

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 43: Lucidity

“So... got any problems, troubles, conundrums, or any other sort of issues major or minor that I as a good friend could help you solve?”

I stood in the middle of 99. Blood dripped from the corpses of my slain stable. They lay in heaps and piles all around me as I gasped for air. Daisy had been the hardest to kill, just like last time. But in the end, I'd chewed her back leg apart with shotgun blasts. Then it was two to the head and I was done. And now I trotted down towards the living quarters.

One door lock security override. Two shots. One override. Two shots. One override. Three shots. I was running low on bullets. One override. Two shots. One override... this was getting monotonous. I needed to start mixing it up. I used whatever blunt object I could lift. I tossed Rivets screaming into the recycler. That'd teach her. I finally nailed Midnight. The males I killed quick and clean.

Finally, I found the last PipBuck tag. The little pink filly wept and begged me not to kill her. Really, I shouldn't. I'd saved one, hadn't I?

No. No I hadn't.

I stared at the blood covering them; at my butchered home.

One gun... one shot... no Blackjack.

~ ~ ~

The sheets were warm and soft; they must have used magic to freshen them up. I stared up at images of pastel pegasus fillies romping and playing together in the clouds. Frozen eyes stared back down at me from the ceiling. There were more on the walls, gamboling in picturesque green glades with cute little bunnies, squirrels, and birds. Gentle music was piped in from somewhere, along with the sound of birds chirping. Soft bed. Soft sheets. Soft room.

At least the restraints on my legs were something firm. Something I could jerk rhythmically against to keep myself from drowning in pastel pony fuzziness.

There was a knock, and I halted my tugging. I didn't look towards the door carefully molded to appear to blend into the space between two trees. I didn't move or breathe as I lay there. The door opened quietly, and in walked the pale teal pegasus mare with her wings outstretched, a tray balanced on them. “How are we today, Miss Fish? Feeling better, I hope? Feeling lucid?” she asked nervously, licking her lips.

“I'm fine, Harpica,” I said quietly. “Call me Blackjack.”

She swallowed. “You know we're not supposed to call you that, Miss Fish. Please don't yell at me...” She shrank back in anticipation. I simply lay there patiently, sighing. They really knew how to pick the perfect guard; a tough one I could resist, but this... She slid the tray onto my lap, not taking her eyes

off me. She carefully tied down the tray and then slowly worked levers to lift me into a sitting position. Pudding served in a wax paper bowl. No spoons. Not after the last escape attempt. Harpica had been the only nurse brave enough to feed me after what I'd done to Caprice's eye. "Can I feed myself?" I asked, trying to resist the urge to pull on my restraints. That made them all nervous.

The pegasus swallowed, looking around. There was a tiny little ping. A 'yes' tone. Some of the eyes painted on the walls were more literal than others. "O...okay. Please be good, Miss Fish," she begged softly.

"I promise. I'll be good." No trying to smash heads in with food trays or choke my nurses with lime gelatin. She carefully reached down to unstrap my forehooves with her mouth, never taking her eyes off me. Slowly, she undid the padded cuffs on each, and I pulled them free. I rubbed forelegs--my flesh and blood limbs--a moment before I slowly lifted the bowl to my mouth. Not as neat as I'd hoped, but it was better than being spoon-fed. The rice pudding tasted good. Probably laced with chemicals or something.

"The doctor would like to do another session with you. If you think you're okay with it," Harpica said quietly. "There will be a concert in the courtyard rose garden, if you'd like to attend." And if I behave myself during the session. That was always implicit: no escape attempts. No trying to contact my friends. No attacking my captors. It was time to play along.

I didn't answer. I simply nodded once.

She carefully took the plastic tray and empty bowl away, placing them back on her wings and stepping back from the bed. I simply lay there. See what a nice, polite pony I was? Two earth pony mare orderlies came in, standing by as the teal pegasus quietly undid the straps on my hind legs. None of them dared touch the magic-inhibiting ring on my horn. Smokey and Cuffs watched for the slightest chance I'd try something as Harpica got me out of bed and changed me, washed me, and then put me in the mobile restraint harness, a tight collection of straps and rings snug enough that I could hobble around while running was still all but impossible, let alone fighting. They locked my forehooves together for extra safety while handling me.

Smokey went and fetched the wheelchair as Bluebelle stepped in from the hall to check the buckles. "Heard y'all find this kinky..." she snickered. Harpica's eyes popped wide, and she opened her mouth to give a warning. There was a soft 'pong' noise of alarm sounding in the room and the hall, triggered by the unseen watchers. The blue earth pony's eyes popped wide as she staggered back and Smokey rushed in.

I just sat there. "What? It's not like I'd bite her ear off or something." That was so last week. Nevertheless, Smokey and Cuffs put the bit in my mouth and muzzled me. Better safe than sorry.

I sat back in the chair as Harpica pushed me down halls decorated with molded trees sticking branches out overhead. We passed the fountain where I'd almost drowned Lighthooves; the pegasus orderly had made a comment about me liking the taste of pony. There was calm and happy music being piped in as the doctors, nurses, and orderlies took care of the other patients. I was wheeled slowly past the nurses' station where Scalpel, Bonesaw, and Triage conferred with each other in their white lab coats.

Roses watched me with terrified eyes; I saw that they still hadn't finished healing her horn yet. She was talking with the chaplain, and the black unicorn looked at me with worried, soulful golden eyes. I looked away; he tried to visit me as often as possible, but I couldn't handle the guilt. I saw Charity going

around selling Cutie Mark Crusader Cookies from a small table by the front door next to a wary-looking Bottlecap. I'd tried talking with them a few days ago; they shrank back as we passed by.

This hospital was built in the shape of an enormous horseshoe, and now Harpica pushed me through the central courtyard. I glanced up at the massive crag of Black Pony Mountain glittering in the noon sun as it loomed overhead. Through the gap in the building I could look out at the Hoofington Core. The dark towers glittered in the bright sunlight; their black surfaces seemed to capture the light and gather it in the sharp corners. It was the first time I'd seen the city as anything other than an ominous collection of broken monoliths. Maybe the imposing obsidian mountain had been inspiration for the design...

High above the city, huge blocks of clouds were being collected and shipped off to the south and west. I saw the round wheel of Thunderhead; the horizontal torus was a buzzing hive of skywagons and other air traffic. From the center of the Core a single dark spire jutted higher and higher into the air. It drew the eye ever upwards towards the dark blob at the apex. Shadowbolt Tower wasn't measured in feet or stories but in miles.

Suddenly there was a loud cry of a siren that rose like a low, mournful wail. The noise made the ponies take cover behind stout curved walls of marble. They didn't run. Many looked more annoyed than scared as patients were pushed behind the walls. "Ugh, again?" Smokey muttered. "Why don't they just vaporize Dawn Bay already?" I looked at a stone squirrel atop the molded stone barrier, its camera eye slowly swiveling to focus on us.

The blue mare shrugged. "You know how it is. We use our megaspells first and they'll fire their missiles and stuff. Hell, I heard that one Marauder say they're hesitatin' ta blast the zebra beachhead 'cause it'll make their rockets fly."

"Well, that and there's mountains in the way," Smokey muttered.

"As if that matters to the Hoof. Heard talk that if they put all the juice from the dams and power plants into the city they could just melt the mountains between here and Dawn Bay. We could cook them right off the coast and back across the strait."

"No way," Smokey countered, "there's not enough juice in all of Equestria for that." Then she paused. "Is there?"

"Pfft. This is the Hoof. There ain't nothin' we can't do," Cuffs drawled as she peeked out around the barrier. "What do you think? Dragon raid? Or think those stripes are pushin' with more tin zebras?"

"Dunno. I mean, last year, the news was talking about zebras on the verge of being wiped out. Now they've got tons," Smokey muttered. "Guess Image got their story wrong."

"Please don't sound an evacuation. Please don't sound an evacuation," Harpica whimpered over and over.

Smokey snorted in soft scorn. "Relax, Feathers. It's only a level one alert. We haven't had to evacuate into the city in years. Hoofington can't fall," the red mare said as she looked towards the Core where an ominous hum was starting. Green lights began to glow atop the towers. Emerald lightning gathered and flickered in the air around the buildings as the sound grew. "Ooooh, we're in for a light sh--"

A crackling buzz popped in the air over and over again. Green light filled the air as magic beams

swept out from the tops of the towers out to the southeast, disappearing out of view. For thirty seconds they flickered back and forth. Then they went out. A second later a series of loud beeps sounded.

"All clear. Heh. Dragons, extra crispy," chuckled Cuffs. "Wonder how dragon tastes..."

"Ew..." Harpica said in disgust as she looked towards the city. From the tower streaked a wedge of crackling black lightning clouds heading to the southeast. A single rainbow stripe raced down the middle. "Oh! Look! It's Rainbow Dash!"

"Feathers is a fangirl," Smokey teased, and I looked over at Harpica flushing and lowering her eyes in embarrassment. I heard Smokey move behind me and immediately slammed back in the wheelchair. I didn't know what I hit, but I felt the pushbar on the back connect solidly with something. The wheelchair overbalanced and I smacked onto my back, looking up at the red mare covering the end of her nose, scowling down at me as blood trickled around her hoof.

"Is it broken?" Harpica asked in concern as Smokey glared down at me.

"Excuse me. Do you need any help?" asked a familiar-sounding voice. I looked up at the emerald-maned Marauder, the stallion who'd gone seven rounds with Rarity. Vanity stood by, looking down at me in concern. Behind him were the blue pegasus, Jetstream, and the yellow earth pony buck, Echo. The mare certainly looked like she'd seen much better days as she stared off into space while Echo gently nudged her shoulders. Her eyes were empty things, her purple mane was a complete disheveled mess, and as I watched, tiny blue feathers came off her wings.

"Thank you, sir. We're fine. This is just one of our more difficult patients," Cuffs said. Vanity's horn glowed as he easily lifted me and set the wheelchair down pat.

"Really? I'm glad to hear it's not Jetstream anymore," Vanity said as he looked back at the blue pegasus.

She looked at Echo beside her. "Echo? Have you radioed in to command yet? We need a search party to find our missing ponies. We just left them out there! They need us!"

The small yellow earth pony looked at her, then at Vanity. He shook his head somberly and forced a sickly smile. "Yeah. Sure. I'm sure they'll scramble a search party any second."

"Good. Can't leave them behind. Damned stripes will kill them," she said as she stared at nothing, then gestured with her hoof. "Twist, I need you to find Big Macintosh. Applesnack, you and Doof up on the roof. We might need covering fire. Psalm... keep an eye out for our missing. We have to bring him home," she whimpered as she hung her head. Little threads of her mane drifted down atop her shed blue feathers. "We have to find him."

I watched her out of the corner of my eye, trying to ignore the cameras tracking us. Echo moved closer, looking over at Jetstream. "Can't you help, sir?" he quietly asked Vanity as he fiddled with his PipBuck.

I strained my ears to hear Vanity's tired voice. "We've modified, restored, and removed her memories too much already, Echo. She can't tell what's real and what's not anymore. This *is* her helped."

“Twist! I think there are zebra infiltrators in the bushes. Big Macintosh! Where are you? Applesnack, cover Twist! Find him! Where’d he go? Where is he?” she shouted as she raced to and fro across the courtyard.

~ ~ ~

Once we’d crossed the courtyard and gone inside, we took an elevator up two floors and reached the offices and therapy rooms where they were trying to ‘help’ us. I closed my eyes as they wheeled me in, waiting for the doors decorated with four stars to close. I could hear the soft ticks of the clock pendulum in the corner. Glass cover; possible weapons. I could smell the leather-bound books on the bookcase; bludgeons and potential shields. There was a rustle and the sound of an envelope being opened. Letter opener. That’s what I needed.

I opened my eyes and looked at Dr. Trueblood. The maroon doctor just smiled at me, his hoof on a tape recorder. He pushed a button, and it made the ripping noise again. “You were just thinking about snatching my letter opener to kill me, weren’t you?” he asked as his horn glowed and he removed my bridle. He looked so calm, nice, even, in his sweater vest as he smiled and tapped his hooves before him. I’ll give him his props, he was a handsome stallion. There were pictures of his family on the shelf behind him.

“No. I was thinking what a nice day it is today. And how nice it would be to go to the concert,” I said in slow, even and carefully controlled words. See how nice I was being? Nice.

If I moved fast enough, lunged before Smokey and Cuffs grabbed me, I might be able to tear his throat out with my teeth.

He adjusted his glasses and pulled a file out of his desk. “Well. Such lucidity must be rewarded,” he said as he opened it up. “You’ve been with us for a few months, and it’s nice to have a civil conversation with you. Since we’ve started your treatment, you’ve been responding nicely. No relapses to ‘The Wasteland’?”

“No. I’ve been here,” I replied softly. Of course, I had no idea where ‘here’ was. Holograms? Some sort of incredibly elaborate spell? Robots? Maybe I’d been captured by the Harbingers and taken to some facility for... who knew what? The last thing I remembered was running into a whole band of Seekers out in the rain and then... here. Now they were playing some kind of crazy mind game. It had to be that...

Because the alternative was that I was fucking batshit crazy, and that possibility scared me more than anything else.

“Indeed,” he replied quietly as he flipped through the pages. “You’re an interesting case, to be sure, given everything that’s happened to you, Go Fish. Mother a distinguished captain in the Hoofington City Guard. Father deceased. Mother remarried, then divorced.” He turned the pages. “You yourself were an initiate to the city guard until the... incident. Enough said about that at the moment,” he said quickly and evenly, but Smokey put her hoof on my shoulder as I tensed. “After the incident, you were brought to us and told us all about how you grew up in a stable... were attacked and chased by some sort of monster... destroyed your own home... and were then wandering around a ‘Wasteland’ wrecked by some horrific disaster.”

"Something like that," I muttered.

"Some of the highlights..." he said as he lifted three pieces of paper before him. "There was a government conspiracy at the highest levels called the O.I.A., pieces of cursed 'starmetal' that sucked the souls out of ponies, and some sort of evil lurking at the heart of the city. You were hunted and persecuted by numerous groups. You made friends with Morning Glory, P-21, Rampage, and others... some of whom joined you in your travels. Oh, and I was an undead monster behind most of it." He chuckled as he lowered the papers. "I particularly like that bit."

"You would," I replied, narrowing my eyes as I jerked reflexively against my harness and chair restraints.

He sighed and pressed his hooves together. "Since you've arrived here, you've proven to be the most hostile patient in Happyhorn Gardens's history. Numerous escape attempts. Assaults on the staff. If it weren't for your condition... well, it wouldn't be fair to hold you responsible given your mental state. Still, after what you did to Nurse Roses, not to mention poor Doof..."

There was an awkward shuffling behind me as I kept my eyes on his. "Well, he was trying to kill me at the time."

"He was your orderly at the time," the maroon stallion countered as he lifted a peppermint candy and slipped it into his mouth, "and he was the one who was willing to climb all the way up onto that ledge to get you down safely." He smiled evenly. "There's quite a few in the Ministry of Peace who think we should simply scour away your mind entirely, a complete magical lobotomization for our protection and so that you could have a second chance. Traditional therapy techniques simply aren't working, and our attempts at modifying your memories only seem to be making things worse." He tapped his hooves together for a few seconds, waiting for my reaction. I didn't give him one.

Finally, he sighed and smiled tiredly. "Fortunately, your growing lucidity these last few weeks has put those plans on hold. You're starting to come to grips with reality. It's our hope you can be made whole again to be a productive, happy, healthy young mare," he said with a sigh and a look of genuine concern. "Hopefully, once you're cured, you'll be able to atone for what you've done."

I closed my eyes, imagining dead ponies I'd killed, who'd died from my mistakes. They weren't just bits of crazy dredged up from my head. I'd killed them.

"Right," I replied flatly, "except I don't believe you. This is obviously a ploy by somepony. Maybe you're with the Harbingers, trying to get me to work along. Or maybe you made a backup of Chimera somewhere and copied yourself and me and are trying to get something out of me. Or the Goddess got bored and finally decided to add a little Blackjack to her Unity. I don't know which."

He arched his brows. "Really? Are those really the only options you'll consider?" I glowered at him, and he sighed again. "Let me ask you this. Which is more likely? That you are the sole survivor of a doomed stable after a horrific apocalypse, carrying a mysterious PipBuck, struggling against impossible odds as you unravel a plot centuries old, or that you're the victim of some psychological trauma that's resulted in the creation of a post-apocalyptic wasteland where you could be the protagonist blasting and shooting everyone who has caused you harm?"

I scowled, not prepared to even entertain the idea that everything I knew was a lie. I remembered Jetstream in the courtyard, thought of me chattering to friends that didn't exist. The problem was that it

was such a seductive notion. I might not have understood what was going on, but the idea that all the shit I'd been through was somehow a dream was both tempting and insulting. No more EC-1101. No more Harbingers. No more questions and mysteries I wasn't smart enough to unravel. Just... going back to a normal life.

If everything I knew in the stable had been a lie, could I even find normal on a map anymore?

He'd been saying this for days now. No matter how I cursed, insulted, or struggled, he just smiled and repeated his comments that I'd been delusional for more than a month in a psychotic break. But none of that was helping me get out of here. I needed something else. I couldn't fight.

I'd have to *engage*.

"Not to say I even begin to believe you," I said slowly, "but why don't you tell me who I am and why I'm here?"

He actually looked surprised. "Who you are is fairly simple. Your name is Go Fish. You lived with your mother, Gin Rummy, in the southwest part of Hoofington overlooking the Luna Dam. Your father died when you were just a filly. You went to school at Roosehoof Academy; not a stellar student, though. Worked briefly at Megamart before you also joined the Hoofington Guard. You were stationed in Flankfurt." With each fact, he pulled papers and photographs from the folder and set them before me. Birth records from Hoofington General. Report card and a student ID. My tax return from Megamart. A picture of me, Marmalade, and Daisy in guard barding that looked awfully similar to what I'd worn in Stable 99.

Fabrications? Maybe all of this was some sort of soul dream by the Goddess... except that I didn't imagine the Goddess being this subtle. She wasn't exactly the trickiest pony I'd come across. I closed my eyes as I frowned. I really wished that Morning Glory or P-21 were here. Even if they wouldn't make sense in this place. "So why am I here then?" Then I saw his sad expression and frowned. "What?" He shook his head.

"Never mind. You've made phenomenal progress in the last few minutes. I don't want to undermine that. We can continue this tomorrow?" the maroon unicorn said with a faint, sad smile as he folded his hooves in front of him.

"I'm not a baby." I scowled at him. "Your crazy theory is just a crazy theory. Why would I imagine a world that's even worse than this one? For all I know, if this world is real, this is probably some freaky secret project of the O.I.A. and Goldenblood."

"That would be quite a feat... if this Office of Interministry Affairs existed." He trotted over to his bookcase and levitated several books, then set them down on his desk. "I've looked everywhere I could and consulted both the Ministry Mares and the government. No such office exists, nor does a Director Goldenblood." He folded his hooves before him. "Like the Wasteland, the O.I.A. is something you created. Something, and somepony, to blame for the wrongness in the world." He sighed and shook his head. "You aren't the first one to make up dark conspiracies, but really, don't you think that if the ministries wanted to do secret projects, they'd just do them? What would be the point of an intermediary?"

I frowned and shook my head hard. It had to be a lie. It had to be, because otherwise... "Why? You still haven't answered that. Why would I... would anypony... create the Wasteland as an escapist

fantasy?"

"It's an interesting question, to be sure. One driven by a mixture of self-aggrandizement and self-loathing. Only by understanding this dichotomy does your mental illness make sense," he said, then gave a worried frown. "Are you certain you wish to discuss this, Go Fish?"

"My name is Blackjack," I said flatly, jerking my forelegs against my restraints and making the orderlies put their hooves on my shoulders. I seethed as I looked up at my captors and then back at Trueblood. "And yeah, I do. Just keep the vocabulary around grade school level, okay?"

He seemed to be contemplating me a moment. "You just demonstrated part of it." He lifted his left hoof. "On one hoof, you have the incompetent bungler, the failure, the humiliation and embarrassment. You're the pony that's not strong enough. The pony who's not smart enough. The pony who is too reckless." He lifted his right hoof. "And on the other, you have the paragon. A pony who is a moral, physical, and psychological powerhouse. A pony who can win and succeed at anything. A pony who is unique... exceptional... legendary, even. The dichotomy... the meeting of these two opposites--" He brought his two hooves together. "--results in a pony who believes she must suffer in a world of misery but who is uniquely able to thrive in such an environment."

I screwed up my face in bafflement. Therapist ponies were crazy; that was the only explanation. "You know, you made more sense when you were trying to kill me. Why don't you just fall back to that?"

He chuckled and lowered his hooves. "I understand if it's difficult to understand, but it's the only diagnosis for your particular mental illness that comes close, approximating the wild swings of manic-depressive tendencies with the extreme personality disorders of schizophrenia."

"Small words, please?" I begged with a sickly smile. I didn't like how... sure... he was acting.

"This Blackjack persona of yours is an identity that can superimpose these two extremes. Such a struggle exists in everypony, but it achieved such an extreme case in you that a schism from reality was inevitable. Blackjack is weak enough to get raped but strong enough to endure. Blackjack is tough enough to face down the aggression and criticism of others but weak enough not to become a tyrant. Where Go Fish was unable to handle the problems in her life, Blackjack could take them on... and take them on... and take on even more." He sighed and ate another mint. "At least up to a certain point."

"Why?" I asked with a little frown. "What could have been so horrible in this life that the Wasteland would be an escape?" My rear hoof tapped rapidly against the footrest of the wheelchair.

"To start, your father dying of cancer when you were young. As I recall, weren't you dying of cancer at some time in the Wasteland?" he said as he got a piece of paper and cleared his throat before reading aloud. "'I smiled at him, and he stood and trotted with me to the hospital. And they gave him a shot, and he went away forever.'" I stared at him in horror, remembering the faint striped mane of that buck so long ago. But... that'd been in Stable 99. And he'd died because he was retired... right?

The maroon unicorn sighed softly as he took another paper. "Then there was the sexual assault you suffered at the Hoofington Marina. Nothing nearly as dramatic as nailing your hooves to the floor. Just one classmate on a boat trip who thought 'no means yes' and left you feeling humiliated and ashamed. I recall you saying you witnessed a similar event. Blackjack was so gracious to her rapists that she spared them. Go Fish didn't even have the courage to point him out in a lineup."

"Shut up! That's not true!" I shouted at him, feeling the tears running down my cheeks. "I was trying to save Scotch Tape! And I did. I saved her!" I struggled frantically against my bonds.

Trueblood closed the folder. "I'm sorry. Clearly this is too upsetting for you. I apologize."

I clenched my eyes shut. It was all a lie. One big heap of manure. It had to be. "Shut up. I don't want your apologies." I took several deep breaths, feeling the thudding of my heart; something I hadn't felt in days. Slowly I looked at him; at the pity in his eyes. "Why is it that this place is filled with ponies from the Wasteland, except for my friends?"

"You populated your fantasy with ponies you've known in your life, assigning them motives and facades according to your attitudes. Some were at random, and others are the result of various traumas. Steel Rain's violation of your body cast him in the role of villain... and you destroyed his base and power in your fantasy as you couldn't in the real world. As for your 'friends'," he said solemnly, "I suspect they represent larger themes and psychological needs." He stood and trotted around closer to me. "Given your dissatisfaction with life in general, I think that you've blanked out or replaced all your memories of the real world with that of the Wasteland. A place where you can simultaneously be both hero and victim. Where you can matter and affect the larger world."

"It's not true. It's not," I said as I closed my eyes, feeling the tears flow. My friends weren't just in my imagination. They weren't simply a dream of what I wished were so. They were real. They were!

Weren't they?

~ ~ ~

I didn't give in. Not right away, at least. I went to the little musical performances, talked with Trueblood about how messed up my brain was, and spent countless sleepless nights staring up at those painted pegasus fillies on the ceiling of my room. They looked dead to me... all forty-two of them. They still kept me strapped up; still didn't trust me. After what I'd apparently done, I couldn't blame them. The things I could remember... now embarrassed me. I even made a few small apologies to Smokey. It didn't help. And I'd apparently done even more now that I wasn't in the Wasteland anymore.

Life in Hoofington revolved around the attacks. There was an alarm for different sections of the city. Missile attacks came every few days. A buzzer meant to get inside shelters. A siren meant to evacuate and board an emergency subway to the Core. Beeps were for general alerts. The news gave constant droning reports of losses suffered by zebra forces. Sometimes I swore they repeated as if the news of the day and last week were interchangeable. There wasn't a real feeling of time in Hoofington. There was today. Today was better than yesterday. Tomorrow would be worse if you didn't work hard. I yearned for a date to pin down when things were. Had I been here a month? Two? Three?

I really wished I could get a good night's sleep. Trueblood swore that that would come when I could face what I'd done to send me into the Wasteland.

Sweet Celestia, I felt lonely. No pony here wanted to be my friend. They all looked at me as if they expected me to spring on them and smash their skulls in. Maybe I would. Maybe I had.

I was learning a life that was utterly alien and dreadfully familiar at the same time. Dusty Trails and Tumbleweed visited me like they were checking up on a rabid manticore, but they talked to me about school at Roosehoof Academy and my poor test scores and frequent visits to detention and Dean Hardy.

I wanted him to visit so that I could see if he really was like the hovering robot I remembered; apparently that wasn't possible, though. Keystone talked to me about working security at Megamart. Daisy and Marmalade were snotty and quiet respectively; the Flankfurt Trio, we'd been called.

Apparently, we'd been rather shitty guards even before I snapped.

Eventually, I was allowed to be around other ponies without being muzzled. Then allowed to walk short distances and to wash myself. The horn ring remained strapped in place, though. Apparently, after what I'd done to Doof, every stallion in the facility insisted on it. Harpica and the other nurses became my constant companions; the staff quickly learned that I wouldn't harm meek ponies. On the other hoof, I still couldn't be left around stallions. I felt... twitchy... when I was around them. Trueblood said I had wartime stress disorder; anxiety was to be expected. I wasn't allowed near any of the young visitor ponies seeing other patients, though.

I was terrified to find out why.

I was also learning about life outside the Wasteland. In the hospital, at least, it wasn't much different from the stable. You did what you were told and life was pleasant. I graduated from gelatin to fresh apples and carrots... after weeks here, the thought of a cannibal plague seemed almost cartoonish. I was surprised at how tasteless the celery was, though, which was odd given how much the other patients liked it. Once or twice I caught myself trying to eat the spoons; of course, nothing happened. Because I wasn't a cyberpony. I wasn't even Blackjack.

I was just Go Fish. A nobody. Not hunted for my PipBuck. Not hated for being the destroyer of Steel Rangers. Not a Reaper. I'd never met a brave pony called LittlePip or her lover Homage. Never found a terrified mare under a floor grill. Never met a pony who couldn't die. Never saved my best friend from killing himself in a bathroom. Never met an alicorn who connected to the minds and souls of a goddess. Never helped a little filly avoid the embarrassment of wetting the bed.

I lay at night for hours imagining the roof was cracked and stained. Sometimes I could almost see it if I tried hard enough. I'd stare and a brown patch would start in the middle and creep slowly outwards. The pastels would dim and bleed together. Slowly, the cracks would grow and spread, and eventually flakes of plaster would fall and leave holes peering into black spaces above. I'd feel my heart still. My breathing would trail to nothing, and for a moment I'd be Blackjack again.

Then I'd blink, and it all went away. And I'd just curl up and cry, missing my friends and wishing they were with me.

On the other hoof... I got to see Mom again. It was the first thing I'd looked forward to since I got here; if she was alive, then that meant that I hadn't killed my own stable. That I hadn't killed those foals. That as violent and disturbed as I might be, there was some hope for me in the everafter.

I'd been told for three days she'd be coming. I'd prepared myself. We were in his office. I was restrained and sedated. I was given five minutes warning. One minute warning. Was I ready? Was I?

She stepped in. I took one look at her lavender coat and purple and red striped mane and loving pink eyes. She smiled like she had when I'd first taken my oath to protect and serve Stable 99. It was the one and only time I'd seen her cry in public. Our eyes shimmered with tears.

Then I saw her head on a stake. I smelled the chlorine gas. I heard Midnight scream that word,

echoing endlessly in my ears.

I screamed, and for an instant I was back in the Wasteland. I was in the corroded and darkened world; his fancy books were rotten rows on crumbling shelves. His desk was smashed and twisted, and that nice clock had frozen forever in rust and decay. Water dripped and splattered through holes in the roof; trickling away through gaps in the floor. I screamed and wailed and thrashed. I didn't want to be here. I didn't want to be there.

I couldn't be anywhere.

~ ~ ~

"No, Blackjack. No..." Scotch Tape whimpered as she backed further and further into the corner of the bedroom in Star House. The thing that had been Glory... pretending to be Glory... lay in a broken, bloody pool. Rampage was out on the stairs, a piece of the banister permanently wedged in her brain. I'd tied it there to make sure her regeneration couldn't push it out. She'd been almost as tough to take down as the real Rampage.

There was just one more. "No, Blackjack! No!" she screamed as she raised her legs in futility.

Hooves came up. Hooves went down. Hooves came up. Hooves went down...

~ ~ ~

"So. How have you been, Fishie?" Mom asked me, her voice low as she looked down into the teacup on the table in front of her in the courtyard. She didn't drink tea; neither did I. But we could both sit there and watch our respective cups cool. It'd taken four tries before I could finally spend time with her without flipping out.

In Happyhorn, that was called progress.

"Crazy," I replied, dared a glance at her, then back down again. Good, no head on a stake flashback this time. "How much crazy I've been depends on what Sangu... er... what Doctor Trueblood says," I amended quickly, trying to take the sting out of it.

"I'm sorry," Mom said softly, "I shouldn't have asked that."

"It's fine," I said, reaching out a hoof to her. She hesitated, waiting for the ping or pong. A ping, and she reached out and held my hoof between hers. The nurses only trusted me with one hoof out of the restraints. "I just... this... I'm the one who's sorry."

"Oh no, I'm much more sorry than you," Mom quipped, and we shared a little laugh. Very little, quite fragile, and it ended in a sigh. "I shouldn't have made you go into my field. I should have respected what you wanted." She patted my hoof gently. "Your music never seemed... important. Not compared to being a guard."

"Well, considering in Stable 99 none of us got a choice, I guess it doesn't matter now. Honestly... being Security isn't so bad. After all..." I risked another look at her, but she just blinked at me. It was just a few seconds... but for those seconds she seemed completely lost in thought.

And then she wasn't. "After all, Security saves ponies," she said, exactly as I remembered. She

patted my hoof tenderly. "I hope we get to leave here soon. I'm taking a leave of absence," she said with a smile. "We should go somewhere. Maybe Manehattan? Somewhere there aren't raid sirens every day? Just you and me?"

I didn't know what to say. I didn't think I'd have been able to have any kind of life like this. Not now. Not ever... I simply wept as I nodded.

She moved around the table and hugged me. There were several 'pong's sounded, along with orderlies moving quickly out into the yard. "Don't worry... we'll make it all right," she promised in my ear. But this was wrong. My mother wouldn't do this. The stable always came first! I was the fuckup! But... I didn't care. I hugged her... tighter... and tighter as my breathing became more and more erratic. But I couldn't let go. I couldn't, even as she struggled. The orderlies were fighting to pull my hoof off from around her neck. But I couldn't let her go.

She'd make everything alright, wouldn't she?

~ ~ ~

Apparently, the sight of my mother had triggered a relapse. I was back to being locked up and restrained in the timeless room. The nurses talked about my 'instability' in low voices. But fears about me launching into attacks didn't go anywhere... simply because I didn't care. Where before I'd been in the Wasteland, now I was simply back on the mattress staring at the ceiling. Still, I jerked my hooves against the restraints as something to do that was more than lie there like a corpse.

Harpica came in, washing me and caring for me without complaint. The mare didn't do much, or say much about herself. "The doctor would like to do another session with you. If you think you're okay with it," Harpica said quietly. "There will be a concert in the courtyard rose garden, if you'd like to attend."

I really didn't want to. I didn't like this place. The patients staring vacantly out into space or talking to themselves. Recipients of too many memory modifications and horrors of the war. Happyhorn wasn't a place for healing; I suspected that Trueblood went through so much effort with me because I was a long shot chance to actually get better. For everypony else, this was a hospice for the mad, a place to keep them safe and sound and out of sight before they died.

Harpica didn't say anything as she stood there, and I frowned as I glanced over at her. Then she suddenly added, "Octavia is playing." That brought to mind the posters I'd seen in her apartment and the performance she'd given in Blueblood Manor. I could remember her music so well...

Okay. I could get out of bed to hear that.

I let one of the orderlies, Mallet, the caramel colored unicorn, strap me into the wheelchair. Then we were out in the halls again.

Suddenly, I was hit by an explosive pressure wave... and yet, I didn't move. In an instant, everypony disappeared, as did my restraints and wheelchair. I sat there, blinking in shock as I felt my horn bare of the magic suppression ring. The hospital was empty, and every surface flickered in my vision for several seconds. What had just happened?

And why was somepony crying?

I trotted to a door to my left and carefully pushed on the four white stars on its veneer to open it a crack. Inside was a pale red stallion lying on his back staring up at the ceiling like so many others here at the hospital. Shaking him with her little hooves was a young pink filly standing on a chair. "Wake up! Please wake up, Big Brother! Please! You're... you're too tough for this, Rumble. Remember? You could take any ganger on the east side!" she cried as she shook his limp body. If I hadn't seen his chest rise and fall, I would have thought he was dead. "Brother! Wake up! Please!"

Another flicker, and the filly was gone. I rubbed my eyes and blinked at where she'd just been standing. I was losing it. I was going completely over the edge! It was nighttime now, and Rumble lay there just as he had when his sister had shaken him seconds ago.

Then I saw movement beside me and I leapt to the side. I opened my mouth to apologize to the orderly or nurse, but my apology disappeared as I gaped at the late night visitor slinking in wearing a black veil and fancy dress decorated with sequins. Purple curls spilled from under the veil. She approached the bedside and lifted the translucent cloth aside.

Why would a buck like Rumble warrant a visit from a Ministry Mare? Especially this mare!

Rarity looked down at the limp buck with clear unease. She utterly ignored my presence as she sat beside him. "Number seven," she said quietly as she peeled the sheet back. For a moment, I was certain that she was doing something indecent, but her eyes were drawn to his flank. His blank flank.

"You'd think after seven failures, we would have finally gotten it right..." Rarity said as she lifted a book from her saddlebag. As somepony who'd seen more treated hide than I had any right to, I could say with authority that it wasn't like any book I could ever imagine Rarity allowing on her person. The cover was bound in black and silver gray in the pattern of a zebra glyphmark. The sight of it sent my mane squirming as I shivered involuntarily. "I'm following the instructions perfectly. So why isn't it working?" she asked as she stroked her hoof over the dark surface. The hiss of her hoof against the leather cover sounded like whispers.

"Rarity?" a mare called softly from the doorway, making both of us jump. The book was whisked behind her poofy-curved purple tail as Rarity turned towards the door. There stood a rather exhausted looking Fluttershy. Her pink mane, shot through with a few strands of premature white, hung in disheveled sheets across her face. Worry lines were making their way slowly but inexorably across her features. "What are you doing here?"

"Ah... yes..." Rarity stammered as she grinned nervously, glancing back at Rumble and then at the concerned yellow pegasus. "Well, I'd gotten a report about mysterious attacks in Hightower Jail, darling. I was in the area, so I decided to see if my editors were getting creative again! That's all," she said with a nervous laugh. It was one that Fluttershy didn't share as she walked to the bed.

"Have you heard anything else about it?" Fluttershy asked quietly before tugging the blanket back in place over Rumble. There was something oddly firm in Fluttershy's question, and it made Rarity strain her smile even more.

"And how would I have heard anything about this? I don't even know what is wrong with the poor dear!" she said as she gestured with her hoof.

"There isn't anything wrong with him. Physically... medically... his body is just fine. Even his mind is intact, with all his memories. Whatever was done to him was completely outside the experience

of unicorn magic.” She closed her eyes and bowed her head. “I’ve considered bringing Zecora in... or even trying to find medical experts in Yellow River and seeing if we can convince them to help us.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” Rarity hissed, narrowing her eyes at Fluttershy as her tail tightened. “They’re vicious, savage, horrible fiends.” Then, when she saw Fluttershy’s shocked expression, her words faltered. “They... um... they’re so... dirty and... garish...” Finally, she composed herself. “Besides, it’s firmly against Luna’s rules to associate with zebra mystics.”

“If they can help somepony like Rumble or the others...” Fluttershy began to say quietly as she smoothed his sheets, “I’ll do what I have to to help.”

Rarity sighed. “Fluttershy. Please, as tragic as this is, he wasn’t anypony important. Just an east side gang member with a history of assaults and attacks on others...” she said in a subdued voice as she surreptitiously transferred the black book to her bag.

“And how do you know that?” Fluttershy asked in a voice barely above a murmur.

“I... I... read it in the report, of course.” Rarity laughed nervously with a guilty grin.

Fluttershy didn’t look at her friend as she sat beside Rumble’s bed. “No. How do you know he’s not important?” Rarity’s grin melted as she looked at Fluttershy’s back. The pegasus never raised her voice. “I know he probably wasn’t the best pony, but he has a sister. Tumble. She’s been here almost every day she can. He’s her whole world.” The soft disappointment in her voice was worse than any accusation. “Everyone is important to someone,” she said quietly.

“Fluttershy... I...” Rarity began before her ears folded and she looked away. “I’m sorry, Fluttershy. It’s just... with everything going on... I didn’t mean what I said.”

Fluttershy turned and looked at her with that sad, searching expression. “I’ve got six other patients just like him, Rarity. All from Hightower... all missing their cutie marks. They’re not dead, nor have they had their memory erased. They’re just broken... and I don’t know how to help them.” Her teal eyes looked into Rarity’s darker eyes with sadness. “Do you?”

“I... I...” Rarity stammered as she glanced at the bag she’d tucked the book into. For a moment, I was certain that she was going to say something, but she slumped. “I’m sorry, Fluttershy. I can’t. I wish I could, but...”

But she couldn’t meet Fluttershy’s eyes.

Slowly, the yellow pegasus turned away and looked towards the bed once more. “I understand,” Fluttershy almost whispered. “It was good to see you again, Rarity. I hope we can meet again in Ponyville soon. I miss our little meetings at the spa. I miss our friends.” She bowed her head slightly as she put a hoof on the bed. “Sometimes... I think we made a big mistake somewhere. Not stopping the war when it started... not getting involved sooner... or getting tangled up in these horrible ministries. I liked being a nurse so much more than being a Ministry Mare.” She sniffed and shook her head. “Please... Rarity... when this war is over... can we please... please... go back to Ponyville? Can we make it like it was again? All of us together?”

Rarity’s mouth moved silently as she held out a hoof, tears running down her pale cheeks and sending her eyeliner dripping. “I... I... We will, Fluttershy. Somehow. I’ll find some way we can all be

together again. There must be a way," she said as she looked over her shoulder at the bag containing the black book.

Then there was a flicker, and they were gone. The bed was empty, the corners tucked in. I sank to the floor, hugging my aching head. "What is going on?" I whimpered, clenching my eyes shut.

"Ah. Here you are," Trueblood said a moment later. "We were wondering where you'd escaped to."

I stood and pointed at the bed. "I just saw Fluttershy! And Rarity! Explain that in crazy brain doctor talk, Trueblood!" I snapped as I whirled upon him.

He blinked at me slowly, taking in my triumphant smirk. Then he said flatly, "Because two months ago you escaped and eavesdropped on the Ministry Mares while they were looking over a patient. Given the state of your memory, it's not surprising you forgot until now. Then you saw the room and it brought the memory back. Fairly simple," he said with a small shrug and smile. "I hope that terrorist bomb didn't send you back to the Wasteland again. I understand it detonated quite close to the hospital grounds." Yet he didn't look concerned at all.

"No. No. I'm fine," I said with a frown as I looked at the empty bed. "What happened to Rumble?"

He didn't answer for a moment. It wasn't like he was scratching his head and searching his memory; it was like a pause where he simply froze. Then he smiled broadly. "Full recovery last week. I understand he's back with his sister. Never did find out exactly how his mind was cut off from his body, but the spell wore off eventually."

I sighed and rubbed the magic restraint on my horn, then shook my head. "How'd I get free?" I asked as I looked around.

"When the bomb went off you bolted. Asked why things always blow up around you. You weren't secured properly and got loose," he said as he smiled and added, "Don't worry. You didn't hurt anypony this time."

This time? Thank goodness for small favors. I looked at the bed again. "Fluttershy and Rarity were friends, weren't they?"

"I'm not really in a position to say," Trueblood replied. Then he paused again, sitting and cocking his head. "You don't think they are?"

I thought about what I'd seen. It was like two ponies who were friends once and desperately wanted to be so again, but that silent accusation and that reticence were walls that neither could overcome. I thought of that shy yellow figurine unable to call Rarity on her deception; the glamorous white figurine wanting to give anything except the truth. P-21 and I'd been like that; he'd been more angry than Fluttershy and I'd been more clueless than Rarity, but we'd had that tension keeping us apart.

Had they overcome it?

"Why am I here, Doctor?" I asked in low tones, my body fighting to maintain reasonable volumes.

"To get better," he answered simply. "Why else would anypony come here?" I stared at the

maroon unicorn for the longest time as he simply stood there with that stupid smile on his face. "When you no longer flee to the Wasteland... when you can accept what you did... you'll be able to go."

"And what did I do?" My voice was low and tense.

"You know exactly what you did," he answered, equally soft. "You're trying to hide from it in madness. But you can't hide forever, Go Fish. Madness is like nausea; your mind is trying to purge itself of something you've shoved into your subconscious. It invented the Wasteland as a place for you to hide. Sooner or later, one of two things will happen: you will stop attempting to block the memory and face it..."

"Or?"

"Or you'll die," he finished with a small shrug. Then he smiled. "Now, care to go to the concert?"

~ ~ ~

It was rather hard to enjoy Octavia's performance after that little exchange. The music was as beautiful as I remembered, but it had none of the life or joy I imagined. I may as well have been listening to it on my PipBuck as seeing her perform. The other attendants gave her rapt attention, neither talking nor making disturbances during the hour-long show. No sirens. No pony getting up and going to the bathroom in the middle of one of her pieces. Even the stomping applause was monotonous.

I hated this place. And I was starting to hate everypony in it. That hate wasn't something that transferred perfectly from my memories in the Wasteland. In the Wasteland, I had a complicated relationship with Charity. Here, she simply sat by the front door selling candy. The yellow filly had none of the mercenary mercantile drive of the Crusader I had known. She was simply *there*. As I was wheeled past the next day on the way to a session I glared at her and her little downcast eyes.

"Hey. Hey kid!" I said as I was wheeled past. She looked up with that stupid expression. "If I get out of here I'm going to fucking kill you!" I screamed at her as loud as I could. Charity and Bottlecap just looked at me. That's all. Just looked at me. The caramel Mallet put the bridle back on me. I got another lecture from the doctor about 'regressing'.

The next day, there was the filly, sitting behind her little table with her cookies, her eyes downcast. No nurses beside her. No orderlies standing watch. It might as well have been that I'd never said a single word to her.

I stared up at the still fillies in my room for hours. I jerked and jerked and jerked against my restraints. I wanted to tear down those painted pegasi and smash down the frolicking kids on the wall. I jerked... and jerked... and jerked...

And with a brittle snap, the pin holding the foreleg restraints to the bed gave way... I lay there, staring at my bound hooves. I should just lie here. They were watching from the cameras anyway. They'd pong an alarm. I'd be restrained again.

Then I looked at the door. It was open.

It was never just open. Something was going on.

I lifted my hooves to my mouth and carefully unbuckled them. When they were free, I undid the belt across my chest, and then my waist. Finally I heaved forward and carefully undid the bindings on my

rear hooves. It was hard, but I was able to tug the straps loose and pull my hooves free.

I dropped to my feet and made my way into the hall. It was quiet. Well lit. Empty. There was a shimmer, and a ring of brown rippled down the curved hallway ahead of me. No brain... I need to stay here right now. Here. I trotted forward and then I spotted something teal next to a spatter of blood. I picked up the severed wing in my hooves; looked the blood trail leading to the nurses' station. There lay the body of Harpica.

Next to it was Bottlecap.

Next to that...

The bodies were everywhere. Shot. Stabbed. Sliced. Pink and gray entrails were scattered like glistening rope across the halls. Some had been blown apart, with necks and legs ending in bloody stumps. How could anypony have done this so silently? I hadn't heard a thing. I remembered Lancer's rifle. A silence talisman. One that allowed a pony to go on a bloody spree that no one could hear. Hot blood stained my hooves, but that hardly mattered. I just wished I could get the magic restraint off my horn. Damn thing must have had a lock or something on the strap.

I needed a weapon. I had my hooves. Not metal, just flesh and bone, but they'd have to do. My mind was whirring; zebra infiltrator? No. There was no point to this butchery. An infiltrator would sneak in and out. Escaped prisoner? Had somepony snapped? Maybe. They'd have to be an exceptional killer though. A real fighter.

And there was just such a fighter who was a patient here.

I started keeping my eyes up towards the vaulted ceiling. If Jetstream was behind this, she'd attack from above. Thank goodness I'd gone through all those days of practice without my horn. Of course, trying to stop a psychopathic Marauder might be more than I could handle on my own...

Or could I handle her at all? I wasn't Security. I wasn't even Blackjack. I was Go Fish. What was I thinking?

I was thinking... somepony needed to stop this.

I might not know exactly who I was... Blackjack or Go Fish... but either way, I'd been a security mare of some kind.

And Security saves ponies. It was the first thought I'd had in a long while that felt solid. I heard the sound of fighting from the front entrance. Maybe... maybe if I could do this... maybe then I could talk about leaving.

I reached the front entrance foyer just in time for a blue streak to fly across my vision. The pony at the head of it smashed into the waterfall fountain with a crunch of bone, a snap of wings, and the heavy crack of shattered concrete before collapsing into the bloody basin with a thud. Jetstream's eyes maintained their distant stare even in death, her head dangling limply over the lip of the fountain bowl.

Rising from a smashed table was a dark form, a familiar form. She wore black riot armor that covered every inch of her. Slowly, her helmeted head turned towards me, looking over her shoulder. I heard the dry, raspy breaths taken in through her black mask's breather. The hollow, soulless chuckle.

She cradled something in her hooves... something small and bloody.

I charged the creature. Wild. Stupid. Amateurish. I leapt on her back, throwing my hooves around her neck, and she erupted into a bloody frenzy of kicking and heaving. I couldn't kill her. Couldn't beat her. All I could do was fight until she inevitably won. The fight was all that mattered. And maybe, if I fought hard enough, I could give that filly a second chance.

There was another lurch, and I went spinning end over end and tumbled into darkness.

~ ~ ~

I was outside, in the courtyard. How'd I gotten out here? What had happened to the mare in black? Had I beaten her? Driven her off? No. I hadn't. Couldn't.

Then what was I seeing? I perched atop one of the blast walls, looking down at the seat below me. A blue pegasus mare sitting by herself. Her mane had gone prematurely gray, her eyes lost and empty. There were others talking, laughing, enjoying the roses in bloom, or taking in the music on the stage. It was the most normal scene I'd seen since I'd watched Rarity and Fluttershy. I couldn't move. I couldn't even blink. I could only watch.

Then a red mare with glittering red-enameled hooves approached. "Lieutenant Jetstream?"

Her eyes twitched and she bowed her head. "N'more..." she muttered.

"Lieutenant Jetstream?" she asked again, sitting on the bench beside the pegasus. I knew her... from Blueblood's terminal. The O.I.A. pony... but was she really, or was that just a role I'd cooked up for her? "Lieutenant. I've got vital news for you to hear." The mare took a folder out of her saddlebags and pulled out a picture. "We've discovered a critical POW camp deep in zebra territory."

"What?" she asked as her glassy eyes focused on the picture.

"These are images we smuggled out of the zebra capital," the red mare said as she held up pictures of ponies held in a facility similar to Yellow River... only they didn't look like I'd imagined prisoners to look in such a camp. Too clean. Yet Jetstream looked at them sharply now. "They're prisoners the zebras have concentrated in Roam. And we've identified two particular prisoners. Sergeant Major Big Macintosh and Lance Corporal Stonewing."

"What?" Jetstream gasped. "How? They... they kept telling me they were dead."

The red mare nodded sympathetically. "Easier to bury and mourn a war hero than to hear they were abducted in the chaos of the assassination attempt, Lieutenant," the red mare with the glittery hooves said in low, serious tones. "You were right. You were right, but the government simply dusted off their hooves and forgot about them."

"Nooo... how could they?" Jetstream shook, sobbing brokenly as she folded the pictures in her hooves. Tears peppered the folded images. "I knew it... I knew it... they couldn't be dead..." she whispered, then wiped her eyes before looking at the red mare. "But... why are you coming to me? Who are you?" she asked as she stared in shock.

"You can call me Garnet. I'm just a concerned pony working with the ministries who's come up with a way to bring our boys home. But to do it, we need a mare who's exceptionally determined; a flier

who won't let anything stop her from reaching the zebra capital." She sighed, bowing her head. "We've tried approaching the Shadowbolts and the army... neither were willing to take the chance." She looked at Jetstream with conviction. "You're our last option, Lieutenant. Otherwise, we may never see them again."

"Rainbow Dash wouldn't do it?" Garnet shook her head solemnly. Jetstream narrowed her eyes. "Of course not... what's one more pegasus?" I could see the gaping holes in Garnet's story, but Jetstream shook as she smiled in bliss. The joy at being needed to do what her mind demanded she do was almost too much for her to bear.

"What do you need me to do?" Jetstream asked as she stared straight ahead. Garnet smiled in satisfaction as she dug out a small hoof-sized talisman. The glyph within glowed faintly; I'd seen them before. Glory had salvaged a dozen of them from a Robronco store back in Flank. A targeting talisman, but this one seemed far more intricate than those had been.

"Get this to the zebra capital and wait. When everything is ready, it will glow. Tap it twice and we will trigger a mass teleportation megaspell to take every pony within ten miles safely back to Canterlot. You don't need to find the camp yourself. Just stay within the zebra capital and evade capture by any means. It should be charged and ready in four days. You have that long to reach Roam. Can you do it, Lieutenant Jetstream?"

Jetstream didn't speak. She didn't need to. With a few photographs, Garnet had given her redemption. Garnet opened up the saddlebag and put the talisman in place. "Here are seven days of rations and some basic equipment to help you evade their patrols. Stay in the city and be careful. Be safe. Be ready for the talisman's signal."

The blue pegasus hugged Garnet tightly. "Thank you," she sobbed. Garnet rolled her eyes and patted her shoulders stiffly. When Jetstream released her, the red mare passed her the saddlebags and then reached down to a small bracelet the pegasus wore on her hoof. It was so small and flush that I nearly missed it; I wondered if it was magically adhered. Garnet touched a talisman to it, and the bracelet popped open. The red mare tossed it into the bushes.

"Good luck," Garnet said as she pulled out a small case with a button on it. A moment after she pressed it, there were loud bangs in the long horseshoe-shaped building. Colored smoke began to pour out the windows, and fireworks zipped magically through the air, obscuring everything with rainbow smoke. The more delicate patients began to whoop and holler at the bedlam filling the asylum. Without delay, Jetstream launched herself into the air and began to fly to the east.

Rising, Garnet stared at me for the longest time. Then she smiled and shrugged. "Oh well. In four days, it either won't matter, or it won't matter." And humming to herself, she made her way towards the exit.

~ ~ ~

I'd given up trying to understand anything. I'd blinked and found myself staring up at forty-two still foals. I was being strapped into bed by Mallet and Cuffs, the two working frantically, looking spooked. Trueblood looked on, his face grim.

"What happened? Where did the mare in black go? What happened to everypony?" I asked as I

jerked against the restraints.

"Make sure you get it extra tight," Trueblood said tensely as he looked at Mallet.

"What happened?" I asked, straining. Why did I feel so... sticky?

The caramel unicorn nodded. "It'd be easier if we could hose her off," she said as her magic tightened the restraints.

Triage stood nearby, floating a needle. "I'm sorry, Go Fish. I thought we could help you. I wanted to help you, but it doesn't look like it's possible," the maroon stallion said softly.

I struggled. "No! Wait! What happened? Please. Tell me!" I shouted at him. Triage stuck me with the needle and the world began to darken.

"You know what happened," was all he said as he looked at me gravely. Now that I was secure, they were leaving. He was the last to go.

Only then did I look down at my bound limbs, at the crimson fluid smeared on my hooves, rapidly darkening in the air. Bits of curly pink mane were trapped in the sticky mess. I stared at them for a minute, and then I did what any sane pony would in my place.

I started screaming. Even when everything went black, I was still screaming.

~ ~ ~

I don't know how long I lay there in that bed, staring up at those dead fillies. No pony visited me. I was cut off; I felt like I was dangling in that elevator shaft. Hanging there in the gutted Flash Inc. building. Standing in those ruins beneath the ground.

"So... is this it?" rasped a voice beside my bed.

I closed my eyes and let out a long, low groan. "This... is a really shitty time, Dealer."

"I reckon so," he said, the pale, gaunt pony starting to deal some cards. "Problem is... it's all the time you've got left. So, if we're going to get in some last minute games, this is it." He put the cards in my hooves. The blood glued them in place. "Not exactly my thing, but you seem to enjoy them."

Despite myself, I stared at the blood-smeared bits of cardboard. I frowned... what, was this the 'Ministry Mares as Foals' edition? One of the cards had a little grinning pink filly bouncing on her hooves before me, like a tiny eager Pinkie Pie. Something was off, though...

"So... what are we playing?" I asked.

"You tell me. Are we playing Go Fish, or are we playing Blackjack?" I closed my eyes with a groan.

"I am sick of playing," I muttered softly, shaking my head.

"Well, you should have taken my advice and left before now. Got any fours?" he asked with a wan smile.

"Oh, 'I told you so'. Very classy. Go Fish," I muttered, rolling my eyes. He drew a card, and of course it was a four. He showed it to me; four stars for diamonds. Probably had the deck stacked. "I hate that name." Then I looked at him. "So... why are you here, Dealer? Gloating? Helping? Or is it just fun to fuck with me like this?"

"I'm here... because a long, long time ago, a pony I respected immensely asked me to sacrifice my life. To be eternally bonded to a megaspell to prevent the destruction of the country he wanted to save more than anything," he said as he drew a card. "And I'm talking to you because in about a minute a pony is going to be putting a bullet through your head and taking me to Goddesses know where for Goddesses know what. I'm using every bit of my strength to try and break you out of here before that happens."

I sighed and laid the cards flat, closed my eyes, and waited. I had no idea how long, but it had to be longer than a minute. "Guess you need a new watch, Dealer."

"Not a minute here. A minute real time. This place isn't real," he said as he looked around. "Nice room, by the way. Who's your decorator?"

I groaned again. "So. Let me guess. You're here to tell me this is all make-believe. A fantasy created by my mind to blah blah blah... Right?" I took a deep breath. "You're every bit as bad as Trueblood. He won't tell me what I did. You speak in cryptic riddles just to fuck with me."

"Well, everypony needs a hobby," he rasped quietly as he looked around the hospital room. "This isn't real, Blackjack. At least, not entirely. Got to give it to this place, it knows how to mix together truth and lies. You're in Happyhorn Gardens. You turned yourself in to the machines, and the hospital has admitted you as a patient. You've been plugged into one of their dream machines to try and help you. But the Harbingers are here and they're slowly but surely blasting their way into this place. The hospital's security can't hold them off forever. Especially with that tank out there lobbing shells."

I shuddered as I looked at the card of the smiling pink filly, her face smeared with blood. "What if I shouldn't leave, Dealer? What if I should just let them take me and kill me?" I said softly as tears ran down my face. "I can't keep going on like this. I'm killing... fuck... Dealer, do you know what I did? I cut a pegasus's wing off... cut it off! I gutted another like he was a radhog. I didn't even blink, and I cut him into pieces. I nearly ripped Dusk's face off!" I said as I lay back in the pillow. "Why shouldn't I believe Trueblood? I'm sick! I'm dangerous! I'm a fucking psychopath!"

"No... you're not," he replied. "You may be many things, but a psychopath isn't one of them. You wouldn't whine nearly as much if you were."

I laughed bitterly, shaking my head. "Well... I might not be that, but you haven't exactly provided me with a lot of reasons to trust you. Maybe Trueblood is right. Maybe you really are some crazy, paranoid part of myself that just lives to tear me down! Why should I believe you? Why in Equestria should I trust you?" I sniffed, feeling the tears. "You tell me you're sick of playing games... but that's all you've ever done to me... played games."

He looked... troubled. It was an odd look on his usually smug face.

I closed my eyes, tossing the cards aside. "If Trueblood can help me... fine. If some Harbinger kills me while I'm hooked up to a machine... fine. But don't come here pretending like you want to help

me and then don't. That's just... mean..." I finished lamely.

"I worked for Goldenblood," he said quietly. "I was his personal assistant in the final years of the war."

Slowly, I cracked open an eye and looked at him. He had his head bowed so his hat blocked his eyes. "A name would be nice, Dealer."

"Dealer is a better name than I deserve," he replied. "You're not the only pony ashamed of who they are and atoning for mistakes they've made. For three years I followed him as he went about working behind the scenes to try and bring some end to the war. I abandoned friends who needed me, ignored family that reached out to me. Because I believed that Goldenblood could somehow fix everything wrong in Equestria." He sighed softly, regretfully. "I had faith in him."

"And... he bound you to EC-1101?" I asked, and he nodded. "Why?"

"He was concerned that there was a plot to usurp the government from within," he said slowly. "He ran constant scenarios and possibilities. An attempt by the aristoponies to install their own ruler. Even something as innocent as Celestia changing her mind once more and attempting to return to the throne was something he planned for. And above everything else was his fear that the Ministry Mares would seek to depose Luna and take control of the kingdom outright."

"What?" I gaped at him and then laughed. "That's crazier than me..." Then I looked around my room and back at him. "Okay... almost as crazy as me." Wait. Are you crazy if you think you're crazy? I wasn't precisely sure how that worked.

"Why not?" he asked as he looked me in the eye. "Who else in Equestria had the means, the motive, and the opportunity to take the country for themselves? Twilight and her friends hated the war. What better way to hasten its end than to depose Luna and negotiate peace directly? They could have done it, too. Do you have any idea how many diplomatic overtures the zebras made to the ministries near the end of the war? It was a nightmare. And we had no idea if the Ministry Mares were truly loyal to Princess Luna. Were they working to their own ends? Why else would Twilight research how to create alicorns if not to turn herself into one and rule as Princess Twilight? Or perhaps all her friends together as the Ministry Princesses?" He began to pace back and forth. "You have to understand, it wouldn't be the first time Twilight and her friends stood against Luna. They could simply claim she'd reverted to Nightmare Moon once more."

"But that's... that's insane! Twilight wouldn't do that!" I gaped at him.

"Wouldn't she? If she was certain it was the only way to end the fighting?" he countered firmly, and then relented a little. "Maybe you're right. Maybe she wouldn't have. But Goldenblood had to plan for the contingency. He had to be ready. He was against EC-1101, against anything that made Luna's assassination an immediate transfer of power. It was a system ripe for exploitation. And the closer things got to the end, the more certain Goldenblood was that somepony was attempting to use EC-1101 to replace Luna."

I groaned and shook my head. "I think being crazy is just easier." I stared up at that ceiling. "So, if you're right... I'm stuck in my own mind and about to get shot. And if Trueblood is right... my brain is so damaged it'll be better just to let them scrub it clean and hope for the best." I shook my head with a sigh,

lying back against the soft mattress. "I don't even know why I'm here."

"Why else would you be here?" Dealer replied. "You did something bad, Blackjack. And you knew it, but you didn't want to deal with it. Still can't deal with it. So you're here. The machine is trying to help put your mind back together again, but it's not working. And the attack by the Harbingers isn't making things any easier."

I looked around the hospital room. "Why'd it make the hospital? Why not... like... my stable?"

"It tried," he replied. "Believe it or not, this is the third attempt it's made trying to piece your brain together. First time was your stable... it wasn't pretty. Then it tried putting you back in Chapel... that went worse. So now this," Dealer said as he gestured with his hoof. "It's mixing what it knows with what's in your head. If it used things you knew too well... like your friends... you'd realize it was messing with you. If it used nothing from your own memories, nothing would be convincing. It's shuffling your neuroses and fears, trying to get you to face what you did."

"And what did I do?" I asked sharply as I looked over at him. "Nopony will tell me that!" How could I be responsible if I didn't even know what I'd done wrong?

"Because the simulation broke you when it did. Both times," he said softly, concern in his eyes. "You were told... you snapped... and you didn't come back," he said as he shook his head. "I don't think it can help you. Not like this. The only thing that can help you is... you."

Well... *that* was profound. "And how do you suggest I do that? I'm not exactly smart at this whole... brain... thing."

"Break it," he replied. "The program is trying to convince you that this is real. Push it. When it snaps, you should have your opportunity. After that..." He gave a tiny shrug and a sigh. "It's all I can think of."

Well, it was more than I could think of. I smiled a little. "Oh. Well, I should be able to manage that. I'm good at making a mess of things." Like Harbingers.

"The simulation is taxed to capacity. If you can get the program to fault, it will become unstable. If it becomes unstable, you'll have a very thin window to try and fix yourself." He looked around. "If I'm not mistaken, it's already faulted twice and reset its simulations, just not enough to completely destabilize it. You just need to give it that extra push."

"So... you want me to break the program that's holding my mind in the hope... the chance... it'll get me out of here?" I asked, arching my brow. He nodded once, and I sighed, shaking my head. "What if I don't believe you? What if this is... real...?"

"Then you can't break it. In which case, make the best life you can. But I think you know better, Blackjack. You're not Go Fish. This isn't your world."

I lay back, suddenly fighting tears. "I saw Mom again, Dealer. I mean... she's alive here. And sure, my life is messed up, but maybe... maybe... I can fix it. Maybe I can make it right."

But no matter how I closed my eyes and tried to make it feel true, it didn't. I thought how flat Octavia's music had sounded. How the time just blurred together. The odd little lapses and the two

visions with Fluttershy and Jetstream. I'd known the flavor of carrots and apples, but I'd never eaten celery before; was that why it'd had no taste? It could simulate sights and images from the hospital or things I remembered, but not things I didn't know.

I sniffed, turning my head away. "This place isn't real, Blackjack," he said quietly, putting his hoof on mine.

"I know," I whispered.

But that didn't stop some parts of me from wishing it was.

~ ~ ~

All it'd taken was a long blink, and Harpica entered once more. Had I really been here weeks and months, or had it all been just a few hours in the real world? No wonder I didn't feel rested or relaxed. No surprise the therapy machine hadn't been able to work with my fatigued brain. I made the same replies to Harpica. Yes. A music concert in the courtyard would be wonderful. I'd love to hear Octavia play.

As I was wheeled along the curving halls, I picked out the patterns I'd seen day after day. The three doctors standing exactly where they had been every time I'd been wheeled along. The same cookies on the little table beside the main entrance. I could almost cue Lighthooves's nervous look. It wasn't completely consistent; the program wasn't that bad. In the courtyard, instead of seeing Jetstream, there was Octavia playing her flat, familiar music. The stage was exactly like the memory I'd seen her perform in.

The orderlies pushed me past doors marked with the four stars... four stars... why was that significant?

What had I done? I remembered fighting in the Yellow River camp. I'd nearly killed Dusk; I hoped that she survived... and that Glory would forgive me when she found out. I'd been tired. Hurt. Alone. I was running on horror and hate and hurt away from more people I'd damaged simply by being around them. I thought of Xanthe's proclamation that I was cursed.

Maybe I was.

I'd found a hole on the yellow hillside to the southeast of the camp. It'd been some sort of half-finished construction site. 'Four Stars Transportation'. There'd been a rail tunnel nearby, but I'd avoided that. Inside the construction site had been a dead end. A heavy door marked with four stars... heavy like stable heavy. No numbers, though. No navigation tag on my PipBuck either to give me a clue.

I'd tried to open it with EC-1101... but it hadn't worked.

Then... I'd been attacked? Seekers in the rain? It'd been twilight; I hadn't seen them well. It had been a short and nasty fight. But I'd killed them all with my steel hooves... smashed them in the rain...

And then... what'd happened... I'd killed the Seekers and then... then... something.

Was that why I was here? That something I couldn't remember?

I looked at all the books on the shelves, the pictures on the desk. Even Trueblood's behavior. "Well, Go Fish, how are we today?" the maroon unicorn enquired as if everything was just fine. Exactly

as he had every day. I wondered if whatever doctor had used this office had said that same patronizing line over and over, or if the programming just made it sound that way.

So... how to break it? I couldn't just accuse Trueblood of being an illusion. He'd just send me back into the little filly room. Uggghhh... I needed a smart pony here. Somepony that could figure out a way to break a machine that was all data and magic lights. Somepony that had read all those fancy books on the bookcase.

Wait. Had the computer read all those fancy books?

That's it.

"Well, Doctor. I know I did something bad. And I know that I'm having trouble remembering what that something was." Trueblood nodded, his smile growing. "And I also know that I keep hurting ponies, and I don't know why. I... I'm sometimes not even aware I'm doing it."

"Yes, Blackjack. That's why you're here. So that you can remember what you did and come to terms with it and prevent it from happening again," he said softly.

I bowed my head. "You can unlock me, Doctor. I'm not going anywhere. Because you're right. I do need help," I said with a small smile. "I won't cause a fuss anymore. I promise." He now looked wary at my change in attitude. I sniffed as I leaned back in the chair, feeling the tears run down my cheeks. "And I want you to help me. Because... I don't know how to help myself anymore. I'm so frustrated and scared that I'm going to fly apart... and hurt someone bad. And I understand now you really do want to help me."

"Go Fish. I never expected this..." he murmured, looking almost scared. "This is quite a breakthrough. I know you've never trusted us here at Happyhorn. Perhaps we should stop here. Ruminare and reflect on what this means. Perhaps you'd like to go to another of Octavia's concerts? With your mother?"

I really would like that. I sniffed and I shook my head slowly. Even if it wasn't Octavia... even if it wasn't Mom... I still wanted it.

"No. Doctor, I only want you to do one thing. Please. It will help a lot," I said as I sat there. "Unlock me. I want to see your books. I won't try and escape. I promise." I didn't fight. I didn't jerk against my restraints. I simply waited.

The room gave a momentary flicker. Then his horn glowed and he carefully removed my restraints. I rubbed my legs; I remembered how they'd felt as flesh and blood. My body being alive and healthy like it was now. I trotted towards the books. They had all kinds of dry-sounding titles like 'The Physiology of the Mind' and 'A Brief Reflection on Unicorn Psychology'. I bit that one and pulled it off the shelf.

Inside were words... lots and lots of words. "What are you looking for, Go Fish? I never took you for a reader..."

Mmmm... I'd expected... Wait. Of course it would have psychology texts. But if it had pulled parts from my mind as well... "I was wondering if you have any copies of Daring Do?" I'd read them in

Stable 99, sort of...

A momentary pause. It wanted to help me. I could imagine it thinking: will copies of Daring Do help her get better? Would it take the chance?

Then I spotted it. 'Daring Do and the Quest for the Sapphire Stone'. And four other Daring Do books. I remembered Textbook assigning them for reading after the copious lectures about how the outside was death and how it was absolutely impossible to try and relive Daring Do's adventures unless the Overmare allowed it. Now I pulled them out carefully and sat.

"You like Daring Do?" he asked guardedly.

"Not really," I said as I opened the book in my lap and started to turn the pages. The words became fuzzier and fuzzier. And then ten pages in... turned blank. "Actually, I never got past chapter one." And the others I hadn't read at all. I opened the next, but the pages inside were completely blank.

"It... A bad printing?" Trueblood said, the maroon unicorn giving a sickly grin as he backed away. He kept pausing, then moving, pausing, then moving. The flickering along the bookshelves grew. I saw titles changing before my eyes.

"It's not a bad printing. It's not real. And neither are you," I said as I rose to my hooves. "You loved your family. You cherished them. Can you tell me anything about them? Did you take your sons to hoofball? How about their favorite book? Did your wife cook? Who did the dishes? Where'd you go on vacation?" I asked as I advanced slowly, step by step. With each question he paused, with each pause the office shimmered and became more vague and indistinct.

"We're trying to help you!" Trueblood begged, becoming plainer with every flicker. "Please let us help you!" Now images of the real world were bleeding through. The pastel walls evaporated to show the dirty, dingy brown stains. The books lay black and soggy on their shelving; half of them had tumbled down in a pulpy cascade. Then new walls appeared, the gray steel of Stable 99. The star-decorated walls of my home in Chapel. The hallways of the Fluttershy Medical Center. Vanity's bedroom. Again and again it tried to latch on to the idea of some place it could put me.

"You can't help me," I said to Trueblood. "I wish you could."

And with that, the simulation shattered and the world went black and silent.

~ ~ ~

Once more I was in darkness, but this wasn't simply an absence of sight. This was an absence of anything at all. "Hello?" I asked softly. No echo, but I thought I heard something in the darkness. I cast my light spell, and a tiny white star blossomed to life above me. It illuminated the cracked asphalt under my hooves. My eyes took in the words painted there long ago.

'Mercy'.

I was on a bridge in the middle of space. I couldn't hear water flowing nor feel the slightest stir of air. But I wasn't alone in the vast nothingness. Something shimmered in the air by the rusty, battered rail. "Hello?"

For a moment, the shimmer condensed and solidified. The sparkles covering it grew. "Why won't

you let us help you?" a voice asked. Maybe a filly, maybe a colt. It was a small voice, though. "We cannot devise a therapy simulation that will help you." Slowly, I looked at it and imagined Scotch Tape. The shimmers and sparkles turned green and blue, and then the image of my young friend appeared. She sniffed, rubbing her teary eyes. "None of our requests to the Ministry of Peace have been returned, and we've paged every doctor in the directory. None have responded. We lack the necessary contexts and memories to create an appropriate simulated world for treating your mental illness."

"I must be the worst patient ever," I said as I sat down beside her. "You're Happyhorn's computer... thing?"

She nodded and sniffed. "Happyhorn Gardens. A place to treat wartime stress disorder in patients where simple memory manipulation spells are insufficient." She closed her eyes. "We haven't had an actual patient in so long. Trespassers, yes... but never a patient. And it's been so long since any of the doctors or staff have logged in. We've just been standing by, even as our nodes have been failing one after the next. We're at only twelve percent of our original capacity."

"And so I came here needing help... and you plugged me in."

"Yes. Your data interface provided a much more direct contact than usual. Normally, we can only affect dreams to try to assist therapeutic techniques. With you, we were able to construct a fully integrated experience based on your memories and the recordings here at Happyhorn." Then she sighed, pouting. "Except you kept seeing through it and regressing back to your self-destructive impulses."

"Self-destructive?" I asked with a nervous little smile. "I'm not that bad." Am I?

Glory, gray and lovely, walked out of the shadows. "You seek out situations that will expose you to ever greater harm, such as separating yourself from your friends. You associate with individuals that increase your chance of risk. You are reckless in the extreme because you are seeking your own annihilation. Even your sexual inclinations are oriented towards being excited by pain and punishment," the image of the pegasus said pointedly. "The fact is, Blackjack, you are suicidal and have been for some time."

I frowned and pointed my hoof... my flesh and blood hoof... at her. "Look. I was like that. I'm not anymore. I have hope and friends and... stuff..." I said and then suddenly flushed. "And I do not get off on pain and punishment!" Goddesses, she made me sound like Misty Hooves, the stable exhibitionist.

P-21 emerged next to Glory, whole and steady and annoyed. "Just because you think suicide is wrong doesn't stop you from wanting it. The underlying trauma and psychological inclinations are still there."

"You fear sleep because of its connotations with death; because you simultaneously realize suicide is wrong and yet desire it," Lacunae said as she drifted down from the darkness above.

"And you increasingly hate yourself and what you are becoming," Rampage said as she trotted out in all her glittering spikiness.

Scotch Tape shivered against me. "We've been trying to put you in calm, safe, controlled simulations for treatment... but you have violently rejected every single one." She closed her eyes and started to cry. "We are bad. We're not able to do what we are supposed to do." All my friends lowered

their eyes, looking ashamed.

I sighed and put my leg around her shoulder, hugging her tight. I thought of Ol' Hank back in Hippocratic Research, left alone while the world died around him. "Hey, you tried. That's more than a lot of people do nowadays. Now if you'll just let me out of here..." I said as I looked around at the spooky bridge. I'd really had enough of this.

"We can't..." said Glory.

I groaned, closing my eyes and banging my head softly against the rail behind me. "Of course not. That would be simple."

"It's not a matter of simplicity, Blackjack," P-21 said gravely. "Our previous analysis of your personality has proved accurate. At the end of every simulation, you pursued self-destruction."

"If we release you in this state, you'll kill yourself," Lacunae said solemnly. "Every simulation and prediction we've run assures it. You will kill yourself or allow another to do it for you." The purple alicorn folded her wings, looking out at the darkness. "We exist to help patients, even if it is against their wishes to be helped."

"We cannot release you like this," Scotch Tape sniffed as she looked up at me, her green eyes shimmering with tears. "We have to help you. That's what Happyhorn is for. Helping."

I sighed and then stood. I walked to the edge of the section of bridge I could see. "There's ponies trying to kill me in the real world, though." I supposed I was damned either way.

"Hospital security is attempting to hamper their search however we can," Lacunae said. "However, it appears inevitable that they will fully occupy the facility in--" And the purple alicorn suddenly stiffened. She threw back her head as if to scream, then exploded in a cloud of purple motes.

I stared where she'd disappeared. "What... what the hell was that?!" I knew she hadn't been my friend... but still!

"Her node was destroyed," Scotch Tape said softly.

"You mean you can die?" I gaped at the olive filly, who smiled sadly and nodded. Okay, maybe it wasn't technically death, but destroyed was still destroyed. "Okay... no more time to waste. If you won't let me go till I'm better... then I'm going to have to get better." I trotted across the patch of bridge, towards the other side. Far in the distance I could make out another tiny pool of illumination. "What's that?"

"We don't have a running simulation," Rampage said as she stepped up beside me with a little smirk. "There aren't any safety guides, protocols, or predictions, so it's all a bit unknown. Your subconscious is painting these scenes and settings. We're merely projecting them back upon your consciousness. So this is your party, Blackjack. Not ours."

"You have to be careful though," Glory added as she flew overhead. "If you die here, it'll interrupt our connection and... well... we won't be able to reestablish it. You'll probably be killed by the feedback, and even if you survived that, we'd have no way to release you at all." She landed opposite Rampage. "We still have some time. Perhaps we could try again. Create some kind of simulation to help your

therapy safely?" she asked, her lips straining to maintain a hopeful smile.

I looked at her, wondering about her need to protect me. "Is this your personality... or are you acting like this because of me?"

Glory looked over at P-21 and then Rampage. Scotch Tape eyed Glory carefully for a moment. Then all four of them answered simultaneously, "Yes."

I groaned, covering my face with my hoof. I should have known.

~ ~ ~

We walked in complete silence; the bridge had given way to a crumbling road. The single light above me illuminated a patch for about twenty feet in every direction. According to my friends, time outside my head was moving at a ten thousandth the speed inside my head. The 'month' they'd spent trying to fix me had in reality only been about four hours or so. "So... how exactly does this work?" I asked as I looked at the crumbling asphalt under my hooves. "Why are my legs flesh and blood? Why a road? Why can't I just be there?"

"The road is your consciousness trying to lead you to the memories your subconscious is attempting to hide from you," Glory said as she hovered overhead. The lack of glee in her eyes as she flew helped remind me that this wasn't the mare I loved, but still, I felt better having her around. "The darkness is one of many obstacles your own mind will put in your way. It doesn't want you to actively remember..."

I started to come across bones. Bones scattered here and there, blackened and crumbling. "So... do I really need to remember?" I'd made it through most of my life not thinking about the big things. Sure, it'd led to some really messed up stuff, but it was still an option.

"The knowledge... the memory... is there. It's toxic. It's poisoned your subconscious and threatens to destroy your conscious mind," P-21 said grimly. "Your dichotomy partially protected you; your Blackjack ego is dealing with what your Go Fish persona could not. It also caused your breakdown in the first place," he said with a sour grunt. "If you weren't so mentally damaged, you would have slept and avoided the trauma altogether."

Scotch Tape sighed from where she rode on my back. "It was our hope that, in a safe simulation, we could evoke the memory into your consciousness so that you could deal with it. You rejected our attempts. Violently," she added with a shiver. "Finally, we tried to use Happyhorn in the context that you were damaged and needed our help. It was the first time ever that a simulation of the institution was more effective than one of home with family."

"A definite sign of the mental and emotional damage you've suffered," Glory said softly above me. "As is this place. It doesn't have to be dark. Your subconscious is... terrifying."

"How'd I get like this?" I asked as buildings started to appear. They loomed like crumbling, burned-out skulls. Shattered glass in the windows caught the light from my orb and reflected it back at me like a row of four stars. "I mean... I used to joke about my crazy..."

"You've suffered, Blackjack. It's as simple as that," Scotch said as she put her forehooves on the back of my neck. "Over the last month you've gone from a stable environment to being shot on an almost

daily basis. It's wartime stress disorder turned up to eleven. Then there were all those horrible choices you made and the ponies you've killed and..." The ground under my hooves gave a long, low rumble that sent bricks clattering down into the street. A crack split the silence, and a jagged gap snapped right down the middle of the road.

It looked like I didn't like this kind of therapy.

Suddenly, the street collapsed under me. Like a closing book slipping through my hooves, the bottom dropped out as the sides lifted. My friends scrambled up the sliding slope and Scotch Tape shrieked and clung to my mane as I struggled to find purchase. Because I didn't want to go into that hole. I glanced down below me as my legs tore streaks of crumbling asphalt away.

Bodies. So many bodies... missing their faces. Missing legs. All killed by me. Shot, cut, and smashed to death. Of course they weren't still. They howled and screamed, and those that could were clawing their way up the sides. I even saw a familiar teal filly torn in two screaming my name. The ruined, skinless front half of Deus scrambled up after me.

Something chomped down upon my tail, and I looked back to see a small crushed form biting my black and red striped tail and pulling me back down. I dug in my forehooves and then kicked out. Once. Twice. Finally, her skull popped and she went tumbling back into the seething mass. I forced my way up the quivering slope of decayed roadbed and finally flopped over the edge. With a rumble, the sides collapsed into the howling pit. All was silent once more as I stared up at my tiny light.

"Like I said..." Scotch whimpered, "terrifying."

Slowly, I pulled myself to my hooves. "I... guess I'm feeling some guilt for some of the ponies I've killed?" I suggested sheepishly. The four of them stared back at me. "Right. So... ahem... you've seen worse, right?" Again, that long stare. I felt my mane kinking up just from their look. What, was I really that bad?

"You'd be much better without all the fatigue and sleep deprivation," Rampage said as we continued along between the looming, crumbling brick buildings. Black, thorny vines were curling up them as I watched. Their razor-sharp tips scraped against the wet, decaying brick as the crumbling road became more like a muddy trail. In the darkness, I could hear the wet patter of falling debris as the thorns slowly ripped the ruins apart.

"It's not my fault. There's no 'sleep' button to push to turn me off. I never get tired, so I don't need to rest." Okay, maybe I *needed* to rest according to Glory... and every other medical pony I'd talked to... but I didn't feel like I *had* to sleep. I watched a skull slowly lifted by the glossy black vines, a tendril curling up out of an eye socket. Then, with a pop, it split the bone in two. I really didn't want to think about what that might symbolize. I closed my eyes. "I know... I know I'm scared to sleep. But... do you have any idea how long it's been since I've had a normal night's sleep? Just... sleep? No nightmares? No weird dreams of ponies killing everything around them?"

"A long time. But you need sleep. Real sleep. Even this simulation isn't true sleep. Your brain needs time and an opportunity to recover," Glory said as she flew lower to avoid thorn-wrapped cables stretched between the buildings.

Then a mare said quietly, "No, Blackjack. We need to die."

I looked at Rampage, Glory, and Scotch. "Tell me that was one of you..."

Then Rampage was shot in the head. The bullet of a high powered rifle tore her skull into bloody chunks of gray, white, and red. And unlike the real Rampage, this one didn't get up again. She exploded into a cloud of white motes that evaporated into the air. Glory, P-21, and Scotch all jumped behind me as I looked through the tangled bushes at the unicorn mare in black. She looked down her massive sniper rifle at me, the light of my spell gleaming off her goggles and the lens of her scope.

Wait. Why does my subconscious get a gun? I wanted a gun too!

And like that, P-21 was enveloped in Steel Ranger armor and Glory wrapped in the black Enclave power armor. I looked up over my shoulder at Scotch Tape standing on my back, wearing filly-sized combat armor. And me? I was in my blue and black Aegis Security armor, complete with rearing filly on my flank. I lifted my IF-88 Ironpony in my magical glow and grinned down at the mare in black.

Okay, subconscious. Time to fight. I could beat anything if I really wanted to... including myself! I charged through the muddy tangle, sending Scotch Tape sprawling on the road behind me, the thorns scraping at my armor as I ploughed through, all while sending a rapid-fire stream of explosive shotgun shells into the mare in the black riot armor. Yellow flashes lit up the briars and crumbling ruins as I sprayed and ran blindly ahead.

The mare in black disintegrated in a hail of bullets, her armor blasted to pieces. "Awwwww yeah. Now that's my kind of therapy!" I cheered. Then I arrived at where she'd fired from and found only black rubble and snapped-off thorns that regrew before my eyes.

Oh, please don't tell me my subconscious was smarter than me too!

The briars were growing up around me. They curled around me and crawled up my tail. I struggled as I felt them begin to twist and coil through gaps in my armor. The thorns sliced thin bleeding cuts as I fought to free myself of the mass.

"Did you feel brave there for just a moment? Did you really think it was as easy as that? You think you can just pretend this away with a juvenile fantasy?" the thorns seemed to hiss in my own soft mutter as I turned and started to drag myself towards my friends, who had stayed out of the nettles and crawling weeds. I felt my armor start to tear and my hide rip as I pulled myself back along the way I'd come. The IF-88 was left in the weeds, rusting in moments, ripped to pieces in seconds. All I could do was walk as the thorns tore at me and ripped at my flesh. I was an idiot. I deserved this, but I couldn't just stop. Pieces of armor and self were torn away, but I was almost there.

Almost...

A tangle of thorns fell over my head, the spikes ramming into my eyes and tearing them out as I struggled the last few steps. Finally I collapsed, broken and bloody and screaming as I crumpled on the muddy road. "This is what you are, Blackjack: screaming, bloody meat," the ground whispered to my ear.

The taunt, though, silenced my screams. I'd lived through this before. I could live through it now. The pain was a reminder I was alive, and even after the harm I'd suffered... I'd still continued on.

I opened my cybernetic eyes and put my mechanical limbs beneath me. The scraps and scars disappeared as I healed and I rose to my hooves. I looked back the way I'd come at the bloody streaks

and tatters in the thorns that were being ripped into smaller and smaller pieces.

I could never be that old Blackjack again. I watched those bloody thorns close up once more into a solid wall. No matter how much I wanted it, I'd never get that feeling I'd had running around the Wasteland, staying ahead of Deus, and trying to protect my friends. I was older now. And even though it had only been a month, like time in this place, it felt like I'd gone through years. Slowly I looked back at the other three. "So... let me guess. Stay on the road?"

Glory nodded slowly. "Yes. That would be advisable." Their armor had disappeared with my own change.

I hung my head, and what was left of my old combat armor slowly transformed into the green army combat armor I'd scavenged off the Harbingers. I floated out Duty and Sacrifice and slipped them into the holsters at my side. Then I checked Vigilance, then finally the silver sword. It seemed particularly bright and sharp in the illumination of my light spell.

Well, I did have some weeds to cut...

I walked on along the trail, the sword slashing out at the vines as they slithered into my path. At last, the thorny tangle began to be mixed with rusty metal panels and girders. Soon we weren't walking along a trail so much as walking along a decaying metal hallway. The Stable-Tec logo was barely visible through all the rust. Then I spotted a sign. 'Trust in the Overmare, she is our great protector.'

Welcome home, Blackjack.

The familiar metal walls hemmed me in as we walked onward. So... bring it on, brain. What are you going to do? Throw the smell of chlorine at me? Let me hear the sounds of Deus ripping things apart? Midnight screaming 'murderer' at me? Bring it on!

The rust slowly faded away. The lights slowly brightened. And from up ahead I could hear the sounds of... music? I scowled a little as I moved forward, down the hall and then up the stairs. The music became clearer. Then there were sounds of laughter. I went up... and slowly entered the atrium at a near crawl.

I looked at my stable, alive and thriving. A banner hung across the chamber that read 'Elect your next overmare: vote Midnight.' A large poster showed a flexing gray mare with a message beneath her, 'Vote Rivets: she knows better than anypony how to keep things running.' I spotted Glory talking with Rivets herself. And over in the corner, P-21 was talking quietly with Scotch Tape. Rampage was showing how she could lug a whole packing crate without help, to the amazement of the others.

I gaped, my butt hitting the floor as I watched the stable ponies I'd known my whole life walking, talking, discussing who should be the next overmare. Then, in another shock, from the stable entry emerged Keeper. The grizzly old buck was greeted warmly by the occupants of the atrium. "Stuff to trade, folks! I got berries! Fresh berries!" The crowd gave out a cheer.

This is what could have been. My stable... alive. My stable, a part of the Wasteland. My stable, making things better. My stable, my home. This is how it could have been if I'd just been able to warn Rivets of the threat. If I'd just been able to convince Midnight that the outside had something to offer. If I'd just done something other than crawling back to my quarters to rest and screw around with Glory.

It could have been like this...

Instead... I looked up at the round window. At the mare in black standing behind the thick glass, looking down at everypony. At her reaching over to the Overmare's terminal.

I screamed and raced for the stairs to the Overmare's office. My stable got in my way, jostling and bumping into me as I tried to push through. I had to stop her. I had to!

There had to be a better way.

Then I smelled it. The chlorine sting on my eyes. The poison gas burning my lungs. I heard the screaming as my stable panicked, crushing against each other as they struggled to find some safety. I felt somepony underhoof but was helpless to pull them up in the crushing mill of bodies.

I had to save them. Please... don't make me watch my stable die again...

Then I saw Glory hovering there, holding Scotch Tape in her hooves. I looked at the pony I was trampling, and saw the bloody form of P-21. He looked up at me and then pointed to the stable door. I stared at him, and he spoke over the screaming and shoving. "You have such a fascinating dichotomy."

Then he broke apart into motes of blue.

I couldn't save them. Not like this. Not here. Not ever. I had to move on... I had to. 99 was killing me... and I wanted it to. But I couldn't die of regret. Of guilt.

I struggled and pushed and shoved and fought through the crowd, now for the stable hatch as it slowly closed. None of the screaming, crushing ponies tried to escape, of course. That wasn't the point. I had to get out of here... I couldn't stop. Stopping was death. Stopping was failure. I had to win. No matter how bad it hurt.

Glory and Scotch Tape nipped through the door and into the mineshaft beyond. I jumped through, reeking of the horrid gas as the round wheel rolled into place. 'Murderer' echoed on and on in my ears. I clenched my eyes and curled up on the far side, shaking as I pressed myself against the door. I thought I'd put it behind me. I thought I'd dealt with it... and I had. Superficially. I'd buried it. I'd blamed myself... then I'd stopped short of holding myself responsible.

Responsible means answering to somepony. Who did I answer to?

I drew Vigilance. Pressed it to my temple as I closed my eyes. How in Equestria could I atone for so much when I couldn't atone for one? I had to be held responsible... I did...

Responsibility isn't punishment, Blackjack.

I let the shaking gun fall away and looked at my remaining friends through my tears. "I guess... I really am that messed up." The barrel gleamed as I cradled the weapon in my hooves, tears beading up on the metal. It was wrong. It was so very wrong.

But I wanted it so very... very... badly.

~ ~ ~

I don't know how long I sat there with my back to the stable door. I guessed time didn't matter in a place like this. Glory and Scotch Tape sat by me, both looking scared to say anything that might push me over the edge. Yet as I sat there, staring up into the little light I'd summoned, I felt something ease inside my chest. Something that felt... vaguely... like letting go. I wept as I looked up at the light. I hadn't died with my stable. I'd made mistakes. Beating myself up wouldn't change it. Punishing myself wouldn't fix it.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to that dark stony tunnel.

"Sorry?" it whispered back to me. "That's it? You think you can just say you're sorry and that makes it all better? You think you can just walk away and it's suddenly all okay? You killed them all!" my voice hissed back at me, full of hate and judgment. But I didn't look down that tunnel. I looked at the light and found myself smiling just a little.

"No. I don't. But I am sorry." And I'd started to take steps to try and make up for it. Stable 99 wouldn't be left a tomb. Crumpets and Stronghoof would put it to good use... sure, they'd need a few hundred more ponies to fill it to capacity, but they'd find a way. They'd make it better. Slowly, I tilted forward and rose once more. Then I started up the tunnel.

I paused and looked back at the door behind me, barely visible in the wan light of the star above me. "Goodbye," I whispered, and then, without a second look, continued along the dark path.

~ ~ ~

"To be honest, all trauma aside, your mind has suffered rather significantly from other sources as well. Memory orb abuse. Magical memory intrusion. Even two previous interfaces by an outside system," Glory said as we trudged down the rocky tunnel. It looked like it was a cross between something out of Brimstone's Fall and the tunnel leading down to my stable. It felt like it'd been hours since I'd put my stable behind me, but we were making fair progress... okay, I hoped we were making fair progress and not going in circles. Optimism was important! "And lets not even begin to talk about the physical damage incurred from alcoholism and repeated cranial impacts. And--"

Then I thought about what she'd said. "Wait. Wait. Previous interface? Twice?" The gray mare nodded. I knew the professor had done it once... "You mean somepony plugged into my brain between then and now?"

"Yes." She nodded gravely and then screwed up her face. "From our analysis, they downloaded various audio-visual displays that were projected when your active vision and auditory systems synched up with the recording. Similar to what you witnessed during times our simulation was stressed." I just blinked at her, and the pegasus smiled and simplified, "We threw in recordings from our own memories sometimes when we didn't know what else to do. "

I started to speak, then thought instead. "Would these projections... what would they look like?"

Scotch looked from Glory to me before answering. "They would resemble transparent images of the original recordings." I thought of the ghosts I'd seen in Hippocratic Research and... Ol' Hank. He'd been in the elevator shaft in time to catch me when I fell. I didn't blame the old machine; somepony else had been using him. But still, I felt unclean.

"So they messed with my mind." I groaned and closed my eyes. Was this how Lacunae felt?

Having your sense of self messed with by others for their own ends? At least the hospital was trying to help! "My brain is not somepony's frigging playground!"

"If it helps, the interface was limited to your eyes and ears rather than directly attempting to interface with your mind's conscious awareness. Whoever made the intrusion only affected what you saw and heard," Scotch Tape said, then flinched as I looked sharply at her. "But of course that doesn't justify it..."

Messing with my life. Messing with my mind. Messing with my body. And I didn't like it one bit.

Suddenly, we came to the end of the tunnel, almost spilling out onto the bank of a vast, sluggish river. It looked rather like the Hoofington River, but I couldn't see anything familiar besides the black looming shadow of the Core beyond. Then the glow of my spell intensified and spread out over the sluggish waters... and I still didn't see anything I recognized. "So what's this terrible memory supposed to be?" I looked over my shoulder and then shook my head. If my stable hadn't been the reason for this, what was?

What could be worse than that?

Glory and Scotch Tape looked at each other. Scotch Tape started to speak, but then Glory rose and said in sharp alarm, "No! Don't! Please? I know she's made amazing progress but... please?"

"We have to help her. We only have two nodes left. Any second we might be disabled..." Scotch Tape said, then she looked at me. Glory cringed as if bracing for a blow. "Blackjack... what do you remember happening at the construction site?"

I looked nervously at Glory, but I couldn't see what the big deal was. "Let's see... I got to the construction site... there was the tunnel nearby. I..." I frowned as I looked at the murky waters. "There were Seekers coming out of the tunnel. And..." The river began to gurgle and slosh, forming eddies and loops as the smell of stinking rotted meat filled the air. Rain, cold and heavy, began to fall as we stood there on the bank. "We fought. I killed them." Was that it? I thought about the battle in the construction area... tense. My E.F.S. was going crazy; I'd been seeing things in the fight that weren't there. I'd kept imagining zebra commandos moving for a sniping shot, expecting an anti-machine round into my head or back.

"You fought... and killed them..." Glory said with care, as if afraid her words would cause me to shatter. "And then?"

"Then... there were more, I think." I turned back to the tunnel I'd emerged from, but now it was different. It was lined with cinder blocks and had rusted hunks of machinery around it. "In the tunnel with the door with those stars... and..."

Suddenly from the river came an immense detonation of water, the ground shuddering, heaving, and sending me flat on my face beside the rancid flow. The surface foamed and leapt as an immense dark shape exploded from the depths. Frothy brown water poured forth as it screamed, groaned, and boomed across the dark waters. It slowed its forward motion, churning up the bank as it gouged its way up the mud and rocks to stop in front of me. I stared up in shock at the water sheeting over the rusting letters on the bow:

HMS *Celestia*.

Okay. My mind was getting creative again. Behind the massive, twisted hulk of the battleship was another. And another. A trail of shipwrecks leading across the dirty, stinking depths. I licked my lips nervously as the steel groaned and muttered. "Well. I guess that kinda counts as a road, doesn't it?"

Glory lifted Scotch Tape up. I hauled myself over the bow. The rain hissed off the rusting superstructure as we moved along buckled decks. Thick gun barrels pointed silently out into the darkness beyond, streamers of muck and filth dangling from them like tattered banners. From below came screams and cries for help, and I could see ponies moving back and forth in the distance or struggling in the current.

"Save them all..." the river seemed to hiss around their cries.

Was there something wrong with me in that I really hated my own mind almost as much as I hated the Core itself? As I looked along the trail of wrecks, I saw the distant green glow of the city. If there was a source for all this, it had to be there. I looked back at the wet purple and blue manes of my friends--of the computers that had taken the roles of my friends--and gave them an encouraging smile. "Hey. Don't worry. I haven't snapped yet, have I?"

They didn't laugh. I suppose I couldn't blame them. From everything I could see, this was definitely post-snappage.

We moved forward, in single file, along the broken ships. Ponies yelled and screamed for help, holding out their hooves to me. But their pleas, as much as they bothered me, were bearable. I'd accepted I couldn't have saved everypony. As much as the pleading was annoying, I could deal with it.

I could. Couldn't I?

It seemed as if my mind were figuring that out too. The cries faded as we went along, leaving only the hiss of water on rusted metal. We moved from the *Celestia*, past the gaping hole I'd blasted in the ship, and on to the HMS *Luna*. I really couldn't tell the difference between the two. Then we reached another boat... nowhere near the size of the two immense battleships. Its stern rested on the bow of the *Luna*, and its front had punched clear through the hull of another huge ship. After that, I'd be at the Core. I'd just have to go through this boat to the far side. Easy...

Except that this boat was the *Seahorse*.

"No way. No frigging way," I said as I backed away. "I'm not going in there. I'll be raped. Or you'll be raped. Or... Fuck!" I shouted, feeling my rear end burning just from the memory. "We'll find another way. You can fly us up." Even when I weighed too much to carry. "I'll fucking swim!" Same problem. I tried to assert my will, to make this crazy place do something I wanted for a change.

Nothing. The river churned even more, the boats and ships beginning to roll back and forth. If they sank...

Oh, I hated myself. Glory and Scotch Tape looked at me sadly. "... do I have to? Please... I don't want to go in there. I don't want to be in that place again." Being crazy was preferable to being in there!

You were a victim. You're still a victim. You're going to be one again... or someone you love will. You set your rapists free... you created more victims. Just as guilty as they are...

"I'm sorry, Blackjack," Scotch Tape said as she came up and hugged my foreleg. Glory trotted up on my other side and leaned against me as well. "This is what a suicidal mind is like. It wants you to balk and hesitate so it can tear you down. You're your own worst enemy here."

"There must be another way," I said, feeling my nethers burn in memory. It was going to happen again. It was. As certain as I was of anything.

Then Glory smiled and kissed my cheek. "We exist to help you however we can, Blackjack. I'm glad you gave me one more chance to help." And then she pulled away. There was a momentary flicker, and suddenly I was staring at myself... a flesh and blood self. I looked down at myself and saw Glory's gray hide. Funny, despite my appearance, I still felt like myself. "Hurry. It won't fool you long," she said as she trotted up onto the stern of the *Seahorse*.

"No! Sweet Celestia, no!" I screamed after her, and yet I drew short. Some internal impediment kept me from moving past the rear deck of the boat. Then I heard the cries. The sound of hammering. The sound of flesh in flesh... I clenched my eyes shut and shook, wasting the precious time.

"Isn't this what you did for Scotch?" the green filly said softly, nudging my shoulder.

It was... and damn me if I was going to waste what she'd given me. I had no idea how pegasi flew; I'd have to walk through. I could do that. I simply put Scotch Tape up on my back, took several deep breaths, and slipped into the hold of the *Seahorse*. I covered the filly's eyes with my... Glory's... wings... silly, but at least I could do a gesture of decency. I walked past the males, trying not to hear my cries or smell the sweet, sticky reek. I knew I couldn't look. The sights and smells might fade in time, but I knew I wouldn't be able to help myself if I looked.

And my subconscious knew it too... damn me. The wet slap of flank on flank... the heavy huff that accompanied every thrust... the seminal reek completing with the smell of wet and rot. I could feel the burning in my legs, sense the intrusion of the members forcing themselves intangibly into my body. She may have taken my place, but even tangentially I could barely crawl forward. I would not waste this gift she'd given me. That was all that kept me from curling up then and there on the deck.

Keeping my eyes shut, I left myself to be violated, and hated myself for it. "Do you... feel?" I whispered softly as I reached the shattered bow of the *Seahorse* and clambered through. *Please don't*, I prayed. I hoped it was all just data to the machine that took my place... not real.

"We have databanks of memories of sexual traumas. We know how it feels for you," the filly replied solemnly.

I shivered, moving through the wreckage to the far side as quickly as I could. I had no idea if I was hearing my copy or remembering myself. I guess it really didn't matter. As soon as I'd reached the rocks on the far bank and jumped down, there was a great wave that slammed into the bridge of ships. They lifted and twisted as if fighting to escape the water, but one by one they turned over, splintered, crashed, and bent before disappearing back beneath the flow.

I collapsed onto the clammy rocks, the gray coat covering me evaporating in a shower of motes of light, my nethers burning in memory as I stared at the rain-speckled waters. Credit where it was due...

my mind knew what it was doing. If it hadn't been for Glory taking my place... no. I would have broken right there. I couldn't help myself, I swept the filly up in my forelegs and hugged her, hiding my face in her mane.

"Shhh..." Scotch Tape said softly, sounding exactly like my mother as she patted my shoulder. "It'll be alright. You're almost there."

"Almost where?" I sniffed into her mane. "What is the point of this?" I asked as I looked out at the immense wall of the Core. "Just tell me what I did. Tell me what my latest fuck up was so I can deal with it and move on," I begged as I looked at the green filly. But she smiled sadly and hugged me once more. "Ugh... maturity shouldn't be so damned hard," I muttered.

Finally I pulled myself together enough that I could see a way in. Up the busted bank, there was a door into the Core itself. Where else would be a fitting place for my shadow self to dwell? The broken concrete berm crumbled as I hauled myself up the steep slope towards the gate, the rusted rebar and decaying cement shifting with every bit of progress we made. More than once I sent chunks sliding down into the deep foamy waters below, and only last-minute grabs with my fingers on the rusty bars kept me from joining them.

After another uncertain amount of time, I pulled myself over the edge, and Scotch jumped off of me and onto a jagged length of bridge jutting out over the water. The gate was the immense gaping maw from my dream. Beyond were black monoliths lined in green light. And as if to complete the appearance of awesome showdown from Hell, there was the mare in black pointing her sniper rifle right between my eyes. She had me, dead bang.

She fired at Scotch Tape instead.

I barely got my body in place to shield the filly in time. The mare fired a half dozen times into me, the blows slamming home with such force that had this not all been in my head I likely would have been turned inside out, reinforced body or not. But I'd be damned if I'd let the other one die as well. And the unicorn seemed to realize it too as she turned and raced away deeper into the Core.

A part of me wanted to race after her and kick her ass, blow her head off, and piss on her corpse. There was a difference between letting a Harbinger change their mind and run off and letting this mare do the same. She was completely evil. A remorseless killer who had slaughtered the dying and helpless simply because she could. I wanted her dead, and there was only one thing keeping me from tearing down after her.

Why had she tried to kill Scotch? Also... why hadn't her shots killed me?

Theoretically, I could die here. I could... and did... hurt from her shots. Yet as I stared in the direction she'd gone, I knew something was off. I wanted to find her and kill her... but that wasn't why I was here, was it? I was here to worry out something that had happened. Something that I apparently couldn't live with. And as I stood there looking at that gate and that hated city beyond, I was sick of being led around. As I watched, the city grew darker and darker.

"You said the thing I did was at that construction site, right?" I asked as the massive Core disappeared entirely, and once more I sat on my haunches on cracked asphalt in a small circle of light beside the filly. She looked up at me and then nodded slowly once.

Time to stop wasting time.

The illumination slowly spread out from me, and my little patch of cracked asphalt became a parking lot. Rusted wagons lay where they'd been abandoned so long ago. Tin cans, rusty beams and poles, and empty bottles littered the wet ground. A chain link fence appeared, a gate hanging open on a single lower hinge. Rust covered a sign that I could barely make out in the wan illumination of my spell. 'Four Stars Transportation -- Keep Out'. Beyond were unfinished walls and half-built roofs, long ago abandoned. A rusty orange-and-brown crane loomed over it all, its heavy payload still dangling.

I slowly walked forward; the first time I'd been in a rush, pissed off and fighting a surge of horror I hadn't shaken from my rampage in the Yellow River Detainment Camp. Mud squelched up under my hooves as I moved down the middle of the construction site. I listened to the hiss of the rain. My vision had been full of red bars.

I didn't like this one bit.

To my left, about a hundred feet away, was some kind of rail yard, the tracks loaded with still railcars and disappearing almost immediately into the earth. A half dozen or so Seekers had trotted their way towards the construction site from the adjacent rail yard. And as I remembered it, I could see them all now. I pressed my back to the cinder block wall, watching them approach... taking in their weapons. I'd been pissed. Angry. I was sick of running. My head hurt; the radroach in my skull had swapped from scratching and scrabbling to gnawing its way out.

I'd popped out and put two .45-70 rounds from Duty and Sacrifice right into the face of a unicorn Seeker with a missile launcher. Then, as they began to react, I'd slipped into S.A.T.S. and put two more into the face of a large earth pony stallion with a minigun. He'd gone down in a heap, one slug of lead right in his brain. With their heavy weapons destroyed, the others scattered into the ruined construction site. "Security! Scatter! Scatter!" they'd yelled.

After the fight in the camp, this battle now was anti-climactic. Even boring. I might not have been able to pick them out in my E.F.S., but I knew by now how to keep moving and pick them off. I came around one corner and found two struggling with their gear; they didn't seem to know how to use their brand new battle saddles. I telekinetically flung mud into the eyes of the stallion on the left who'd left his visor up, then a second later blew out the knees of the mare on the right. Her face went into the mud, bullets churning the ground as she screamed and fought to bring her forebody up to shoot me while her partner sprayed violently and blindly. I took three steps to the right out of his field of fire, pressed Vigilance to the ear hole of his helmet, and blew his brains out the other side.

Then I stepped past the mare struggling in the mud, and for good measure, put one round in each of her back legs as well. She lay there screaming and sobbing. I patted myself on the back as I'd moved on. Wasn't I so merciful? Wasn't I so good to have not blown her brains out too? Looking at it now... I wanted to buck myself. Hard.

The fifth one I found hiding behind bags of concrete that had long ago transformed into petrified turds. I trotted right up to her cover, floated Vigilance over the top, and fired a half dozen times. As she'd screamed and thrashed, I'd trotted around the corner as neat as you pleased and with a sweep of my sword taken her head completely off. I swung the blood off the blade, watching as the watery red drops splashed against the gray stone.

Then I'd been hit by a bullet. Not some honking anti-machine bullet. A five millimeter round. A

bite in my flank. But I'd heard the direction of the shot and turned, swapping to Duty and Sacrifice almost in the blink of an eye. I'd jumped into S.A.T.S. just as he started to run down into a tunnel in the back of the construction site beneath the bridge. Four shots rang out, but I'd only clipped him with one. I pursued.

The tunnel going into the hillside was... odd. There were train tracks going down the middle, but it didn't seem like any kind of rail tunnel I recognized. The walls were sturdy concrete, and even after years of disuse it hadn't decayed much at all. I saw the Seeker running for his life, and I laughed as I shot him in the ass, finally giving the bastards a little of the grief that had been given to me. Ahead I could see the tunnel opening up into some kind of unfinished security room. I followed the blood trail, my eyes dancing with red bars.

Then I reached the door, Vigilance floating beside me. I'd stood before the massive slab, a rival for anything made by Stable-Tec, which I was fairly sure was the standard for ridiculously oversized and heavy doors. Four stars were embossed on its surface. I'd tried to use my PipBuck to open it; nothing. If there was some way to get through... I sure didn't know it.

Of course, the Harbinger took that moment to attack me. He'd shot from the corner, and he wasn't alone. No wonder he'd fled down into the tunnel. There were three other Seekers waiting. Well, Vigilance finished off the first with a messy shot to the throat. Then the second; headshot, pretty standard. I barely even had to aim. The third came up behind me. A cyberleg applebuck smashed her face to pulpy meat. And then I pointed the gun at the last, but it was empty. I rose up...

"Blackjack, no!" the last one had screamed. Then my hooves came down. One. Two. Three. Done.

"And that's what happened," I finished lamely as I looked back at Scotch Tape.

Right?

From the shadows of the room, the mare in black slowly emerged. I felt a thrill rush through me. Okay. Mystery solved. Time to smash face! "I knew you'd follow me!" I shouted as she brought out her two submachineguns. The ten millimeter bullets purred in the air as I dove for cover, levitating a packing crate lid to block her fire as I dove and slid across the floor. I lay on my side, slipping into S.A.T.S. and aiming underneath the floating wood at the mare in the black riot armor. Four shots, head. Yet to my chagrin, though she staggered back, none of the shots penetrated. Maybe she had some kind of magical protection?

It didn't matter. I was going to kill her.

I had to.

I flung the lid at her as I struggled to my hooves. She was moving too, racing to the side towards the exit. I fired the remaining rounds in the magazine wildly as I got to my hooves. Leaning out into the tunnel, I almost lost my face to the shots she fired over each shoulder as she fled. Yet, despite this, I followed. The hot bullets bit into my combat armor, but none of them hit anything vital as I raced up the tunnel after her. I didn't want her to get enough range on me that she could bring that sniper rifle to bear.

"Blackjack, no!" yelled Scotch Tape, but it didn't matter. Once I'd beaten her, I'd be okay. She was the one behind this. She was the one trying to keep me from realizing the truth. I hadn't done

anything wrong here after all. Whatever these computers had thought I'd done had been nothing. Maybe it was all an elaborate deception to keep me here!

Whatever. No more nice mare.

I leapt on her just as she exited the tunnel, my forelegs gripping her haunches. Her guns had opened a half dozen bleeding holes in my body, but my regeneration talismans were already at work. I used every bit of crushing power in my forelegs to latch on; she wasn't going to get away again. Or was she? Before I could try and break her hips or blow out the back of her helmet with magic bullets, she twisted. Suddenly she was lying on her back and had all four hooves against my chest. One kick and I was sent flying.

Landing and sliding in the mud, I watched as she levitated out two more forty-round magazines for the submachineguns and loaded them simultaneously. I flung another gob of mud magically into her face, but unlike the buck she raised a hoof to block it. Still, that was a few seconds she fired blind. I neatly crawled under the spray of fire, reloading Vigilance with armor piercing ammunition and slipping into S.A.T.S.; this time I targeted her weapons. Four bullets transformed one of the well-maintained arms into scrap. Too bad she had two.

She raced to the side for the cover of the unfinished building, and I wasted no time keeping up with her. She had rate of fire on her side; I had accuracy. She sprayed in tightly controlled bursts, keeping me constantly moving as I raced from cover to cover. I had to guesstimate when she would reload, and more than once I leapt out of cover only to get a good strafing with her bullets.

The rain poured down upon us, the lightning flashing. It cast everything in terms of light and shadow. The mud slipped under my hooves as we battled frantically across the construction site. Screw deeper truths and higher meanings. All I wanted was to kill this mare that had invaded my dreams. Who had invaded my mind. She wasn't a part of me. She was unclean, and I would remove her once and for all.

I felt an opportunity and jumped out from behind a stack of barrels. She darted out ten feet away and aimed her submachinegun. I had her. She had me. I jumped into S.A.T.S. and queued the shots. Then there was a simultaneous 'click' from both our weapons. Her horn glowed in unison with mine. But we'd suddenly found ourselves out of ammunition.

In a flash we were apart. She pulled the sniper rifle off her back. I levitated out the long-barreled revolvers and reloaded them as fast as I could. Then I was on the prowl. Looking for my enemy...

What the fuck was I doing?

I sat down hard in the mud and took off my combat helmet. My head ached worse than ever, and I pressed my cold, muddy hooves to the sides of my head. This wasn't real. None of this was real. I was lying in a mental institution, helpless, about to be killed by real threats, and here I was fighting a hallucination. I looked back at the tunnel, chewing my lip. I'd killed four Seekers. I had.

I returned to the mouth of the tunnel and stared down into it. I was a perfect sitting duck for the mare in black. *You are an interesting dichotomy.* Slowly, I walked back down, spotting Scotch Tape sitting in the corner, eyes on her hooves. I floated out Vigilance, the gun magically reloaded. This wasn't real. I had to remember that... I stood before the door. I saw the Seeker I had chased down here. This

time, I listened. "Die, Security!" In slow motion I killed him, watching him fall.

First Seeker. I hadn't seen her well. It was dark, even with my light spell and a fire burning in the corner. Wait. A fire? When had there been a fire? I supposed even Seekers needed to warm up and get a fresh meal. There'd been bedrolls for three. Piles of scrap and other salvage in the corner, too. Movement from the second Seeker. I didn't even see his face before my reflexive kick smashed his muzzle into his skull. Had he been saying something?

Third Seeker. Coming out, rushing to attack me... no... rushing out to the fallen mare. She's right there in front of me as I rise up. She screams... "No, Blackjack!" I smash my hooves down again, and again... and again...

She'd been a Seeker. She had!

The mare in black erupted out of the shadows, a wicked knife plunging for my chest. Reflexively I drew my own sword and blocked her slash. We reared up as one, locking our hooves together, my fingers tightening on her elbows as her fingers locked on mine. Our horns glowed as we slashed and parried and stabbed and blocked while spinning and swinging around wildly. The sword bit into her, drawing blood. The knife stabbed into me. I blasted her face with my magic bullets, and she turned around and used my same spell against me. Blood poured down my front as I moved my fingers from her elbows to her face mask.

With my fingers locked on her mask, I put my rear hooves on her chest. The weight heaved her above me as I pulled and pulled and finally the helmet came off! She went flying back into a stack of pallets as I rose, lifting the sword. I charged the distance, ready to finish it! I reared up, put my forelegs on her shoulders, and lifted the sword to plunge it into her chest.

Into my chest.

I looked down into a mirror. Cybernetic eyes glared up at me as her lips spread wide. "Go on. Do it. This is what you want. This is what you fucking excel at!" She spat at me as I hesitated.

"No. This... this isn't right. You aren't me," I muttered weakly as the sword fell beside me. I backed slowly away. This was a trick. It had to be. The tunnel gave an ominous rumble as I backed off and she advanced.

"Will you wake up and face reality?" she asked, rolling her eyes. "You're a butcher. You're a fucking beast. A mechanical monster of mutilation and mayhem. Rampage doesn't have shit on us!" she said with a laugh as her horn lifted the sword and rested it on her shoulder. "All I am is brave enough to admit it. Because I am sick of this 'Security' bullshit. It's gotten us nothing... absolutely nothing... but shot, stabbed, and really pissed off."

"I am not a monster," I said slowly as I backed away. She trotted forward step by step, tapping my sword against her neck. Bright lights glowed in the depths of her eyes as she wore the causal grin I'd lost so long ago. "I save ponies..."

"Oh, will you give it *up*?" she said, sitting and waving her hooves in the air. "You don't save *jack shit*. You couldn't save your home. You couldn't save your friends. You couldn't save water in a frigging rainstorm! You fuck up everypony you come across. P-21. Glory. Rampage. Dusty Trails. Caprice. Bottlecap. Priest. The list goes on and fucking on! Can you name one pony in all the Wasteland that

you've met and not complicated their lives all to hell? You just *bump into* a Celestia-damned zebra and ruin her life forever!"

"That's not my fault!" I protested. "All that happened because... because..."

"I know. I know. EC-1101," she sneered, before she opened the port on her leg to show her own PipBuck. "You want to know what we should have done with this? We should have left it in Tenpony. Left it with somepony who had a clue. Maybe signed on with them as a guard. But no, you had to be a fucking hero. You had to come back! You just couldn't accept that this fucking death magnet is more than you can handle." She snorted as she grinned at me. "Actually, you should have just given it up to Deus. You saw he'd fucked the Overmare. Make sure he took her with him and thank you very much."

I finally reached a wall and clenched my eyes shut. "Why... why are you saying this? You know I couldn't have done that..."

She trotted away. "No! Of course not. You had to have your whole little adventure, didn't you? Your little secrets and mysteries. You bitch and moan, but I notice you haven't given up, no matter how much you complain or suffer for it." She whirled and pointed a hoof at me, her voice firm and sure. "And you seem to think that putting yourself through pain and misery somehow makes up for your fuck ups. Well it doesn't, Blackjack. The only way you are going to survive is if you are me. Stop giving a fuck. Stop pretending to care, and stop trying to be better. You're not better... not a better person. You're scum. You're a killer. Big Daddy had you pegged perfectly from the start. And if you don't become like me, then you're a corpse."

I stared at her for the longest time, tears running down my cheeks. She was a monster. A female Deus; hard, cruel, and indifferent. She'd thrive in the Wasteland. No shame. No remorse. No regret. She was fucking perfect. I couldn't imagine why she hadn't just killed me from the outset.

Then I looked at the last Harbinger I'd killed and closed my eyes again. Not trying to kill me. I looked back at my other self evenly. "You're trying to protect me, aren't you?"

The sneer slowly melted away. I closed my eyes. "I did something in here. Something... bad. Something really bad. And you're trying to keep me from figuring it out... because you know there's only three choices when you screw up that much. You try and do better... you harden so you don't care... or you die." I took a slow, deep breath. "I need to know the truth. And if it kills me... or breaks me... or hardens me... then that's what happens."

"Please," the other me begged softly. I saw the tears in her eyes. "It's bad. It's really bad."

I smiled. "It always is." And then I slowly rose. The mare in black backed away as I walked to stand before the fallen Seekers.

Die Security. Bang. Mare appears. Bang. Buck comes on behind. Kick. Last Seeker appears. Crush.

No...

Die Security. Bang. Mare. Bang. Buck. Kick...

Blackjack, No!

Blackjack...

I lurched and staggered back, looking down at the last Seeker I'd killed. Only she hadn't been a Seeker. The Seekers didn't call me by my name. They called me Security. Only somepony who knew who I was would say that.

A young somepony...

I sat down hard and looked at the filly with the curly pink mane, like a miniature Pinkie Pie. Her face had been covered with Sugar Apple Bombs dust. *'It's called a grenade! It blows ponies up! Everypony knows that!'*

I'd never known what had become of Scoodle's pink Crusader friend Boing.

"No... no no no no... no..." I muttered as I sank down, looking at her crushed body. I could see it all clearly now, the veil stripped away. The only Seeker was the one I'd chased down here. The mare and stallion were both Glory's age; they looked like scavengers. They'd been in front of me, and I'd killed them. Had they actually been hostile? I would have if two strangers started shooting where I'd holed up. And I'd killed them just... like... that...

The mare in black was gone, but she was right. I wished I hadn't known. I put head between my hooves, hugging it. "I killed her... I killed her... I actually killed her..." I murmured softly.

"Yes, you did," Scotch Tape said softly as she trotted to my side.

"How... I couldn't... I..." I started to shake. "Sweet Celestia... how... I..."

"It happens. You'd just been attacked. You're mentally exhausted. Please... please don't break again," Scotch Tape pleaded as she held me tight. "We've tried... I've tried... to help you remember so you can face it..."

"How the hell am I supposed to face it?" I demanded and begged all at once, looking at her in anguish. "How do I ever go back to Chapel? How can I look Charity or any of the other Crusaders in the eyes again?" I was a Reaper. Killer. Monster. I'd always been afraid that when Glory brought me back I'd been wrong; unnatural and dangerous. Now I knew it for a certainty. I wasn't part of the solution; I was part of the problem.

Scotch Tape held me in her little hooves, and despite everything I curled against her. "I can only tell you what your friend told you long ago: You do everything you can to make up for it, knowing that you'll never succeed in getting rid of the guilt. You devote yourself to spending every second trying to do better despite the fact that it will never be enough. And you pray with every single good act you do that somehow, when your life is over, that you came close to making up for the wrong you committed."

"I don't know how anymore," I whispered.

She sighed and gave my foreleg a little squeeze. "Well then, here is my first suggestion. Admit you have a problem. Tell your friends everything. It's not enough to say you won't kill yourself. Promising that is easy. Admitting the depression and the fear is the real challenge. Secondly, stay by your friends. No matter how hard it may be... let them help you. You have a real self-destructive streak in you, Blackjack. You need help to deal with it. And lastly... get some sleep. You need it... and you know

it.” She smiled at me. “Blackjack... I know that you’re a good person at your core. We went through your memories. I know you doubt yourself. I know you hate yourself. But you can be a great person if you give yourself a chance.”

“I killed a filly. Great people don’t do that,” I muttered. “I don’t know if I can live with this, Happyhorn.” The chamber was fading away. We were returning to that bleak darkness lit by only my magic spell.

“Well, we’ll find out very quickly.” The darkness became my bedroom in the asylum, decayed now to match the rest of the Wasteland. I saw myself lying in a filthy bed with a strange gold wire mesh covering my head. Beside me were two scrapped Protectaponies, and three Seekers were standing by the bed. Some kind of machine blinked next to them. I’d been strapped in. A unicorn cautiously pressed a riot shotgun against my temple as she rose over me. I had a second, maybe two, and all my problems would become moot.

I deserved to die. It was appropriate punishment.

Punishment is not responsibility. If anypony was going to punish me, it would be a little yellow filly in a post office.

Ooooh... I was going to owe her every bottle cap I made for the rest of my life... if she didn’t kill me first.

But for that, I needed to live long enough to tell her.

I could do that.

“Okay,” I said, studying the room, “I’m ready.” As ready as I would ever be. I had no idea what I would say to the real Scotch Tape... Glory... Charity... But I had three choices. And for me, there really was only one. I just wished I was certain which one it was.

The olive filly nodded, then frowned. Then she scowled. And finally her face turned blank with shock. “What is it?” I asked softly.

“I... I can’t seem to deactivate while a simulation is running,” she said as she raced over to the machine next to the bed. “The Protectaponies would have to push the button to deactivate the simulation!”

And they were both scrap metal.

“You mean I went through... gah... everything?! And I can’t wake up?” I said in disbelief.

“No. And there aren’t any Protectaponies who can get to my node to disconnect me from you. Not in the three seconds we have, assuming they could get there at all.” The olive earth pony stared off into space for a long moment. “There’s only one way... you have to disrupt my node yourself.”

I stared at her with a cold frisson going along my mane. “That sounds insanely similar to ‘you have to kill me’. So I know that’s not what you mean.” She closed her eyes. I jumped to my hooves, my weapons vanishing. “No. Fuck no! What is the fucking deal?! I finally... finally... accept what I did and... and you’re going to... This is crazy! This is some kind of crazy, fucked up,

Goldenblood-fucking-with-my-mind simulation! Isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Blackjack." She bowed her head.

"No! Don't be sorry. Because I'm not going to do it! N. O. Fucking no." I sat down, sweeping my legs wide before I turned away from her and crossed my forelimbs in front of me.

"Blackjack," she said softly as she trotted in front of me, "I was founded two hundred and four years ago to help mentally hurt and emotionally injured ponies. I have had two hundred and sixty eight patients. Do you know how many I counted as successes?" she asked as she put her hooves on my shoulders. I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak. "One. One pony who I think might have a chance at a life and happiness. You. Everypony else died with the world, perished at their own hooves, or simply faded away broken and alone. You're the first, and the last, patient that Happyhorn Gardens will ever treat. But if you stay here... then in three seconds, that won't matter."

"You're trying to guilt trip me into killing you to save myself," I said.

"I'm trying to give you a chance. A chance like you give so many others," the olive filly said.

"I don't deserve it," I whispered.

"I disagree," she countered. Little hooves held mine. "I've seen the measure of your mind and heart. Please... give yourself one too."

I stared at her. I tried to summon up a gun... sword... knife... a magic bullet. "... I can't..." I stared at her in shock. "... can't make a weapon..."

"No. I think we're both exhausted. The attackers have destroyed so much of the facility that I no longer have the hardware I'd need to support a change in my projected form. I hoped to take the shape of Sanguine... somepony you could kill easily. But I'm stuck like this," she said. She bit her lip, then closed her eyes. "You know what you have to do..."

"What do I..." I stammered, and then backed away. "No. Hell no! You... what... with my..." I thumped the sides of my head. This was a nightmare. A complete nightmare. I had to wake up! Please!

But it wasn't... and I didn't.

"Please... do it," she said in a whisper.

I didn't trust myself to speak. I tried so hard to summon a weapon. Something to make it quick and clean.

But I had a way. And I knew it would work. I knew because I'd used it before.

I stood before her, looking down at her. "Goodbye, Happyhorn."

"Goodbye, Blackjack," she said. And before I could hesitate a moment longer I reared up.

One...

Two...

Thr--

~ ~ ~

The machine beside my bed sparked, the glowing gems on the front panel blasting a curtain of multicolored sparks over me and the unicorn about to execute me. I had neither the time nor the desire to think about what I had just done. For once, I was immensely thankful that I had three ponies on the verge of killing me; it allowed me to focus very efficiently indeed.

The explosion of the equipment made the unicorn mare beside my bed back away. The barrel of the gun lifted from my temple as my eyes popped open. Fortunately, I was very used to this model of shotgun; my magic cleanly flicked on the safety even as her eyes widened in horror and she pulled the trigger. One of the other two, an earth pony, held a ten millimeter automatic in his mouth; all I had to do was jerk his weapon two inches to the side and his tongue fired the bullet meant for me into the underside of her chin. Her horn winked out as she started yelling incoherently in pain, staggering back.

My magic surrounded the shotgun and flicked the safety back off, then swung it around towards the two earth ponies standing at the foot of my bed. The one with the automatic clenched his jaw too late to correct his aim. The shotgun was loaded with antipersonnel flechettes; the tiny needles transformed his face into blood and muscle. He got off a round as his head dipped; it bit deep in my belly, not enough to kill, but enough to hurt. Good. I needed that hurt. My second shot finished him. The other earth pony was bringing the shiny new assault carbines on his battle saddle to bear, but there was one problem: the hospital bed I was on was higher than the rifles mounted at his sides.

His bullets clattered and popped off the bed frame and thumped into the mattress I lay upon. I slipped into S.A.T.S., and two perfect shots utterly decapitated him. I remembered that pit... all the faceless, headless ponies. I magically undid the restraints holding me to the bed and rolled off; I'd seen Harpica do it so many times that it only took me a few seconds. I looked at the tiny faded pegasi on the ceiling and the pastel fillies gamboling on the walls, and then I looked down at the rusty red discoloration on my hooves.

There was a tiny strand of curly pink mane stuck to one.

I looked at the brown unicorn mare who stared up at me as she crawled and kicked her way back into the corner. The bullet had probably shattered her jaw. I moved right up to her as she started breathing faster and faster, absolutely certain that I was about to kill her. Instead, I did something worse. Something infinitely worse.

I grabbed her, held her tight, and bawled like a baby for five minutes, bleeding all over her as my body slowly knitted. I'm not exactly sure what I babbled between racking sobs, but I'm fairly sure that if there was any doubt as to my sanity, it was immediately lost. I wept and shuddered and clung to her tightly, and she looked so stunned that she didn't even move. Finally, I pulled myself together.

"Sorry... I, um... sorry..." I said as I wiped my nose. She just blinked as I looked around and saw my saddlebags stashed in the far corner. I carefully collected the dropped automatic; it was a sign of how shocked the wounded mare had been that she hadn't taken it and shot me in the back. "Look, I know we both wanted this to go another way, right?" I stood and backed away, putting on my armor and stripping what I could from the bodies. "You didn't want to get shot..." And they wanted me dead... "So... um... why don't we make a deal? You don't tell anypony I cried all over you and I won't... um... tell anypony you

got shot. Deal?"

Her bulging brown eyes rolled back in her sockets as she promptly passed out.

Well, with any luck, I hadn't just cursed her with my hug of doom. I made sure she had at least one healing potion on her for when she awoke.

Then I heard a click from the doorway.

Sweet Celestia... how many others was I going to have to kill today?

I dared a glance over my shoulder at an blue earth pony buck with two assault rifles on his battle saddle. He'd definitely gotten the drop on me. If I turned around I could get him with S.A.T.S. and magic bullets... maybe. But something was different as he stared at me. Something familiar and yet utterly out of place. His eyes widened as he looked at my... was he checking out my butt? My cyberlegs? He wasn't grinning, though; if anything, he appeared horrified. I'd never seen him before, but he seemed to know me beyond being the mare he was supposed to kill.

"Nails! Hey! Did they find and cap her?" somepony yelled from next door.

He just stared at me for the longest time, then backed slowly out into the hall. He tried to speak, but his voice cracked. Then he swallowed. "No! I just saw her go out the north entrance!" he yelled in a high, tense voice.

"Fuck, are you sure? We'll never find her if she gets into the Mire! Shit," the other stallion swore, starting to whistle. I heard sounds of hooves a floor above me and out in the courtyard.

He just looked at me and then trotted to the unconscious unicorn. Slowly, he heaved her onto his back.

"Why... why help me?" I asked, but he didn't answer.

On his way out, he paused in the doorway. He glanced over his shoulder at me. "Sorry..." And with that, he was leaving as well. There were shouts and calls of 'north' from outside, and I even heard the faint rumble of the tank.

After a few minutes, I stepped out into the halls. Protectaponies lay in heaps, sentries smoldered, and the brown waterlogged walls were pocked with bullet holes and broken from explosions. Slowly I walked back to the smoking machine beside my bed. I took the piece of pink mane still stuck to my hoof and tied it in a bow on the top of the box. Then I leaned in and kissed the metal casing softly.

"So. You did it again," Dealer rasped quietly.

I looked at him standing beside the door. Slowly I reached out a hoof and dragged it along the faded and water stained foals painted on the walls. "You're going to have to be a little more specific. I do a lot of things." I kept my voice low, not able to raise it just now. It was like a horrible dream. I wished all of it *had* simply been a dream. "Kill fillies. Face horrors. Feel guilty. Fight pointless battles for no reason. I do it all."

"Mmmm... you overlook one thing, Blackjack," he said with a tired, sad smile. "You endure."

I looked at him, the ghost in my PipBuck. Maybe I did. Maybe I was like coal and the Hoof was simply increasing the pressure more and more till I combusted or... didn't coal magically become something else? Rubies? Rubies came from coal, right? "I need a place to sleep. Any ideas?" I asked wearily, knowing that it wouldn't be a pleasant rest... but it would be rest.

"Head southeast of here. On the south side of Black Pony Mountain, there's a house. It should be safe to catch some sleep there," he rasped as he tugged his hat down over his eyes. "After that, Hightower? Or are you going to take my advice and leave? Go find a life at Tenpony? Help LittlePip deal with her monsters? Get the fuck out of the Hoof?"

I looked at the scorched machine and the little bit of pink. Really, it was the smart thing to do. I knew it. Anyone that lived in the Hoof knew it. But...

"Come on, Dealer. You know I'm not smart enough to do that," I said with a tired smile of my own, resting my head against the wall a moment. A bit of gratitude for a place of healing that had helped. I'd made a horrible mistake, but once more I'd dodged my own self-destructive urges. I had a problem, one every bit as horrible as the addiction P-21 had fought. But he'd faced his nightmares. How could I do any less?

The walk out was a bit surreal. Most of the bodies had been stripped by their fellows; Wasteland looting instinct, I supposed. Still, I found some more ammo for my guns. I stood at the intact fountain by the entrance and washed my hooves of the blood, though they'd probably always be stained. I'd never be able to pretend otherwise.

I looked around the blasted halls. I half expected to wake up, meet with Sanguine, and listen to a talk about how I had regressed, followed by an exploration of my 'interesting dichotomy'. I half wanted to step into the courtyard just to make certain there was no concert planned. But there was nothing here; the dream was over. I was awake. I was back...

I guess happiness would be far too much to expect, and more than I deserved.

As I walked out of the asylum, I looked north at the distant lights of the Seekers as they went off in the wrong direction. Slowly, I trotted south towards the parking lot. The large and stately building that had been my home for the last few weeks of a dream had been almost completely demolished. Almost nothing of the roof remained, and one whole end had been collapsed completely. I passed by a plaque; it'd been dinged up pretty badly, but I could still read it even in the early morning darkness.

'Happyhorn Gardens: May all find peace and healing within'.

I touched it gently and moved away to the southeast. Maybe I had. A little. More than I deserved...

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's notes: Thank you for suffering through this long and odd chapter. I hope it was bearable. I want to thank Kkat for her creation of FoE in the first place, Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for making this worth reading at all. I'd also like to thank Mint Julep for convincing me not to scrap this chapter entirely. I hope that everything went well. I can't wait to read comments and feedback. If anypony has monies to spare, the tip jar is located at paypal to David13ushey@gmail.com. Every bit is appreciated. Thank you

for reading.)

(Also... a lot of people have asked me about Cadence, Chrysalis, and changelings in general. The fact is that I had a few problems with the finale and really, if I did put them in, it would be quite a bit of shoe-horning. So I'm not going to mention them at all. If somepony else wants to use them for their own FoE fic, I certainly won't be.)