

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 6: Play

"I know lots of other ways to take care of you. Don't worry. You're gonna get better."

The rain had returned while we were in Ironshod Firearms R&D; this time it was a seemingly endless drizzle that cut the world down to a thirty-foot bubble around us and rendered the ground a layer of slippery muck. It made what should have been a simple trek southwest to the Fluttershy Medical Center a real toil. I wasn't going to discard a single bullet or bit of loot that might contribute to our ten-thousand-cap goal, though, and with P-21's injured leg and Glory's lack of pockets, I was left slogging through knee-deep mud while they trotted ahead.

I didn't worry quite so much with my E.F.S. and compass. In fact, with the navigation tag up I couldn't get lost. The rain gave me time to think, which is always a bad thing. Ten thousand caps just to find out what EC-1101 was, and once we found out, what then? Deus was still out there, somewhere. So was Sanguine, who directed him. Then there was Hoofington, a city of technology and a city built on its hatred of the zebras. A country within a country, as Glory had described it. A place of secrets.

"Ugh. I am not a smart pony. Why do I have to deal with all this complicated shit?"

"Stop whining, Blackjack," P-21 said from ahead.

"I am not whining. I am complaining."

"No. I'm fairly sure that's whining," Glory commented overhead.

No respect. I tell ya, I get no respect.

Never had I been so happy to reach a parking lot. The rusting carts and sky carriages slowly decayed in little heaps across the cracked, weathered, and uneven asphalt. Still, it wasn't mud, and that was all I cared about at the moment. Okay, that was a lie, but if I actually thought about all the things in the back of my head I'd get a migraine. So I was in denial. Who could blame me?

And that's a really *big* building.

Even through the veil of rain, the Fluttershy Medical Center rose before us like an immense tree stump. Multiple wings branched from the central structure. I'd never seen a structure like it before, which admittedly wasn't saying much. I simply couldn't help but think of twenty Megamarts stacked one atop another. If Bottlecap had been right, this was my best shot at finding something to fix P-21's leg.

The yellow bars on my PipBuck gave me pause. One day, I'd find somepony who could explain how the magical cuff could tell if something was going to shoot me offhand or not. Maybe P-21 could figure it out. Still, might as well be friendly, so I holstered the shotgun across my back and shouted into the hazy rain, "Friendlies coming! Don't shoot!"

The yellow bars immediately started to mill about as we approached. P-21 gave me a look, but personally I would be less inclined to shoot a pony who asked me not to. True, I was an idiot, but still. As we got closer, we came across a low barricade of rusted skywagons and, behind the barricade, four ponies pointing rifles at us. Pointing, but not shooting. I could live with that. "Somepony needed some squatters removed?"

"Yes," a buck called out into the rain. His tone sounded dignified and just a bit like the Overmare. "I'm so grateful somepony decided to come. Please, come and get out of the rain." I immediately looked at P-21 in surprise. Manners? In the Wasteland? I walked past the barricade and towards the center of the encampment, where, I now saw, a long sky trailer had been draped with canvas to create an island of dryness in the middle of the drizzle. The first thing I took in about the ponies sheltering there was they were clean, and not clean in an 'I was just rained on' way. Their clothes were trimmed and patch-free. They wore some sort of light armor similar to my security barding and their weapons were of distinctly higher quality.

Then I saw a unicorn inside the trailer who had to be the pony in charge. Charisma and charm seemed to drip from his ivory hide and cobalt mane, and he gave the impression of illuminating the dim interior of the rusty trailer. His smile made my knees feel like I'd just glanced up at the sky. "Greetings. I am Prince Splendid." *You bet you are!* "I'm glad somepony responded to my requests in a prompt manner. Would you care for some refreshment?"

"Sure. Refreshment sounds great." Hot body, manners, and feeding us? This day just got a whole lot better! In fact, I was pretty sure that this was the high point of my entire experience in the Wasteland. Heck, of my life!

Refreshment involved chilled Sparkle-Cola RAD, which had a delicious sharp radish flavor – and more clicks on the radiation sensor – and some fresh carrots and apples. I could only imagine where he'd gotten fresh produce from. "So, excuse me for wanting to talk business while we eat, but who exactly are we evicting from that building?" P-21 asked as he batted a half-eaten carrot around his plate. I gave him a sharp glare that hopefully said 'do not piss off the nice unicorn with the hot flank'.

"Members of the Collegiate that have some academic interest in the site," Splendid said calmly, without showing the slightest bit of umbrage. "We've tried to negotiate with them, but they've adamantly refused. You know the Collegiate." Actually, I didn't. "There's nothing in Hoofington that they don't want to study. So we need somepony to convince them to leave until my business is concluded."

"And just what is your business here?" I asked, giving him my winningest, flirtiest smile. True, I'd only employed it on Midnight with little success. "It must be important for somepony like you to be here."

He looked at me with momentary consideration, his smile softening before he sighed. "My father is old and very ill with a wasting disease. Fluttershy's Ministry of Peace pioneered revolutionary medical technologies and procedures, from simple healing potions to megaspells that could resuscitate entire battlefields. I believe there must be something here that will restore my father to health. Without my father, I fear the Society will tear itself apart."

Society ponies will give ya a meal and then tell ya how grateful ya should be ta get it. "The Society?"

“Ah, yes. You’re from a stable. I should have remembered that you’d be unfamiliar with the various political factions of the Hoof. My apologies.” He stood and said with great pride, “The Society members are the descendants of the aristocracy of Equestria. Our king and leaders are related to Princess Celestia, and thus we are the rightful inheritors of Equestria.” He gave a great sigh. “Sadly, few in the Wasteland will acknowledge our bloodline claims.”

I tried to keep a pleasant smile as Stable 99 returned with a vengeance and the Overmare popped into my mind. “So... you think you should get to rule because your ancestors did?” He smiled and nodded, pleased that I’d gotten it. Great. That splashed ice water on my hot, steamy fantasy.

He seemed to detect my skepticism and smiled graciously. “I understand that the burden is on the Society to prove its worthiness to lead. We don’t expect everypony in the Wasteland to bend knee to us simply because we say so. But for a thousand years and more, Equestria knew peace and harmony under an autocrat. Why should it not be so again?”

Somehow, the fact we were in a rusty sky trailer drinking two-hundred-year-old soda and finding fresh food a luxury made such a simple nostalgic desire both tantalizing and disappointing. Worse, Prince Splendid seemed to believe every word.

“So you want access to the clinic. If I can convince these Collegiate ponies to let you in, would that be okay?” I asked, tapping hooves before me. Things were so much easier when I could just shoot ponies. If I lived, I won.

“If you can, it would be a miracle, but an acceptable one. We have no argument with the Collegiate and their naive ideals. I merely want access to find something to cure my father.” Still, a solution with nopony getting killed was preferable.

Prince Splendid was a gracious host, but there was way too much awkwardness. I had to admit, I was impressed by what I saw; his ponies were better armed and equipped than most. He had fresh food; that was a miracle in and of itself. It was simply the fact that the Society seemed to believe it had some inherent right to rule. Even if he got this super cure for his father, who would it help besides ponies who already had so much?

We stepped back out into the rain with our stomachs fed, but my head, already struggling with earlier doubts and questions, now throbbed. Plus, it didn’t help that my loins were very interested in Splendid, and I had no clue how to address that; in 99 I’d put myself on his breeding queue. No doubt Splendid would have had a backlog of years. Now, I doubted it was just as simple as getting him alone and lifting my tail.

“So, what do you think?” I asked P-21, and then frowned as I saw him staring out into space as he limped along beside me. “Yoo-hoo... Equestria to P-21...” I swished my tail through his field of vision.

He blinked out of his reverie, looking... embarrassed? “Yeah? What? Oh, think? I think... ah...” I stared in fascination as he actually stammered! “I... I’ll leave it up to you.” Rarely have such ominous words been uttered by so level-headed a pony. I didn’t think he could stammer!

“What’s gotten into you?” I asked, and grinned as he went even redder.

"Nothing. I mean... I'm just thinking about what he said to you..." He scowled and then clenched his eyes closed. "Never mind!" he said as he limped ahead of us.

"What was that all about?" I asked Morning Glory. Prince Splendid had been rather gracious to me. "Is he jealous?" I looked back at Splendid's encampment and then at P-21's backside. He was! It explained everything. I couldn't help but nicker.

The gray pegasus looked up at me in confusion and a touch of worry. "You're asking *me*?"

Good point. We crossed the parking lot, heading towards an entrance surrounded by sandbags. And two turrets... hello! Still, the bars remained yellow rather than red. "Hey! Don't shoot!"

"One day you're going to give somepony ideas," P-21 muttered.

Ponies scrambled at my call, and soon three pointed weapons from behind the sandbags. "Go away!" a buck yelled, his thick glasses looking almost like goggles as he gaped at us standing in the rain.

"Calm down!" I said as I sat. "We don't want trouble. We just want to talk." Preferably out of the rain.

"Are you with the Society?" he asked at once and then blurted nervously, "Tell them we're not leaving!" Their beam rifles looked like they'd fall apart with a sharp kick. Those turrets on the other hand...

"I'm here to talk. If I can work out a deal where nopony gets killed, even better," I said truthfully. "My name's Blackjack." Incomprehension. I sighed and added, "Security?" Comprehension dawned and they started to relax a little. Urgh... as much as I hated to admit it, that little title of DJ Pon3's was making my life easier.

"I'm Archie. Come on in," goggle buck said as he turned and trotted back into the hospital. It looked like this was some sort of emergency ward or the like. It'd seen much better days. The butterfly wallpaper was peeling off in brown strips, a layer of muck coated the floor, and it looked like the emergency beds had been converted into sleeping quarters. A strange drum hummed softly in the corner, providing power to a number of flickering terminals. There were a dozen or so ponies working in the dingy space.

"So are you the pony in charge?" I asked.

The brown buck with the scraggly black mane nodded. "For now. My boss went upstairs a week ago and hasn't come back," he said nervously as he looked at the three of us. "Prince Splendid's tried to take over more than once. First he tried to sweet talk us, then bribes, then he attacked."

"Must be something really worthwhile here, then," I commented lightly, and got a worried look from the twitchy brown buck. "Something that a lot of ponies need," I amended quickly, and he noticeably relaxed.

"There is. When we got here, we found that the upper levels are completely untouched. They must have sealed hermetically when the bombs fell and only disengaged when the radiation dropped to

survivable levels.” He looked at several racks with medical goods stacked on them. “Unfortunately, the team who went up there didn’t come back. Neither did the team that went in to look for them. Now we’re stuck here till the Collegiate can send reinforcements.”

“Prince Splendid thinks there’s something here that will help him with his sick father,” I said as neutrally as possible as I saw Archie frown.

“There is! Well... probably,” he said as he turned to the terminal. “We’ve found notes on several new healing potions. Targeted antibiotics. Even regeneration spell infusions.” He pointed at the terminal. “If we could find samples and study them, we might be able to discover how to make more. That could take years though. The prince just wants to take the samples and use them. Even offered to buy them, as if you could put a price tag on this knowledge!”

Great. It looked like what everypony was after was above us. My mane started to twitch. “Well, how about this, then: my friends and I take a peek upstairs, see if we can find your teams, maybe find something to make both you and the Society happy, and everypony lives?” What were the odds that I’d only find one dose of magical experimental super heally stuff?

Damn, my mane was itching like crazy.

We left the emergency room and walked into the central atrium, stepping into a virtual forest. The interior of the massive structure was hollow, and far above us the domed skylight had shattered, allowing rain and runoff to cascade down into the fountain set in the center of the chamber. Chipped and faded concrete vines coiled up the interior, giving the impression of being within some mythical wood. Butterflies and birds perched, frozen and forgotten for two centuries. Glass tubes had once held elegant brass elevators, but now they were smashed or leaned out over the interior.

In the center of the fountain rose the bronze statue of a pegasus pony, one hoof around the shoulders of a young unicorn filly, the other stroking the mane of an earth pony colt. On her shoulder perched an elegant bird. At her hooves, a small rabbit seemed to glare rather insolently out with his forelegs crossed. A plaque at the base of the statue read, ‘We Must Do Better’. Looking at the pegasus’s gentle smile, I couldn’t shake the feeling that the statue wept for all the decay around her.

“Who was she?” I asked Glory softly, feeling a strange sense of reverence and sadness.

“Fluttershy. She was a ministry mare, and a friend of Rainbow Dash. She founded the Ministry of Peace and dedicated herself to helping the ponies of Equestria throughout the war.” Morning Glory looked wistful as well as she looked up at her. “As the war progressed it took its toll on her. Some claim she aided the enemy, despite orders to the contrary, and gave zebras medical supplies and other care. At the end... well... I was taught she went mad with grief and wandered out into the Wasteland to die. She simply couldn’t live with having failed Equestria.”

I stared at the bronze statue a moment longer. “If she failed, I can’t believe it was for lack of trying,” I said softly as we headed towards the stairs. Morning Glory, however, examined the remaining elevator curiously. “Something wrong?”

“I think it’s still functional. It just needs a spark battery and some scrap metal,” she said as she pried up a panel in the center of the platform. I looked at P-21. No need to make him climb ten flights of

stairs if we could avoid it. I checked my inventory and nodded, floating the components to her for the repairs. A few minutes later the brass platform hummed softly inside its tube and an eerie noise filled the air.

"What is that?" I asked as the three of us stood upon the metal disk. It wasn't music but... similar.

"Birds," Glory replied simply as we lifted into the air. Higher and higher the platform rose, and I suddenly had to clench my eyes tight. There was way too much open space around me, and the glass walls didn't help. I levitated out my shotgun and reloaded the drum, checking the wear and tear that had built up over the last day. I was definitely doing a number on it.

When the doors to the fifteenth floor opened I jumped through, breathing hard as I fought the urge to be sick. When my heartbeat slowed I looked back at the elevator where P-21 and Morning Glory were frozen in place. "What?" I asked as they stared at me... no. Not at me. Slowly I turned and looked at the wall opposite the elevator. In flaking black-maroon letters, a single word was written as if with a paintbrush. 'PLAY'.

Oh horseapples...

* * *

Time had stopped as effectively as if I'd triggered S.A.T.S. and simply left it there. My PipBuck's chronometer might've still marked the time, but every minute felt like an hour. Normally I'd be bored to stupidity, but here my every nerve was screaming at attention. Step by cautious step we walked together, me first, then P-21, and lastly Glory watching behind us. The word was painted every few feet, sometimes in elegant cursive and sometimes in wild, broad letters. The lights flickered and dimmed, but I was used to dim and uncertain light. I was not used to the soft, chiming melody that played all around us like an invisible music box with a cylinder that turned just a touch too slowly.

"Hush now, quiet now, it's time to lay your sleepy head..." a filly sang softly in the hallway behind us. Slowly P-21 and I turned and looked back at Morning Glory without saying a word. Our combined look was enough to silence the pegasus. "Sorry," she muttered. I did not want to hear my childhood lullabies right now.

There were other little variances. Dolls hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the hallway. A stuffed rabbit tucked into a hospital bed... no, not tucked. Strapped. Two dozen bed sheets stretched across the hallway, decorated with maroon houses and stick figures. And more detailed paintings of ponies. And... fire. And ponies fighting. Ponies dismembered.

Something moved beyond the sheets, but when I yanked them aside I saw only empty hall.

"What the hay is going on here?" I muttered softly. I suddenly found myself longing for Pony Joe's. "Give me bodies... or something shooting at me... or something. Not freaky pictures and words written in dark paint." I glanced back and saw both of them staring at me. "What?"

"She doesn't *know*?" Glory whimpered to P-21.

"Apparently not," P-21 said as he looked behind us.

"Know what?"

Glory swallowed. "That isn't *paint*, Blackjack." She pointed at the black-red letters on the wall.

I closed my eyes. Oh I really really wish she hadn't said that. "Right. Of course it isn't." I looked down yet another empty hall and shouted, "Okay! You're officially sick fuckers! Now come out so I can shoot you!"

Then we heard a soft '*thump, thump, thump, thump*' in the hallway ahead of us. A bright red ball bounced down the dimly lit hall towards the three of us. No... not a ball. It was too irregular for that. It rolled to a stop at my feet, leaving bright wet splotches on the floor. The face on the severed head was a mask of terror.

A foal giggled in the darkness.

"Cute," I muttered. This head was fresh.

"Shit. Shit. Shit," P-21 repeated over and over again as he stared down at it.

"Calm down," I muttered, trying my best not to freak out. "It's just a head." As we watched, a knee-high door in the wall opened up and a small mechanical pony trotted out and washed off the smears of blood with rotating buffers on its hooves. It ignored the severed head. Now that was some shoddy programming. Then it turned and disappeared back into its little door.

"Maintenance robots," Morning Glory whispered as we continued down the hall past empty hospital rooms. The music box tune continued its soft, too-slow melody as we reached a nurse's station. Everything neat. Everything put away except for the creepy little artifacts and associated body parts. After so many ruined buildings, the cleanliness disturbed me almost as much as the music.

I tried my radio, but the only channels I could find had the same music box melody.

We came across an active terminal. "Finally! Maybe there will be an inventory," P-21 said with some relief as he focused on the terminal. I slowly panned the E.F.S., but my vision kept flickering as if something here jammed my signal. I knew that head didn't come from nowhere though. He struggled for several minutes as the music box looped over and over again. Then there was a soft beep as he cracked the password. I looked over his shoulder, and then frowned as the screen went blank.

>Peek-a-boo. I see you.

The scream that began to play from the terminal rose and fell at earsplitting volume. "KILL ME!" she screamed over and over again between agonizing cries. I grabbed P-21's mane in my teeth and pulled him away from the terminal. Then I put an explosive orange shell into the thing. Silence dropped around us till our ears recovered and picked up the sound of the music box.

"What the fuck is going on?" P-21 whispered, staring down the empty halls.

"Want a gun?" I asked softly.

"I'd just start shooting wildly," he muttered in return. Well, that was an improvement over saying he'd deliberately shoot me. We resumed our search. 'PLAY', the sanguine words demanded. Yellow and red bars flickered so wildly in my PipBuck's E.F.S. that I deactivated it before it made me sick.

We came across a door with something new carved in the wood paneling. 'Ollie Ollie Oxen Free'. I carefully opened it telekinetically, revealing a desiccated corpse rolled in a fetal position in the tiny space at the bottom of the linen closet. She wore a nurse's uniform. Scratched in the wood before the body was a simple eulogy: 'I don't want to play anymore.'

Morning Glory hyperventilated as P-21 talked to her in a hushed tone, holding the young pegasus to keep her from falling over. Given that she herself had almost died of thirst in an equally tiny space, it was understandable. That left me with the task of checking the body. Her hide had dried to a leathery texture that crackled when I carefully swept it with my magic. I found an ID card that read 'Chief Nurse Tenderheart'. A little magical glyph glowed on the bottom of the badge. "What's this?"

Morning Glory refused to look towards me, so I floated it to her. "It's a key for special door locks. The kinds that can't normally be picked and need magic to bypass them." Hopefully door locks like the kind that protected experimental healing goods...

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Going up a floor hadn't helped. If anything, the scenery worsened. We came across storage rooms that had been raided. A cold room that Glory had described as a blood locker was completely empty. Drained potion containers were stacked from floor to ceiling. We found what I guessed was one of the Collegiate ponies... he'd been skinned and bristled from head to hoof with spent syringes. 'Mr. Needle is your friend' had been written above him.

I really wanted to introduce somepony to Ms. Shotgun.

We encountered a box in the hall, a large metal cube with small pink hearts painted on each side. I couldn't explain why, but I had the strangest fondness for the box. There was a little handle sticking out of the side. I glanced at the others, reached out slowly with my magic, and began to turn it. "All around the mulberry bush... the monkey chased the weasel..." Glory sang softly, and I couldn't bring myself to stop her. I knew what was coming, but I was powerless to stop. When the note hit 'pop', the metal top snapped open, and out flew a pony. No... half a pony. The skinned front half bounced back and forth on a heavy metal spring, front hooves crossed as if hugging itself. Bony wings flopped around behind it.

"A pegasus?" gasped Glory in horror.

Then the box suddenly played the rest of the tune and there was a second metallic boing as its front legs popped wide and dropped three metallic apples. Through reflex more than thought my telekinesis flung them away as the three of us hit the deck. Silence. Silence. Silence. Slowly I lifted my head and carefully turned the nearest grenade with my magic. A hole had been neatly drilled in the bottom of each.

Sick fu-- wait... not sick *enough*. "Run!" I yelled as I grabbed P-21 with my magic and scooped Glory up as I bolted down the hall. A few seconds later the bombs hidden inside the box exploded. The

three of us landed in a heap.

"How'd... how'd you know?" P-21 muttered in shock, blood dripping from a nostril.

"The only thing more messed up than scaring us with duds is scaring us with duds, letting us have a moment of relief, and then blowing us up with the real bomb."

"I don't know which concerns me more. That someone thought of that, or that you figured it out," P-21 said with his usual dry smile.

I stood and carefully trotted back towards the box, not sure how to take that. I doubted there'd be a second bomb. It wouldn't be as much fun. Far more effective, yes, but whoever the fuck was behind this wasn't trying to kill us. That wasn't the point. I found the pegasus torso and head. "Is he Enclave?"

Glory glanced at the body, shuddered and looked away, then looked again with a small frown. "I..." She swallowed and walked closer. "I think so. He's slightly desiccated... maybe dead a month or so? But we weren't supposed to go anywhere near the clinic."

Only near raider nests. "So this guy's not with the Volunteer Corps?"

"No. He must be with security," she said softly. Surprise surprise...

I looked ahead with a scowl. "Whatever's in here had better be worth it; I'm in a shooty kind of mood."

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Things didn't improve as we encountered more bodies. A tea party of four bony ponies around a petrified cake with their hooves nailed to the table and party hats on their heads. A body dressed in a foal's tutu impaled on a turntable. I was starting to become numb to the next horror around the corner, yet I couldn't stop looking. The music kept playing; I could barely hear things moving around out of sight.

We found ourselves in a staff lounge. Everything was neat and clean and tidy; I was starting to hate the cleanliness. I longed for a wrapper. An empty tin can. A soda bottle left on a shelf. Anything that was a sign that at one time normal ponies lived here. I was getting sick of wooded wallpaper and frozen birds and butterflies. Oh... and grotesquely posed corpses. I longed for the boring gray walls of 99.

I used the bits we had to clean out the soda machines, sharing two of the fizzy drinks with Glory and P-21. Anything that might have been a personal item was by and large missing. I did find a newspaper clipping posted to the bulletin board. It was so yellowed and brittle I feared even touching it with my magic as I read. The beginning had fallen off, but the remainder I could just make out.

...intosh was ninety minutes from Ministry of Peace care following the assassination attempt on Princess Celestia at Shattered Hoof Ridge. Thousands of soldiers and countless non-combatants suffer while waiting for medical care. Today, the Ministry of Peace, working in concert with the Ministry of Arcane Science and the Ministry of Wartime Technology, has devised a means of preserving injured or sick ponies until such time as treatment is available.

No small measure of thanks goes out from the Ministry of Peace to the Office of Interministry Affairs. Without their tireless work bringing together ideas from all across Equestria, we would never have been able to complete this new facility. Countless young lives would be cut short or left to misery. They are a testament to what needs to be done to end this war and open a new chapter for us all.

-Fluttershy

A means of preserving injured or sick ponies. "This is it," I said in excitement. "If Splendid can bring his father here, they can keep him alive till the Collegiate makes a cure. Heee! I love it when a plan comes together!"

"Blackjack," Morning Glory said softly. I glanced at her, and followed her gaze into the top corner of the room where a carved white bunny watched us sternly. There was the tiniest little hum, and I watched a camera in one eye of the bunny slowly focus.

"We should get going," I said softly, leading us back out into the empty hallway. As soon as we were through it, the door to the staff lounge closed behind us and locked with a solid click. "Oh, that's not good."

Suddenly the lights clicked out, plunging the hall into absolute darkness. Then a red light appeared at the end of the hall. "What the heck is...?" I started to ask, taking a step forward. From the ceiling came a sharp flash, and I felt the bite of a beam weapon hit my chest. Suddenly, the red light turned green, and from the hallway behind us something metallic screeched, coming closer. I fired blindly down the hall, but the muzzle flashes only illuminated something big and bloody. Suddenly the light turned red and it stopped. We all froze.

Oh Goddesses... it's a game.

The light turned green and I screamed, "Run!" My magic grabbed P-21 and dragged him along beside me as the machine crashed along behind us. Red light. "Freeze!" I bellowed and everything stopped. One second. Two. Three. Four. Green light! We raced ahead as fast as we could, but the crashing behind us grew closer. Red light! Silence. Green light! Red light! Green light! Red light! Morning Glory staggered a half step forward and cried out as the beam turret struck her leg.

This red light I could feel the soft tickle of a breath on my hindquarters. I just stared at the red light as I floated out a little disk and set it beneath me. My magic hovered on the button. Green light! I pushed the frag mine's arming tab and wasted no time dragging P-21 closer towards a door beneath the green light. The mine beeped immediately and a second later there was a resounding PONG of metal being struck. Three feet. Two feet. One foot. I was through the door, and pulled P-21 after me, but Morning Glory was a few feet behind us. Red light. In the sanguine glow I could see the vaguely canine grin of metal right behind her as she trembled, frozen in terror.

Then the door closed in our faces.

"Glory! No! Glory!" I screamed as I fired several rounds into the door. It didn't even dent. I beat it with the butt of my shotgun and kicked it with my hooves. "What the fuck do you want, you fuckers?! What!" I screamed down the hall. "Whaaaaat?!" My own voice echoed back at me.

'PLAY' answered the blood on the walls.

* * *

Do you want to come with us?

I'd killed Scoodle through ignorance. Now I'd killed Glory through incompetence. How could I have gone through the door without making sure she'd been through first? I'd seen her get hit by the beam. I should have known she'd be a few steps slower. I'd sunk down with my back against the door, knocking my head against it with the shotgun cradled in my hooves.

"Come on. We need to keep going," P-21 muttered softly. I levitated the shotgun, shoving it controls-first towards his mouth. "What are you doing?!" he stammered in shock, trying to push it away.

"You said if I ever got another pony killed by being stupid that you'd end me," I muttered, looking at my hooves. "Time to make good on it."

"I'm not going to kill you for this, Blackjack," he said softly. "This wasn't your fault."

"I'm the leader. Whose fault is it if not mine?"

"Whatever sick fucker is behind this," he replied. I didn't move, still just trying to give him the gun. His stoic mask crumbled as I saw fear creep into his features. "Blackjack, I can't do this without you," he said softly as he sat down beside me.

"Either I'm incompetent or I'm cursed. Either way, you're better off without me," I muttered. *Is this it? Is this the part where the Wasteland breaks me?* "I don't know what to do and I keep getting ponies killed that don't deserve it," I whispered.

P-21 sighed, hugging the shotgun with his hooves. "I don't know what to do either. If there isn't a terminal or a lock I might as well be back in 99. I'm so scared right now that the only thing I know for sure is that I'm going to die, and it's going to be ugly. I'm not you, Blackjack. I might be smarter than you, but I'm not as brave as you are."

It hurt so much, but what could I do? Give up and die... that was the easy out. The contemptible way out. Give in to hatred and just kill and kill and kill? That was so tempting right now. A bloody part of me craved it. Kill the Collegiate, take their stuff, kill the Society ponies and repeat the process. Kill, take, kill, take, and never feel again. It was a more thrilling form of suicide.

You keep going, knowing that it will never be enough. You spend every second trying to make it right, knowing you never can.

Slowly I reversed the pull on my horn and took the gun from him. I rocked forward and stood. I wasn't quite done just yet. Despite everything, despite the fact I was not a smart pony, a plan crept out of my meager brain. Worse... I was looking forward to it. "P-21... you're ten times sneakier than I am. You know terminals. You can open locks and get where you need to go. Somewhere in this place is someone controlling everything. You've got to shut them down." I passed him the keycard.

"You're splitting us up," he said flatly. "You know nothing good can come of this, Blackjack."

"It's the only way I can think of. Together we're a big target. Alone... you might be able to shut them down. I'll be a nice, big, stupid pony to keep their attention," I said with a grin. I tried to keep it as I added, "You might also find Glory."

"You really think she might be alive?"

No. "I'm not going to give up hope just yet." Giving up hope was so ten seconds ago. "Just do what you do best and leave being a decoy to the not smart pony."

"You're not stupid, Blackjack," he said quietly, then caught my arched brow. "Okay. Well. Good luck." I loaded up the drum with orange shells and spun it once loudly as I trotted in the opposite direction. As I trotted I felt an old song nibbling at the back of my mind. I started to hum the tune as I slowly smiled. It was phenomenally stupid, but that was something I excelled at!

"You put your right hoof in... you put your right hoof out... you put your right hoof in, and you shake it all about," I sang, tired of the music box playing in the background. Okay, it was more shouting than singing as I charged down the hallway. "You do the pony pokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about." I paused and grinned as I heard the music box cut off, replaced by the very tune I was singing! That's it, you sick fucker. Pay attention to the crazy filly with the shotgun!

"You put one shell in! You take another one out!" I shouted as I blasted another bunny camera. "You load another shell in and you blast it all about! You do the pony pokey and take the fuckers out. That's what it's all about!" Move fast, shoot, and shoot some more. If a turret popped out of the ceiling I popped it before it got to fire more than twice. Don't think. Don't let the fucker mess with me with spooky fucked up shit. Shoot... shoot... *kid*.

I froze in the hallway, and the music cut off as if with a knife. The foal stood there in a strange pink dress. Her lavender hide sported a massive scar running up her side and disappearing into her pink mane that fell across her eyes. Her mouth was sewn in a grotesque grin as she stood before me in a doorway.

Shoot, Blackjack! "Play?" she whispered without moving even her lips. *Shoot her!* "Do you like my costume?" Slowly she tilted her head up towards me. *Shoot shoot shoot!* Her mane fell aside, revealing two red lights for eyes. Her mouth wasn't sewn in a grin. It was sewn shut! "I wanna be a unicorn," she hissed. The gun shook in my magical grip as my focus wrestled with what was before me. "Can I be you?"

The filly's dress ripped as two metallic tendrils burst from her shoulders. A razor sharp scalpel gripped in one slashed across my face, and I barely blocked it with my PipBuck. The shotgun roared, and the shell struck the filly in the face. The lavender hide ripped like cloth, revealing the smoking head of a small maintenance robot within the sewn together skin. I put a second round into it and it crackled softly before collapsing. "Tag!" I shouted down at the thing. "You're it!"

"We're it," a voice whispered down the hall. "We're it..." In the dim light I saw two red eyes looking at me. Four. Six. Lots. "Play!" they whispered in delight.

Okay. I definitely had their attention! Now it was time to run! "Catch me if you can!" I laughed as I ran like I'd never run before.

* * *

I had no idea if I'd evaded the abominations, if they'd gotten bored, or if they were setting up more games. I'd moved up a floor, and there weren't any more hospital rooms. This floor was for surgery. The lights kept flickering on and off, making me jump as entire hallway segments appeared and disappeared. The music had returned, this time a cheery tune about cleaning up winter. Not only was it creepy, it muffled what little noise the abominations made as they moved.

I found an office and pushed my way inside. I was heartened to see the lock on the safe had been opened and the terminal decoded. Whatever else had happened, P-21 was still out there. The safe held a few healing potions and some gold bits. I walked behind the desk, setting the shotgun down in front of me. The specialty shells had one downside I hadn't realized: they wore down my weapon like mad. I really didn't want to try and fire it again if I could help it. Not without some significant repairs. That left me with the automatic pistol from the weather station and Folly, which had no bullets. Carefully, I took out the pistol and loaded the blue spark rounds interspersed with normal lead rounds.

This office had been thoroughly trashed, but I really couldn't tell if this was the result of the abominations' vandalism or if the owner had just been particularly sloppy. The stacks of papers were almost as high as my horn. With a wry smile, I picked up a file on top of one of the towers. 'Marigold: PH medical authorization: Denied.' Only the Ministry of Peace could have a form denial stamp with frowning bunnies, I supposed. Then, stamped on top of it in pink ink with butterflies: 'Medical waiver: Approved.'

"Lucky Marigold. I could sure use some of that luck now," I said as I flipped through the first few pages and glanced at the picture of a blue unicorn with bright glasses standing in front of some kind of missile. I was sure that, if I didn't have monsters after me, I'd somehow be even more bored. I tossed the file back on top of the stack and then started as the entire pile collapsed to the floor with a rustling, sighing soft crash. "Great," I muttered, rubbing my eyes and hoping P-21 could find a way to stop all this. I sure wasn't smart enough to.

I noticed a sound file loaded on the terminal. Why not? I hit the playback as I prepared my clips. At least it would give me something to do.

Entry one: We've taken control of the facility here. Data files have all been corrupted or deleted. We need to find the central maneframe if we're going to find anything worthwhile. Took us forever to get in through the roof, but thank Celestia this place is intact. We'll probably move our entire biomedical team in here once it's secure. I've never seen so many medical supplies in one place; nothing special but we've got healing potions to burn.

Entry two: Found the stasis chamber and the maneframe. Dozens of pods still with power. They can just stay asleep for all I care. Some idiot severed the maneframe control ...kzzzzzt... scalpel and got electrocuted for her trouble. Shouldn't be a hard fix. Once it's connected we'll bring in the biomedical team.

I stood and looked at some of the pictures hanging askew on the wall. Fluttershy looking rather

terrified on a stage in a weird dress; goddesses, she looked adorable! The yellow mare smiling shyly beside a purple unicorn with a pink streak in her mane and an orange-coated, blond-haired mare in a cowboy hat; the construction site in the picture looked like it might be that of the Fluttershy Medical Center.

Entry three: Everything is up and running. Still some kinks to work out. We've got to kill the sound system; that music box is driving me crazy. Is this what they actually listened to two hundred years ago ...bkzzzt...

Entry four: Brighthoof and Sky Sparkle are both AWOL. Probably fucking in the staff lounge again. Toys keep on showing up in the hallway; I think the soldiers are starting to get antsy. I need to organize some ...kzzzzzt... should be okay though. The biomedical team found the ...kkkkzzzt... experimental of course, but it's almost a megaspell-level infusion. Practically a cure for death.

Looking at the computer terminal, I spotted a little square of note paper, 'Please don't ask about that procedure again, RH. We've only had one success. I won't risk any more babies. I can't. I'm sorry. F'

Entry ...bkzzzt... gone. Something cut them apart. Skinned them alive. They were... posed. It's got to be Morn... kzzzzt... or Nigh... kkkzttt... find them, they're arrested and command can figure out who to shoot. Fuck it. I'll shoot 'em myself and save command the trouble.

Skzzzzzt... roof access is sealed. The biomedical team is just gone. Somehow he took them out. He's the only one not accounted for. Somehow he got control... kzzzzttt... fuck... I'm tired of this game. How the fuck could anyone in my team crack this hard?

...zzzzzt... tired of playing...

I finished loading the last drum and clip for the shotgun and automatic pistol: shock rounds in the latter, slugs and explosive shells in the former. Then the recording started screaming. I didn't pale or freak out or shoot the terminal. I simply sat there a moment listening to the screams. Then I stretched out a hoof and clicked it off. I loaded a clip into the automatic, worked the slide, and walked to the door. I stood in the hall, looked left and right, and then shouted at the top of my lungs, "Play time!"

It started as a whisper. Then a mutter. Then a roar. Pick a hall. Any hall. I started running, but I was done with running away. Keeping the automatic in a careful grip, I fired the rounds ahead of me at any nightmare stepping into my line of fire. The maintenance robots sparked and jerked, ripping apart the skins that had been sewed around them. "Bad pony!" they cried as I used S.A.T.S. and dumb luck to chew my way through them. I paused only long enough to smash in their heads with the baton, just to make sure they didn't start moving again.

"That's right! I'm a bad bad pony! And I'm coming to spank you!" I yelled out, half mad and all furious. I giggled as I saw some turn and totter away. "That's right! It's time for spankings!" I screamed as I chased them down.

"Bad pony," a deep voice said from the doorway. I turned and looked at a huge heavy robot draped in slabs of meat. "Time out," it said firmly as, with shocking deftness, it flung a glowing white ball of glass at me. A grenade or... something. I reached out with my magic to swat it back at the machine

and...

oooOOOooo

What the fuck was going on? Why couldn't I move? Why couldn't I talk? Why couldn't I scream? Instead, I was lying on a couch and reading a newspaper about the continued outcry over the assassination attempt at Shattered Hoof. It was as if I'd somehow been shoved into this strange mare resting on the couch. The only thing vaguely familiar was a PipBuck, a far fancier version than my own, strapped to her hoof.

A white mare with graying pink hair stood behind the desk in... an undamaged version of the office I'd just been in? She had a bright red cross on her flank and a white lab coat draped over her shoulders and forelegs. She fidgeted with her pencils on her desk, nudging them back and forth. I looked over at her. "Calm down, Doctor Redheart."

"Calm down? How can I calm down, Garnet? She's coming here." She tapped her hooves against the desktop.

"It is her hospital, after all," Garnet said, and I could feel her smiling.

Redheart sighed, frowning. "Still, I can't believe Cheerilee went straight to the Ministry Mare for this! I thought all objections had been dealt with. How could she bring this up now?"

"I'm more impressed that the Ministry Mare is coming all the way here to talk with her about her reservations. It can take days to arrange a conference with Applejack or Rarity. And forget Rainbow Dash or Twilight." The pony I was in sighed and folded the paper, her sparkling red hooves glittering from her pony pedicure. "They're almost inaccessible, even for the O.I.A."

"Are things that bad? I hadn't heard," Redheart said in concern.

My host waved a glittering hoof dismissively. "Oh no. I wouldn't say things are bad. Just... tense right now. Everything would be so much easier if we could just disband the Ministry of Awesome and tuck whatever she's doing into the Ministry of Wartime Technology. But Luna won't hear of it."

Then the door opened and admitted a purple mare with smiling flowers on her flank. She had wrinkles around her eyes and her hair was completely gray. Garnet watched as the two mares looked at one another with clear dislike... and yet I could tell there'd once been the foundations of friendship between the two. No pony shows that much regret without having lost something dear. "Cheerilee. So good to see you again. How are things at the education bureau?" my... host? inquired, rising and giving a polite hug.

Cheerilee seemed quite relieved to have somepony to talk to. "Things are... well... like they are everywhere I suppose. Thank you for working with the Ministry of Image for us, Garnet; sometimes it seems we always get bumped down the priority queue. If it wasn't for your help, we'd probably never get the materials we need." Then Cheerilee frowned. "Though, could you please tell them that the Ministry of Peace's schools don't need their more... creative... history books? I received a text telling how ancient zebras drank blood and practiced ritual pony sacrifice!"

“Ah, yes. Sometimes the Ministry of Image can get a touch... inventive with their textbooks.” I didn’t have a clue what they were talking about. If zebras didn’t drink blood, why say they did at all? Since I couldn’t get off this ride, though, I thought I might as well pay attention to it.

Then the door opened and all the talking stopped. I’d seen her cast in bronze; now I was seeing her in flesh. The yellow pegasus may have been smaller and less dramatic than her statuary counterpart, but as I watched I couldn’t shake the grace and beauty and aura of kindness that seemed to radiate off her. She greeted everypony by name, shook hooves, and talked with clear sincerity and interest. Just touching her hoof made me feel special, and it wasn’t even me!

Once everyone settled into a little circle, Redheart immediately spoke to the purple mare beside her. “I know you’ve had second thoughts, Cheerilee, but we’re already committed to their use.”

“Redheart. We can’t use these devices yet. We don’t even know all the spells that have gone into them!” Cheerilee looked across at me as she said that. “We have no idea what the long term effects will be.” She turned to Fluttershy. “You need to stop until we’re sure they’re safe.”

“I know that you’re upset, Cheerilee, but we’ve tested them for three months with no ill effects, aside from a few complaints about boredom.” The mature mare’s tone reminded me of Mom saying ‘trust me’.

“You’ve tested them on animals and adults. These are children, Fluttershy. Three months being trapped in your own body might be tough for an adult who understands what’s going on, but what about a child? They want to run and play and talk. They can’t simply be locked up for weeks on end. Fluttershy, it’s cruel!”

Then Fluttershy spoke in a soft and gentle voice, “Are you saying I should leave children to die when I have a way to keep them safe and alive until they can be healed?” At that instant I knew that Cheerilee was screwed.

Cheerilee paused and then let out a struggling, “No... but... Fluttershy...”

“Tell me that I should let children die and I will stop the use of the pods right now and start long-term testing. A year at least,” Fluttershy said in that soft, reasonable voice. A pony would need a heart of stone to say those words.

“Fluttershy, I don’t want any colt or filly to die. You know I don’t. But I know kids. I know this isn’t an answer.”

“I know children too...”

“No, Fluttershy. You like kids. You don’t know them. You never even had one...” Cheerilee cut off at a soft gasp from Redheart. Awkward silence. “...I’m sorry.” Fluttershy simply closed her eyes as if bracing against an inner hurt. Cheerilee looked horrified at what she’d said, but the words were spoken.

More silence. Then Fluttershy spoke softly, “Me too. I’m sorry, Cheerilee, but I can’t delay using something I know can help.” Slowly she stood. “Excuse me.”

"Damn it... why did I say that?" Cheerilee asked with a snotty sniff. I saw the specter of Redheart and Cheerilee's friendship appear as the former walked over, bit a box of tissues, and offered one to the other mare. She took it and blew her nose.

"Don't worry, Cheerilee. It's not as if the children will be left alone. They'll have constant interaction with the staff, me, family, and teachers. They won't be neglected," Redheart assured her. "Most of the time they won't even be awake. We can keep them sedated and dreaming sweet dreams until they can be woken up. Beautiful dreamers."

"That's what I'm afraid of. Children don't stay children forever. They always become something else." The purple mare rose and quietly left the room as well.

Redheart shook her head. "I'm sorry you had to see that." She put the tissues away and looked to me. "She's a teacher, and a good one. I think she'd been much happier staying a teacher rather than working with the ministry's schools."

Garnet nodded. "I can appreciate her concern. I'm glad she hasn't found the report of the subjects developing resistances to the sedative over time. Certainly twenty years is a long time, though. It's not as if we'll keep them in stasis for centuries."

"She was right about there being some confusion regarding the spells involved, though. Some of the nursing staff is concerned. There was a memo about spells from the Ministry of Image being involved, but that couldn't be right."

"No no. I'm sure that it was an error, Redheart. Some days we can't tell what's coming out of the Ministry of Technology and what's originating with the Ministry of Magic. We just do our best. Still, we're quite glad to see the Ministry of Peace going ahead with the facility. I'll try and get more specifics sent your way."

"Thank you, Garnet. I appreciate it."

"Oh, don't worry about it. Oh, just a heads-up that Robronco will be here to tie the maintenance robots into the system maneframe. Once their control system is linked to the bots, your nurses shouldn't have to worry about them causing messes."

oooOOOooo

I returned to my body, screaming as fire roared from crotch to ribcage. I lay on my back, strapped to an operating table, pulling against the restraints on my limbs. Overhead, a robotic spider on a white boom hovered over my body. Little scissors were slowly snipping open my belly as I screamed and thrashed against the restraints. "You fuckers!" I hissed through clenched jaws as spit ran down my chin.

"Bad pony. Potty mouth pony. She said a bad word!" gibbered the sewn-together abominations around me as the scissors went 'snip snip snip'. "She needs a time out. She needs to be punished. Bad pony!"

The children were sleeping.

All around the perimeter of the room were metal pods with observation windows and padded interiors; at least forty was the best count I could make under the circumstances. In the pods were foals. Some were missing legs and eyes. Others appeared burned or worse. Others appeared intact, so I could only guess they suffered from some internal disease or condition. They all lay so still they might as well have been corpses. Each had a tiny monitor with zigzagging lines on it that was too far beyond my intelligence level to understand. The cables all ran to a central drum decorated with a dozen terminals. Running from this drum was a thick cable that disappeared into the floor. Blackened marks showed where the hoof-thick connection had been mended.

I wouldn't scream. Crying was unavoidable, but that helped me focus. "What do you want?" I yelled as I focused every bit of magic on the scissors and pushed the arm away, leaving the foot-wide incision.

"Mommy! Play! Die! Live! Cry! Hug! Blood! Mommy! Please! Cookie! Fuck! Daddy! Pain! Skin! Mommy! Toys! Puppet! Doggies! Birthday! Outside! Home! Die! Kill! Costume! Sleep! Hurt! Out! Play! Die!" the robots around me chanted.

We're not going to leave them in stasis for centuries, Garnet had said. What if they were left anyway? How many years had it taken before the children became resistant to the sedative? How many more before the handful of survivors had been unable to keep the children focused? How long before they went mad and sought ever bloodier and more terrible games?

Somepony, I suspected Redheart, had cut the connection between the repair bots and the facility maneframe. They'd sat here alone, incapable of any interaction at all. Unable to sleep. They couldn't even kill themselves. Then the Enclave arrived and connected the maneframe again. The children had resumed their games, honed after decades of being trapped within themselves.

Now I was next. My telekinesis pushed against the medical robot as I clenched my teeth so hard that I felt a tooth crack. It wasn't enough. A three-fingered hand reached in and pulled out a loop of gray-pink intestine like a thick noodle. I wouldn't scream. I might choke on the vomit rising in my throat as I felt inch after inch slipping out.

Then I heard a sharp crack from the ceiling directly above me. An air vent cover collapsed onto the robotic arm, jamming its metallic hand deeper into my innards. Glory poked her head in, eyes wide, teeth clenched on her beam pistol. Right now, she was a more welcome sight than Splendid stepping out of a hot shower.

"Bad. Bad. Bad ponies. Bad," the robots chanted as the medical arm released my guts and reversed to slam itself against the fallen grating. Glory dived from the ductwork, circling the arm as she looped above me. All eyes were on her, except for mine, which noticed the small blue shape of P-21 slip in through a door. Carefully he picked his way towards the terminal. Glory wouldn't be enough.

I lifted my head and looked at the buckles on the straps holding my limbs. Pain made the world black out around the edges of my vision as I fumbled with my magic. One of the buckles came free. Then another. Then another. Slowly I kicked myself free as the abominations surged forward. "Bad ponies. Bad ponies." I sat up, spotting my shotgun. I could make out the orange shells in the drum.

I levitated the gun to me and slowly rolled off the table. And then I discovered something truly

disturbing: I could either handle the shotgun or hold my guts in, and I wasn't doing the latter. A hot, wet slipperiness moved out of me combined with a sensation that made me want to put a shell through my skull. It was only twenty feet to my target, but that was the longest twenty feet of my life.

P-21 typed desperately. Glory flew desperately. I tried to walk desperately. Had the abominations realized what I was trying to do, they could have stopped me easily. I think they just took glee in watching me struggle. Maybe they thought I was trying to help P-21 or run. Instead I staggered my way to where the cable emerged from the rear of the machine. Suddenly my intestines went taut and I almost blacked out again. "Would you mind getting off my guts?" I croaked.

The cable was thick. Even with the explosive rounds it'd take me several shots to chew through. The shotgun didn't have that many shots left in it. That was okay. I only needed one. I grinned back at my abomination audience. "Playtime is over!" I ejected the drum and kicked it underneath the cable. One round remained in the chamber. I pressed the tip of the shotgun to the ammo drum and fired.

The explosion was barely equivalent to a grenade, but it did the job. The cable snapped once more as I was showered with shrapnel. With a soft hum the arm froze in its pursuit of Glory. The abominations froze in place, puppets with their strings cut. The zigzagging lines went crazy as darkness finally caught up with me.

Heh, crazy kids.

* * *

When I came to, I felt good. Great. Wonderful, in fact. I opened my eyes, and immediately felt my midsection. Only an ugly red line remained, and that was healing before my eyes. The table I was lying on had a strange talisman that covered me in a pink glow. Some kind of regeneration magic pulled my torn body together.

"Oh, good. You're awake," Glory said from beside the table. The pegasus looked like she needed a few days sleep and a few years of therapy. Maybe we could get a two for one special.

"Oh good. You're alive," I replied, and got a little smile in return. I looked at the strange egg-like talisman. "Please tell me there are more of those."

"There are more of these," she replied softly.

"Oh thank goodness--" I began, then saw her looking away. "There really aren't more of these, are there?"

"You told me to tell you..." But I shut her up with a hug.

"I thought you were dead. I was so sure I got you killed," I said as I hugged her tightly. "How'd you get away?"

"Red light," she said softly with a little shiver. "It went on and on. I think they were paying attention to you on the other side of the door. The vent was right above me, so I shot through. They called me a cheater. After that it was just following the shouting and gunshots."

The wound across my middle had completely healed. At once my eyes widened. "Get P-21 in here! We can heal his..." There was a buzz and the pink glow disappeared. "...fuck."

"The talisman only works on one subject," P-21 said as he limped in from the doorway.

"I wanted to heal your leg," I muttered softly.

"Why? You didn't break it."

I sighed as I climbed off the bed, looking at the burned out talisman and feeling as if it'd been wasted on me. "I thought if I healed your leg I'd stop reminding you of 99. Then maybe we could be friends."

He arched a brow and smiled, shaking his head. "Ever think it's not about you, Blackjack?" I blinked stupidly at him and he sighed softly. "Guess not. Come on. We've got one last thing to deal with." He started back out the door. "And it's going to suck. It's going to suck a lot."

We trotted back into the operating room. I tried to ignore the drying bowel strung over a quarter of the room. He stopped in front of the large central terminal.

Ofillia Stasis System Review:

>Current patient survival prognosis: 0.00%

>Patient intercom system: Error. System disabled.

>Terminate Power: Y/N?

No. "No no no... fuck no. Fuck!" I yelled as I looked at the pods around me with their wildly zigzagging readouts. I could imagine their screams as they were locked up once again. I rounded on P-21. "I'm not killing forty children! Are you out of your mind?"

"No. I'm not," he replied as looked at the terminal. "We have two choices: we leave them in stasis, or we shut down the whole thing and they die."

"Wake them up! See if they're crazy." I could kill *crazy* foals... I hoped. Oh Goddesses, did I actually just think that?!

"We can't, Blackjack," Morning Glory said softly. "They were dying when they were put in the pods. They're *still* dying. Some wouldn't last a day, according to their records. If we leave them... maybe... I don't know. Maybe someday the Enclave can do something to help them."

P-21 shook his head firmly as he looked at the wide-eyed pegasus. "The Enclave lost a biomedical team to these kids. And they've been trapped here for two centuries. Are you willing to leave them trapped, again, on the hope that someday they might be able to be saved?" He sighed. "I told you this would suck."

"Why are you asking me?" I said softly as I looked at him.

"Because there is no right answer here. Because she's right. Because I'm right. And no matter what, they're going to suffer." He sighed. "I want to do one. She wants to do the other. You're the

tiebreaker.” ‘And you’re the leader’, his eyes seemed to say.

No. Fuck him! Fuck me! No! Put me back on the table and rip out my guts, but don’t leave the decision up to me! I slowly looked around at all the pods. “I can’t... I don’t... fuck!” I shouted, clenching my eyes closed. I wanted back into that dream the orb had put me in. Neither of them would look at me. I gazed at the pods. There was no right answer here. I was damning myself either way. I thought of flipping a cap, but what if it came to the shutoff and I tried for two out of three? Or vice versa? Damn me! Damn me...

Slowly I straightened as I looked at all the pods. “I don’t know if you can hear me, or understand me. I don’t know who any of you are or what you want. I only know you didn’t deserve being trapped like this. I’m sorry,” I whispered as tears ran down my cheeks. “I don’t know... I don’t know what’s going to happen yet. Where I’m from, when you die, you just go away.” I sniffed as I bowed my head. “I hope... I hope that if you do go somewhere... I hope that it’s some place better.”

I turned and looked at the terminal. ‘Y’ and ‘enter’. The hum of fans died one after another as I murdered forty children. I swallowed, knowing there was no forgiveness possible for this, and sang softly, “Hush now, quiet now. It’s time you lay your sleepy head. Hush now, quiet now... It’s time to go to bed.”

I choked, but then Glory sang after me, “Drifting off to sleep, exciting day behind you. Drifting off to sleep. Let the joy of dreamland find you.” She was falling apart as badly as I was. The only light in the room was the jagged readouts on each pod that became less and less erratic till they became flat lines.

P-21 then shocked us both as he raised his voice and finished, “Hush now, quiet now. Lay your sleepy head. Hush now, quiet now. It’s time to go to bed.” With that he bowed his head as well as I sank to the floor. Finally the flat readings winked out one after the other.

Damn me. Damn me. Damn me...

* * *

Redheart had crawled into the storage room that had held the regeneration talisman. Half her hide had been skinned off before she’d severed the connection. Had she come in here to try and save herself? To protect the various talismans and experimental goods? Did it really matter? If there’d been a cure in here for any of the children, I had no doubt she would have used it. She lay curled on her side, covered by a bloody, shredded lab coat. The body had mummified in the sealed storage chamber.

I noticed she seemed to be cradling something protectively in her hooves. Given what I’d already done, robbing the dead was icing on the proverbial cake. To my bewilderment, Redheart yielded the object to my magic surprisingly easily.

It was a figurine of Fluttershy. Her soulful blue eyes looked up at me as she hugged a disgruntled white rabbit beneath her hooves. So gentle. So forgiving. ‘Be Kind’ was written on the base. Her head was cocked just so, as if she knew I desperately needed to talk to her.

“I’m sorry. I tried. I tried to do better. I tried to help...” Slowly I held the Fluttershy figurine to my chest as I slumped over onto my side, weeping and blubbering like a foal. “I’m so sorry.” As I lay there alone in the storage room, I suddenly knew exactly why Redheart had come here:

To beg for forgiveness she would never receive.

Footnote: Level Up.

Skill Note: Speech (50)

New Perk: Foal at Heart - This perk greatly improves your interactions with children.

(As always, thanks to Hinds for helping me edit, and thanks to Kkat for helping me write at all.)