

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 40: Recovery

"Nice work, Rainbow Dash!"

Ponies are thoughtful, compassionate, reasonable creatures. We might sometimes be driven to violence, but most ponies most of the time are simply trying to do the best that they can. However, now and then, ponies can go a bit... off. I don't think that Twilight would have left Discord in that place if she hadn't been obsessed with finding a final solution to the war. I think that, in better times, she would have demanded that Luna and Goldenblood stop tormenting and using him. Likewise, in certain circumstances, I take defeat particularly hard, far more than my usual screw ups. These sorts of things happen.

Like right now.

"Clippers," Glory muttered, holding out her hoof.

I pulled the electric clippers off the shelf. Apparently this was a heavy-duty model for preparing patients for surgery. "Glory. Are you sure you need to do this now?"

"Clippers!"

I sighed and set them in her hoof. She tapped the button, and the blades started to buzz. Without another word, a shower of rainbow mane cascaded around her shoulders, ending up in a gloopy mess in the dye on the floor as she shaved away with a wide grin on her face. "Heh... you won't change color, huh? Well then, that means I'm just gonna have to get rid of you!"

Okay, this was getting just a little bit scary. I put a hoof on her shoulder. "Glory."

"Just a minute, Blackjack!" she hissed as she moved the clippers along her mane. Finally, she set them down and stood, staring at Rainbow Dash's reflection in the mirror. She pointed her hoof at it. "Ha! Can't be Rainbow Dash without the rainbow, can you?" the bald blue pony shouted.

"Glory..." I groaned, covering what was left of my face with my hoof. I knew that somewhere, if it still existed, there was a little blue weed that was laughing its roots off. "Scotch... my face...?"

But she wasn't listening. "Let me just get my tail and..." She paused and closed her eyes, rubbing her nostrils. "Ah... ah... chooo!" she sneezed, and at once her entire mane popped back into existence on top of her head. She stared, her pupils pinpricks, then she screamed and threw the clippers with all her strength at the mirror. "Goddesses damn it! Why won't you go away?" she cried as the clippers broke and the mirror shattered, pieces tumbling into the sink basin. Her forehooves seized one of the larger shards of broken mirror. "I'll cut you away!"

That's it. It was fun while it lasted. My metal hoof smacked the broken shard out of her grasp, and I scooped her away as she started thrashing. "No! No! I can't look like this. I can't! Being a Dashite was better than being a Dash!" she screamed, and I had to admit that Rainbow sure was a fighter. But I had cyberlimbs. I tossed her onto her back and pinned her. "I have to get my face back! I have to be

me! I could take it as long as I'm me!"

I could relate. I wanted my face back too, and I could imagine what she was feeling right now. It would be like me waking up and finding myself Deus, or P-21 turning into the Overmare. Granted, I didn't see why being Rainbow Dash was so bad, but clearly it wasn't a good thing. "You are still you!" I said as I stared down into her tear-streaked face. "All your memories and things are still yours, right? Do you have memories of living in Ponyville?" If the answer was yes... well... hopefully Lacunae could do something!

"I..." She sniffed and closed her eyes. "I... last night... I... I dreamed I was in Cloudsdale. I... it was the second time she'd done the sonic rainboom! I dreamed it! I'm turning into Rainbow Dash. I just know it! That damned weed might as well have killed me outright!" She sobbed as she pressed her face into the unmangled side of my neck. Well, it looked like I *would* need to have a chat with our resident mystic alicorn for some answers.

I sighed and held her tight. Okay... if I started dreaming I was somepony else, I'd be freaked out too. ...Of course, that had actually already happened to me... but by that point I'd been a lot more used to the whole freaky Wasteland thing. "You're Morning Glory. Not Rainbow Dash. Morning Glory is a doctor, a smart pony, and the mare I love. Okay?" I said quietly as I looked into her terrified and upset eyes. "Right now, there're two ponies who need Morning Glory's help. Not Rainbow Dash's."

For some reason, my words didn't seem to comfort her. "I don't want to fade away," she sniffed. "I don't even know if it's safe for me to use the auto-doc any more. Not now. Not when I don't know what's me and what isn't."

"You have to. Please," I said softly, stroking her rainbow mane and looking down into a stranger's eyes. "You need to prove you're Morning Glory... to yourself. I don't know what that stupid weed did, but I know that Morning Glory is tough enough to overcome it."

She sniffed, not looking convinced at all as I moved off her. She sat up slowly. "I know... it's just... it's waking up and finding you've turned into the most hated pony in the skies." She curled her wings around her. "I haven't even been able to fly since we got here. I was resigned to being on the ground. Happy, even... as long as I was with you. But now I'm scared to death that if I do fly somewhere, I'll be more Rainbow Dash and less Morning Glory."

"I didn't think you hated her. I thought pegasi thought she was a hero," I replied as I sat next to her.

She shook her head. "It's much more complicated than that. Yes, Rainbow Dash was one of the greatest pegasi in history. She's right up there with Commander Hurricane: nigh-mythic status. But pegasi... well... some of us have a way of tearing down our heroes, too. Rainbow Dash might have been awesome, but she also got tens of thousands of pegasi killed. Some Enclave speculate that the first strike at Cloudsdale was an attempt to kill her personally, not just a strike to destroy our capital. Then there was her turning her back on the Enclave to help the surface. As a historical figure, yeah, you can tolerate her. But as a person..." She trembled and sniffed. "Look at me. First thing I did was call her an idiot!"

I sighed and shook my head. "I'm sorry. I had no idea. At Tenpony, they were just mildly curious if I was related to Twilight or not. I can't imagine what they might have done if I magically became

Twilight Sparkle.”

“Thunderhead is a little better than most about her. We were completely tied in with the Ministry of Awesome, and so in a way she made us awesome too. But if Thunderhead found out about me... I don’t know what they’d do.” She shuddered. “And the rest of the Enclave... Neighvarro especially... it would be ugly. They tried Rainbow Dash in absentia a century ago and found her guilty of crimes against the pegasus race. They disintegrated her in effigy.”

“Well, good thing you’re not Rainbow Dash,” I replied firmly, staring into her eyes and daring her to disagree. Maybe not the best way to handle an identity crisis, but she didn’t argue. I smiled. “Now... can you transplant lungs and reconstruct faces, Morning Glory?” I felt a little cheesy trying to channel Mom’s ‘buck up’ speech, but she was head of security and had to be able to get through to people.

She gave a little smile. “Yeah... I think so. It should be easy with the auto-doc and compatible organs... but where did you get them? Did you have Sanguine grow them for you?” she asked as she shook off bits of rainbow mane that clung to her.

I looked away. “Something like that. Doesn’t matter now, though. It’s gone and buried.”

“Too bad,” she sighed. “That kind of technology would have been incredibly useful. A pity it had to be under the control of that monster.”

I thought of the Flux being sucked out of Discord. “There were other drawbacks to it, too. Suffice to say that it’s better to not think about it.” Hopefully she’d leave it at that. She looked curiously at Boo, who was curled up on the hospital room bed and watching with her quiet, dull expression. “This is... well, I’m calling her Boo. She was living in the tunnels under Hippocratic Research.”

“She doesn’t have a cutie mark,” Glory said as she peeked at the white pony’s flank. “I’ve heard of late bloomers, but she’s our age, Blackjack. And I thought I took forever getting mine.” Then she glanced at the rainbow lightning bolt and sighed. I wondered if it was an illusion... or a sign that something deeper had changed in Glory.

“I don’t think you ever told me how you got yours,” I said as Boo crawled off the bed and shook herself. Together we walked towards the operating room.

She smiled awkwardly. “It’s silly... I was studying for my graduation finals; I had to get a top score for advanced placement at Thunderhead’s medical program. Everypony expected me to get a perfect grade, but it was just... not happening. I was making mistakes, getting things mixed up in my head. I was tired and exhausted trying to study.”

“Being a smart pony sounds hard,” I said with a smirk, and she smiled along with me. I was glad to see that some attempt had been made to clean up the blood. As freaky as the neatness was, it belonged in this place. Still, I wouldn’t have minded a little litter... maybe some water-stained tiles...

“Maybe, but we also tend to get shot up less, too, so there’s a plus side,” she said with a smile. “I was at the end of my limits, about to just quit and go into the basic courses. It would have meant three, maybe four more years of study before I got into medical school. But then I realized that I didn’t have to memorize three hundred isolated facts. If I started with the heart... I’d memorize the facts of the heart... then the blood vessels it was connected to... what organ systems were connected in which order... It was like a sunrise that drove out all the confusing darkness, and suddenly I could see everything.” She

flushed a little, hanging her head. "I guess you'd have to see one to really know."

"Eh, I've seen the sun." Granted, it was in memories and the like rather than with my own eyes. "But I guess I can understand that. It explains you."

"Better than this thing does..." she muttered, looking at the lightning bolt.

"Isn't it similar, though? I mean, you were confused, and then... BAM! You figured it out." My shout made Boo jump behind Glory. The blue pegasus smiled sympathetically, and we paused long enough for the pale mare to relax. "So your epiphany came like a bolt out of the blue. And you're good at connections, so the rainbow color is how that's all related. I mean, I just shoot things, but you know all about repairing and medicine and energy weapons and stuff."

"I think you're stretching it now," she murmured, but looked a little more at ease. She might not like her body or the cutie mark she was borrowing, but she didn't have to hate it. "So, tell me everything that happened after Lacunae teleported us away."

I started to talk, but then I closed my mouth again and reconsidered. The Goddess needed to know as well. I owed her. "I'd like Lacunae to hear it too. And Scotch as well. Why don't you tell me what I missed here?"

"A very frantic five minutes," Glory replied. "Scotch had stopped breathing, her eyes were terribly damaged, and she was going into shock. We were lucky; when we arrived, Archibald was in the room trying to determine how to get the pods moved to Elysium for his father. They had one all wired up and everything. They started to argue, but Lacunae was very persuasive."

"Shouted telepathic insults can have that effect," came her smooth voice in my mind. Then she asked, in a more formal, imperious tone, "What did you learn at Hippocratic Research? Was Chimera intact?"

Hello, Goddess. "The facility was a wreck. We got enough of it to work to make some spare parts for myself and Scotch. Unfortunately, the security systems were attacking us. I had to destroy what was left to get away."

"Hmmmph," the purple alicorn snorted. "Very well. I expect the other will be in Canterlot soon if she's finished mucking about with Rangers. Hopefully she'll have better results." She started to turn away.

"I freed Discord."

That made her freeze in her tracks. Then she slowly turned to look at me in shock. "You. Did. *What?!*"

"I freed him," I replied firmly as I trotted up towards her. "It was the least I could do after Twilight left him there, trapped in that starmetal coffin." Her shock gave way to anger, but I didn't let up. "You knew what was being done to him. You knew! But all you cared about was figuring out how to make alicorns."

"Don't you presume to lecture me; you don't know what he did to me, my friends, and the kingdom!" I looked right into the eyes of Twilight Sparkle.

"Really? Did he turn any of you into stone? Did he drill holes in your body? Did he torture any of you? Suck out your blood for his magic?" I asked as I advanced. I pointed a hoof at her. "Two hundred years in agony. I don't care what he did, Twilight, no one deserves that!"

"Discord was a monster that fed on misery and strife!" Lacunae shouted.

"And how was what ponies did to him any less monstrous?" I said, not giving an inch. "What if it'd been done to another pony? The fact that it was Discord doesn't change how wrong it was!"

"That... I... that was... I meant to speak to Luna. I forced a recall of the Flux, once I knew how dangerous it was. Discord... it was a very busy time, Blackjack!" she stammered, then shuddered. The alicorn swayed, then whimpered as she curled up. "I'm sorry..."

"Twilight?" I asked as I knelt. She looked up at me with teary eyes, and I hissed softly, "I'm sorry, Lacunae."

"So is Twilight... please... understand she is sorry. She just... forgot..." She closed her purple eyes once more and shivered, and I reached down to stroke her mane. "The Goddess put her shame in me. Her guilt. She was ashamed of so much... so sorry for what she had done. Please, believe that. Please..." She pressed her face into my chest and whimpered softly, "Pinkie..."

"I... I do. I do, Lacunae," I said quietly. "I'm sorry. I just... that place was really messed up. You know what happened there. Copies. Fusion. Flux. Discord."

"You know that you doomed us all by setting him loose," Lacunae sniffed. "His power is... immeasurable."

I sighed. "Yeah. And if I have to, I'll deal with him later. But he's chaos, right?" The purple alicorn looked at me with a troubled frown, then nodded once. "So if everypony expects him to act one way... then the chaotic thing is if he does the opposite. Right?" I asked with a hopeful smile.

"Unless doing what is unexpected is expected so he does the expected to be unexpected," Glory offered. "Or he might unexpectedly be unexpected by doing the expected... I'm not exactly sure how the math works out. Do two unexpecteds become expected?"

"No, I'm pretty sure they're squared," Lacunae replied. She wiped her eyes and even gave a thankful little smile to my rainbow-maned love.

I clapped my hooves over my ears. "Ahhh! Stop! All this egghead talk is starting to educate me!"

The pair just looked at each other, then launched into a discussion of theoretical Discord unexpectosity states. I felt a migraine coming on. Evil ponies... Evil smart ponies...

But at least I gave them both a reason to smile.

* * *

I filled them in on what had occurred at the complex, glossing over the specifics of the source of the organs. Thankfully, Lacunae didn't get into those specifics either. The mare seemed to be trying to deal with the emotions shoved into her by the Goddess. It seemed to physically weaken her; how much mental anguish and trauma could a pony take before they just... couldn't anymore? If something

happened to the Goddess, would Lacunae be affected? Would she be free, or would she crumble, or explode?

I really didn't like these unknowns. I was also glad I didn't know whatever LittlePip was up to. As we walked along, Glory remarked on Boo several times. She seemed unconvinced that the white pony following me around didn't know how to talk. I suppose the idea of fully grown ponies popping from nowhere was a little hard to swallow. It wasn't until Boo relieved herself right in front of us that Glory concluded that... yes... she wasn't quite right. And guess who it was they looked at to clean up after her?

Ah well; I was the one who brought her up here. And it wasn't the dirtiest job I'd had. I tossed the mess and the rag down the garbage chute at the nurse's station.

As we approached the doors to the operating room, I balked. How could I set hoof into the room where I'd decided the fate of forty foals?

"Wait, what is that?" I asked as my ear picked up a noise from within. A sharp 'Beee... dooo... beee... dooo...' playing over and over.

Glory went pale, jumped into the air, and streaked down the rest of the hall, slamming through the double doors so hard one was knocked off its hinges. "Lacunae!" came her scream, and a second later, the world disappeared in a purple flash. When the world returned I was back in the middle of the operating room beside the very table where my insides became my outside. The robotic arms looked particularly sharp at this moment. "Power fault! The stasis is unstable. We have to transplant her lungs now! I don't know if we'll be able to stabilize the pod!"

Fortunately, the crates Sanguine had filled were right beside the operating table. "Where is P-21?" I asked as Glory rushed to the terminal podium in the middle of the room. Boo hung back at the smashed-open door, blinking with fright and confusion.

"I don't know. I also don't know how long the pod's been malfunctioning!" Glory said as she tapped the keys with her hooves. "There's a reason you don't fiddle with these things. Once something is in stasis, you leave it alone! I have no idea what parts of her body might have undergone cell death if the field strength was uneven."

The mechanical arms lifted. "Lacunae. Teleport her onto the table, then get all the healing potions you prepared. This is going to be a messy transplant at best. She's going to need an IV feed as soon as we replace her lungs and eyes." Glory swallowed, her hooves tapping. "I have no idea if this system is a hundred percent either. I was hoping P-21 would spend few hours helping me check for bugs." She licked her lips nervously as there was a flash in the beeping pod, and suddenly Scotch appeared on the table. "Why didn't I focus on that rather than changing my mane?!"

"You thought you had the time. You didn't know the pod would malfunction," I replied.

Scotch looked... dead. She reeked of chlorine, and her eyes were swollen shut. Patches of her hide were raw and discolored, as if she'd been burned. That smell hit me like a hammer. Only the tiny rise and fall of her side gave any hint that she was alive at all. She whimpered, starting to shake.

"Black..." she said weakly. "Hurts."

I rushed to her side. "It's okay. We're going to fix you up, Scotch."

"He didn't... talk..." was all she said before I was being brushed aside.

"Roll her onto her back, Lacunae," Glory instructed. "I'm breaking about thirty or forty rules for hygiene and postoperative infection prevention," the mare muttered as the arms began to whirr and hum. Glory then rushed to a cart beside the operating table and opened a bottle. "Dribble this along her chest," the mare instructed as she grabbed a hoofful of gauze. I smelled the sharp tang of alcohol. Glory then wiped down the filly's chest. "Okay. Med-X will have to do. I--"

She froze as she stared into the drawer. "Where's the Med-X? There were three doses here ready!" She looked around the cart. "I can't crack a chest without some kind of anesthetic!" She looked at me, her eyes frantic. "Do you have some?"

My inventory function said no.

"The Society and Eggheads cleared out the storeroom. Lacunae, maybe there's some more at the nurse's station?"

"That's where I found those three," Lacunae replied.

I took my saddlebags and upended them, dumping every bit of trash and salvage I'd trotted across. I had to have something! The metal crown thingy I'd found in Miramare bounced twice on the tile floor and rolled away. Guns and bullets were useless here. I was useless here!

Then Lacunae swept up the crown with her magic. "A recollector! Perfect! Blackjack, give me a memory orb," the alicorn instructed. I looked at the scattered orbs. Well... eenie... meenie... that one! I picked it up with my mouth and trotted it over to the table; I didn't want to risk getting sucked in, what with my wonky horn and all. The alicorn put the crown on Scotch's head and then slotted the orb into the spot where the black opal had been; it must have fallen out somewhere. At once the filly went limp.

"I hope that's the Gala..." I murmured... wait, did I even have that orb? Ugh, I needed to catalogue and label these damned things!

"Okay. Get clear," Glory said as pink talisman lit up over the operating table. "That should stabilize her long enough to get finished now that she's under." I heard the purr of electric clippers, then saw a familiar vibrating blade move down towards the filly. I swept up my things with hooves and magic and dumped them into the bags, letting the inventory spell take care of the packing. "Good... it's cutting nicely... all her internal organs seem to be functioning as well as can be expected... heartbeat is weak... we need to get this done fast."

I heard a wet noise fill the air and looked away. I did not like operating rooms... no thank you! I looked over at the malfunctioning pod and trotted closer. A pink pony in my head put on a brown cap and lifted a magnifying glass; there was dirt smudged on the control panel next to the pod.

"I need to find P-21..." I said sharply as I turned and ran for the hall, Boo scrambling out of my way. I needed to find him. Now!

Missing Med-X, and he'd done something to the pod. He could hide from my eyes, but not my Eyes Forward Sparkle! I spotted a blue bar all by itself and homed in. I found him lying in a bathtub

nearby, Dusty's hat pulled over his face. The three empty syringes were on the lip of the sink beside him. I felt a rage and fear like I hadn't felt in a long time.

"Interesting place for a nap," I said sharply.

"G'way..." he muttered thickly.

"Scotch is in surgery now. She might be dying. Somepony messed with her stasis pod," I said as I looked at the dirt on his hooves. He just lay there, twitching a little.

"Go away," he repeated, putting a little more effort into it. I pulled the hat away and stared down at his contracted pupils as he looked up at me. His spasming limbs were relaxing bit by bit as he closed his eyes.

"You took the chems for your daughter's operation to use yourself. How could you? And what did you do to her pod? Did you try and open it?" I said lowly, and my eyes threw up a targeting reticule on his head. For once, I wasn't disturbed by that. I was way too angry. "Did you try and kill her?"

He just lay there. "I'm sick of hurting..."

"Your leg is fine!" I yelled at him, feeling sick myself. "It's been fine for more than a week! What the hell is wrong with you?"

He covered his face with his hooves. "Hurts. I don't want to hurt any more."

"What do you mean?" I asked with a frown. "What hurts?" Maybe there was something actually wrong with him.

"Everything," he muttered. "Everything always hurts. And when you're hurt, if you're a good pony, you get a shot. And then it doesn't hurt any more. Or if you struggle and fight, you get a shot, and then it doesn't hurt, either." He closed his eyes again. "Go away, Blackjack. I tried to tell her, but I couldn't say a word. I just... I just leaned against it and couldn't say a thing. I needed a shot so bad. Everything hurts."

Okay... don't think about that just now... If you were a bad pony, medical would give you a shot to help you perform. "Are you saying... do you mean that back in medical... in 99... they kept you dosed up on Med-X?"

"After what the Overmare did to my ass on a regular basis, what do you think?" he said with a grumble, glaring up at me before staring away into the side of the tub. "I was so glad Daisy busted my leg. It was an excuse to have a shot whenever I wanted. When we were in Flank, I stocked up. I could just... not hurt... but then I ran out..."

"When?" I asked softly.

"The arena. Reapers aren't big on painkillers, I guess. And Megamart had run out. I was only able to get one shot from Bonesaw. And... I kept thinking about 99... and how we'd failed... and it hurt so damn much. Everything hurt so damn much. I just wanted it all to stop."

"But then I saved you," I murmured. "Why didn't you tell me you hurt so much?"

"Because you don't. You get shot, stabbed, blown up, and raped, and I never once hear you say 'Oh, it hurts too much. We have to stop.'" He let out a little sob. "I just want everything to stop hurting! I thought the arena would be perfect... but then you stopped me... so I'd just stay close to you till something... something... killed me. But I just kept on living, and now even one shot isn't enough. Now it takes two or three. And they were just lying there and I hurt so damn bad but I'm not dead yet!"

I touched his shoulder, but he jerked away. I sighed. "And Priest... made you hurt less..."

"Yes... but he's gone." He screwed up his eyes and hissed softly in pain. "I thought... I don't know what I thought. I thought for a while, maybe I could do some good. Get through it... be like you." He turned his face away. "When we went to Hippocratic... I wanted revenge. But... I also wanted to stop hurting."

"You were staying with me because you thought I'd get you killed?" I murmured softly, feeling cold and hollow once more. I hadn't felt like this in a long time.

He sniffed and nodded. "With all the shit you attract? I figured something would get us sooner or later. But you kept on throwing yourself into the meat grinder over and over... they nailed your legs to the floor and we cut them off and still you... Goddess, Blackjack, how do you keep going?!" he asked as he looked up at me in anguish. "And then you died and... and I was alive... and all I wanted was to swap places with you!" He laughed brokenly. "You know what I thought when I saw Dusty die? Damn... lucky mare..."

I sighed, leaning down and stroking his mane gently. "Everything hurts, Blackjack. Everything. I was so sure that the hurting would stop in that damned laboratory. A shot. A turret. That goop. I just wanted something to kill me so that you could go on and save everypony. Something. But... somehow you saved us all. Again... because that is what you do..."

He closed his eyes again. "Please don't save me. Please just leave me here. I'm so sick of hurting. So damned sick of everything." I looked down at my friend and stroked his mane. I had no idea what to do. No idea at all... except...

Hush now, quiet now, it's time to lay your sleepy head...

No! I save ponies. I don't kill them.

But... how do I save P-21?

"I'm sorry, P-21. I don't know how I can take the pain away," I said quietly. "I... don't hurt. I'm not exactly sure if I'm a pony anymore. Maybe... maybe somewhere back in Tenpony, whatever part of me was a pony got cut away and replaced by a talisman or a pump or something. I don't know how a pony is supposed to feel anymore. I get shot and it... it doesn't feel the same anymore. I remember the first time I got shot. Now, nothing feels right," I murmured quietly. "I eat metal and rocks now. I have little bars telling me how much energy I have left." I closed my eyes. "Maybe... maybe the reason I'm not affected by Enervation is because I'm really a robot... just one with more fleshy bits than your average Ultra-Sentinel."

He shifted to look up at me. "But right now... Glory is doing the transplant to try and save Scotch Tape's life. And even with the organs, she might not pull through." I sighed, stroking his mane. "I know what it's like to hate yourself. I know what it's like to want to end the pain. I do... I know how it feels to be

violated and to just want it over. I'm sorry I couldn't help you." I'd been on the mattress before, the very place he was now.

I took a deep breath. "If you lie here like this, and don't go to her, and she lives then... she isn't your daughter. One way or another, she'll get past this. Maybe you won't. But I guarantee that if you stay here like this right now, and she dies, then you'll be just as dead as if I had left you back at the Arena. There are some things you never forgive yourself for." I closed my eyes. "Either way, I'm not going to leave you here just waiting for the pain to come back. Because it will... lying here causes the pain."

He lay there with his eyes closed for the longest time. I knew the chems and his own self-loathing were keeping him there. I could have dragged him out easily... but it didn't matter. The mattress he was stuck on would have been any place I took him. Only he could get off it... and I didn't know what we'd do if he didn't.

Then he shifted a little, rolling over to put his hooves beneath him. Slowly he rose, and I put a hoof out to steady him. I sniffed as he took one step out of tub, then another, then stepped free. "Why do I keep on following you, Blackjack?" he murmured as he slumped against me. "Why do you think I can be a better pony? More than just a trick pony?"

"Because you can. I can see it. Duct Tape could, too," I replied with a small smile. "Now, I think there's a waiting room thingy near the operating room. We can go there and... um... wait." He missed the obvious opportunity to point out my obnoxiousness, just ducking his head and focusing on walking without falling down.

When we reached the waiting room, he took a seat and closed his eyes. I dug out my magic primer and stretched out on the couch. Concentrating on turning the page took my mind off Scotch... but not off P-21. I didn't know anything about drug addiction! Glory had tried to talk to me about it, but to me it was more a 'chems do damage to your body so they're bad' type deal. I never thought of them changing the way a pony thought and acted. They were supposed to be... pop some Fixer, and you were good.

Had P-21 really been in pain for so long? Was it real pain like from an injury, or something in his head? This sounded a whole lot too serious for just a Fixer or two.

Boo slowly crept into view. I smiled and talked softly till she came over to get a mane rub. I fished out a slightly smooshed Fancy Buck Cake, and she ate it happily.

I tried to keep my mind off the question I couldn't answer by flipping through the primer. I was getting through the basic telekinesis practice spells. I practiced lifting and lowering Duty and Sacrifice. The revolvers were heavier than Vigilance. Theoretically, I should have been able to use a half dozen pistols with my magic, but in reality it was far easier to float an object than to aim and fire. Your brain literally had to juggle from one weapon to the next to use them all if you were going to do more than simply fire blindly. Duty and Sacrifice were different, though. I lifted and aimed them both with little difficulty. The intricate scrollwork on the five-shot cylinders depicted magical flames. I practiced working them in unison, pulling the triggers simultaneously at an imaginary target.

Then I practiced my little light spell... because for the first time in my life, I could actually do magic. Boo watched the little floating mote warily, then when it came near, tried to eat it. I smiled as she made an icky face. Before, magic was something other unicorns did. Other unicorns were better than

me, and I always assumed that that was that. I was a screwup unable to perform the most basic magic spell beyond simple telekinesis. My magic bullet spell had been the first time I'd done more, and even that was sort of still telekinesis. But now a light spell... it made me wonder what other magic I was capable of.

I thought of Lacunae's shield spell. Wouldn't that be useful, given the amount of fire I saw regularly? Or healing spell... okay, maybe that was a bit much. I wasn't sure if a healing spell would even work on me. Maybe I needed a repair spell... or both?

"Hey, P-21... wanna throw some books at me?" He blinked, frowning a little in confusion. "Come on! I want to see if I can figure out how to do Lacunae's barrier thingy." I grinned and gestured right at the end of my snout. "Come on. You can't make my face any worse than it already is. So give it your best shot."

You know, for having three doses of Med-X in him, he could throw the waiting room magazines and books really hard!

After two dozen, I had a bloody nose and a ringing headache and wasn't any closer to making a magic barrier. Maybe I could talk to Lacunae about it. Before, though, I just would have given up. 'Blackjack is screwup; Blackjack can't learn, durr...' But now I knew magic was more than just my inability. Of course I had to get pummeled with a half dozen more books before I finally got P-21 to stop throwing them.

"Okay, clearly the whole 'magic shield' thing is a little more complicated than just... imagining a wall or something," I said as I rubbed my horn.

"Well, if you ever need more books thrown at your head, I'm sure you won't have any lack of volunteers," he replied with a small smile.

"You know... I've got to wonder, how do you make those shots with your grenade launcher?" I asked as I looked at Persuasion on his hip. "I mean, I know a lot of it is skill."

"I don't know. I suppose it's an earth pony thing," he replied with a shrug, looking at the door to the operating room. "I can't do magic or fly, but say I need to get something somewhere, I know just how and how hard I need to kick it to get it where it needs to go."

"Oh yeah? Prove it. Put a magazine on each of those three seats there," I said as I pointed across the waiting room. He looked at me flatly and reached over, bit three magazines, and tossed one after the next onto all three seats. I frowned sourly. "Okay... do it again." And so he did. "With bo--" And three prewar books landed on each stack. "Yeah, well, I can do magic."

He stood, walked slowly towards a garbage can in the corner, and pulled out a tin can. Then he looked at me and kicked the can hard. It bounced off the wall, and I ducked as it whizzed by my head. "Ha!" I laughed, pointing a hoof at him. Then I heard a ping behind me and a ting above me... and felt the odd sensation of the can landing squarely on my horn. I looked at him and his sad little smile, levitated it off my horn, pulled it to my mouth, and started to chew without taking my eyes off him.

"Touché," he replied as he took a seat. He closed his eyes for a moment. "How do you do it, Blackjack? How do you... how do you keep on being you?"

"No pony else is dumb enough to take the job," I replied with a chuckle and a shrug. "I mean, really, the uniform is nice, don't get me wrong, but I think I have something explode on me or near me on a daily basis. Any pony with two brain cells knows that that's not worth it." I grinned at him. "I expect I'll figure it out in a month or two." If I was still alive, that is.

"That's what I mean." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "You... helped Sanguine. Even after everything he did, you helped him." I opened my mouth, but he quickly added, "I'm not saying you were wrong... even if I think you were. It's just... you do things that are amazing. You laugh and joke and you just keep coming back for more."

"Not always," I said, feeling myself... wait, was I blushing?

"Thank goodness," he replied as he closed his eyes. "You know... after Priest... when you were on your bed like that... I have to admit, a part of me was relieved."

"Relieved I screwed up?" I asked with a frown.

"Relieved you could mess up. ...Following you hasn't been easy at all, but it's been a heck of a show. You're so... good. You are. You try so hard to be good that..."

"I'm not a good pony," I replied firmly, looking away. Wow... maybe my face was too cooked to blush. "I want to be... I try..."

"And that's what makes you good." He laughed softly, mirthlessly. He looked at me long and low. "Sometimes, I can't believe the things you do. I mean... I really can't. You keep going when other ponies would break. You try and give every pony a second chance... a third chance... a fourth chance."

"Stop," I said firmly, frowning. "I'm not perfect. I fucked up... I fucked up big, remember?"

"I do. But in spite of that, you keep on going. You keep on being good." For some reason, his praise was starting to annoy me. "You never give up, even when any pony else would. I sometimes wonder what it would take to stop yo--"

I rose to my hooves, and Boo raised her head in alarm. "Damn it... do you want to know why I keep going? It's because, if I actually stop for two seconds to think about things, I want to blow my head off. I'm not a good pony. I'm a pony trying to make up for all the fucked-up things I've done! What I did in and to 99. What I did to those foals. What I did to you. The fact I'm probably going to need an oil change before I have my period. That I have a crazy ghost pony living in my PipBuck who comes and goes as he pleases. I only keep going because I'll die if I don't. Not because I'm good." I sighed and looked away. "I'll drag myself forward into a meat grinder because it's less painful than thinking about what I've done. I can give second chances... because after my mistakes... I'd want a few hundred myself."

"Maybe... but you haven't quit yet. Not on any pony," he said quietly as he stared away. He took a slow breath. "I keep thinking about good ponies... you... Priest... even Glory. And no matter how I try... I don't fit in. I'm not as good as the rest of you."

"You're fine," I said as I trotted over to him and put my leg around his shoulders. "It's not about being good. It's about trying to do better. If you quit trying, then you'll just get torn down bit by bit till

there's nothing left." I sat and stroked Boo's ears till she lowered her head and started to snooze.

He watched me, then sighed. "You make being a good pony look so easy."

"No, LittlePip, Fluttershy, and Homage make it look easy," I snorted. "And don't get me started on the Stable Dweller. I mean, she can at least save her stable... in which she dwells, I assume." From whence she plotted her eventual salvation of all the Wasteland. ...You know, I didn't exactly know what the Stable Dweller did to help ponies. LittlePip faced down mind reading monsters and slaver armies.

Ah well, she had to do something. Otherwise, why would Homage talk about her like that?

Then the door pushed open, and we both rose to our hooves. Lacunae looked at the pair of us.

She wasn't smiling. "You should come." He suddenly staggered against me, and I was barely able to keep us both upright.

"Scotch... is she...? She's alright? Right?" I asked as I held P-21.

"You should come," Lacunae said in our minds, and then pulled back. We stared at the swinging door in shocked silence. I'd been so sure... he'd... had it been because... no. Don't think that. Don't let him think it. Just...

"Come on. Let's go," I said as I nudged him towards the door.

* * *

The oxygen talisman sent up a slow stream of bubbles from its bottle, the tubes running to a mask covering Scotch's face. Gauze covered her eyes and several patches of her hide, and bandages ran from her throat down to disappear under the sheets. A monitor beeped slowly as it magically read her vitals. Glory adjusted the machine, her lips pressed together and her eyes angry.

P-21 took one look at her lying there. "Is she... is..."

"Honestly, I have no idea," Glory said as P-21's hind legs gave out. She glared at him. "Somepony hit delicate equipment. Somepony took drugs I'd prepared for the procedure. Everything was rushed transplanting the lungs. We could have kept her stabilized through the prep. The robot could have swapped the lungs in three minutes if everything had been perfect. This was far from perfect. So really... I don't know." She closed her eyes. "The eyes went smoothly enough... and the skin grafts. But really, I can't tell you if she's going to live or not."

"Glory..." was all I could say. She just shook her mane and stepped past us as she headed for the door.

"It's night now. If she pulls through till morning, it'll be a miracle," she said in cold anger as she stepped out. "Come on, Blackjack. I need to get you prepped. Make sure he doesn't cough on her monitor or something," she said to Lacunae. The purple alicorn simply nodded.

P-21 didn't look like he was going to cough. He looked like Sanguine sitting there before the four copies. In a way, I suppose he was.

"Is it that..." I muttered in shock as I followed her into the hall.

"I've never operated that fast or sloppily before. If it wasn't for Lacunae, she'd be dead right now!" Glory said sharply. "What was he doing with her stasis pod? Why did he take the Med-X?"

"He's... got a problem. A..." I hung my head. "I'm sorry, Glory. I'm sorry I gave those Mint-als to Scotch. I..."

She looked confused for only a few seconds before her glare softened a little. "He's addicted, isn't he?" I closed my eyes and nodded. She sighed and reached out to pat my shoulder. "It's not your fault."

"Isn't it? You tried to say something. Heck, Rampage tried to tell me!" I stood and started pacing. "I just... he's always been so strong. I never thought of him..." I shook my head. "He'd needed it since before we left Stable 99."

"You mean for his leg?" She frowned as we started to walk towards the operating room.

"No. I mean the medical ponies gave it to the males, either to calm them down or deal with the aftereffects of... rough sex." I shook my head; I'd never thought of it. A shot to put them to sleep. A shot to calm them down when they were hysterical. Shots to help them perform. It wasn't just his leg; his whole life he'd been under the influence. "So... you have to... you know... do the medicine thing. Make him not addicted anymore. You can do that, right?"

"Theoretically, but the fact is that addiction isn't as simple as that. Addiction is more than just chemical. It's psychological as well. He might not be able to control himself."

I answered at once, "Well then, I'll control him and..." Oh... yeah, that might not work so well.

"Are you prepared to give up your hunt for a few months while you do? Med-X addiction is a doozy. Going cold turkey could easily kill him without the proper medical help." Wait? Did she actually mean that stopping taking the drug that was messing him up could kill him? My mane went all clammy. "Well, I'll keep him... I'll..." The thought of Scotch Tape dying... of P-21 dying... "Damn it, Glory, there must be something I can do! I know he's got the problem now. I'll watch him close. I won't let him get messed up again."

"Blackjack... there are some things you can't do," she said in a low voice as we walked.

"I just dealt with a ghoul who wanted to kill me and got out of a deathtrap alive. There's nothing I can't do," I insisted stubbornly. Hadn't he followed me into that deathtrap for the whole 'death' thing, though? "We'll just have to keep an eye on him." I looked at her hanging her head and nudged her. "How about you? How are you doing?"

She sighed. "I'm trying to compartmentalize what happened. She was critically ill; I had to cut as quickly as possible. She might have been braindead even before we got her out of the pod. Death happens." She glanced at me and my startled expression. "One of the first things they teach you in medical school. Death happens; you can't save all of them." She sighed. "I just hope I didn't make a mistake. Rainbow Dash was no surgeon."

"Sanguine said the surgery was simple," I said with a frown. He'd lied to me... I should have

dragged him along... wait, no, there was a fusion spell we hadn't had time for and his panicking half crazy family had been freaking out and...

"I'm sure that, for a two-century-old doctor, it is. For somepony who's only read about the procedure and witnessed a few transplants, it's a lot more tricky. Essentially, it's 'activate the stabilization field, get the patient unconscious, crack them open, remove the bad organ, put in the transplant, sew and anchor it in place, and flood everything with healing potion. Close up and hope for the best.'" She closed her eyes.

"What are her odds?" I asked with a gulp. Boo bumped my flank with her head, making me jump. My jump made her jump as well, and she ducked behind the counter, peeking at me.

"I still can't believe there were dozens of ponies like her in that place," Glory said softly, shaking her head. "Anyway, I don't do odds, Blackjack. You're the one who knows gambling. We'll know by morning if she's going to pull through or not. There's no chance of organ rejection, but infection... having something rupture... internal bleeding..." She hissed softly in frustration. "If he'd just not touched the pod or taken those chems... if I could have had more time!"

"You did the best with what you had," I said as I bumped my head against her. Aha! Now I knew where Boo had picked it up.

She gave a wan smile. "I know... it's just, at this point, I feel helpless."

"We all do," I murmured softly. We walked along together with our heads held a little bit lower.

Glory got over it first. "Well! Before morning arrives and my confidence is shattered forever, let's see if I can't get you free from that hazmat suit!" she said brightly.

Fifteen minutes later, I was discovering just what Glory could do with a scalpel. I doubted I would ever feel the same way about her as she held the razor sharp blade in her lips and sliced away the yellow rubber and the barding beneath. No sooner was the yellow rubber cut than a reeking pong of pony sweat, blood, and leather struck my nostrils. Glory backed away, coughing and gagging as the blue pegasus turned decidedly green.

Okay... that couldn't be healthy.

"You're lucky. With that healing talisman inside you, you'll regenerate all of this relatively quickly," she said matter-of-factly as she freed my tail from its rubbery sack. I swished it a few times, letting it air out. Oh, I could really do with a good brushing. "He included a few ounces of muscle tissue and fat so I can build you up."

"That's good, but... Glory, I look like a robot. How much..." Was there a pony left in me?

"You are not a robot," Glory replied as she tossed the sack away. "Yes, we had to replace a lot of compromised bone and reinforce your epidermis. The alternative was something like Deus, with external supports poking out of your hide." That still didn't make me feel much better. She sighed and stroked my mane. "Look at it this way. Would you feel better if you saw only bone sticking out of those injuries?"

"Gah, no!" I said with a shiver.

"Then you shouldn't feel bad about the metal," Glory replied. "You're injured, not damaged. And

we're going to heal you, not repair you," she said firmly. Then she took up the scalpel and finished cutting away as many scraps as she could. The only pieces that remained were rings where bullet holes had allowed the barding and hazardous materials suit to bond with my hide. It didn't hurt... but it didn't feel natural, either.

'Natural'. Was that a term that could be legally applied to me anymore?

"Okay. Now the fun time. I'm out of Med-X, so we're going to have to use a memory orb. Hopefully it won't wear off till I'm finished. Do you have a preference?" Glory asked with a small smile. Given how jumbled up they were... I really needed a case or something that let me label them. I sighed. Really, most of my orbs weren't all that pleasant to begin with. I really didn't want to relive Stonewing getting a cockatrice squished into him.

Besides... now that I was out of the suit... I had something else to take care of.

"Um... give me a second, okay?" I said with a flush.

"Why? Is something the matter?"

"Um..." How to put this delicately? "I need to use the little filly's room."

* * *

As I trotted out of the bathroom, I really hoped that I hadn't just ruined the toilet. They were something precious in the Wasteland, and what I'd tried to flush... well... let's just say I wasn't sure it could handle what I'd just put into it. I made my way back towards the operating room, but then paused. There was Doctor Tenderheart's office. I smiled as I stepped inside, looking at the terminal P-21 had hacked and at the safe he'd left open. He'd been so brave going on his own to try and find some way to stop the mad children. I'd thought Glory had died.

I closed my eyes. I really couldn't say if I'd made progress since then.

I looked at Marigold's file on the desktop and slowly turned it over, looking at obscure medical wordings. Then the stack of files slipped and fell to the floor in a clatter, sliding in a fan of papers and folders. Great, Blackjack, just great. I knelt down and started to gather them up with my hooves and horn. I knew it was irrational. This wasn't my office; heck, the pony who had worked in here had been gone for two centuries. Still. It was her space.

As I picked up the last, I spotted a faint golden glow from the open safe. Slowly, I pushed it open and looked down at the little yellow glass orb. I hesitated, then stretched out my hoof and carefully rolled it out. My fingers extended as I stared down at it. "You're not supposed to be in there."

"Interesting," rasped the Dealer's voice, making me jump, and I looked aside with a scowl to see him staring out the window.

"Oh, that just about sums up my entire life," I said with a little frown. "What are you doing here?"

"I just thought I'd comment on the vagaries of life and the oddities of luck. Random chance. All that," he said as he spread out five cards showing a royal flush. "One second you get exactly what you need... the next..." He tapped one card, and it went from an ace of spades to a two of clubs. "Nothing. How do you think that memory orb came to be there? Something you missed first time through? What

are the odds that you'd find that?"

"No idea. I'm still waiting to find the memory orb that explains who the hell you are," I replied sharply as I stood on my hind legs and approached him. He smiled up at me, his hooves working the cards better than I could with magic.

"I told you. I'm nopony special. Just along for the ride."

"Horseapples. Who are you? What are you?" I asked as I looked him over.

"Nopony special at all," he murmured softly. "Is it so hard to believe?"

"Yes," I replied flatly. "My life is too interesting just to allow a random ghost pony to be living in my PipBuck along with a key to Equestria's darkest secrets. I mean, I'm used to some pretty odd shit, but that's just a little much. Call me crazy."

"No. You're not crazy..." he said in a dangerous, low voice loaded with rage as he stared out the window at the distant green glow of the city. I saw his jaw work, his muscles flexing under the coat. He sighed. "How did it come to this?"

"You tell me, Goldenblood," I said as I crossed my hooves, sitting on the desk all upright; oddly, my body had no problem balancing, so long as I actually didn't try and balance.

"I'm not Goldenblood," he said quietly.

I doubted that, but there was no point in lapsing into the whole cycle of accusing and denying. "But you knew him," I challenged.

He didn't answer for several seconds. "Nopony knew him. None of us. We all thought we had him figured out. Luna thought he was her loyal evil chancellor working behind the scenes. Fluttershy thought he was a helpless little lamb, till he showed his fangs. Horse thought he was an idiot. Twilight thought he was a friend... then an enemy... then a friend... then an enemy... Then who knew? And Spike thought he was a father..."

"And who did you think he was?" I asked. If I had to play games to get answers, I'd play and hope he slipped and revealed something.

"Me?" He arched a brow and then looked out the window again. "He was the pony who blew up the world." He shoved himself away from the window, turning towards me with a scowl. "Oh, he didn't do it by himself. Don't get the idea that he twirled his mustache one day, gave an evil laugh, and set out to kill everypony. No, the Ministry Mares, Celestia, Luna... everypony was guilty. Everypony facilitated it. Everypony gleefully raced towards the edge, and anypony who didn't like it and thought it was wrong... stayed silent. Goldenblood was just the architect who set it all up. If he'd just shut his mouth and died and let Luna fail, the world would have been a better place."

"So why'd he do it?" I asked. The fury returned on his face as he glared at me a moment, but then he cast his eyes away.

"Don't know. Fluttershy? Twilight? Luna? He always did have a weak spot for assertive mares. Or maybe it was something else. Maybe the power and the secrets and lies wormed their way inside him till he snapped. Till one day he was so sick of it that he stopped playing the game," he said as he leaned

towards me and clopped his hooves together in front of my face, making me jump. "And then he found out you don't stop playing this game. You can't just change the rules. You can't suddenly make things right again." He snorted softly as I picked myself up. "He would have loved you. Probably have killed you about the time you found out what EC-1101 did, but loved you."

I sighed and shook my head. "So... why not spill?"

"Not my job and not my place," he sniffed.

I grunted and rolled my eyes. "Oh, come on. Just disclose the details already, Dealer or whoever you are! Why do you insist on all this mystery crap?"

"Because I'm not playing the game anymore. Not like Sanguine was, or like you are. DJ Pon3. That stable dweller." He laughed, long and thin. "What, you think this is all a coincidence? I don't believe in coincidence. All of you start wiggling around like a kicked-over anthill all at once? You start discovering the O.I.A.'s secrets? Wars and death and chaos? It's two hundred years ago all over again. The same fucking game's still being played."

"What game? What are you talking about?" I asked, backing away a little. Maybe I wasn't the crazy one. "I'm not playing a fucking game here!"

"No? Why are you trying to find out about the projects?" he asked as he licked his lips. "Why are you trying to find where EC-1101 is getting to? Because you think it'll lead you to the answers, don't you? Why do you care about this shithole of a city? Why do you keep on fighting, day after day?" He pulled out a card and threw it in my face. Its surface was a mirror and I stared at my tattered reflection. "Look at you! You're half metal, Blackjack!" Another card of me nailed over a crate landed in my hooves, my hide painted white and red. "Look at the shit you go through." Another card showing the atrium full of still ponies. One of a mine's bloody rock crusher. One of forty stasis pods. "Look at the shit you cause!"

"Shut up," I screamed, the cards fluttering away like dead insects as I backed away into the corner. "What do you want from me?"

"I want you to stop playing the game. The same stupid game everypony's been playing for years. Stop pretending it's all for something. Stop imagining you can fix it. You can't save the Wasteland. You can't save ponies. You can't save your friends. You can't even save yourself," he said as he took his cards and tossed them into his cowboy hat. "Don't be like Twilight and her friends. You'll just get everypony killed if you do," he said as he put it back on top of his head. He pointed to the memory orb in my mechanical grip. "Put that orb back where you found it, get the help you need, take your friends, and go. Leave this damned place and find some peaceful patch. Forget about Goldenblood and Equestria. They're dead and gone."

"I don't... I can't..." I said as I clenched my eyes shut. "He did something. Caused something. And I have to stop it. I can't give up." Yet I could still see him there, looking down at me in disgust and judgment. Then nothing. Slowly, I cracked my eyes open and looked at the empty room.

Nothing. Just an empty room.

* * *

"Are you okay?" Glory asked with a little frown as I returned to the operating room.

"I'm pretty sure I couldn't see okay with a set of binoculars. But I'm ready to let you get to work," I said hoarsely as I tried not to look at the glass trays full of wet fleshy tissue.

"Do you have a memory orb you want to look at?" Glory asked as she turned towards the podium that controlled the surgical robot.

I carefully lifted the golden orb that had mysteriously appeared in the office safe. "Yeah. I guess so."

She frowned. "Without Lacunae, it should take an hour or two. So if you wake up in the middle, try to go back in." I hopped up onto the operating table. Oh, I really didn't want to be here. Lying here brought forth all kinds of memories of snip snip snip. In fact, I could see those little scissors on the end of a steel shaft.

"Okay... okay. Just... work quick." I bit my lip as I tapped the orb against my horn, trying to make the connection happen. "Come on... come on..." There was a tiny spark from my horn, and I looked over at the Dealer watching me coldly. Then the world spun away.

oooOOOooo

There was only one pony that felt like this. My chest burned and bubbled with every breath. My legs ached and my head throbbed. This body was utterly exhausted. Yet Goldenblood walked across a plaza. Great black buildings loomed from every direction around us. The ponies scurrying around them seemed almost like afterthoughts. What had Hoofington looked like before it was burned to the ground? I couldn't imagine this as an improvement.

It was night, but lights on the black facades lit up everything in garish colors. Two other ponies flanked him, but he paid them no mind. Really, feeling like this, I expected him to be looking for some bed to curl up in. If I'd felt like he did, I'd want to sleep for a couple of years. He walked slowly ahead, weaving slightly on unsteady hooves. He kept his eyes low, save for occasional glances around him or over his shoulder. The cold, wet air felt good on his burning lungs.

"Mister Goldenblood...? Are you sure he'll be available at this hour?" one of the bucks following him asked.

"Ponies like him don't keep normal hours," Goldenblood replied. He looked up at the blue neon sign over the front door. 'Robronco'.

The three walked into the large foyer... and right into the sights of an immense Ultra-Sentinel. Its guns pointed right down at us as it boomed, "Prepare to be destroyed!" And then a buck's voice followed it up with, "That's the last thing our striped nemesis will hear when they face off against the Robronco Ultra-Sentinel! Robronco, putting technology to the test for a better and brighter tomorrow." More sentinel robots stood on podiums around the massive rainbow machine. Protectaponies just stomped their hooves weakly on the fringes.

Clearly, Goldenblood wasn't a pony who startled easy. "That's a hell of a demonstration model," one of his escorts muttered.

Goldenblood pressed the elevator button with his horn before he asked exactly what I was thinking: "What makes you think it's for demonstrations?" He smiled just a little as the two bucks shuffled nervously behind him. In the polished steel doors, I saw the Ultra-Sentinel watching the three of us.

What indeed?

Going up, Sweetie Belle crooned a tune softly through a speaker. Goldenblood hummed along in his rusty way. The bucks following him coughed once the entire trip. Not exactly the friendliest bunch. Were they protecting him or guarding him?

The door chimed and opened wide, and I heard a mare say, "How about Neighponese? I could really go with some Kung Pow Yeow Dum." Three mares trotted into view: an orange pegasus, a familiar-looking earth pony wearing a bow, and a unicorn with a poofy lilac mane.

"Oooh! Or there's a Fancee restaurant down by the river!" squeaked the white unicorn mare. Funny, but I could have sworn I'd heard that voice before.

"I really should get back to Fillydelphia. We're behind on almost a dozen stable inspections, and if I hear about one more delay in the Everfree, I'm gonna spit my bit," the crème earth pony drawled.

Then the three noticed Goldenblood and stopped short. The earth pony looked vaguely curious and the unicorn confused, but there was a deep loathing in the purple eyes of the pegasus. And there was fear, too. "Goldenblood," the pegasus murmured.

"Scootaloo," he replied in a rusty purr.

The earth pony blinked in surprise. "Oh, you're Director Goldenblood? Nice to meetcha." There was some hesitance on that last part. I could understand; Goldenblood was hardly a pony you applied 'nice' to easily. "Scoots tried to forward me the O.I.A. gobbledygook, but I'd rather design a tripod with two legs than understand all that fancy legalese."

"Quite understandable, Apple Bloom. Wise ponies let others handle those trivialities while they focus on getting important things done. I must commend you on Stable One. Very... impressive. I'm sure Canterlot's finest were quite taken with it."

"Well, now that Hoofington's not hoggin' all the good steel, we're getting the stables done lickity split." She gave a serious little smile. "I mean, not that Hoofington's not a nice city. Just... not exactly what I'd design."

"Yes, well. Certain considerations had to be taken into account. Still, Scootaloo's been able to work wonders with your financing. One has to wonder where she finds all the bits." Scootaloo wasn't taking her eyes off the scarred buck. "After all, Stable-Tec is a fully private company. If this were owned and controlled by the M.W.T., I might be able to understand where the money comes from."

"And Luna'd close us down," Apple Bloom said with a frown. "I swear, Her Majesty can get her feathers in a bunch when you start talkin' about the dangers of balefire bombs targeting cities."

"It would rather be like somepony suggesting selling hydraulic lifts on the possibility that your stables might collapse," Goldenblood rasped in his low, hissing whisper.

Apple Bloom frowned. "Are you suggestin' my stables aren't built up to snuff?"

"I don't know. Are you suggesting that Princess Luna will somehow fail to preserve Equestria from the zebra megaweapon threat?" Goldenblood countered.

"Reckon not," the red-maned mare muttered, then sighed. "Can't see the harm in taking a few precautions, though. Just in case."

"Yes. In this day and age, precautions are wise," Goldenblood murmured as he looked away.

"Speaking of precautions, Goldie. I've made sure there's a spot reserved for you in Stable One, right alongside Their Majesties," Scootaloo said with a little smirk. "You'll have your own room and everything."

"Thank you. I'll keep that in mind," Goldenblood rasped. Then he turned his eyes to the unicorn and smiled. "Sweetie Belle. Please, let me say what an honor it is to meet you. I'm quite the fan of your songs."

The unicorn smiled back warmly. "Oh, why thank you," she said as she blinked in confusion. "But... ah... you're not what I expected at all. From the way Rarity and Scootaloo talk about you, I thought you were some kind of blood-drinking monster."

Goldenblood looked at the flushing pegasus for a moment. "Oh no, Miss Belle. I'm afraid I'm quite an ordinary monster." The three mares looked at each other with weak smiles, and he shook his head. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I have business with the great and powerful Mr. Horse. Ladies." He gave a slight bow and walked down the hall.

"Well, he was nice... in a creepy, doesn't-ever-blink kind of way," Sweetie Belle said behind them.

"So, you wanted to get some Neighponese, Scoots?" Apple Bloom asked.

The pegasus grumbled, "I've lost my appetite." Then the elevator doors slid closed.

Goldenblood chuckled to himself as he entered an elaborate waiting room. Tiny ponies frolicked on the table, and only the faint clicking gave hints that they were robots. In the corner was a primitive Protectapony with a placard reading 'Model #0'. Paintings of deserts and fanciful moons rising hung on the walls, magically enchanted to twinkle softly. A brown earth pony wearing a large, elaborate PipBuck trotted over to a little table where there were fresh apples, various berries, and a golden drink dispenser of some sort.

Clearly, Robronco wasn't hurting for bits either.

The receptionist behind the table was a pretty young thing about my age. After assuring Goldenblood that Mr. Horse would be with him momentarily, she said into her headset, "No, I love you more. Mmmm... no... I love you more."

Ah, love.

Goldenblood just sat quietly, not glancing at the clock on the wall nor at his companions. He simply sat there. I was nearly crawling up the mental walls as he waited. Then Goldenblood started

counting down from ten. "Three... two... one..."

The receptionist looked up. "Mister Horse is ready to see you now." He just rose and trotted around the desk and down the hall. "He's in room... um..." the mare called after him, but Goldenblood kept going without looking back. "Freak," muttered the mare, before going back to gushing, "No, not you! I love you more!"

Goldenblood seemed to know his way around well as he walked straight past several offices to a conference room. The yellow stallion waiting inside looked at Goldenblood with a cheeky grin. "Hey, it's moldy Goldie. How's it going?" he asked as he sat upright on the edge of the table, without the help of robotic legs. He slid a bowl of orange squares towards him. "Cheese squares?"

Goldenblood didn't say anything for a moment, and then he trotted around towards the brown-maned buck. "So, meeting with Stable-Tec go well?"

The yellow stallion shook his head with a suffering sigh. "Eh. It's not fair. I mean, throw a fat Stinkin' Rich at me, and I'll have him eating out of my hoof by the end of the meeting. But what am I supposed to do with three hotties like those? And Sweetie Belle! Sweet Celestia, it just ain't fair to bring flanks like hers to a business meeting."

"Well, I think it's a calculated move by Scootaloo to counteract your urge to digress on tech ideas with Apple Bloom by exploiting your penchant for lechery," Goldenblood replied. "Or she's planning on Rarity killing you when she finds out you're drooling over her little sister."

"You think?" Horse mused, scratching his chin. "Yeah. I could see that. A highly elaborate plot to make Rarity snap my head off... Scoots is clever like that." He sighed and shrugged. "Eh, well, if you gotta go, I can think of worse ways." He lifted the bowl and tapped the bottom, knocking three of the bite-sized chunks into the air, and twisted his head to catch them in his mouth. Chewing loudly, he looked at Goldenblood. "So, where have you been? I've been trying to touch hooves with you for months."

"Occupied," he said quietly.

"Yeah yeah. Super secret stuff," he snorted, rocking off the table. "So... I got it."

Goldenblood lifted a cheese square and popped it into his mouth. It tasted like bitter paste as he chewed slowly. "Show me what you've discovered."

The yellow buck grinned as he nodded his head and walked towards the wall. He reached out with a hoof to press against the beige padding, and then there was a click accompanied by the wall panel sliding up. "Really? Secret passages, Horse?" Goldenblood said with a sigh as he followed him inside.

"Hey, what's the point of designing an entire city and not having fun secret passages and the like?" He grinned as he led Goldenblood through some metal hallways. "It's come in handy a few times when the M.o.M.'s come to call."

"Pinkie Pie's targeted you?" Goldenblood asked with a frown.

"I'm a bad bad pony," Horse laughed. "Well, not me personally, as far as they know, but I do business with them so, by extension, I must be bad. But somehow, when the Pinks come to call, I'm always miraculously out of the office." He gave Goldenblood a wink, and I felt the scarred stallion actually

smile. They trotted into a large lab space of some type with a number of tools laid out on a table. Robotic horses were arranged along the walls or hanging half-finished from hooks. Now Goldenblood was looking around... not simply at random, either. His head panned across the room as if he were scanning everything in sight.

"I see your work on the next generation of Protectaponies is coming along nicely. I'm glad to see you haven't given up on them in favor of bigger, better, and more expensive glorified tanks," Goldenblood said as he looked at a magical hologram of the city. The Core of Hoofington was arranged in three vague circles stacked one atop the other and running north and south. The green bars representing buildings occasionally flickered and flashed.

"Hey, what can I say. Someday there'll be a big demand for robots that are more than killing machines. Apple Bloom got a kick out my microponies. Think I'll send her a holopony just for her to tinker with," he grinned.

"Helping a competitor?" I arched a brow.

"Pffft. Stable-Tec isn't a competitor. We both have visions of the future. Hippocampus... now they're competitors. 'More coal-fired plants, now.' Bleugh. They treat anything that doesn't involve burning rocks as a joke. A hoofful of dams and biomass plants, a few solar projects, and a bajillion coal plants." He snorted scornfully. "Once the Tokomare is working, Equestria won't need coal anymore." He rubbed his hooves together as he chuckled. "Ohhh, I can imagine their wailing and gnashing teeth when we get the system online and suddenly their entire business model becomes as obsolete as pony-pulled trains."

Goldenblood nodded. "If you can get it to work." He cocked a brow. "Is that why I'm here?"

"Maybe." Horse grinned, then walked to the table. "Care to stroll with me down concept avenue?" He clapped his hooves together. "Sweetie Bot!"

A copy of the mare I'd met at the elevator strolled into the lab... only Sweetie Belle hadn't been wearing a frilly black lace uniform. She floated a tray holding two mugs of steaming beverage beside her. Smiling demurely, she put the tray down and fluttered her eyes at the pair. Goldenblood covered his face with a hoof. "Really, Horse?"

"What? A guy has needs. And once I can convince Sweetie Belle to sign off on using her likeness... Whooo... these are going to sell like hotcakes!" The yellow buck nickered, raised the mug in his hooves and took a drink, leaving chocolaty foam dripping off his mustache. "I could get you one. I'm thinking of running a whole line based on the Ministry Mares, as well as some more generic versions."

"I'd question the wisdom of that, long term," Goldenblood muttered before taking a drink. The beverage tasted like rancid piss. He set the cup aside and focused on Horse.

"Okay! To business." Horse sat upright on the table next to the tools, then picked up a rock that had been tied to a stick and held it between his hooves. "What is this and how does it work?"

Goldenblood looked at it flatly. "A hammer. You swing it."

"More accurately, it's a lever that multiplies the force applied to swinging it," Horse said as he set

down the primitive tool and picked up a ball peen hammer. "And this?"

"Same thing," Goldenblood said, now with a tone suggesting that this had better be going somewhere.

"But, I think you'll agree, more efficient, yes? Easier to swing. Smaller, but focuses more force with its smaller striking area. Better control than that?" He gestured to the rock on a stick, and Goldenblood nodded with a frown.

Horse set it down and picked up a small hammer. It was made of some kind of shiny metal. "This is a titanium-magnesium alloy hammer." He gestured to the tapered head that came to a flat little striking surface. "Perfectly balanced to maximize the force applied. You can tap a needle into a plank or drive a tenpenny nail through a two-by-four in two hits with it. I can bang robots all day." He snickered at Goldenblood. "After all, it's not the size that counts, but how you use it."

"I'm fairly sure that you didn't call me here to make innuendo about your hammer," Goldenblood replied with a larger hint of annoyance.

Horse chuckled. "Nope, my good sir. Not without a few mugs of cider in me, at least." He picked up the next tool in his mouth and tossed it to Goldenblood. It was a tiny crystalline hammer the size of my hoof. "That is a force talisman used by my horned assistants. It can apply up to ten kilomacs of force in an area ranging from a decimeter in diameter down to one millimeter."

"Why do you insist on using Fancee units?" he groaned. "What's wrong with the Equestrian Standard?"

"You tell me why we have twelve inches in a foot instead of thirteen and why there are sixteen ounces in a pound instead of fifteen and I'll get back to you on that," Horse replied. Goldenblood set the talisman down in the row. "You can see the pattern?" Horse asked as he gestured at the tools.

"Yes. Each one is more efficient than the last. More power, greater ease, less mass..." Goldenblood replied.

"Bingo. I love working with smart ponies," he laughed, then grinned as he tapped the empty table next to the talisman. "So, Goldenblood. What do you imagine belongs here?"

Goldenblood stared at the empty table, then looked at the grinning buck. "Whatever you're about to show me."

"Goldie, you know me too well," Horse chuckled as he reached under the table and lifted a tiny silver cube in his mouth. He set it on the table at the place where he'd gestured. "Ta-da."

"That's a hammer?"

"Indeedily it is," he said as he took out a spark battery and a weird device with light bulb thingies attached. "You know how this starmetal stuff only reacts to one specific frequency? Well, watch what it does when we apply just a little bit of magic power at that frequency, but modify the amplitude..." He turned a few knobs.

Goldenblood winced. "I hate that noise." Funny, I wasn't hearing anything at all.

Then there was a ping, and the quarter inch thick metal plate next to the cube indented. Then it indented again. Then again. And then it struck so hard it knocked out a perfectly round chunk of the quarter-inch steel. Horse grinned like a kid with a toy. "See? Hammer." Then he looked at the dials. "Or saw. Drill. Cutting torch. Really, it's a lot of hit and miss trying to find out the precise amplitude patterns to get the metal to react... but it does. Energy in, amplitude to decide what effect you want, and energy out."

"Interesting," Goldenblood breathed softly. "Most interesting. And how do you explain this phenomenon? Any theories about where it came from?"

"This metal isn't *precisely* a metal." He lifted it with a grin. "It's a solid state tool that can do whatever you want it to do, if you know how to interact with the stuff. We're just figuring that part out. As for where it came from... ancient zebrakind might have somehow developed this level of wonder technology... but personally I doubt it. This kind of tech would have left some kind of record or something. Nope. I posit that it had to come from somewhere else." He grinned broadly. "Have you ever heard of the zebra myth of the Eater of the Stars?"

"Eater of Souls," Goldenblood corrected. "And yes, I have. As the myth goes--"

Horse chuckled as he started to juggle the ball peen hammer, the titanium hammer, and the little silver cube. "Yeah, yeah... big nasty creatures from the stars... blah blah blah... death warning gloom and doom... blah blah blah... stars are bad, evil, wicked things... blah blah blah. Only I think that in at least one of those cases, what hit the ground wasn't just some rock from the heavens but a device from an unknown world. A device from a race thousands, no, millions of years more advanced than us."

"Corroboration?" Goldenblood asked. The yellow earth pony grinned immediately. Then he reached under the table and pulled out a strange sleek metal weapon. I wondered if the tingling mane sensation was mine or his. "A star blaster! How on Equestria did you get your hooves on a star blaster? I couldn't get Luna or Rainbow Dash to turn one over to me! The one used for Starfall has been under the M.o.A.'s strict control."

"I know a pony who knows a pony..." Horse said, rubbing his nose. "You'll note the similarities in the metal. The way they both feel... of course, the star blaster is a lot more primitive in function. Pull the trigger and watch it go. But the similarities are astounding. The starmetal seems to be able to create magical fields of power and then use magic and natural energy to do... whatever it does." He tapped the weapon. "Clearly, both of these devices are non-terrestrial in origin. The zebra myth just explains the impact of the original device."

"It may explain more than that," Goldenblood frowned as he rose. "Well. Clearly this was quite a breakthrough. You have my thanks."

"Thanks? Goldie, Goldie, Goldie... Thanks is nice... really. You're a great pony to get thanks from. But as much as I love thanks... and I do... I really do... I need something more... substantial. I mean, I invested a great deal of personal time, effort, and resources into this silvery beauty. I can't do little off-the-books side projects if there's not going to be at least a cookie out of it for me."

"You want money?"

"Money. Pbbbt! You sound like those Hippocratic jerkoffs. Fuck money. I have money. I have all the toys the money can buy. I have a Sweetie Bot! I have a piece of very very naughty weaponry from

the stars. Money's nice, but I really don't care about it. Nope." He grinned. "What I want is what you want. I want a backstage pass to the concert. I want to play the game and see just how well I can play it. I want you to deal me in."

Goldenblood smiled slowly. "I'll see what I can do."

"Ooooh," Horse shivered. "I can just imagine what you can do." Then he grinned. "Oh. And don't worry. If some nasty zebra baddie whacks me, or something major happens to me, like I fall down an elevator shaft, I've made sure all my findings go straight to the ministries." His grin widened even more as Goldenblood stared at him. Horse trotted over and tapped some keys on a terminal. A grainy video appeared showing Goldenblood slowly backing a pony towards the shaft. The railing swung wide, and the mare staggered over the edge as Goldenblood stood there. A moment later, her hooves disappeared. "Really? An elevator shaft? What... were you struck by the urge to become a Daring Do villain?"

Goldenblood stared at him for almost a minute. Finally, the scarred pony smiled. "Like I said, I'll see what I can do."

Suddenly, Sweetie Bot perked up. "Oh great and wonderful master, the stallions accompanying Director Goldenblood have received an urgent message for him. They are quite insistent."

Horse frowned and pushed a button, showing the foyer and the two bucks yelling at the flustered receptionist. "Huh... looks like you are the stud in demand, Goldie."

Together they trotted out, Goldenblood giving the star blaster a wistful look as they left the hidden lab and emerged in the conference room. Quickly, Goldenblood headed in the direction of the shouting. A yellow stallion held his earbloom and nodded his head as the brown buck traded glares with the receptionist. As they spotted the director, the two sat up. "Sir, there's been an incident in Manehattan. Applejack is dead." The receptionist gasped. Goldenblood looked at her, there was a flare from his horn, and she suddenly went glassy eyed and slumped out of sight behind the desk.

"What?" Horse gasped. "That is... oh... so not cool..." Goldenblood stared at him, and for a moment he was certain he was next.

"Stop standing there and get that confirmed," Goldenblood snapped at the brown buck. Then he looked at the yellow escort. "Luna's been informed?"

The stallion nodded. "She's asking for a temporary replacement until Applejack's status is confirmed."

"There is no replacement for Applejack! I need all six of them," Goldenblood said sharply... then he turned and looked back at the stunned stallion. He seemed to be making a decision. "You want in on the game, Horse?"

"I... wha... me? Ministry Mare... er... Stallion?" he stammered.

"On a temporary basis. If Applejack really is dead, then there will have to be... adjustments," he said as he looked away.

Horse just grinned. "Alright, Goldie. You got yourself a deal."

Goldenblood looked back at Horse. "Oh, I certainly did. And if you're so keen on playing, Horse, I'd clean out your records when you get back." He turned for the doors and snapped at the yellow escort, "I need a skywagon. Now. We need to get in place before news gets out. The ministries are going to be shaken and the O.I.A. needs to be ready. Come on, Horse. We're going to Canterlot."

"Cool," Horse grinned as they stepped into the elevator together. "Hope Applejack is okay, though. She is one cool mare."

"You better hope so as well. If she really is dead, I'll have to find out who is responsible and remove them just to be safe. Odds are I'll have to include you as well," he said grimly. Horse's smile disappeared. The world swirled away.

oooOOOooo

I came out of the memory feeling all... oogley. A Goldenblood memory, planted in a safe where I would probably come across it. And if I hadn't, odds were that one of my friends would. I lay there on the bed, trying to ignore the burny, itchy sensation on my face. It made me feel like I had radroaches wiggling under my skin. I felt the pull of gauze and listened to the beeping of the monitors.

Dealer freaks out just as I find it and tells me to stop and quit, as if that were even an option anymore. Horse talks about the starmetal as some sort of uber technology from aliens or something. I didn't believe in coincidence anymore. Somepony had wanted me to see that. Dealer hadn't. How had he known... Really, how did Dealer know anything? The golden color of the memory orb, maybe? Maybe.

Unfortunately, since I couldn't buck the Dealer while lying all woogly on a bed, I did my best to look around. Funny, my E.F.S. was doing freaky things. There were scrolling lines of data, as if it was doing the technopokie. I wished, yet again, that I had Midnight nearby to explain just what my PipBuck was doing. It flashed through the data. Then a prompt appeared.

>EC-1101 navigational data updated.

>Next waypoint: Hightower Transmitter: Hoofington.

I'd been put in a hospital bed; one with musty smelling sheets. Next to the bed was a table loaded with heavy books. 'Equestrian Legal Statutes', 'History of the Law', and a dozen files sat in stacks. This had to have been Chief Justice Fairheart's room. I glanced around and spotted a security camera in the corner of the room, up against the ceiling.

Had EC-1101 found the camera, checked the footage, and determined he was dead? Could it do that? Had Dealer been involved? I groaned and clenched my eyes shut. "Too many fucking questions!" I snarled into my pillow.

I leaned over and levitated the top file, wondering what the Chief Justice of Equestria was up to right before the bombs made everything moot. My eyes scanned the front page, and then I looked at the title.

Legal review for the removal of the Ministry Mares from power for crimes against Equestria.

What... the... fuck...

I couldn't understand more than the basics. It might have been talking about law, or it might have been giving me directions on PipBuck applications. The core of the report seemed to be listing crimes the Ministry Mares had committed in the last ten years in the name of ending the war and the prosecution of these crimes when the war was concluded. I looked at the second file: articles of treason brought up against Goldenblood. The third one was investigating the legal option of forcing Luna from the throne and restoring Celestia to power. There was a file asking the question of whether the power and authority of the Princesses ought to be absolute. The potential legality of pegasus secession. Accusations of cronyism and nepotism against Applejack. Abuses of power against Twilight Sparkle. The charges against Pinkie Pie were practically a book!

If the bombs hadn't fallen... if Equestria had won the war... what would have happened afterwards? Would Luna have remained in power? Would the Ministry Mares? I thought of the things Twilight had done... Fluttershy... Rarity... would I have wanted them punished for what they did to win the war?

As much as I hated myself thinking it... yes. At least out on their rumps... but I'd want a whole slew of them punished as well. Yes, they were at war, but some of the things that had been done were simply evil.

Twenty years of war... over... but peace? That was a long ways off.

Glory probably wanted me to stay in bed, but honestly I didn't hurt enough for that. I slipped out and looked at myself in the mirror. I didn't touch my face; that would probably take the longest to heal. Instead, I used my horn to magically peel away the gauze from my neck where I could get a good view. The hide beneath was... well... white. It had a strange diamond pattern dotted all across it, and I could see the red mark where it bonded with my dingy hide.

"How are you feeling?" Lacunae asked from the doorway. She looked at my shoulder and sighed. "Blackjack. Glory didn't wrap you up in gauze simply for the fun of it."

"It itches," I said, reaching up to scratch it. A glow around my hoof halted me. Okay. I was the big bad Security pony. I could handle a little itching. "Listen, Lacunae. About what I said..."

"You didn't say anything that wasn't the truth," she replied calmly. "Twilight Sparkle has had two centuries to think about her mistakes. To dwell on them, in fact. Many of the memories in me come from her regret. The sad fact is... as good a pony as she was... she was not perfect. As good as her intentions were, they did not always have the results she intended. She did things that were wrong because she believed that, in the big picture, they would be vindicated."

"The ends justify the means?" I asked, looking at the folders.

"There was a war to win," she said quietly, looking at her hooves. "Sorry..."

I sighed and closed my eyes. "I'm nopony to judge, Lacunae. Even if I do... I shouldn't." I'd felt that urge to win at any cost. Even if it was wrong, it was something I couldn't escape. "If the Goddess is listening to you... tell Twilight that I'm sorry."

"Discord was still a mistake," Lacunae said firmly, but then looked away. "But you are right. He should not have been used like that, or left in that condition. We should have done better, but we wanted

to give Luna her war-winning potion so terribly badly.”

“Is Glory with Scotch and P-21?” I asked, trying to scratch at the gauze. She smacked my hoof away with her own.

“She is. She feels it best not to leave him alone after what he did.”

I sighed. “He’s got problems. Big problems. But that’s okay. We can keep an eye out and help him work through them.” I looked at the big alicorn. “And he’s not the only one. Did Glory tell you about her dreaming she’s Rainbow Dash?”

“Yes. She was quite distraught. Given her appearance, it was understandable,” Lacunae replied. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Hello. Have you seen our group? The only pony I don’t worry about is... Boo. I don’t worry about Boo.” Then I blinked. “Wait, yes, I do. Do you really think she doesn’t have a soul? That’s she’s just a pony animal?”

“I don’t know. The evidence is against it, and Twilight never had the opportunity to explore the potential of the blanks any further. In the Chimera files, some blanks were observed for more than a year and never manifested personality or cutie marks. They could be trained to respond to stimuli, but were never more than that. The results confirmed what we wanted to believe; Blanks were a perfect source for needed organs. Otherwise, Scotch’s life and your vanity were purchased at the cost of innocent lives.”

Okay... that was enough thinking about that. I turned off the monitor... actually, I mashed buttons till it stopped beeping. “What about Glory? Do you think... she isn’t really turning into Rainbow Dash, is she?” Speaking of her, I really wanted to check in on Scotch... and scratch. I really *really* wanted to scratch. And find out where Rampage had gotten to. And figure out how to get to Hightower from here. And... how to treat Med-X addiction.

“I suspect not,” Lacunae replied as we walked out into the hall. When I looked at her in confusion, she elaborated. “Her behavior hasn’t really changed, and while she may have been dreamed about being Rainbow Dash... her Sonic Rainboom was well established and is probably well known in pegasus history. If she begins having memories of private things... inconsequential things... that would be a time to worry.”

“So then, am I being possessed by a mysterious unicorn in black who’s been invading my dreams?” I asked with a cheeky grin. Lacunae just looked at me sadly, and my grin slackened a little. Okay. Not something to joke about anymore.

We came around a corner and spotted Glory slumped against the wall, wearing a blood-splattered doctor’s coat. Inside, Scotch lay in a bed almost identical to the one I’d awoken in. Boo was curled up at the foot. P-21 just sat there with that empty, forsaken look. I looked at the bandages wrapped around her eyes, the machine beeping softly. I knelt beside Glory, but she just gave a little snore and curled up.

I smiled and brushed her pretty prismatic mane. A bit short for my taste, but nice. “Can you find her a bed? Then maybe find out where Rampage got to?” I whispered as I looked up at Lacunae. She nodded once, and a glow lifted Glory into the air. Cradling her in her magic, Lacunae walked across the hall to a separate hospital bed. I sighed as I smiled, thankful for the kind, quiet, meek alicorn’s

assistance, then walked in and over.

"Hey..." I murmured softly as I tapped his shoulder. He didn't move.

"I should have told her," he said quietly.

Yes. You should have. "Tell her now."

"It doesn't matter now," he replied softly, reaching up to stroke her blue mane. Just like her daddy's. "I thought... when I saw her in the pod... if I just touched her... maybe I'd be able to say it. Instead, I killed her."

"Her heart is still beating," I said just as delicately, as if the volume of my voice might finish her off. "It still matters. And in case you missed the chain of events, I'm the one who let her come. I'm the one who got her killed." Call me greedy, but I'd take the blame and damnation on this one. I'd hoped it would give him peace, but instead he gave a low choking sob. "Tell her. Before she goes into the hereafter."

"I don't know how any more."

"Do it however you can," I said as I stroked his tangled blue mane. Then I patted his shoulder and stepped back. "Come on, Boo. Let's give them some space." The pale mare sat up, blinked, looked flatly at me, and lowered her head again. "Snack cake..." I said as I reached... okay, nevermind. Where'd Glory put my gear? Back in the operating room.

"She's fine here," P-21 said hoarsely. "Thank you, Blackjack."

I smiled sadly and patted his shoulder one more time, then stepped out. As I started to close the door, I heard him take a deep breath. Maybe it was rude of me and wrong of me, but I didn't shut the door all the way and didn't leave. "I'm sorry. I know I don't have any right to talk to you like this. I know... I know that you knew. I'm your father... Goddesses know I don't deserve to be. I didn't deserve your mother's kindness; I was petty enough to resent it, actually. I never wanted to think of my time in 99 as having any consequence or meaning. That it was all horrible. That it was all better left behind and destroyed."

He sighed quietly. "But that's not true. There were good things. Things I never appreciated. Things worthwhile and... and good. There was good in 99. Your mother... was good. And so were you. Blackjack. Probably lots of mares. It was always easier just to pretend like you were all Overmares. But it was a lie... and it hurts to keep lying to myself that it was otherwise.

"Then you joined us and... and you were such a good girl. Braver than I was when I came outside. You followed us all over the place... even into places no filly was meant to go. And when BJ told you who I was... I couldn't face it. Not because you were a lousy daughter, but because I didn't deserve to be your father. I'm a coward, Scotch Tape. And you deserved better than a worthless pony like me."

I sniffed as I poked my head in and saw him standing beside the bed, stroking her mane. Then he began to sing in soft, low tones.

Together forever...

With each other...

That is the way... I think it should be...

*One.. with another...
A friend... just like a daughter...
That is the way... I think it should be...*

I looked behind me as a sleepy and confused Glory approached, rubbing her tired eyes. I lifted a hoof to my lips, and she looked past me as her eyes widened.

*And if along the way, we find ourselves apart
Know that it's not so... you're here in my heart...
And if as time passes, you find yourself alone and scared...
Remember my feelings and memories of home...
A place called home...
Any home...*

His voice quavered and failed. I swallowed hard then stepped in. I couldn't sing... not really... but I could try for him.

*Together... forever...
With each other...
That is the way... I hope it will be...
One... with another...
A friend... just like a brother...
That is the way... I think it should be...*

He looked at me, tears shimmering and threatening to spill as his eyes met mine. Somehow, our words aligned as we felt the same things and put them together. Behind me I heard Lacunae approaching with Psychoshy and an adolescent Rampage. If that yellow featherbrain so much as snickered, I'd buck her into next week.

*And if along the way we come across some troubles
I know I'll be able to face them with you beside me
And if as time passes, you find life painful and hard
Remember my friendship and know that I'm here with you.
Right beside you...
Always with you...*

We looked down at her still form and sang the phrase over and over again, Glory and Lacunae joining in; even Rampage. *Together Forever... With Each Other...* as our voices grew softer and softer. And then silence save for the slow beeping of the monitor.

Then I saw a tear creeping down Scotch's cheek. P-21 stared as tears of his own flowed freely. Slowly he reached out with a hoof and wiped it away. The little filly sniffed and whispered softly, "Daddy..."

With a sob he leaned over her and held her carefully in his hooves as he began to shake. The green filly pressed her face to his neck, crying beneath the bandages as she hugged him back. I sniffed, feeling tears spilling down my cheeks and feeling like a pony... a whole and intact pony for the first time in a very long time. And since there wasn't any more room to hug Scotch, I hugged Glory and the very perplexed looking Boo instead.

I looked at Psychoshy, expecting disdain and disgust. Instead, there were tears in her eyes too, and I was shocked to see Rampage embrace her fellow Reaper.

Together forever... with each other...

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: First credit as always goes to the amazing and wonderful Kkat for creating Fo:E. Then to my super amazing assistant Hinds, the engineering obsessed zebra. Next to Bronode... don't mind him, he has way too many apple ciders... and finally Snipe. If you want a straight pony to talk to... look at him. Oh... and I should probably thank Manehattan Steamroller for the music 'Traditions of Christmas.' Thank you everypony who leaves feedback to help make this story even better. And if anypony wants to help finance this expedition, tips and spare bits can be sent to David13ushey@gmail.com through Paypal. Thank you for reading. I hope it was enjoyable.)