejoining me as she looked on in confusion and bumped my shoulder with her head.

Slowly, I approached Sanguine and swallowed. “Sanguine...” But he didn’t answer. He simply looked at the four copies, a pony who had lost everything. Another pony sucked dry by this horrible place. As much as I hated him, I felt sorry for him too.

“Blackjack!” Rampage shouted as she raced in from the copyroom. “We’re screwed! The storage room is filled with robots. Hundreds of them! I’ve never seen so many before.”

And there went our way out of this place...

The door to harvesting was slowly peeling open as the Ultra carved its way inside. I looked at Sanguine staring at the copies, ignoring Psychoshy as she sobbed brokenly. “Trueblood...” I spoke softly.

“We were such a nice family. Don’t we look nice?” he whispered. “Sandalwood...” He pointed at

the tan colt, then the brown one. "And Mahogany... Sunflower wouldn't let me name them anything with blood in it." He sniffed, shaking his head. "They're such strong, clever boys."

"Just like their father," I replied.

He shook his head firmly. "No. Better than their father. Much better..."

"I'm sorry it turned out this way," I said quietly.

"I should have talked to you... told you why. I shouldn't have... done what I did. Not that..." he said in a hoarse whisper, like a ghost.

"I should have given you a chance to tell me," I replied. "Trueblood... we have to get out of here. The rail line is cut off. So is the way through security and Flim and Flam's escape tunnel. Is there another way out?"

He didn't answer. Then he said softly, "In production, there's a shaft going down. There was a pipeline for Flux... it went to a red tunnel. There's a lift... You can get out that way... I suppose." He paused and murmured quietly, "Such a nice family."

I stared at him as he gazed at the copies of his lost family. If I forced him to go, like Psychoshy had, all I'd have left was a thrashing, feral ghoul. At this point, there was only one thing left to say. "Goodbye, Trueblood." But he didn't respond. I suspected he would never say another word ever again. It'd taken two centuries, but the Hoof had finally caught him.

I turned to the others as the Ultra peeled open the door like a lid off a can of Cram. I grabbed Psychoshy by her mane, employing the wonders of fingers, and dragged her out as she started to thrash. "No! No! Bring him with us! Don't just leave him! He's all the family I have! Please!" she screamed as she fought me. We entered the copyroom as the Ultra squeezed its way into the fusion room. I nodded to the Dealer once we were clear of the door. A prismatic flash cut through the gap before it sealed and locked down.

Psychoshy's mane tore free of my grip as she hammered on the sealed door with her hoof. "Sanguine! Sanguine!" she wailed over and over again, sinking down sobbing as she pressed her cheek to the door. "Please..."

Then there was a cherry red glow followed by a prismatic sparkle as the Ultra-Sentinel resumed its pursuit. Clearly it wasn't going to be satisfied till we were all dead.

"Come on," I said. "Sanguine said there's a way out through production."

"Leave me," Psychoshy said quietly.

"Nope," I replied. "I am through leaving ponies behind to die." I meant it, too. Sanguine's family hadn't deserved to die... not like that... not after two centuries trapped in a nightmare they couldn't escape. "Security saves ponies."

"Shut your mouth, you stupid, self-righteous little cunt. You didn't save him! I am going to--" she began, when there was a soft 'pfft' and a dart appeared in her flank. Her blue eyes widened as she began to sway. "Fucking... cunt..." And then she went limp.

I looked over at Rampage holding the blowgun in her mouth. P-21 rolled his eyes as he said, "I know you probably wanted some kind of teary heart to heart before you won her over and convinced her to live, but we've really got to go!"

I tossed Psychoshy onto my back, and we retraced our way back up onto the catwalk. I stared down at the blanks still standing around in dull obliviousness. My instinct was to save them... but I couldn't. Boo, at least, was clever enough to follow me. I'd have to lead the rest, and I couldn't see any way I could lead around a herd of mindless ponies. I tore myself away, trotting along the catwalk back into production. All we had to do was get down the shaft and escape this...

Pink Cloud.

I stared down at the swirling gas as it was mixed by the robots moving slowly through it. My E.F.S. could make out dozens of bars, and occasionally I could see the flash of lights from their domes or eyes as they moved through the toxic Cloud beneath us. We found ourselves back in front of the central pillar, the twisted statue of Discord behind us. There was nowhere left to run. I looked down into the swirling Pink Cloud but couldn't see any kind of shaft.

"Not good," I muttered.

"I'll say. I'm completely out of popcorn," Discord murmured. "I mean, if this is that last show I get to watch before I die, I'd at least like to enjoy it properly."

I stared at the statue, a terrible desperate feeling inside me. "Can you do something?"

Discord was silent a moment. "Well... I don't know. In better times, I'd turn the robots into mechanical wind-up toys and inhale the Cloud through one nostril and get high off it... but now, I really don't know." His tone turned contemptuous. "I really shouldn't be surprised, though. Ponies freeing me because they need me to save their cutesie-wootsie butts."

"So you're saying you'd rather stay trapped and die than help us?" P-21 asked grimly.

"No. I'd rather you set me free. Then I'd turn you into stone, put you outside, and let you enjoy the pigeons crapping on your head for a thousand years," Discord muttered.

"Pretty sure that pigeons are extinct," Rampage said.

"Oh. Well. That's one small improvement. I'll probably have to bring them back, though. You can't get the whole 'turned to stone' experience without birds pooping all over you," he said.

"We can't free him, anyway," P-21 said as he pointed at the explosives on the pillars. "Soon as he's loose, those things blow up."

"I suppose I could try and eat them like hot tamales, but spicy food gives me gas," Discord offered grudgingly.

I looked at the Cloud, and then looked over at the signs again. One blurb stood out. 'Activate the water flush system'. I peered up at the dim roof and made out the hundreds of sprinklers covering the surface. "Dealer! How do I activate the water flush system?" Ugh, no sign of him again. I knew he wasn't my crazy, so why was he hiding now?

I'd have to find it myself.

"I'm going down there. Get ready; soon as the Cloud washes away, those robots will be able to see us," I said as I dropped the doped Psychoshy next to P-21. Then I frowned... when I did find it, I'd have to move fast. P-21 was carrying the crates. Rampage couldn't carry Psychoshy or Boo in her diminutive form. I looked at the blank mare and sighed. I really hoped this worked. "Boo... I need you to listen. I have to go down there for a bit. You need to follow Rampage and carry Psychoshy. Okay? Can you do that for me?"

She blinked once, cocking her head curiously, and burped. I groaned. We were doomed.

"Don't worry, BJ. I'll try and explain it to her," Rampage said and then frowned. "Are you absolutely sure that you don't want us to try and come with you? I could..."

"Rampage, that pink stuff turns your flesh into goo. Do you want to risk being reduced to a blob of pink bubblegum stuck to the floor? We don't have any way to vaporize you quickly. I'm the one already stuck to my barding, and I've got the metal legs." I turned and dug through my saddlebag, though, pulling out the clear helmet. How things like this fit in my bag, I couldn't imagine. I put the helmet on. The air talisman looked broken, though... I'd have to be quick. "Be ready to move soon as you see the tunnel."

"We'll be ready. But Blackjack, what about the Enervation down there?" P-21 asked grimly.

"Slow, probable death from Enervation or fast, certain death by robot?" I replied rhetorically, trotting quickly back to the stairs down into the Pink Cloud. Instantly, my hide started to prickle from the holes in the environmental suit as the gas got in. Oh, right, those. I'd be lucky if air became an issue. My telekinesis was barely able to lift the revolver. I was left with my own four hooves.

The pink mist swirled around me as I moved through the narrow gaps between the machinery. Was something generating this, or was all this mist the result of years of Sanguine living down here? I guessed it really didn't matter in the long run.

"Unauthorized zebra intruder," crackled a voice behind me, and I turned as crimson beams scoured my backside. I could barely see the glowing eyes, but it looked close enough. I set my forehooves and kicked back with such force that the Protectapony's head exploded in a shower of scrap and sparks. As it fell on its side, more crimson beams flashed over me. I fell the other way, already feeling woozy from the poisons seeping in.

I needed to find a valve, a lever, a button... something that would be used to flush away Flux. I couldn't even tell which way the walls were. Barrels of Flux were stacked in precarious leaking columns and pillars around and atop the equipment. Some seemed to have absorbed the poison, changing from rainbow sludge to an almost bloody pink fluid. I really did not want to find out what it would do to me.

"Halt and be vaporized!" boomed a voice as I darted atop a still conveyor belt. A missile rocketed through the fog, and I leapt away out of reflex. I was quite impressed that I managed to complete the backflip and stick the landing, facing the sentry robot as the missile exploded behind me. Three barrels tumbled down towards me, spilling noxious magical waste. I stood on my hind legs, lifting my forelegs to catch the barrel, and heaved it towards the large machine. The gatling gun purred and the drum exploded, showering the robot in pink goo. Instantly, it began to liquefy into a rusty sludge.

Okay. I really, really, *really* didn't want to get that stuff on me!

Four more Protectaponies came trotting out of the fog, walking through the sludge, heedless of the rust that crept up their metal legs as they sprayed beams of magic incineration at me. I rolled back under the conveyor and kicked three more barrels at the robots as they advanced, the moving objects drawing their fire as I ran the other way.

My back burned terribly. I was fairly sure that, if I was completely natural, I would have been pink bubblegum by now. The robots were closing in, and I still hadn't found any method of setting off the sprinklers! I had no clue where the stairs out of this fog were, and my breathing was getting slow and heavy.

"Unauthorized presence. Exterminate!" buzzed a sentry bot out in the pink fog, sending another missile flying towards me. I barely hit the ground in time for it to miss and explode, showering me with chips of concrete. I looked back at the crater the missile had blown out of the wall... and then at the large pipe and wheel next to the hole. 'Emergency Water Flush System' read a sign over the valve, and I whooped as I rushed up to it, set my hooves, and started to turn.

Nothing. I grunted and strained as I heard the robot approaching behind me. Then I noticed a little sign hung on the wheel.

'Out of Order.'

"I am going to kill them!" I bellowed at the little yellow sign. Okay, so technically I'd probably have to invent time travel if I wanted to do that, but it would be worth it! The robot fired another missile, and I dove aside in time for it to blow another chunk out of the concrete wall.

I'd seen Rampage take a sentry down with her hooves, but she had super strength and the ability to not die. I raced through the gloom towards the robot, its gatling gun purring as it swept a line of metallic death towards me. As the robot came more and more into view, I left it to my body and leapt up onto a conveyor belt, continuing to close the distance. It fired another missile as my legs sprang onto a barrel and vaulted over the streaking projectile to land on its back.

"I have dealt with enough shit today!" I screamed as I rammed my hooves into its metal head. The robot responded by lurching to the left and ramming into the machinery, nearly knocking me off. Then it reversed and slammed into the machinery on the right. I was only just hanging on. I needed something more substantial...

Oh, this was going to suck...

I took a deep breath and my horn flared, popping the helmet off once again. A sane pony would hold her breath, but I really needed to get that sprinkler to work. "P-21! Grenades!" I screamed at the top of my lungs, and threw the helmet up as hard as I could with my free hand as the other held on with dear life.

Funny, if I'd had P-21's hat on, wasn't surrounded by toxic gas, and didn't have an army of killer robots after me, this'd be pretty fun!

One second, nothing. Two seconds... nothing. Three seconds... I was fucked... and then I heard the clatter of metal pinging beside me and threw myself over the machinery to my left, using the

robot's momentum to carry me over. There were three explosions as P-21's grenades went off, and I knew the robot was scrap. Well, it at least wasn't doing more than crackling feebly. It wasn't going to be getting up soon...

And neither was I... I felt my ear stick to the floor, then felt it stretch like taffy as I rose to my hooves. I staggered towards the wall and that pipe and that damned valve. I gripped it with my fingers and began to heave. My lips felt runny and I dared not close my eyes; I wasn't sure I'd be able to open them again. Harder! Twist harder! Do it! *Be strong! Be unwavering!* I felt a little orange pony in me that wouldn't let some stupid valve stop me from saving my friends.

I felt my mechanical parts and my fleshy parts start to move, like the latter were simply going to slide off the former. Don't inhale, Blackjack. Whatever you do... don't do that! Just turn the damned wheel. Even a dumb shit pony like you can do that without fucking up... right?

There was a grinding noise beneath my hooves, and then the valve suddenly popped. Immediately, I heard a great gurgle within the pipe and from overhead there came a loud hissing of air that was soon replaced by that of water. A deluge poured down upon me, and I drew in a painful breath through my nose as I stood in the flow. The water was tainted pink as the countless sprinklers hosed down that section of the factory floor.

I tried to open my mouth... but I couldn't. I rubbed a hoof over my lips, but felt only a single, smooth flap of skin.

Shit... shit shit shit...

There was only one thing to do. I levitated out my sword, and slowly drew the razor edge along my mouth. Fortunately, I was able to hold off the screaming till after the cut finished. For several moments, I could only stand there in the flow, breathe, and bleed.

Unfortunately, the robots weren't going to give me much more than that. There were sprinklers washing the Pink Cloud out of the air, but that was simply making it easier for the robots to see me. I looked up at the shocked faces of P-21 and Rampage and followed the catwalk with my eyes till I saw where the stairs dropped down. How the heck did I get all the way over here? I backtracked through the deluge, still feeling lousy as the toxic water surged around my legs, running along the rows of conveyors as a trio of Protectaponies spraying crimson beams around me.

"Okay, this is a little too much," I muttered. I struggled to keep myself low... and above the surging poisonous pink water. I peeked over the edge at the robot standing on the far side. I heaved a barrel and bathed the machine in rainbow sludge.

The Protectapony sparked and flashed, then looked around. It touched a hoof to its cheek. "My goodness! I have suddenly achieved sentience! I have hopes! Dreams! A destiny!"

The other two robotic ponies turned towards the dosed machine. "Error!" And then they proceeded to hose it down with their scarlet beams.

It waved its metallic hooves dramatically. "Egads, I am undone!" Then it exploded. Well... it wasn't exactly what I'd expected, but it did provide me enough of a distraction to reach the stairs!

"Good throw," I said to P-21, but he just stared at me. "Does anypony see the shaft down?" I

rasped; oh, sweet Celestia, my mouth hurt! They stared at me in horror, and I hissed, “Yes, I look like shit! I feel like shit! Do you see a way down?!”

“Over there, I think,” Rampage said as she pointed through the deluge to a square stairway dropping down near the base of the cylinder. Right now, the shaft was functioning much like a drain. Already the sprinklers had washed enough of the Pink Cloud out that I could see the far side of the production floor.

That meant that the small army of robots over there could see me.

We ducked low as minigun rounds and crimson beams lanced up at us. Even Boo knew to hit the deck. I saw that Rampage had put my battle saddle on the pale mare and was holding the wires connected to the bit like a leash. Psychoshy was tied to the blank’s back. I looked at P-21. “Okay. Tell me you still have that balefire egg bomb.”

He dug in his bag and pulled out the flashing dark rainbow orb. He’d duct taped it to a block of plastic explosives. I was barely able to lift the detonator with my magic as I held the block with my hooves and scanned the machinery. Where was it?

A prismatic rainbow beam sliced through the air and nearly cut the catwalk in two. It sparked off the starmetal cylinder as I scrambled back and jumped inside next to the twisted statue. I peeked out, and a rain of gatling grenades detonated in deafening thunder.

“I have to admit, this is quality entertainment,” Discord laughed as I rubbed my ear... and tried to ignore the fact that it wasn’t the right shape any more.

“Shut up,” I said as I peeked out again... and saw the Ultra-Sentinel driving *through* the conveyor belts as it circled around to fire into the space I occupied. I didn’t have long. I poked my head out and screamed at my friends, “Get down the shaft! Hurry!”

I kept the block in my hooves as I watched the Ultra-Sentinel rolling around, tearing up whatever passed under its heavy wheels as it got into place. “That’s quite a throw. Even for metal legs...” Discord observed as I lifted the block of explosives.

“Shut up,” I hissed, watching my friends. They were at the stairs. The robots all seemed occupied with me. “Celestia is dead,” I said as I watched for my opportunity.

“So I gathered--” he began.

“Shut up,” I snapped. “Luna is dead. Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood are both dead. There’s enough chaos and discord in the Wasteland to choke a thousand spirits like you. Chaos is boring in the Wasteland right now, Discord. Death is fucking boring. It’s routine.”

There was a pause, and the voice inside the statue muttered, “I don’t understand what you’re saying...”

“I’m saying that this is your chance, Discord.” And it was my chance, too. “Do better.” And I stepped out and heaved the explosive as the Ultra-Sentinel turned to point that prismatic cannon at me. My throw was true. The balefire egg landed exactly where I needed it.

Right against 'Flux Extraction Pump #26'.

I dove inside Discord's alcove as the prismatic beam flashed, and as it swept back and forth inside the space, I pressed down on the detonator. Instantly, my world became light and sound and a roar that was broken only by the crackling of my PipBuck. The starmetal shielded me from the direct force of the explosion, but it couldn't protect me from the ample radiation. But all that was secondary. The pillar was untouched, but the pump was vaporized. I stepped out in time to see a roiling, glowing, green mushroom cloud dissipating in the rain.

Now a spray of rainbow gunk spurted out into the production room. The catwalk was so much twisted scrap and the Ultra-Sentinel was right below me now. Any second, it'd lob grenades in. I could close the hatch, but that would probably seal me in here forever.

So I did what I did best... something stupid.

I launched myself into the air, twisting as it tried to adjust its aim fast enough to vaporize me. Gravity was faster. I landed right atop its rounded back, my legs scraping against its smooth rainbow paintjob. If I'd had bones, my legs probably would have snapped from the fall. I still felt as if I'd wrenched something inside as I rolled over and over again, falling off its rear and landing with a splash in the frothy, filthy water.

It turned as I struggled to lift myself to my hooves. I needed five pounds of scrap metal, ten pounds of aspirin, and a few days to rest and recover at this point. I had about five seconds as the robot wheeled itself around and pointed that prismatic cannon at my face. I stared at the pretty rainbow light about to annihilate me. At least it would be quick.

Suddenly, the massive machine lurched as blue foamy water exploded up beside it. The explosion twisted and congealed into a bluish blobby form of the mishmash creature on the cylinder. Discord stood next to the robot as it turned towards the greater threat. For some inexplicable reason, Discord had a large 'S' on his chest and a wavy red cape billowing in the rain. "For truth, justice, and chocolate milk rain!" he declared boldly.

The gatling grenades purred, blowing the mass apart as I struggled to my feet. But Discord just reformed, pulling himself into the shape of a giant lizard... dragon... thing... and breathed rainbow flames on the machine. The prismatic beam sliced the lizard in two; Discord hadn't been lying after all. Two centuries of being encased had weakened him badly.

But all that was secondary. Above me, the pony-sized explosive charges were suddenly blinking bright red lights.

Containment had failed.

I staggered through the sloshing water as Discord kept the Ultra occupied. Then a blue carpet lifted me up and wooshed me across the production floor to where my friends had been pinned by the robots. It batted the machines aside, then scooped up my friends and deposited us at the top of a diagonal shaft sloping down. The lift was awash as water poured down around it; I hoped it still worked. Two large pipes ran along the ceiling down into the depths. The end of the carpet became a tiny, wan, Discord. "Why?" he asked as he looked up at me. "I never agreed to help you."

I just stared at him a moment, then shrugged, "It's just what I do. I believe in second chances."

"No matter how stupid they are," P-21 muttered, half annoyed... and half smiling at the same time. Rampage held Boo's leash as the water continued to pour down. The little blank pony didn't like this at all, her ears drooping as the toxic water splashed around her. Still, she seemed to know that staying close to the striped filly was better than being alone.

"Ah, your friends?" he said, perking a little as he hopped up on Rampage, then looked at the suspicious blue stallion and adopted his scowl perfectly. I couldn't help but smile. Then he appeared next to Boo's head. "Hello!" he called into her ear, an echo sounding over the splashing water. He stuck half his body in her ear, and looked out at us from her clear pale eyes, waving. The blank scrunched up her face and rubbed at her ear with a hoof.

"Hey," I said with a small frown, and he pulled himself out with a soft pop.

"So very sorry," he said immediately. "Nice girl, but not too bright." Then klaxons began to sound, and Flim and Flam's voices warned me not to panic and to run for my life... calmly.

The Ultra was rolling towards us... no... towards the shaft. "Hurry," Discord panted as he looked back at the machine. "This thing is no fun. While I'd love to turn it into tapioca pudding, right now I'll be lucky to slow it down enough to get it buried down here."

"Will you be okay?" I asked, and the tiny draconequus blinked and actually blushed.

"You really do care! How... interesting. I never thought it possible. Well, being buried alive in rock is a huge step up from being buried alive in metal that's slowly killing me with drills stuck through me," he said as a dozen holes appeared in his tiny body. "But I should be okay... ish... though I think I'll need a nice long vacation before I'm even close to my old self. But still..." Then he grabbed my head, held it firmly, and pressed his lips to mine with a loud 'Mmmmmmwah!' Finally breaking it, he grinned. "Thanks."

The tiny Discord disappeared in a pop of glowing white, and I was left sitting there for a few seconds. The only thing I could think at the moment was how surprisingly long his tongue was.

And then a giant, fat Discord rose up from the sudsy water wearing a strange diaper. "Ooooyyy!" he said as he stomped one fat leg, then the other, setting himself in a squatting position. "Domo arigato, Mister Roboto!" he roared as the Ultra slammed into the huge draconequus. The Ultra gave an electronic squawk as its wheels spun in futility, while Discord slapped it repeatedly with his lion paw and eagle claw while screaming, "Baka! Baka! Baka! Baka!"

This was our cue to get out of here. There was a lever at the top of the lift. I struck it, and immediately the platform began to descend the steep shaft. A row of red emergency lights was the only illumination as we dropped. Before he disappeared from sight, I caught Discord's eye as he was slowly pushed back by the Ultra. He grinned widely, winking at me.

Then he gave one last mighty cry, "Banzai!" and the entire lift shook as an immense explosion went off above us. A great wind blasted past, carrying water and dust and chemicals as a roar began to rumble. I had an image of the entire Hippocratic Research building collapsing into an immense hole right above me as the lift plunged down into the earth.

Of course, there was a saying about frying pans and fires; personally, I'd never used much of either, but I could appreciate the sentiment. Especially now, as my chest began to burn painfully. Instantly, my friends started to sway and droop. Enervation. Lots of it. We were getting into depths comparable to our previous jaunt under the city. The one that had almost killed all of us...

Fortunately, despite the pain in my chest, I didn't feel the draining lethargy I had before. It hurt, but it was a distant hurt, and instead of passing out I felt a faint ringing in my ears. The rumbling roar overhead quickly drowned it out as the pressure grew and grew above us, the flow slackening off.

Then a prismatic beam sliced down the center of the shaft, bathing it in glaring light. From the top of the inclined tunnel two glaring lights flashed down at us. Discord hadn't succeeded in burying the Ultra-Sentinel with him. It was coming down, and fast!

"This thing is really starting to piss me off!" I screamed as I looked around the platform. Nothing we could use to hide behind; that beam could cut through anything anyway! There was only one thing I could think of... something stupid. Again. "Jump!" I shouted as I ran and grabbed Boo. The mare just stared as if even she couldn't imagine I'd do something so crazy. I leapt off the edge of the lip, landing on my back on the water-slicked concrete.

"That's lemming talk!" Rampage shouted as she leapt after me.

"I should have gone with Glory!" P-21 agreed as the five of us plunged down the shaft together while the Ultra crashed into the lift. Its prismatic beam flashed down again and again over the edge as we flew down the shaft, evading death for a few more seconds however we could. P-21 slammed into me, Boo, and Psychoshy. "Is this part of the plan?" he screamed as we slid.

"Yes!" I yelled back.

"Your plans suck!" he bellowed at me as we gained speed.

Couldn't argue with that one. "You bet!" I agreed, moving faster and faster, leaving the lift behind. Then one of the prismatic beams flashed and illuminated three unavoidable facts: the bottom of the shaft had been closed, it was now full of toxic water, and half my body was made of metal. "Oh shi--" was as far as I got before we plunged in together. Boo and Psychoshy floated. Me? I sank like a rock, my eyes barely picking out anything in the red gloom of the submerged lights. This water burned; maybe not as much as the cloud had, but between the poisonous water, the lift dropping a mechanical death machine down on my friends, and the Enervation sapping everypony's strength... it really did not look good.

I had to wonder if LittlePip or the Stable Dweller ever had days like mine.

As I dropped into the toxic liquid, I dimly made out the doors framed in hazy red light. I spotted a lever beside them and tried to flail my way towards it. I wasn't a good swimmer even before I got metal limbs. Worse, there was some kind of pit beneath the doors filled with machinery; to run the lift I supposed. If I missed the landing... ugh... don't think about it, Blackjack. Just move sideways more than down. Sideways! That way! I watched the lip of the landing drift past my outstretched hooves.

I screamed in a fury of sudsy bubbles and flailed wildly, wanting to beat the shit out of the world. I supposed it might have counted as swimming; it was enough to get my forehooves over the lip, and I extended my fingers around the lever. I really wanted to breathe right now... really... was a little oxygen too much to ask? Maybe I could breathe poisoned water? Ugh, why was I thinking about poisoned water

when my friends were about to get crushed? I had to be like a certain white pony and just hold on a little longer!

I pulled the lever as hard as I could. It popped, crawling inch by inch as I struggled. The door groaned from the pressure against it. I tried to brace my hooves and pull again. Really... just a little air? Maybe the professor had given me special lungs to breathe water and hadn't told me? Maybe?

Stop thinking and pull, Blackjack.

Then there was another resounding 'pong' and suddenly the sound of an endless toilet flushing. The doors opened partially, and I was suddenly pushed into the gap. It wasn't quite wide enough for me, though, and I braced my back against the metal and pushed with all four hooves. Come on... Come on! Cut me some frigging slack here! There was one final bang, and with it the doors popped wide and I was launched out into the red passageway beyond. A torrent poured after me, knocking me end over end. My chest burned and my ears rang and I really wished I was capable of throwing up.

With a yell my friends were flushed out after me. Boo snorted and coughed, P-21 retched, and Rampage spit a stream like a fountain. Of course, then the groaning began. This was the kind of Enervation that killed in minutes rather than hours. The red tunnel was completely undamaged and was dominated by two large subway tracks and a broad concrete road. A few wagons and a lot of crates were stacked where they'd last been left two centuries ago.

"Okay... so... plan is... we trot along and take the first exit out of here. Right? Good plan." I coughed and rubbed my cheek... then blinked. Okay. I wanted a mirror right -- never mind. I didn't want a mirror. Maybe a paper bag for now and a mirror for later, when we weren't in a tunnel of magical death. I trotted over to a wagon and wiggled into the harness. I was the only one not being reduced to groaning weakness at the moment. "Did I forget anything?"

Then I heard the groan of the lift in the shaft as it reached the landing. The rainbow Ultra-Sentinel hissed softly a moment as it turned the little turret head to look right at me. "Oh. Yeah. Right," I muttered. Its prismatic cannon lit up, and I raced over to my friends as the beam sliced where I'd just been standing.

It was running time again! "Get in! Get in now!" I yelled as they crawled into the back of the wagon. "Faster. Faster!" It was cutting its way through the doors! "Come on, everypony in? Right!" I tore off along the concrete road as it burst into the passage behind us. The four-legged mech hopped onto the subway rails and started to roll after me. "Okay... at least we're moving. Could be worse!" I yelled, focusing on speed as the four-wheeled metal wagon rattled on behind me.

Then its gatling gun whirred and a line of explosions crawled along the red concrete walls above me, slowly working their way back and forth as it pursued. "Ahh... I mean... It can't get any worse!" I yelled. Its prismatic beam then lit up and swept horizontally behind me. The munitions crates exploded with shockwaves that threatened to dump me off my metal hooves! "I mean..."

"Shut up and run!" P-21 bellowed at me, then gasped at the exertion.

I doubled down. I was the one with the cybernetic legs and not getting the life sucked out of me and... oh... look at that little bar with a flashing E beside it.

I knew I had forgotten something. I was barely able to fish out a spicy little ruby to try and suck

on... just to keep my power going long enough to live.

I saw a pair of doors that read 'MASEBS #14' sealed up tight. I slowed for just a second, and that row of explosions from the gatling grenade launcher almost passed right over us. There was no way I could slow down for it! I could only grit my teeth and go faster. Then I looked back at my riders digging through the crates and yelled, "Is there anything in there we can use!?"

A second later, P-21 popped into view, his forelegs hugging a portable missile launcher. Then Rampage sat up hugging two legfuls of grenades. Finally, Boo sat up gnawing idly on a missile. I grinned. There was nothing quite as good as being able to shoot back!

The missile launcher thumped and hissed as fast as P-21 could load it, and Rampage lobbed magic disintegration grenades as fast as Boo could dig them out. I didn't think she knew precisely what they were, but she knew that Rampage was glad to throw them. The Ultra now had to slow down, bob, and weave to avoid our return fire. I slowly started to gain ground. Then a pair of lights flashed on the rails ahead, and a train roared by, brakes shrieking as sparks sprayed from its wheels! The Ultra-Sentinel leapt onto the other set of tracks to avoid being scrapped by it.

Even I couldn't keep this up forever. We were approaching another set of double doors. 'MASEBS #13', it read. Still, no time to get in. Right now, all I could do was run as fast as I could and swerve to avoid the crates of munitions littering the tunnel. Rampage and P-21 were failing fast, too. They were firing wildly now, just trying to get lucky. P-21 was bleeding out his nose. I couldn't even see Boo.

Then a pair of headlights lit up the other track. The electric train had reversed and begun to pull even with the wagon. I glanced back at the flatbed cars, piled high with crates marked 'Danger: Explosives'. The Ultra-Sentinel began to drop back.

Oh crap. "It's going to blow the train!" Where could I go? What could I do... stop? That'd just make us a sitting target! Go faster? I was going as fast as I could! I looked at the racks of missiles loaded on the back as the train pulled even. What did the city even need that much ordinance for, anyway?

Then P-21 hefted the missile launcher and aimed it very deliberately, but not at the robot chasing us or the trainload of explosives... because, unlike me, he was a smart pony who didn't do stupid, impulsive things.

No, he aimed it at the train's wheels.

The missile hissed down and exploded, and there was an earsplitting squeal as the front wheels locked up and popped off the rails. The car twisted sideways and flipped, dragging the next car over with it and spilling munition crates across the entire tunnel. With a muffled *whump*, a missile rack exploded as the Ultra's beam gatling tagged it. The explosions rapidly built, and suddenly I felt a pressure wave shoving the cart along the tunnel, my hooves leaving the floor for several seconds as the firestorm set off explosion after explosion. I remembered the elevator and prayed, '*Don't blow up. Don't blow up. Don't blow up,*' to the crates in the wagon behind me.

Fortunately, there was another pair of doors ahead, marked 'Miramare'.

I dug in my hooves, wincing as they screeched along the concrete, trying to slow without crashing

completely. My hide felt gross underneath the barding and hazmat suit; I just wanted to scrape it all away. I sweated and panted and gasped and sagged in the harness. I'd reached my cyberpony limits. I'd been shot, stabbed, blown up, poisoned, and drowned. I was done.

Then there was a metallic grating noise, and a flaming chunk of train car was pushed aside. The blackened Ultra-Sentinel with busted gatling grenade launcher and prismatic cannon looked at me with its little cameras and gave a low rumble as it charged after us, trailing a cloud of smoking and flaming debris.

"Oh, come *on!*" I shouted, looking at the heavy doors. How in Equestria had we lost the war with machines as tenacious as this? There were two more sets of levers by the door. I pushed one, throwing my whole body against it, while P-21 and Rampage shoved themselves against the other. Motors whirred, and without the pressure of thousands of gallons of water against them the doors opened quite easily. *'Please be at the bottom. Please be at the bottom,'* I prayed silently as I pulled the wagon through.

It was at the bottom. I felt like I could fly. We piled onto the platform and pulled the lever and immediately the lift crawled up the diagonal slope. Finally, I relaxed and tried to take a nice deep breath.

The doors squealed as the Ultra rammed its way through and off the landing, onto the slope. Its four wheels screamed as they fought for purchase, and then it started to crawl its way up the ramp after us. The busted prismatic gun unleashed a shotgun-like spray of wild magic beams that made us all take cover.

"Oh, that is *it!*" I shouted, slamming the elevator's control lever into reverse.

"What are you doing?" P-21 gaped at me, holding the white stasis boxes, as I wiggled out of the wagon's harness.

"I am through playing around!" I shouted as I shoved the wagon over the edge. The munitions crates tumbled into the wildly spraying energy and blew. I didn't even flinch from the shrapnel as I drove the lift straight into the flaming bot. It raised its burning front wheels before the lift collided and began pushing it back down the slope.

The electronic eyes of the sentinel blazed a sudden, intense green and its speakers released a screech of feedback and static as it lifted a leg feebly. Then it shrieked, "GIVE IT TO ME! GIVE ME LIFE!"

"Oh, I'm going to give it to you alright..." I muttered at the insane robot, then crushed the Ultra-Sentinel like a bug against the bottom of the ramp. Then I raised the lift and lowered it several times till the shriek silenced completely. Finally, as we started back up again, I took the missile launcher from P-21, trotted to the edge, and fired it into the sparking wreckage. As the lift rose, I tossed the spent launcher down after it.

I huffed, sitting in the middle of the lift, and dug out a ruby to suck on. P-21 stared at me as I sat back against the lift controls. "So... go to Hippocratic Research, get EC-1101 back, stop Sanguine, and get out," I murmured as I looked at the confused buck. I slowly smiled... or... tried to smile... I really did not want to know how bad the damage was. "I think this counts as one of my plans actually working!" And I glowed with pride as he was rendered speechless in wonder.

* * *

We had to stop the lift and shift aside some rubble to wiggle out into the balefire crater at the airbase. We were exhausted, drained, shot up, poisoned, and mutilated. All of us needed a short break. We broke back into the command center and flopped down in the barracks. I made sure Boo had a snack cake and stroked her mane; she'd shaken for nearly an hour after we got free. Oddly, I think that was the natural reaction for anypony that went into the tunnels. Then I chowed down on a half dozen gems and felt my insides twisting around as the magic went to work. After everything I'd been through, I felt like I could do with a week of downtime.

I'd be lucky to get a few hours. I had barding fused to me and robots after me and had just set loose a spirit of chaos that was only slightly amicable to me... but a hell of a kisser. I had organs to deliver to the Fluttershy Medical Center, hopefully to save Scotch's life. And then I needed to have a nice long chat with my crazy. We had to work out something with Psychoshy... but for now she was just quiet and sullen, really like a more moody P-21. But first, I had something more pressing to do.

"I need to find a mirror," I groaned as I rose to my hooves. P-21, Psychoshy, and Rampage all looked at me in alarm. The first frowned in worry, the second grinned, and the third looked pitying.

"Oh yeah, I got to see this," Psychoshy chuckled, rising to her hooves.

"Get down," P-21 told her sharply, then looked at me. "Maybe you should wait."

"Wait?" I knew it was bad, but wasn't he taking this a little too far? I slowly gave a nervous smile; they were taking this joke a bit far! "Come on, I want to see how bad it is."

But Rampage shook her head too. "Trust me. Regen. Let Glory try and help. Then look in a mirror." I looked from one friend to the other for some sign that they were kidding, but the only one taking amusement from this was the yellow pegasus.

"How... how bad...?" I muttered, touching my face with a hoof again. "How bad is it?"

Psychoshy cackled. "Half your face is gone!" Gone? What did she mean... gone?

Rampage snarled and leapt onto her. "Then we can give her half of yours. Oh, wait! She doesn't want to look like half a tailhole!"

But I rose and trotted quickly to the locker room, moving back towards the toilets, Rampage yelling after me. I saw the grimy mirror, wet my hoof in radioactive water, and slowly wiped the filth away. What looked back at me through the brown droplets couldn't have been me. That wasn't my face. That was... somepony else. *Something* else.

Call it vanity, but I always liked to imagine I looked... decent. Maybe not as cute as Glory, but easy on the eyes.

What I saw now... was not easy on the eyes. It wasn't just injury... I had pieces of my face missing. Gone. What remained was... wrong. Was that metal under my skin? Like a honeycomb of steel woven under my flesh? There were cables. Metal pins in my flesh... oh sweet Celestia... I wanted my heart to pound and my pulse to race, something to prove I was more pony than machine. The professor hadn't mentioned any of this! Glory hadn't mentioned any of this!

...the flayed Reaper's mechanical mouth gaped, forcing a shattered jaw to stretch impossibly wide. An articulated metal windpipe released that horrible noise as flaps of skin dangled from him. Broken pieces of skull clung to an armored sphere that was still horribly attached to his mechanical spine...

I couldn't help myself; I closed my eyes as my organic bits started to shake. "Glory can fix it. Glory can fix it. I'll regenerate. I will." I just wished that my words sounded less like a prayer. Really, I'd sacrificed my flesh and blood and orifices to doing the right thing before. What was a face?

Just... me. I couldn't help myself; I felt tears trickling down my raw features. At least I still had half my face... glossy and burned...

Then I felt a bump against me and looked down at Boo, staring up with her big pale eyes. I sniffed. She bumped her head against me again. And again. "I don't have any snack cakes for you right now, Boo." She looked a moment, then bumped me again. I frowned. "Stop it, Boo... I don't... I can't..." Bump. She looked into my eyes, so sad and serious. And then she curled the corners of her mouth just a little.

She didn't care what I looked like. I let out a little sob... and a little laugh too. "You're smarter than you look, Boo," I said, and she bumped me again. I held her in my hooves, rubbing her ears. She only cared about the important things.

"Blackjack?" Rampage said softly as she trotted in after me.

"Psychoshy wasn't exaggerating, was she?" I muttered, bowing my head.

The striped filly growled, "I am going to burn her face off with a blow torch."

"No..." I said, shaking my head. "It'll be okay. I can wear a mask or something. That's like a badass Reaper, right?"

She snorted softly. "Yeah. Totally badass..."

Before we left, I made my way to the Marauders' lockers. I tried guessing a few passwords for each of them, putting in every personality we'd met in Rampage, trying 'Twilight' for Big Mac's, and messing around with Psalm's. I entered in 'Rarity' for Vanity's locker, and nothing happened. Then I huffed... and remembered his last memory orb. I closed my eyes... what summed up the noble pony more than anything?

I typed in 'Regret'.

The locker door hissed open. I didn't see any pictures or photographs. There were simply some files, two memory orbs, and a strange metal crown thingy with a large black opal set in the front. There was also a pair of revolvers with their handles decorated in intricate mother of pearl. Vigilance would always be my firearm of choice, but I had to admit that there were something tempting about the long-barreled guns. The weapons were chambered for rounds even larger than Vigilance's, and I was glad that under the revolvers were three whole cases of the right ammunition.

'Duty' was written on one in elegant flowing script. 'Sacrifice' was inscribed on the other.

I packed the locker's contents away and closed the door with a quiet click.

* * *

The sign over the entrance read 'Emergency'. I certainly looked the part as the five of us limped our way inside. The beam turrets by the door were scrapped, and there were a few fresh bullet holes and scorch marks, but it looked as if the Fluttershy clinic had gotten off lightly compared to Brimstone's Fall. The blue bars in my vision immediately stirred as we stepped through the door, and a half dozen bucks and mares pointed a variety of firearms at me as I stood there in the doorway. "Get out of here. We're closed for business," a jet black unicorn buck warned.

"You might want to rethink that," P-21 said firmly as he pushed back his wide-brimmed hat. "We've had a really long day."

"Get out of here!" the leader repeated as he stared at me in horror. I sat down. Was I going to have to beat my way in here? Kill them if they turned hostile? I sighed and started to turn away; P-21 could sneak past later or we'd have Psychoshy rap on a window up there or something. I just wanted to get in and rest and get my face put back together.

"You sodding wankers! If you pissants would pull your head out of your arses, you'd see she's no threat to you!" a mare growled mechanically, and I stared as a power-armored pony trotted into view. The apples painted on her rump weren't familiar, but the automatic shotguns were a dead giveaway. I never forgot a gun.

"Hey Crumpets," I said with relief as the half dozen moved aside.

"'Ello girl. You look like you've taken a pretty rough shagging right upside the face," the Steel Ranger said with a tilt of her head. "Is there bloody requirement that to save ponies around this place you got ta look shot halfway to hell?"

"It's pretty standard. Like with how the more ragtag and bizarre the group you have, the better your odds are of winning," I replied. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, after you blew the *Celestia*... congratulations on that, by the way. Cottage Cheese says whatever pony gets their hooves on your gun becomes a star paladin, no questions asked. Wanker," she snorted. "Anyway, after that the bloody traditionalists took the *Applejack* and ran back to Manehattan. So we needed someplace safe to hole up. This looked like a right sturdy fortification... reminds me of home, actually... and so I stopped by just in time to prevent some raiders from finishing the job."

"And we're grateful to you for driving them off, but we're not interested in becoming a base for your order," the unicorn that had turned me away said testily. "This place is being run by the Collegiate and Society."

"You should be lucky we're asking. Steel Rain's lot wouldn't bother," the mare snorted. "Eh... doesn't have near the facilities we need anyhow."

"Steel Rain's *alive*?" Fuck! What did it take to kill ponies around this place? Now I'd have to face him again and there'd be some heartbreaking reason he was such a prick and I'd... arrgh! Was drowning simply too much to ask?!

She nodded. "That's the story we hear. Found somewhere to go to ground. Not sure what his plan is, but he's got sixty or seventy folks with him. Without the *Applejack*, we're not getting back to Trottingham anytime soon. So we're looking for a safe place to hole up. We're scattered all over this damned valley. What with the schism in the Rangers, who knows how things are going to turn out?"

"Schism?" P-21 asked with a frown.

"Eh... it's not something most folks would know. Most folks know the Rangers for being great soddin' gits taking whatever tech they trot across and having bloody great sticks up their arses. Fact is, there's more than a few of us who think these guns aren't just for show and that we should use 'em like Applejack intended... to protect folks." She snorted. "It's the way things are in Trottingham, mostly; without us, the beasties would have eaten everypony a long time ago. Nearly all of the other groups are mixed or devoted to the 'traditional' outlook, though. Except now, the waste recycler's finally burst, because Steelhooves is finally facing down Cottage Cheese. Soon as we heard it, we painted our colors. Probably get my head blown off, but they can pike Luna's horn up their arses if they don't like it."

I looked at P-21 and then back to her. "What sort of facilities do you need?"

"Eh, some place defensible, but with decent power supply and environmental supports. I heard there's an airbase south of here that might do. If we can pull together thirty or forty ponies, then we should have a decent shot at things." I thought of Miramare; it was true that they might be able to hole up in there for a while, but it wasn't ideal unless they could get all the systems working.

"How about a stable?" I asked idly. P-21 looked at me sharply.

She snorted. "Well, sure. A functional stable'd be just fine. But they're a tad hard to come by in mint condition."

I looked back at him, then nodded to the side. He said in a low voice, "What are you thinking? Are you seriously thinking about telling them where 99 is?"

"I was thinking about it before the chaos at the *Celestia*. I blew up their base, P-21. If we give them 99, then they can organize again and do some good around here," I said softly. He frowned, his eyes darting aside. "It might make up for how Goddesses-damned terrible that place was. And it might be nice if Scotch Tape can one day go home again."

"That place will never be home," he muttered. "No place will."

"It is for her. Think about it. As is, it's a glorified crypt. Let them put it to some good use. And maybe we'll have a group of armored friends to back us up some day," I added. "Maybe they'll teach you how to use their fancy armor, too."

He snorted, but smiled just a little. "If we ever need a stable full of Steel Rangers for anything, then I think it'll be time to retire." Finally he looked away. "Fine. If they can clean it out and make it safe... I'm fine with it. Just don't ever ask me to go back there again."

"I doubt I ever could, either," I replied. The guilt alone would kill me. We trotted back to Crumpets. "So... how about a stable, slightly used?"

* * *

"I never knew you could kiss people through power armor," Rampage remarked as we trotted up the many flights of stairs, Psychoshy flying up slowly beside us.

"You can't, but that didn't stop her from trying," I grumbled. Even with my warnings about the chlorine gas and the contaminated food recycling system, she'd been more than ecstatic at the news.

"I can't believe you didn't try and get caps or anything from her." Psychoshy said as she hovered effortlessly. I could tell she'd looked forward to rubbing her flight in our faces, but my legs were mechanical, Rampage couldn't get tired, Boo probably wasn't smart enough to care, and P-21 would sooner have kissed the abrasive mare than complain his legs were tired. "The very least you should have gotten was a suit of that power armor for yourself."

"I'm already half power armor. I want to be less power armor," I muttered. At least power armor you could take off!

"Really? Being a cyberpony really was an advantage down in those tunnels," Rampage replied. "If you were flesh and blood, we probably wouldn't have gotten out alive."

I balked a moment. "It's... it's not like that. Sure, having the metal limbs was helpful, but... I don't know. It's like... the more metal I am, the less me I am."

"Bitch bitch bitch..." Rampage muttered, rolling her eyes. "All I'm saying is that you should be more grateful about what you are than more down on yourself for not being what you think you should be." We finally reached the sealed ward, and I pushed the door open. I noticed that somepony had cleaned the walls; there were still stains, though.

We trotted in, and then my ears twitched. "I know we should wait, but you saw that explosion. We can't just sit around here..." The voice was oddly squeaky, not the soft smoothness I remembered so fondly.

"Blackjack will come here if she is alive. If she is not, somepony will have to look after Scotch Tape until a regeneration talisman is found," Lacunae replied smoothly from one of the hospital rooms. I stepped in and saw the alicorn looking into the bathroom.

"Yeah. Fortunately, I'm too dumb to die," I said brazenly as I stepped in.

"Ohmygoshohmygoshohmygosh!" blurted Glory from inside. "Don't come in, Blackjack! You can't see me like this."

"Trust me, you look a lot better than I--" I said as I stepped into the bathroom doorway. What I beheld was neither my normal single-winged beauty nor the blue pegasus with a rainbow mane, but a creature covered in black sludge standing next to several beakers mixed with tar-like concoctions reeking of ammonia. Her rose eyes popped wide at the same time as mine, and we pointed at each other in unison.

"What the heck happened to *you*?!" we shouted together.

* * *

Fifteen minutes later, after I'd explained what'd happened, Rampage had stopped laughing and taken Psychoshy out to... do something. P-21 skulked out with Lacunae as well, off to deliver the crates and talk to his daughter. He'd better be doing that! Boo lay on a hospital bed with Fancy Buck Cake crumbs all over her mouth. That left the two of us together. "So this time you're dying your coat black? What, why not just shave your mane or call yourself 'Fallen Rainbow'?"

She stuck her tongue out at me. "Because smart ponies can learn when something doesn't work the first time," she said before stepping into the shower. "Since I doubt there's a box of mane treatment anywhere in the Wasteland, I simply mixed some up. It's basic organic chemistry. Lacunae helped fill in the gaps, and one of the bucks downstairs showed it was effective when we tested it on him."

"Right," I said as I carefully lifted one of the beakers. "Is being Rainbow Dash so bad?"

Glory shuddered. "Blackjack... you remember how upset my sister was when she thought I was a traitor?" I nodded. "Imagine how every Enclave pegasus will feel if they see me. We're all educated that Rainbow Dash betrayed her own people when she left us. That's just the simple propaganda. I don't even want to imagine how somepony like Lighthooves will take it. Rainbow Dash is gone, and I do not want to be the new Rainbow Dash."

"Well, you do what you have to do," I muttered as I turned on the shower.

"Ah, cold!" She jumped. "I wish this place had enough power for hot water!" she complained as she scrubbed her mane.

"Bitch bitch bitch," I replied, in perfect copy of the striped filly. "I got barding fused to me and half my face melted off... but that's nothing compared to a cold shower."

"Sorry," Glory said sheepishly, hanging her head a little.

I sighed. "Yeah. Me too. Because if it was a hot shower, then nothing would stop me from hopping in there with you," I said as I examined the beakers and bottles. "So how's Scotch?"

"Critical but stable. We arrived with barely enough time to turn the power back on and put her in stasis," Glory said softly. "Her lungs are destroyed, and her eyes and hide were severely burned by the chemicals." She lifted her face directly into the stream. I had to admit that as much as I loved Glory, there was something a little more... trim... about Rainbow Dash. Lean. Firm. Athletic. I watched the dye slowly run off her body in rivulets and...

"Glory... are you sure that that stuff works?" I asked with a frown.

"Please, Blackjack. I've been working on it for hours. I've tested it. Make sure you don't get any on your coat," she said with just a touch of indignation. "The sooner I can stop worrying about some lightning rod spy camera spotting me like this, the better!" I stared as she washed the chemicals away, then covered my mouth. Oh, this wasn't funny. Do not laugh, Blackjack. Laughter is the swift and sure path to grief and angst. But I had to say something!

"Uh... Glory... are you *sure* you're sure it works?"

"Yes, Blackjack. Still, soon as this joke wears off and I can stop looking like Rainbow Dash... ugh, I swear, I feel my intelligence leaking out my ears every time I see her face." She snorted softly in

irritation before sighing, slumping her head as the dye pooled like ink around her hooves. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be complaining about seeing her face when you've been hurt so badly. I just hate looking at a reflection that isn't mine!"

"No no, that's not a problem..." I muttered. "Glory... I'm afraid..." I had to tell her!

"I know, but don't worry," she said as she sat in the shower with her eyes closed, scrubbing her coat briskly. "I know that your damage looks severe, but the surgical robot here should be able to... well... patch you up. Lacunae's recharged several healing potions, so even if they're not as effective as they could be, they should help with the skin grafts and reconstruction. Granted, I'm not an expert, but I've read books on the subject," she said as she reached over for a towel and began to dry off her mane and face. The cloth instantly stained soot black from the chemicals.

"Well that's great to hear, but..."

"Scotch'll be fine too... I think. I'm not an expert on transplants, but if the organs really are cloned from her own body, then I don't think there's any possibility of rejection," she said as she stepped in front of the mirror, scrubbing her mane with the blackened towel.

"Um, Glory..." Do not laugh. Do... not...

"Yes, what is it Black--" But her mane wasn't black. Nor was her coat. A few wet streaks of black dye smeared her prismatic mane. Her hide was the exact same cyan as my statuette. Her rose-colored eyes bulged, pupils shrinking to magenta dots, locked on her reflection as her hooves trembled on the porcelain.

"I'm afraid the joke's still working," I snirked, my eyes watering from repressed laughter.

They probably heard her obscenity clear in Manehattan.

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

Quest Perk added: Kissed by Discord - Do you really want to know?

(Author's notes: First, as always, thank you to Kkat for creating Fo:E. Then great thanks to Hinds, Bronode, Snipehamster, and guest reader Minty Julepness, for making this chapter decent. I'd love to thank everypony who leaves comments and feedback. Finally, I'd like to thank everypony who leaves tips through paypal at David13ushey@gmail.com. Even a single bit is appreciated. Thanks for reading. Incidentally... chapters 35,36,37,38 and 39 were all supposed to be ONE chapter... clearly Somber can't tell a short story with a gun to my head... sigh...)