

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 38: Blood

"You should see the looks on your faces! Priceless!"

I'd heard that you see your whole life flash before your eyes just before you die. Personally, I doubted it. I'd already died once and was quite thankful that I hadn't had to relive every embarrassing moment in 99. Then again, they also say practice makes perfect, so I suppose that it shouldn't have been a surprise that after getting blown up I'd see it... except that perfect apparently required more practice than I'd gotten so far, since the life I was seeing wasn't mine.

Figures.

I could see and hear, but that was all. It was almost like being in a memory orb, but I couldn't tell who or even what my host was. Flim and Flam paced back and forth nervously, plucking at their business suits. The middle-aged stallions looking like they were visibly aging from stress as I watched. "I can't believe she's coming here! Why here? Why now, of all times?!" wailed the mustachioed Flam.

"I don't know. I don't know! She simply demanded to see us in person about one of our products," Flim muttered in worry.

"It can't be the Sparkle-Cola FLASH line, can it? Maybe she found out about some of the side effects?" Flam gasped. "You don't think she's here for a share of the profits? I thought she signed off on that!"

"Well, there is some question as to if she actually signed it or not, but legal assures us it should stand up in court... probably. Sixty percent chance," Flim said. The yellow unicorn rubbed his nose and then yelled, "Where is he? He's supposed to prevent this, right? That was part of our deal!"

"He'd better!" said Flam, who then sat hard and wrung his hooves together. "I can't believe it. Everything was going so well! Sure, the nightstalkers could show a better overhead, but we've been making a mint dropping their eggs in zebra population areas! We've got a whole new line of Poison Joke products starting next month! And the scorposprites have been working like a charm behind the lines. Maybe we can get through to Rainbow Dash to talk to her and..."

Suddenly, there was a purple flash, and Twilight Sparkle appeared. I had to admit, though I'd seen her several times, I'd never before seen her looking so... scary. Her mane had streaks of gray, and wrinkles had set in around her eyes and mouth. Worst of all, though, was the hard look in her eyes; it made me wonder if she was going to just turn the pair into stone or something just with that glare.

"Ministry Mare Twilight Sparkle! So nice to see you! We were just talking about how happy we are to have such an intellect as yourself visit us!" Flim grinned widely. "Let us formally welcome you to Hippocratic Research, where we conduct science effectively!"

"Efficiently!" piped up Flam.

"And ethically," they finished in unison. Twilight's lips didn't budge in the slightest. You could almost see the nervous sweat popping out of their foreheads. Flam's telekinesis pushed a button on his

terminal, and music began to play.

"If either of you starts to sing, I'm sending you to Pinkie Pie," she said without missing a beat, and the two bucks froze. Twilight's horn glowed as she pressed the same button and silenced the music. A pair of glasses and a clipboard appeared, the former settling on her muzzle as she examined the latter. "I've sent six letters, four polite inquiries, and five formal requests, and now I am here in person to get my questions answered: what is Flux, and how is it made?"

The two bucks went from looking nervous to looking sick. Flim tapped his hooves together. "Well, you see. First we take a very precise assortment of gems and liquefy them in our proprietary super Flux recombobulator matrix, which--"

"Does nothing," Twilight interrupted. "I've examined all the formal documents you've submitted on Flux over the last decade. Every single one. And I've concluded that I've never seen a larger collection of gibberish in my life."

"Oh... you couldn't have really read..." Flam began, and then he met Twilight's flat gaze. His mustache drooped so much that he thought it would simply drop off. "Every... single... one?"

"Yes. Every one. I've gone over all your submissions and patents and formulas trying to duplicate your process for producing Flux. I've studied your product in minute detail and come to the conclusion that it doesn't matter how many gems you liquefy or rainbows you mix together; there is no way that you can produce a substance like Flux from those raw materials." The clipboard disappeared as she looked at the twin brothers over the top of her glasses. "So I am here, gentlecolts, in person, to find out exactly what Flux is and how you make it."

The pair gave her a sickly smile. "Ah, if we may ask... by any chance, have you spoken with the director about this?" Flim asked weakly.

"I don't need to involve Horse, thank you very much. I am quite capable of handling this on my own." The two shared a look.

"No no. Not him? I mean the *other* director?" Flam winced as her gaze sharpened. A golden flash came from beneath the door to the hall.

"Goldenblood is no longer director of anything! And any day now, I expect him to be thrown into a dungeon, exiled, or thrown into a dungeon wherever he's exiled!" she shouted as her mane bristled.

"Oh, I doubt I'll get off so lightly," rasped a familiar bastard. It was slightly mollifying to see that Goldenblood looked every bit as battered and exhausted as Twilight. His golden mane was disheveled, and his suit looked as though it'd been slept in. "My apologies for being late."

"You," Twilight said with more outright loathing than he'd ever heard before. "You're not late. You don't need to be here at all!" she snapped. "You can take your sneaky bag of tricks and go, Goldenblood."

He stared into her hard gaze, and then his lip curled slowly. "Luna didn't tell you, did she?" The question seemed to shock and unsettle her. He looked at her with an odd amused expression that made him want to kick the scarred unicorn stallion, then chuckled softly, shaking his head. "Let me guess, she said that she had no idea how Hippocratic Research produced Flux, but that she would have Horse

forward the information to you?" Anger knit the mare's brows as she glared back at him.

"He did, and it was all garbage. The same garbage that I've gotten from you for over a year!" she said as she pointed her hoof at him. "You were supposed to give me everything about Chimera, Goldenblood. Everything means everything!" She swung the hoof dramatically. "Your obstruction is why you were removed!"

His smile didn't change. It was the most poisonous smile I'd ever seen. "And yet, even with me gone, you're still having problems with making alicorns." The look was like a poisoned dagger in her chest.

"I've examined every aspect of the project as it pertains to transformations and fusions. Even improved on some aspects. We don't need the megaspell for the transformation, just for the creation of the metamorphic potion. But I've broken down every ingredient of the potion, adjusted and examined and readjusted my findings, and tracked down every one of its constituent elements. All but one. 'Metamagical Flux', which is identical to 'Biomagical Flux' and 'Transmogrifical Flux'. You just put on different colored labels," she said with a glare at the twins.

"Ah... it was a marketing decision, I think..." Flim muttered weakly.

"And the more I've worked with this stuff, the more I've come to realize how dangerous it is. Do you have any idea what happens to ponies exposed to it? The mutations? Do you know what it did to Sunny Days? I had to waste time and resources devising a spell just to try and negate its effects. And it's used everywhere, Goldenblood! Manufacturing. Energy production. Medicine. Food." She paused and fixed the twins with her glare. "Sparkle-Cola." The pair looked as if they wanted the floor to swallow them up, but then her glare returned to Goldenblood. "I've been using it myself for all these years and only now realized that I don't have a clue what it is or how it works. But that ends today." She stomped her hoof. "If all of you don't tell me exactly what the big secret is, then my next stop is a meeting with Luna and Pinkie Pie. We'll find out whatever it is you're hiding here."

Goldenblood looked at her, then said quietly, "Twilight, go back to Canterlot. You're making great progress on your stealth suit. Focus on that. Relax and forget all about Hippocratic Research and Flux. You don't want to know, and you don't want to force this."

"How... how can you know that?" She gaped at him. "You're not the director any more, Goldenblood! You have no authority in Equestria anymore." But he didn't move. He didn't even blink. If anything, his eyes were pitying rather than hard. And slowly, she took a step back. "No. I have to know. The I.M.P. project has to work. It simply has to. There's nothing else that will end this war! I'll get all my friends, and we'll put this place under a microscope if we have to. I'll get Princess Luna to..."

"Give it up, Twilight," Goldenblood said softly. It may have been just me, but for a moment it sounded as if he were pleading with her. "You've done great and incredible things, Twilight." It might have been a kind statement, but it seemed to strike her like a blow.

"Great and incredible?" She suddenly laughed, her mane frizzing even more. "I've done nothing... nothing... for five years now. Nothing since Big Macintosh died! My friends have accomplished more to help protect Equestria than I have. It's my responsibility to come up with magic that will save Equestria! That's what I promised Luna when I established the Ministry of Arcane Science. But even after everything she's done for me, I'm no closer to giving Luna what she needs to end this war. Don't you understand? I'm a failure." I knew that look on her face; she might not have been on a

mattress, but she was fighting hard to stay off it.

Goldenblood gave the brothers a single look that promised them a trip down an elevator shaft. I saw the two unicorns share a glance, one magically sliding the Twilight bobblehead out of sight, and then they started to study the ceiling as if it was the most fascinating thing they'd ever laid eyes on. Only then did Goldenblood look back at the mare fighting so damned hard for everypony else.

He stared at her for another long moment. "I'm sorry, Twilight. I really am." He closed his eyes and seemed to be thinking of something. I'd never seen a buck look more... old. Goldenblood looked tired, not just in body, but in spirit too. "We're all doing what we can to save Equestria, even if some of us have become monsters in the process." Then he looked at the brothers. "Show her."

Twilight lifted her head, staring at him in confusion. The brothers shuffled nervously. "I'm not sure that's..." Flim began, but Goldenblood silenced him with a look. "...that we should delay a second longer! We can use our own private elevator to speed the process along! Yes, the sooner we're done here, the better." The brother tapped the keys of his terminal and opened the elevator door.

"But... why?" Twilight asked in quiet disbelief, looking at him in amazement. "Why are you showing me this now?"

"Because... I owe you," he replied quietly as he walked to the elevator door. "And I'm sorry."

~ ~ ~

I awoke feeling some scrap metal half tangled in my mane and shook my head, tossing it away and receiving a sting of pain as it cut the side of my face. I sighed. Great. More crazy? Dream? Enclave mind control device finally kicking in? Possession? What kind of commentary was it on my life when I couldn't count out any of those?

"You know, all things considered, in light of the last day or two, I think I might have made a mistake in coming back to Hoofington," I said as I dangled in the middle of a pitch black shaft by one of my forelegs. It'd gotten caught in a tangle of cable as I plummeted past. The elevator car had gotten jammed above me and was letting out groans every time I wiggled around too much. I had no idea how far I'd fallen, or how far there was left to fall, or what exactly awaited me at the bottom. I thought for a moment that I'd heard P-21 and Rampage yelling my name, but now everything was silent.

...Of course, I could have answered at least *one* of those questions by timing how long it took that scrap to fall. If I'd been paying attention. ...It had actually hit bottom, right? Oh, idea! I sniffed and snorted and coughed and hacked and finally worked up a nice wad of phlegm, then turned my head and spat, letting it fall. My ears strained, and I heard a very distant 'plat' far below. The elevator let out a protesting noise as I twisted, trying to see anything in the blackness that the dim red light from my eyes was, if anything, just highlighting. Pen-thin beams made lousy flashlights.

Then the cable suddenly slipped along my leg. I waved my other limbs wildly in the dark, looking for something to hold on to, and then, just as the leg came free, extended my fingers, seizing the cable and holding it fast with both forelegs. There was a tense moment as I hung there, looking up at the place where my brain saw the faintest suggestion of a dark red leg, but the metallic digits held. "Okay, Rover, wherever you are... you're right. Thumbs are better." I swung my hindlegs until one hooked the cable to better support my weight. Then the elevator gave another groan and jerk. "Now, how to use freaky

thumb powers to get out of here?"

From somewhere below came a number of mechanical bangs. "Okay... thumb powers expended... maybe..." I couldn't do more than turn a page with my horn. I tried to remember the magic primer as I swung there under the groaning elevator. Magic is internal, not a bunch of magical words, chants, and incantations. And all unicorn horns glowed when we did magic; I just needed mine to glow more! I closed my eyes and imagined a little star shedding light like a candle. That's what I needed... light... lighty light light... the electric crackle grew in my horn as it tingled. I opened an eye.

Nothing. I clenched my eyes shut and twisted my face into ridiculous expressions. Still nothing. Finally... it might not have been the most 'magical' of methods, but I just made like I had the worst case of constipation ever, grit my teeth, and pushed!

Then there was a pop and a discharge like when I fired a magic bullet, followed by a zap and an immense sense of relief. I stared at the tiny mote of light hanging in front of me. "I did it..." I murmured weakly in shock as I stared at it. Then it sank in. "I did it!" I cheered in glee, whooping. Suddenly the elevator car lurched as it dropped a foot, making me gulp... but then I looked at my little spell... my compact spell... and grinned and silently cheered.

The feeling of euphoria quickly faded as I looked around and saw nothing but four walls and the elevator's two guide rails. I gingerly stretched one of my forehooves towards the nearest rail but was still short. I closed my eyes and forced a grin, shaking my head. I didn't like it... not one bit. But it wasn't as if I had any better ideas. I swung my hind end one way, then the other. Back and forth. The elevator car overhead began to squeal in time with my swings. Just stay up there a little bit longer...

I let out a cry as I let go of the cable and smacked into the rail, all four limbs hugging it tight. Okay! This was progress. Now all I had to do was slide down the rail to a door. Easy as pie... See? I was already sliding. Sliding really fast! What exactly was the speed difference between sliding down a rail and falling down alongside one? My enameled limbs were squealing, and my chest was getting pretty damn toasty rubbing against the metal. Wait! Was this thing oiled or something?! "Ooooo... Shit!" I yelled as I fell away from the rail.

I fell to my death for a few seconds before I slammed my back against a curved metal surface that gave beneath me, slowing my fall with a growing hum. "Whoa there, little lady!" a robotic male drawled. I slid along the metal, my hooves banging and scratching the hovering orb before I dropped... and fell into a tangle of robotic limbs. The three cameras that apparently served as its eyes turned to focus on me. "Always told 'em this elevator was unsafe fer pony travel, but does anypony listen to old Hank? Nooo."

"Please don't explode! Please don't explode!" I really *really* hoped that the joke had finally run its course as I clung to the levitating robot.

"I ain't gonna explode. Ol' Hank's the finest Handy you ever seen! Oooof... you sure are a healthy girl, aintcha?" the robot crackled as we dropped down the shaft. "Need to maximize my levitation repulsor drive!"

"I... um... have more metal in me than most mares." No shooting the lifesaving robot over a weight joke, Blackjack. I looked around the elevator shaft.

"Is that so? Sheee-oot, and here Ol' Hank was convinced my sensor talismans were fritzed fer

good! Looked at you and couldn't tell if you were a mechanical or biological. Good thing I kept my access probe to myself. Wouldn't want to get fresh."

We finally reached the bottom of the shaft; two tunnels led off in different directions. I slipped out of Hank's limbs and onto the concrete floor, very, very glad to be back on something solid again. "I don't suppose that you know where I can find Sanguine, do you?" The spidery robot floated there a moment, and I added, "Er, I think his name is Trueblood?"

"The doc? Oh, he's probably somewhere in the facility over yonder. Been making a mess o' things. I keep on putting out repair citations and notifications and the like, but nopony's gotten back to poor Ol' Hank since we got the call fer the big sleep."

"Big sleep?" I frowned.

"Oh, it was a long time back. Big order went out to power down and wait fer further commands. So most of us done went quiet like the rest o' the city. 'Course, Maintenance Quad B was left out. The four of us tried to keep everythin' neat and tidy, but after a while things break down and wear out. Ol' Hank's all that's left to keep things workin'." He sighed. "Seemed like a damned shame. We had so much work we need to do. Floors to polish. Hinges to oil. And I haven't gotten round to fixing Ms. Moonstar's desk drawer. Hope she's not too cross."

I frowned; I'd never thought of the bombs falling from a machine's point of view. I tried to imagine having a life and then suddenly being told to go to sleep, then waking up to find that everything that was important to me was gone. Did Ol' Hank realize that Moonstar had probably been dead for two centuries? That the world beyond this facility was smashed and broken? Could it imagine that?

"What did you mean when you said that Trueblood's breaking things?" I asked.

"Well, he ain't much of an engineer," Ol' Hank muttered. "He's trying to wake the machines down below up. Snooty things, never really talked to us much. All kinds of medical stuff that make a powerful mess when they leak. Dunno why he bothers, but lately it seems everypony's yelling all at once fer us to wake up again."

"Yelling at you?"

"Started a few weeks back. General alarm went out to the Hoofington region: zebra megaspell attack. Woke up some emergency systems, and those woke up some communication systems and those woke up some command systems and now none of them have a clue what we're supposed to do. But there's some folk like the doc who keep saying we're suppose to do what he says, and at the same time we're suppose to do what the Core Command says and at the same time we're getting Core commands to not do what Core Command says! It's enough to make a poor ol' maintenance bot like me pop his processor gems!" He gave a huff. "If you don't mind my saying so, you biologicals sure do like to cross your wires."

I thought about that with a frown. "So you're telling me that somepony out there is giving you commands to wake up and do things, but somepony else is telling you not to do them?"

"Mmhmm! Between when the alert went out and now, there've been four hundred and two million, seven hundred and ninety thousand, one hundred and twelve commands issued and four hundred and two million, seven hundred and ninety thousand, and sixty seven countermands issued. Makes it a

mite tricky fer a bot to get his job done.” Wait, I might not have Glory’s head for numbers, but even I knew that those didn’t add up!

“Why fewer countermands?” I asked.

“Well I don’t rightly know. I just clean things up,” Ol’ Hank replied in faint exasperation. “Course, even Ol’ Hank got the order to apply my rotary saw to the doctor’s head. Don’t rightly know why. But then that got countermanded a millisecond later and I just went back to cleaning. But personally, I reckon whoever’s making the commands is a mite faster or cleverer than whoever is canceling ‘em.” And whoever was making the commands was trying to kill Sanguine. Suddenly, all his talk of running out of time was starting to make more sense. Eventually, one of those commands would get through.

But... it still didn’t make sense, really. Why didn’t he just go? Lots of ponies had trouble leaving Hoofington, but it was hard for me to imagine a pony like him not being able to set up shop somewhere else. He’d been trying to get Chimera for Red Eye, and he’d given me the evil villain ‘experiment on the Wasteland’ speech. Either would have been good enough motivation, but something didn’t quite fit. When he’d heard that I’d died he’d carved a trail of butchery to flush me out because something in the Core was woken up and after him. Why not simply leave? A ghoul of Sanguine’s capacity had options. Something had kept him here. Chimera? Was that something so important to him that he would risk his life, risk everything for it? I just didn’t see it. He’d lived well enough without Chimera for two centuries.

There was something else. “Can you tell me what Sanguine-- I mean, the doc needs with Chimera?”

“No idea. Not sure what yer referring to. ‘Fraid Doc doesn’t have much respect for the maintenance staff. Guess he doesn’t put much stock in clean floors,” Ol’ Hank muttered.

I nodded, then tried to think of who might want to countermand orders to kill Sanguine. Who would know about Chimera and want to keep him alive? A chill ran through me. “Ol’ Hank. Does the name Goldenblood mean anything to you?” The robot just stared at me for the longest time, and I frowned. “Hank?”

The robot’s buzz saw whirled as it seized me by my throat with a pincer and plunged the rotating blade straight at my face! I brought up my forelegs and the saw teeth sputtered and sparked off the enamel. This thing had me outnumbered on fighting limbs and was way too close for me to bring my battle saddle guns to bear. Its cutting torch flared to life as a metallic scream sounded from its speakers.

I had only one thing going for me: traction. I blocked the saw and torch as best I could and powered forward with my hind legs. The robot’s levitation talisman didn’t slow it at all as I powered it into the far wall, pulled back, and slammed it again and again. Finally, something inside the robot popped and crackled, and the levitation talisman went dark. The robot fell to the ground, the shriek dwindling to a soft crackle and then falling silent.

I pulled my throat out of its pincer grip and sighed. “Guess so,” I murmured, looking up the shaft. There was no sign of my friends; I supposed they were going to find another way down to me. I sighed, looking at my hooves and weapons. I really missed my telekinesis; as solid a rig as the battle saddle was, I simply wasn’t as good with it as Glory. I kept getting in fights where I just couldn’t shift my body as I needed to. I carefully removed it, sticking it in my bags, and bundled up Taurus’s rifle and the shotgun. Scotch still had Vigilance. The sword would probably be too long and ungainly if wielded in my mouth. How the heck did ponies without magic fight with those things? “Well... I guess it’s just me and my own

four hooves for now.”

As silently as I could, I picked a tunnel at random and made my way down it. I tried not to think of Glory and Scotch. I tried not to imagine... I stopped and thumped my head hard on the concrete wall. “No. No. No. No. You are not doing this now. Priest was bad enough,” I muttered, then winced and rubbed my head. “And now I’m talking to myself! Ugggh!”

Okay. So I wasn’t at my finest right then.

The tunnels were all Hoofington standar-- wait. Strike that. The blue line subway tunnels had at least showed signs of damage, rust, and overall decay. These walls were crack-free. A product of Ol’ Hank’s work, or was it because they were even more overengineered than the rest of the underground? I supposed it really didn’t matter. I travelled further along and reached some sort of security station in front of a heavy door; there were bones behind the bulletproof glass... and a sidearm. An IF-38 Cornhusker revolver. Not the most powerful gun, but it had a mouthgrip I could use comfortably without the battle saddle.

In the break room behind the station were a fold-out cot and some lockers that I cleared out... and a terminal. I chewed on my lip; this really was more P-21’s thing. Still, I knew the basics... go to the login prompt, hold down those two keys there to get the debug and look for words that might be the password. Fail too often and it’d lock up permanently.

Ten minutes later, I felt a surge of glee as I picked out the password from the junk: ‘Cider’. There wasn’t much in the terminal. Duty roster and a complaint filed against one security buck for being scared of the lower levels. Then there was an option to open the door. I bit my lip and toggled it.

The door lifted up, revealing a little shack practically invisible behind a concrete slip nestled right up against a cliff face. I heard the river flowing by and carefully poked my head out. There was the Zenith Bridge off to my left. I barely suppressed a scream of frustration; this whole time, there was a back door to this place?! Ugh... without a way to tell Lacunae, there wasn’t a reason to leave it open and invite trouble inside.

I closed it up and retraced my steps, picking my way along the other tunnel. Conduits and pipes ran along the walls and ceiling; I suspected that this was a maintenance access of some sort. I ran across a little alcove with a workbench and shelves of engineering supplies, as well as some ammo containers. I chowed down on some nice juicy steel nuts and bolts as I practiced my telekinesis on a bobby pin in the lock of one of the ammo boxes, the most I could manage at the moment. The first one snapped after a few fumbles, but I felt an odd little surge of pride as the second popped the lock.

Bleugh, all magic gem cartridges and spark drums. Then I pursed my lips and placed one of the cartridges in the workbench vise. After a bit of determined twisting, the plastic lid popped off the cartridge’s base. I carefully shook some of the rainbow dust within onto my tongue, and the crystalline specks popped and crackled delightfully. Not exactly the same as a whole gemstone, but sti--

A low snuffling and rumble filled the air, making my eyes widen. Something was walking nearby, with slow, dragging, *heavy* steps. I slowly poked my head back into the tunnel in time to spot the dark hindquarters of... something... moving out of sight. Very carefully, I moved down after it as the scrap metal and gem dust restored my damaged limbs. The passageway I was in was opening up into some kind of storeroom; clearly, Ol’ Hank’s cleaning routine ended here. The floor was strewn with crushed

and scattered drums. Rainbow goop was spattered all over the place.

And the... thing... was moving somewhere inside. I slipped slowly out into the room and worked my way around, keeping opposite the thing and moving as quietly as possible. My rear hoof stepped in some of the goop, and I felt a momentary spike of concern as I looked back... but other than feeling like I'd just stepped in something foul, nothing was happening. Okay, another point for cyberlimbs. I just had to keep it off my hide. Maybe it was time to bust out the...

Wasn't there a thing in here that I was supposed to be keeping an eye on?

The bellow nearly shook me off my hooves as I turned and looked down between the battered, tottery shelving at what I assumed was once a pony. Four hooves, head, and tail; that was a pony, right? It was as if somepony had started there and then suffered some sort of psychotic vision of massive twisted knots of flesh and barely restrained bulk. The pale form's bloodshot eyes glared around wet leather straps that seemed to be holding most of its body together. However, all that was secondary to the size of its mouth, which was filled with broken stone-like teeth.

With shocking speed, the ungainly thing spun and kicked an intact drum down the aisle at me, and I barely ducked as it struck the rack behind me and burst. Quick as I could, I was running from the rain of droplets. Really. Hazardous material suit! Sounded great. Especially having doffed the battle saddle! Really, I could have done with having something a little higher caliber at my disposal, too! When this was over, I was going to take a few days to try and get my horn back in order.

The pony behemoth, which I suspected was one of Precious's 'fatties', came charging around the end of the next row. Its broad hooves smashed and scattered the barrels that had fallen. Big I could handle, but big and fast... I slipped into S.A.T.S. to--

No, I didn't! Instead, I realized that S.A.T.S. was gone just in time to dive to the side as the colossal hooves plunged towards me. Don't roll. Don't slide on your belly. Put some damn distance between you and it. An instinctive part of me wanted to flee back down the tunnel, but, big as this thing was, I knew it would fit. I had to do something else...

I had to go up.

I leapt up to the second tier of shelving and extended my freaky fingers to grab the edge of the third. I clambered up, then on to the fourth. Beneath me, the behemoth howled and smashed the base of the shelves again and again; I was nearly knocked free as the whole structure swayed. I reached the very top, though, and looked down at the glaring beast beneath me. Okay, Rover was *really* right. Thumbs were saving my life more than guns.

The thing howled and kicked the shelves again, bending steel with each powerful blow, and the shelves gave another ominous sway. "Hey! Knock it off!" I shouted, looking at the heavy barrels stacked around me and then at the floor way, way below me. A little light lit in my brain as I grinned down. "Hey! Don't knock it off!" A little blue pony in my head had come up with an idea, and it was gonna be awesome! I shoved a barrel over the edge, barely missing the pony creature. It bellowed in rage and slammed the shelves again. Then the metal groaned, and there was a loud ping as something gave, and then more pings, and at once the shelves stopped swaying and began a steady movement that was building momentum.

The pony creature realized its peril, trying to move its bulk as the shelves tumbled over and

dumped thousands of pounds of drums in a cascade of steel and chemicals that pounded down on top of it. The shelves were coming apart, dumping steel beams and shelving atop it as I felt the sideways motion start to become a downward motion. I leapt for the next set of shelves as the collapsing set smashed into it, scrambling to keep the leaking rainbow goo off my hide. I looked down at the pile. If it wasn't dead, then I'd give up.

Carefully, I scrambled my way down and trotted back to the workroom. I busted out the hazardous materials suit... but having discovered the joy of thumbs, I hesitated, then broke out the sword. Somewhere, I was sure, a hazardous materials specialist was weeping as I cut off the ends of the suit's forelegs and stuck my limbs through. Then I wiggled the rest of the way into the yellow suit, leaving my barding on under it, used a whole roll of duct tape to seal the gaps around my legs, and tugged the saddlebags around my waist. I balked at the helmet. Without my E.F.S., I'd need to rely on my eyes and ears more, and my mouth was the only way I was going to be able to use the revolver at all.

I returned to the storeroom and stalked past the oozing rainbow heap. I paused for the longest time, my ears straining for any sign that that thing was going to get back up and come after me. Small favors; it was so much goo beneath the steel. Now, as long as I didn't meet a similar fate, I was happy.

Trotting past it, I moved into a hall... and looked at the translucent starburst flanks of Twilight Sparkle and the scarred hide of Goldenblood. The hallway was a mess of rainbow gunk and ooze. Ponies in lab coats and hazardous material suits trotted past, appearing and disappearing as they moved. I sat down hard, immobilized by the sight. "It really is an impressive facility, but I can't help but notice some similarities in the layout," she said as she looked dryly at the exhausted buck. "What, did you simply steal Maripony's design and bury it underground?"

"Steal? Of course not," he said in a faintly hurt tone. "Stealing implies removal. We steal from Stable-Tec. We *copy* from the M.A.S.--" He took a misstep and fell to his knees with a groan.

"Goldenblood? Are you alright?" She knelt beside him and helped nudge him to his feet. "You look... well... worse than usual."

"No, I'm not alright. But you needn't concern yourself with me. I've learned some... unpleasant things myself lately," he rasped as he stood with a groan.

"I'm sorry I pressed Luna to remove you. I wanted to work with you, Goldenblood. I thought that was the whole point of your office," she said as she looked at him sternly. He blinked at her, as if not even comprehending what she'd said, before he smiled tiredly.

"Oh. That. No, that's hardly a bother at this point. My removal was inevitable, though I hadn't realized how much more of a trial protecting others from my mistakes would be," he said with a sigh. "Regardless, if everything turns out as it should, it won't matter much."

"What are you talking about?" Twilight asked in worry.

"Don't worry, Twilight," he said quietly as he lifted himself to his hooves. "We've taken care of everything. And even if it doesn't work out... everything comes out clean one way... or the other." They faded from sight, as did the rest of the ponies I'd seen.

No. Not all of them. I gaped as two ghostly ponies trotted by and then faded into nothing.

I blinked, shook my head, and looked down the trashed hallway, now empty and strewn with garbage and detritus. I stared at it in confusion. "What the hell..." I muttered with a groan, rubbing my temples as I felt a doozy of a headache start. Was this some weird Hoofington Enervation thing? Was I going crazy... er? "Do not tell me I have to choose between crazy and ghosts."

I just wanted to find Sanguine and kill him. Why did that have to be so hard?

Moving along, I encountered something nice and familiar: automated turrets blasting at me from the ceiling. I took cover behind two barrels, almost relieved at something as reassuring as a machine firing low caliber ammunition at me. Twelve rounds later, the turrets mounted in the ceiling blew apart. That left me to see the other fun little addition to the latest house of horrors: bloody bones and viscera were heaped among piles of pale white hide. The stench made me gag as I stepped past.

I was liking this less and less with every minute. I was finding quarters now, bunks for the staff that had worked here. I really couldn't see ponies commuting to and from this place. The bunks were just as trashed as the rest, most of the metal smashed to scrap; I munched on a few pieces and shoved some more into my bag for the next time I felt snacky. I searched everything, though, and found some more ammo, some bobby pins, and some 'Sugar Tails' porn magazines stuffed in a fire hose box. More bloody pony parts. I made my way to the cafeteria and found a cupboard with some Fancy Buck Cakes and cans of Cram. Really, what pony ate that stuff before the bombs?

Well, I was in a house of horrors, but the reek of decay didn't put me off my appetite. I munched down on a can of meaty stuff, and then ate the can. As I chewed, I leaned against the counter. No explosions. No screaming. Had P-21 and Rampage made it down here? Were they okay? I did my best not to worry. P-21 was sneaky enough to avoid detection, and Rampage hadn't met anything that could kill her yet. I popped the pullring into my mouth and chewed...

Then I jumped completely out of my hooves at the sight of the mare standing right beside me. I probably would have shot her if it wasn't clear that she wasn't a threat to me. Unarmed and unarmored, the white earth pony with the white mane had eyes so pale that it was hard to tell where the irises ended and the sclera began. The only reason I didn't think she might be some kind of ghost was that I couldn't see through her. All ghosts were transparent... right?

"Hi," I said as she stared at me. "Hello?" More staring. "Are you okay?" More stares. I moved, and she moved. I waved my hoof in front of her eyes and she shrank back. Her ribs showed through her hide. "Hungry?" Nothing. Even more disturbing was the lack of a cutie mark on her flank. I nudged one of the Fancy Buck Cakes at her, and she pressed her nose to it, sniffing, and then started to chew on the wrapper. "Um... need some help?" I took the cake from her, unwrapped it, and then handed it to her. She munched it down, orange carrot filling smearing her lips. Then she took another and started to chew on that wrapper.

Okay... ghosts, body parts, monsterponies, and now a brain-damaged mare. "Can you tell me about Sanguine? Where is he? What's going on? Hello?" But all she did was try her best to chew through the wrapper. "Great," I muttered sullenly. Then I turned to leave the barracks and heard hoofsteps approaching.

"One of the tubbies knocks over a whole shelf of cans, and I'm the one who has to trot up here and check it out?" a mare muttered as she trotted by the doorway. I saw a flash of yellow and orange; Fury, or whatever it was she called herself. I was just about to sneak out and head the way she'd come

when there was a clatter. I looked back at the white mare, who'd knocked over a stack of plates trying to reach one of the snack cakes. And then I looked back to find myself face to face with Fury. Her orange eyes widened in shock, "You? Fuck! You can't be here! How the fuck are you here?"

By the first 'here' I had the revolver out. By the second, I'd put a bullet between her eyes. She began to glow even before her body hit the ground, and I scrambled back as quickly as possible. The explosion launched a wave of stinging debris at me, and as I staggered back I saw her settle into a heap of ash and then glow once more and reform into a mare. "Fuck. Jerky Boy was sure we'd have a day or two to get back and get out of here before you fuckers caught up," she said as she trotted forward. The barracks were a dead end, and that end was trotting forward in a leisurely stroll.

I couldn't waste time with bantering. I put two more rounds in her head even as she heaved a scrap of bunk onto her back. I hit the deck as she exploded once again, settling into glowing ash even as I barely avoided the flying scrap metal. The heap of dust started to glow and then reformed. She glared at me in irritation. "Fuck! Still don't get it, do you?"

I spat the gun between my hooves, shook out the shells, tossed a hoofful of bullets into the air, caught them in my mouth, and shoved them into the empty cylinder with my lips and tongue. How the hell did earth ponies use guns at all? "Trying for Deus's spot in the foul mouth brigade?" I asked as I snapped the gun shut and looked around; it was like fighting Rampage. I'd run out of bullets, or she'd get close enough that one of her blasts would take me out. The pale mare let out a bawling cry that drew the orange mare's glare. "Stay away from her!" I shouted; I bit the gun and put another bullet in her head. This time, I got lucky; the scrap metal deflected off my lifted forelegs rather than biting into my throat.

"Stay away from her? She's a fucking blank," she said, snorting in contempt. I pointed the gun at her. "Yeah. Keep trying that. Fucking idiot." I fired again, and the concussion wave smacked me into the fire hose box. I looked at the heap of ashes as she reformed and glared at me. "Fuck! Still not dead yet?" I shot her again, more junk peppering me as she blew once more. And just like before, the heap of ashes reformed. How the fuck could I beat her? It was worse than Rampage; it was like fighting Gemini again.

Wait... would that work?

She reformed, glaring at me in clear annoyance. "Give it up! You can't beat me."

"Sorry about this," I said as I put the bullet into her head yet again. But as she glowed, I turned my back to her and threw open the fire box. The explosion slammed me into the coiled hose even as I gripped the valve handle and pulled, praying to Luna and Celestia that the water was still on. The hose hissed and immediately swelled. I turned back around, holding the fire hose, and pointed the nozzle at the glowing ashes.

As they began to rise, I blasted them into the heap of twisted bunks with a jet of water. The yellow mare took shape again, then gasped and stared at me in confusion a moment. Then she looked down at the half a bunk lodged in her torso. Slowly, she reached down and tapped it with a hoof. "F...fuck..." she gasped, and then glowed bright yellow. The explosion threw more debris at me, but I didn't flinch away. As soon as she disintegrated, I focused the stream of water on the ashes. She reformed again, and this time there were pieces of her that seemed to be missing. Pieces of mane, an ear, patches of hide... Again, she blew, and again... and again...

Finally, she reformed and I turned off the hose. There was no way she was going to move at me

again... not with her lower body stuck in the drain in the middle of the barracks floor. She looked at me in a daze. "Fuck... fucking... poetic..." she said as she looked at herself, half trapped like Dusty Trails had been, her hide pale and her voice weak. The water sloshed and pooled around her.

"Like I said... sorry," I muttered as I backed away towards the terrified white mare.

"Didn't think it could happen... fuck..." And then she stiffened before slumping over. She glowed one final time, exploding in a spray of dirty water, and when I next looked back there was nothing but the gurgle of ashy liquid flowing down into the shattered drain.

I slumped down, staring at the hole and then at the spooked mare. I really would have liked my heart pounding right about now. Some gasping for air, some relief. Slowly, the white pony stepped closer, then nuzzled one of the Fancy Buck Cakes lying in a pool of the nasty water. I tugged the wax paper wrapper away and held it out to her. She hesitated, caught it in her mouth, and trotted away to munch it down. I tapped the back of my head against the counter, watching her eat. "My life just keeps getting weirder and weirder."

* * *

An hour later, Boo and I were getting closer to where the activity was going on. I'd named her Boo because at the slightest noise she would go scampering away for a hiding place. This proved quite a useful warning system, as her hearing seemed much better than my own. I wondered if the professor had done something with my ears, too; she hadn't said anything, and I didn't think my ears were worse, but whenever Boo's eyes went round and she backed away, I'd find some little niche to hide in with her. There was more than just the big and ugly pony things down here. There were manticores and nightstalkers creeping about, too. I'd nearly walked into a knot of the shimmery snakedog things, but then I'd seen her backing up; fortunately, the beasts either hadn't noticed us or weren't interested. A scratch between the ears and an occasional snack cake kept her going. She didn't speak and didn't seem to understand when I spoke to her. She simply reacted to things, her eyes wide and empty. Even the name I'd given her was more for my comfort than anything the mare seemed to recognize as a name.

And she wasn't alone. While the big pony things were the most common, there were also plenty more like her. Pale stallions and mares that stood in corners or were torn to pieces by the facility's hungry occupants. They weren't nearly as gaunt as Boo was, but they also didn't seem to have her sense of survival. I watched in shock as one stallion simply trotted forward and was torn to pieces by a trio of satisfied nightstalkers. Boo's mane was longer, her body thinner. I suspected that might mean she'd been around this place longer.

We'd come to a room that looked like some kind of zoo or something. Dozens of cages were stacked three high, and the open cages had been transformed into dens for the manticores. Right beside it was another room with large metal tables, hoists, and chains. Smashed equipment and droppings littered the floor, and Boo balked. I saw two manticores lounging within.

"Who's a good kitty for Mommy? Who is?" crooned a voice near the cages. I peeked forward and spotted Brass ruffling a third manticore's mane. This one looked particularly large and nasty. "Did baby like his din-din? Huh? Did baby like his meaty weenie nubkins?" the mare asked before picking up a pale haunch and tearing off a hunk of meat. "About damn time that ass got the machines to crank out more than just one at a time. I swear, this whole damn place is falling apart."

Since Fury had gone boom, I needed some answers, but I didn't want to fight Brass and three

manticores at the same time. There was the problem of getting Boo to follow, though. She lay there, trembling behind me, and wouldn't follow me away. A nasty little part of me coldly thought of leaving her; I needed to win. I couldn't stay here till we were discovered. I couldn't drag her kicking after me. But as I looked back at her, I took that thought and smashed it with a mental hammer till it retreated.

Softest heart in the Wasteland? Maybe, but I couldn't do better by leaving her behind.

I shrugged off my saddlebags and emptied one out. I wondered how they managed to hold so dang much, but hardly had time to waste on that. I took a snack cake and broke it in two, placing it in the bottom of the empty bag. Then I gently slipped it over her face. Boo jerked back several times, but I hushed her and petted her mane. It felt strange treating a pony like an animal, but that was what I had to do to get her past this obstacle. Finally, I got the bag over her head, and she went still. She trembled, but didn't struggle as I put her on my back and crept through the room.

I froze as one of the beasts looked up at me. Then it closed its yellow eyes and gave a belch. I supposed that there was a downside to being well fed. I got clear of the room, moving down a much larger hall. I'd kill for a map! 'You are here. Project Chimera here! Evil ghouls here!' How nice that would be!

Boo started to wiggle, so I set her down and took the bag off her head. She blinked, sniffed, and rubbed some smeared cherry filling off her face with her hoof before snorting and looking around fearfully. She was almost like my second shadow. Up ahead came numerous screams and bellows, as well as the rattle of automatic weapons and the snap of a whip. "Get that batch into the tunnel! Move it! We need to get them cleared out or we're not going anywhere!"

I peeked into another large room split by two rail lines. One line was occupied by three more tanker cars like the ones I'd seen before, and the concrete docks were occupied by a dozen ponies wearing red barding and four griffins in power armor. They were herding four of the big fatties into the rail tunnel with whips and sparking metal poles, driving them towards the sounds of battle; there were a whole lot of smashed sentry robots in sight. I wondered why the ponies and griffins didn't simply close the massive metal doors to the room. The place looked like it was under siege!

On the far rail dock, a pipe on an arm extended over the rails. Bright rainbow sludge poured from the tube into the openings on top of the cars with diarrhea-like noises. Lovely. Other ponies, not white 'blanks' but ragged wastelanders wrapped in dirty clothes, handled the filling process. From their mottled hides and the knobby tumors popping from their bodies, I suspected that they'd been exposed to too much Flux as well. Unfortunately, I couldn't see any way to get past them.

Hello? I spotted a flickering, ghostly Twilight and Goldenblood trotting towards a side door. Then a ghost door opened and... arrrgh! I was not smart enough to deal with this! Still, it was a better possibility than trying to storm across the rails and fight my way through a dozen guards and four power-armored griffins. I moved to the side with Boo at my heels and carefully tried the door. Locked. I fished out a bobby pin and carefully began to work the lock. P-21 could have done it without a second thought, but I was scraping and tapping and any second we'd be spotted.

Then a bullet smacked through the hazmat suit and into the barding over my flank, making me jump and grimace in pain. I spotted a griffin coming to do something presumably messy and quite probably deadly to me; the others were pointing and shouting over the noise the robot battle was making, and very soon they'd all be shooting as well. I pulled the pin out and twisted the lock with all the meager

strength my horn allowed. The drum popped free and rotated, clicking open. Guess I still had a little luck left in me. I threw it wide and stepped into a stairwell going up... a stairwell dripping with Flux.

There was no way I was going to leave Boo behind, so before she could balk and run, I scooped her up onto my back and carefully stepped into the slimy substance, closing the door behind me. Boo was no Scotch Tape. I had to focus, be strong, be enduring, and be awesome all at once. If I brushed the Flux-spattered walls; if I slipped and dropped her... I remembered the screaming room all too vividly. "Don't wiggle... please don't wiggle," I groaned as I made my way up the steps. Skinny or not, she was fully grown, and she'd recently eaten a lot of snack cakes!

I made it up the first flight, reaching a barrel smeared in the faintly glowing goop. I felt the hazmat suit covering my belly brush against it as I carefully climbed over. One tear and I'd be back on the road to having screaming guts. I was halfway up the second flight when I froze just in time to avoid having a dollop of goop fall right in my face. I stared at the stringy streamer it left behind. Another drip. Down below me, the door opened. "Here pony pony," grated a male griffin through a power armor helmet. No time. I waited for the next fat drop and scrambled up to the next landing.

"You're one crazy meatwagon, coming in here," he drawled, starting up behind me.

I started up the third flight, weaving my way around barrels that had tumbled down the stairs around me. "I am so going to eat your hindquarters first for making this annoying," he grumbled. I reached the third landing just as he came around the corner behind me. I took one glance back and then shoved a barrel hard down the stairs at him. The rusty container flung rainbow Flux everywhere and burst like a blister when it struck him, coating his faceplate in goop. He fired wildly, blinded by the sludge as I disappeared around the corner.

"I don't know how you're not jelly yet, but I swear I am gonna smear you on a cracker!" he swore, now moving much quicker after me. Okay, that was a new one. His armor had to have some sort of protective covering for his wings; just my luck. Every barrel I could send rolling down to slow him went. Finally, I saw the top of the stairs and, past that, a Flux-free hallway. A half-full pallet of barrels was stacked there; I set Boo down in a clear area, then turned and shoved the remainder of the pallet down the stairs after him. A half-dozen drums smashed down into him, soaking him in rainbow goop. I needed something substantial, more than my pistol.

Fortunately I had something more substantial.

The griffin pushed the last barrel off his face in time to see me standing there, making like Lancer and pointing Taurus's rifle down at him (well, not quite like Lancer; I was once again proving Rover right about thumbs). If I'd had S.A.T.S., I might have had a chance to kill him outright, but, even with armor piercing .308 rounds, I doubted I could finish him off before he brought his weapons to bear. And he probably knew it too... but I didn't need to kill him.

I just had to make a hole.

I fired as rapidly as possible, the bullets biting deep into his armor as he shoved his way clear of the barrels. I went through the entire magazine before he started shooting at me with a machinegun and I ducked back. "Cunt... whore... meatwagon..." he growled as he crawled up the stairs after me. The hallway behind me was a shooting gallery, a hundred feet at least without any cover at all. I ducked down as he struggled up the stairs, shoving a new magazine in and then making like a zebra again. As he

stepped over the lip, I opened fire once more. It still wasn't enough, and I was out of barrels.

"Die!" he gasped; was it just me, or did his armor look... tight? He leveled his machineguns at us.

Well, I might have been out of barrels, but I still had a pallet. I knelt and kicked the heavy wooden platform at him with all my strength. Bullets started to shred it in midair, but it was still solid enough when it crashed into him to send him slipping and sliding down the stairs into the puddle of rainbow goop. Down below, he started to yell and then scream... and then suddenly there was a loud crunching noise and it all went silent. I stared down at armor that bulged at every seal. Red meat now oozed out the holes. I shuddered as I stepped back. Again, I really really hoped he was dead after that... and that he didn't turn into something worse.

I returned to the shaking Boo and, with some effort, magically wiped the sludge off my hooves using the dirty papers that littered the floor. I looked at my hooves critically. I'd hoped that the metal was resistant to the corrosive or magical influence of the Flux, but... was it just me, or did they look a little more blueish? I sighed and looked at my silent companion; what this place really needed was a balefire bomb or something.

She just stared back at me. And I'd thought P-21 was a lousy conversationalist...

We trotted along the hallway. Windows on one side looked down at the loading docks. There were more robots coming, sentries and something else: smaller, more spidery-looking robots that hopped, skittered, and jumped around the sentries. The power-armored griffins and the fatties they shoved into the line of fire were keeping them at bay for now.

It appeared that all of Sanguine's shit had finally come back to bite him in the ass. Looked like I'd have some competition for taking my own chomp.

"You!" yelled a voice beside me, and I turned to see a ghostly stallion pointing his hoof at me. Then I looked behind me at Goldenblood, the brothers, and Twilight Sparkle. It took me a moment to place the familiar buck: Doctor Trueblood. "You're not supposed to be here anymore! You're not supposed to be anywhere near here!"

I stepped aside as Trueblood stomped towards the four. Goldenblood smiled thinly. "Hello, Trueblood. How's the family?"

Trueblood stormed right up to him, not seeming to notice Twilight standing right behind the brothers. "Princess Luna stripped you of your directorship, Goldenblood! This is a capital offense, you being here!"

"Kids still feeling under the weather, then?" Goldenblood replied smoothly, and the doctor's eyelid twitched in shock. "Well, that's too bad. I know Sunflower will take care of things." The complete lack of acknowledgement made the doctor's eyes pop in rage.

Then Twilight stepped in front of Goldenblood, and the doctor's jaw dropped. "He's here with me. Assisting me with a little fact-finding mission, Trueblood." The doctor sat down hard, his mouth working as he stammered.

"But... But you can't be here! Horse should be here if you're... The director... I mean... you're supposed to be in Tenpony right now! How can you be here?" He gaped at her, and Twilight frowned,

her brows knitting together as she trotted towards him.

"I am sick..." she thumped her hoof against his chest firmly, "and tired of being told where I am supposed to be and what I am supposed to do. I am tired of secrets! I am sick and tired of directors of the O.I.A. telling me what I should do!" She shot an angry look at Goldenblood. "Honestly, what is with your office? Your office is like... like... the office of sneaky shenanigans!"

Goldenblood laughed, and that seemed to spook the twins and Trueblood even more. "It's a very long story. Hopefully, someday you'll hear it." He shook his head with a smile as he looked at Trueblood. "Well, then. Care to accompany us, Trueblood? The Ministry Mare is curious about where Flux comes from. We're showing her."

His mouth moved again. "... I... I... I need to contact Horse. Excuse me." He started to turn away.

"No," Twilight said firmly. "I think I'd like you to come along too, Trueblood. It appears that when you brought Project Chimera to my attention, you failed to mention several key aspects of it. I'd like you here to explain anything you might have missed... without a director telling me what I should and shouldn't know." Trueblood just stared at her with a mortified expression. Goldenblood smiled and shook his head. She looked at him sharply. "What?"

"Nothing. It's just nice to see you like this again," he murmured softly as together the five continued flickering down the hall. I couldn't help myself; I trotted along behind them with Boo at my heels. Personally, I was just dying to find out more of Goldenblood's secrets myself.

The group disappeared and reappeared as we walked together. Three more times, Trueblood tried to excuse himself, and every time Twilight refused to let him scurry off. The windows looked down at another large room; this was full of dozens of pods similar to the ones that had held the foals in the Fluttershy clinic. Many of them had clearly been damaged or tampered with, and several held bones inside.

Twilight looked down with obvious disgust. "What are those?"

"Hazardous biological samples," Goldenblood explained. "Combinations where either the host was dangerous or the combination unstable. Some combinations... phoenixes, dragons, manticores... produced a pony hybrid that was too aggressive to field safely."

"We store other unique biological samples as well," Trueblood muttered. "You never know when you might find them useful."

"You'd better not have any samples from me in there!" Twilight said in shock.

"Luna expressly forbade any biological samples from herself, Celestia, the Ministry Mares, or myself," Goldenblood replied, looking over at Trueblood. "She was rightly concerned that some ponies might try some inappropriate meddling."

"I don't like your implication," Trueblood retorted.

"You weren't supposed to," Goldenblood said pointedly.

The next set of windows opened up to a room that resembled an abattoir, and I was so glad that I couldn't smell the contents. There were four steel tables in a row with four machines hanging overhead

that reminded me of Ol' Hank's limbs. One wall was covered with steel hatches, like dozens of refrigerators, and there were dirty white containers scattered everywhere.

"This is our organ harvesting operation," Goldenblood said smoothly. "It's fairly new, only been in operation a year or so. The system automatically removes any and all viable organs from any subject placed on the table. They're then loaded into the stasis containers for delivery all across Equestria," he said as he pointed down at the white boxes with a hoof.

"Organ... what?!" Twilight's mane frizzed at once. "Does Fluttershy know about this?" she asked as she pointed down at the room.

"In a general sense," Trueblood muttered. "She understood the crippling need for ponies all across Equestria to have compatible organs. She might be somewhat ignorant as to the specifics. All she needs to know is that when a little colt or filly needs a heart transplant, her ministry can provide it. And if not, she can keep them alive till proper organs are arranged. She doesn't need to know how it works."

Twilight covered her mouth and shook her head before stepping back. "I can't believe you would do this."

Flim coughed. "Well, there was quite a market incentive for it."

Flam tapped his hooves together. "The Ministry of Peace has quite a lovely operating budget, and we thought it'd be a shame to be left out."

Twilight looked at the pair. "You're disgusting."

"Oh?" Goldenblood arched a brow as he trotted in front of her. "Would you rather have ponies die when we have the magic and technology to save them? If so, make the command. We'll shut that room down forever." Twilight looked horrified, and he shook his head. "This is why we keep you and your friends in the dark. So that you don't have to know these things."

"I... I didn't come here for this, Goldenblood!" Twilight stammered.

"No, you came here for secrets," Goldenblood retorted evenly. "And I am giving them to you, Twilight. Horrible, bloody, terrible secrets in all their raw glory." He stared into her eyes. "If you can't handle something as simple as this... if the knowing of a little secret is too much for you to bear... then stop now and go home."

That returned some iron to her, and she glared back at him. "I'm not giving up, Goldenblood. But..." Her eyes turned to the window.

"Then let us continue. It's time you met Chimera as more than just notes on paper," Goldenblood said quietly. I copied Twilight's expression perfectly; this wasn't going to be good.

Why was Boo cowering like that? Oh crap...

Brass swooped up and smashed through the glass, showering me with shards that I barely deflected with my upraised hooves. "There you are!" she shouted in glee as she pounced at me. "They said they spotted a pony with a black and red mane, but you wouldn't believe how glad I am that I'm the

one who found you!”

Somepony talked way too much. I brought the revolver up, but unlike Fury, Brass didn't just let me blast her in the face. In a flash, the mare was on me, clawing and stomping and biting and stinging. Had any of my limbs been flesh and blood, they would have been torn away; as it was, the hazmat suit and Reaper barding beneath it still didn't stop the stinger from plunging into my side. I instantly started to feel woozy as the venom began to work through my system.

“You have no idea how much I've wanted to finish you!” She knocked the gun from my mouth, cackling. “I just wish you were the gray cunt. I'm looking forward to ramming that gatling beam gun right up he--”

I interrupted her by grabbing her neck and ramming my horn deep into her throat. The piercing headbutt made her choke and gag. I only wished that I had three magic bullets to follow it up with and S.A.T.S. to insta-cast them with. She jerked back, my horn coming out with a small burst of blood, trying to leap back out the window, but I couldn't have her getting away and finding help or circling back around for another attack. No matter how sickly I felt with her poison in me, I couldn't let her go. As she perched on the edge, I rolled forward and launched myself at her, wrapping my legs around her throat as we tumbled through the window together and down into a heap of garbage and old remains.

I kept up the pressure on her throat as we landed; she choked as she thrashed against the ground. *If I died now, would my legs keep choking until she went after me*, I wondered. Except... simply killing her wouldn't be winning. Finally, I had to shove her away as hard as I could and dig through my bags for a healing potion and some antivenom. As she fought for breath, I slugged down one and then the other. The healing potion wasn't all that effective, but Glory's antidote counteracted a lot of the woozy sensation immediately.

I had all of six seconds before she was upon me. She was deadly in close combat, but she was too damn fast for me to keep *out* of close combat! Her tail made grappling a risky proposition, though it was becoming my best bet. Watching her closely while trying to dodge, I noticed her wounds weren't regenerating. I could take her down if I could just get her down. High caliber shot would do it; but that would require a big rifle and a pony capable of using it. Explosives? I didn't see anything that would otherwise go boom in here. Revolver was up there. No magic bullets...

Shit.

“You've killed so damn many of my lovers and pets. I'm going to feed you to them, clone you, and feed you to them again,” she swore as her lips spread wide, showing her dozens of sharp and pointy teeth. How could it be that the undying pony who blows up was easier to kill than the idiot who screwed beasts? “Mmmm... the Blackjack diet. Somehow, that'll make this all better.”

“Be careful. I bet I taste like regret and failure,” I muttered as I looked around. “You know, I have to wonder just what has to break in a mare to fuck her up as much as you.” Think, Blackjack, think!

“Ohhh... I could make up some sort of sob story for you, but the fact is that this is the way I am, and I like it. Now quit stalling and start dying!” she growled, baring her fangs.

Oh well, thinking wasn't my forté anyway. I had barely enough time to draw my sword before she was upon me. The silvery steel sang with a single deadly note that made me grin even as I felt a twinge inside at the sound. The wild swing was enough to make her draw up. I thought I was supposed to

clench as hard as possible on the handle and swing as fast as I could, but as I held the slim weapon, I realized I had to relax my jaw. Increase the arc of my swing.

The manticore hybrid leaned back and sprang forward with a snap, and I thought for sure I had her... but the bite stopped short. Instead of snapping her fangs at me, her tail thrust over my horizontal swing and tagged me hard in the side of my neck. The pointed shank withdrew with a spurt of blood that made me sway; I really hoped that there was enough antivenom still in me to counteract the poison. I reversed my swing, but she jerked her tail back.

I made a lunge to try and spear her face but she ducked low, launched forward, and dragged her claws along my exposed throat. I nicked her ear in my counterattack, but again she was too fast for me to do anything substantial. If I'd been flesh and blood, I'd probably be bleeding out right about now. Only my body's automatic regeneration had slowed the bleeding from my neck. I suspected that if I had my PipBuck, the health monitoring system would be informing me that I was all kinds of fucked up in the head and torso regions.

She seemed quite happy to slowly rip me to pieces bit by bit, though, and my regeneration certainly wouldn't be enough to recover from that. And from the distant sounds of yelling coming from beyond one of the room's doorways, I suspected that soon I was going to be quite thoroughly screwed... oh, great, why'd I have to think of that?!

Suddenly, there was a click and the whirr of fans. The lights overhead flickered and came on, and the vents began to blast cold air and rattle loudly. The mechanical limbs suspended above one of the tables jerked to life and started to swing and whirl and beep. Most importantly, the doors leading towards the shouts hissed closed and locked. I looked at Brass, but she was looking around in bafflement. Finally, I shrugged and tried several sudden slashes, barely jumping away from a bite that probably would have finished me.

The manticore pony snarled as she circled to my side, but I moved back, keeping the table with its flailing arms between us as I struggled to use my brain. I wasn't going to be able to outfight her at this rate. She'd have killed me by now if I hadn't been augmented. If I attacked first, chances were she was going to dodge and nail me with her stinger. I needed to make her attack first if I wanted a chance at hitting her. ...How to do that, though?

Well... when in a fight to the death with a monsterpony about to tear you to pieces... I raised my forehooves in the shape of a T, then rested the blade on the edge of the table as she gaped in amazement that I would do something so... foolish. I kept the handle inches from my mouth as I smiled at her. "Listen, Brass, before you kill me and eat me and stuff... there's one thing I just got to know: did you do this whole manticore transformation thing because you couldn't find any of your own species to fuck?"

That did it. With a manticore's roar she lunged, all bestial rage and fury. She pounced forward as I took the sword and swung, the blade humming in the air as it connected with her leading foreleg and cleaved the limb off completely. She flapped her wings to keep from falling flat on her face, and I feinted with a cut to her head... wait, when had I learned to feint? Sure enough, she pulled her snarling maw back and stabbed with her venomous tail. The sword reversed and sliced the bulbous tip away. She screamed, taking to the air as her stumps dribbled blood.

She let out a pained roar as she flew out of range, a roar that was echoed from above. Three

manticores flew into the room through the broken window and immediately spread out as Brass found a perch and licked her wounds to slow the bleeding. The monsters began to circle me. Okay, sword, what am I supposed to do now? I gave ground, using the tables to try and keep myself in front of them. I might have pulled it off with two manticores, but with three I was going to get penned in.

Not good.

"Death Filly!" screamed Rampage as she dropped from an overhead vent and onto the back of the nearest beast. She might not have had much weight, but she didn't need it with all four power hooves discharging simultaneously. The mantichore gave a furious roar as it immediately tried to shake the Reaper off its back, but Rampage bit down and tangled her left hoof in its mane, and then proceeded to smash her right hoof against the back of its head.

I grinned. Now if only there were two more of her...

Then I heard a dull thump over the whirr of the machinery and backpedaled fast as Persuasion's grenade blasted the other two manticores, though the big one was so tough it didn't seem too deterred. "About time we found you," P-21 shouted from the hole in the observation window as he cracked open the launcher with his hooves, then pulled out the spent shell, spat it aside, and smoothly loaded a fresh grenade from his bags.

The larger mantichore stayed with me as the smaller soared across the room towards him. Biting the grenade launcher in his teeth, he fired it almost straight up at the ceiling! The projectile poned off a metal strut, bounced off a vent, dropped down right behind the smaller beast, and exploded. That finished pulping the mantichore, sending it crashing into a heap. He looked right at me and actually smirked! When had he learned that badass smirk? Maybe it was the hat.

The remaining mantichore spared me such difficult contemplations by nearly biting my muzzle off! I managed to lift a forehoof and let him mangle that in his jaws instead of my face. It might have been metal, but it still hurt. Rather how I imagined it would feel to shove my hoof into an electric blender. I jerked to the side to stop the descending tail spike from finishing me in one stab, then swung the blade in a slash that cut across the side of the mantichore's face, taking an eye. The creature removed its fangs from my mangled metal limb, backing off warily; I really hoped that my cyberlegs could recover from this degree of damage!

From the side, Rampage's power hoof made rhythmic flashes as she smashed it against the monster's head. Finally the beast's skull could take it no longer, shattering with a meaty crunch. The corpse collapsed on its face, and Rampage crawled off with a clear wobble. Pale foam dripped from her mouth. "Hey, Blackjack? Got any more of that antidote stuff?"

P-21 scrambled down towards her, and I grinned. As soon as Rampage was back on her hooves, the three of us could tear this creature down and then finish off Brass. And Brass knew it too.

She let out a roar, and the huge mantichore immediately turned to attack my friends. Rampage had barely downed the antivenom from P-21 when that heavy tail swung into her body with a meaty crack. She flew across the room, smashing into the wall, and lay there limply. Alone, P-21 slung Persuasion and began to back away, tossing out mines as fast as he could push the buttons. The huge beast set one off and jerked back in pain. Its long, low growl wiped any trace of a smirk off the blue stallion's face.

I moved to go to his aid when Brass launched herself from her perch and slammed into me as a hissing, clawing missile. As P-21 and the huge manticore circled one another, she threw herself on me. The sword pierced through the shoulder of her severed limb, emerging out the far side before her thrashing body tore the weapon from my mouth. Her jaws closed on my throat, grating on something in my... skin? Something else the professor hadn't told me about, I guessed. At least it stopped her from ripping out my neck and taking the vital plumbing to my brain with it. Instinctively, I swung our bodies as hard as I could, throwing us both off balance and onto the metal table behind us.

The machine overhead whirled, pincers snapping and saws whirring as we wrestled. I couldn't get a breath through my crushed throat. She screamed into my neck as the machine opened up her flank with a scalpel, her thrashing tail knocking the metallic limb aside. A mechanical claw gripped my head, saw blade trying to cut around my eye socket as I jerked and thrashed. This was not how I wanted to fight! I glanced down into her furious, blazing eye. An eye that swore evisceration for me and then P-21, then all-you-can-eat buffet status for Rampage. I'd killed her pets and her lovers, and that frenzied glare promised to do the same to me and mine.

So I extended my fingers, grabbed the side of her head, and shoved my metallic thumb into her eye socket till I felt it grind against the bottom. She disengaged her jaws enough for an agonized roar, thrashing wildly as I pushed and shoved her away. I grabbed the edge of the metal table, pulling as hard as I could. Bloody strips were torn from my ears and cheek as I pulled myself out of the machine's grip and flopped on to the filthy floor. My throat was a ruin, my face was coated in blood, which I'd lost far more of than could be healthy, implants or no, and I wasn't sure if I was breathing through my mouth or through the hole left by her fangs.

And, looking back at Brass, I realized that I'd gotten lucky. The mechanical pincers seized her thrashing limbs and flopped her on to her back. She screamed in terror, and had I been able to move, to stop what I knew was coming, I would have. As it was, I was too battered to even look away as her limbs were pulled taut. A sickle on the end of a thin beam swung down and stroked from crotch to throat almost like a lover's caress. It hesitated for a moment at her chest, but then hummed and vibrated as it tore through her sternum.

I looked away then, but nothing spared me from the sound of the bone cracking or the scream she let out as the metal hands opened her wide.

The huge manticore forgot all about P-21 at that point and roared, flying over the table with such incredible ferocity that the harvesting machine was torn from the ceiling in a shower of sparks, the bloody mechanical claws releasing as the limbs and equipment were scrapped. Stumbling to my hooves, I looked at the mess that was left of Brass and pulled the sword out of her. She stared at me, and I did all I could not to look at her failing organs. This was way beyond a healing potion or ten. This was more than even Hydra could heal.

"Sanguine... can fix... please... don't wanna die..." she whimpered at me and swallowed hard. "I'm sorry I've been a bad pony," she gasped as she shook on the table.

I couldn't say a word, given my throat was still slowly knitting back together. At least I could breathe... kinda. The huge manticore returned, and I backed away as it gave a low snarl. Rampage was back on her hooves, but she still looked like half the bones in her body were in the process of healing. The immense beast scooped up Brass in his paws with incredible care, cradling her in his forelegs as he

gave a soft chirring sound and nudged her with his broad leonine nose.

She lifted her remaining forelimb and stroked his uninjured cheek. "You big baby..." she rasped as the manticore started to lick her wounded face and mane. She licked back once, then finally closed her eye and went still.

"Let's go, Blackjack," P-21 said as he heaved my bloody body across his back and struggled to carry me up the heap of debris to the shattered observation window. The lights began to turn off, and the clicking machines stilled. Boo shook as she followed, keeping her distance from all of us; I couldn't blame her, with me in this state.

We were well down the hall when the huge manticore let out a long and mournful cry I wouldn't ever forget.

* * *

We found a large office where I could collapse and munch down on some Sugar Apple Bombs and three cans of Cram, along with a box of paperclips that had been left long ago on the desk. "So, we circled around like you said to go down to that sealed door. We got inside, but then we ran into turrets and those huge white ponies--" P-21 began before I waved my hooves to interrupt him. Boo was in a corner munching down on some more snack cakes and making a mess of herself.

"Wait wait wait. I told you what?" I frowned, pink crumbly meaty... stuff... stuck to my lips. I didn't remember any of that! I frowned, chewing the can thoughtfully as I looked at the pair.

"Remember? We called down for five or six minutes; the elevator was only ten or twenty feet down before it jammed. You finally said you were all right and that we should go through the door and meet you down here. Warned us to watch out for the turrets too," P-21 said, sharing a look with Rampage; that 'Is she going crazy, or does she just not remember?' look.

"Well, the first thing I remember after falling was hanging under the wreck. If there hadn't been a robot in the elevator shaft, I would have been goop at the bottom." I shook my head, trying to recall anything between the explosion and waking up. "You're sure it was me? And I told you to watch out for turrets?"

Rampage nodded as she looked up at me. "Yeah. I thought you were just telling us to be careful, but we came to this one hall and there were like... four popup turrets. If Blue over here hadn't been on his hooves with a grenade ready, I think I would have been dusted and he would have been toast."

P-21 frowned at her but looked back at me. "It wasn't like we were just trotting along, but yeah, your warning had my eyes open for the turret casings in the floor. Anyway, soon as we started running into those huge things, we tried sneaking into the vents to move around."

"Yeah, they're always doing that in the books," Rampage said with a grin that faded as she considered. "Though it was a little bit tight, and there were nightstalkers. And there was the whole 'getting lost' thing." I winced as my mangled metal hoof began to ping and pop, the repair talisman's pink glow slowly pulling it back together. Cram with rubies; the perfect choice of regenerative snack for cyberponies. Who knew? Once I was 'digesting' the can and some stones, I lay back and let my body

mend itself.

I was ready to take a break for an hour or two, but then again I had no idea how much time we had. My eyes scanned over the old photos scattered on the desk. A smiling mare and two colts beamed out of the grainy black and white photographs. There were a few pictures that had been clearly damaged; any with a stallion had been cut to omit his face.

I took a little more interest in the office and noticed the terminal. For once, P-21 wasn't all over it with his mad arcane science skills! Yet. After much harassment, he got up and started to hack into it. There was something here. Something! I just knew it. After several attempts, he finally got in. I was right; there was a whole ton of medical and scientific gibberish I couldn't begin to understand. Finally, though, I found something I could: the message box.

O.I.A. Internal Message #345-01-92> Look, I know you can't access any of the systems with them on lockdown, but you can keep extracting Flux from the source. Right now, your job is to find any dirt on Goldenblood you can, particularly related to 'Project Redoubt' and 'Project Horizons'. I swear, we're finding more skeletons than I ever imagined possible. We've got to keep the Ministry Mares from knowing the truth. If they found out... well, just keep your eyes open. I wish that Trottenheimer and Silver Stripe were cooperating, but that halfbreed is dragging her hooves and I haven't been even been able to find out where Trottenheimer was transferred! Horse.

O.I.A. Internal Message #349-01-92> I understand your concerns about Twilight Sparkle's pursuit of the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. Please understand that it is not in Equestria's best interests for her to succeed. In this, I am in agreement with that bastard. Do not attempt to contact Princess Luna directly about this potion. You won't like where it lands you. Just make like Flim and Flam and send her the usual garbage. Oh, and remind them who's buttering their bread now. I'll cut them off from the Flux if they forget again. Horse.

O.I.A. Internal Message: Forwarded #351-20-01> Honey, please come home again soon. I know you're under a lot of stress with things happening at work. I know that you can't tell me what you're doing, but remember that I love you. We love you. I hope you make it back in time for the Gala. I know some time off will do wonders for my very special pony.

Huh... nothing shattering. Still, it made me wonder about the cut up photographs. Jealous coworker? Guilty spouse? I turned to get P-21 and Rampage's opinions, but then I spotted him tossing an empty Med-X syringe into the trash and frowned. "Did you get hurt?" Rampage glanced at him, and immediately her smile sickened.

"Haven't we all?" he replied without meeting my eyes.

I frowned as I looked at him. I'd gotten hurt. In fact, I could have done with a shot of the painkiller myself, if I didn't know my body was repairing the damage. But despite all that fighting, I didn't recall him getting scratched. "Uh, no. Actually. No. I don't think you got hit since we entered the woods."

"Well then, my leg hurts, alright?" He scowled, leaning back with a sigh. "I'm just worn out. I hate this place. With everything that's happened, I just need it to keep me steady." He closed his shadowed eyes a moment and then looked at me; I didn't think I'd ever seen him looking so... tired.

"Okay. Just... take it easy on that stuff, okay?" I said with a small frown. He didn't answer as he

lowered his eyes on his leg. I looked over at Rampage, but she simply shrugged.

"So... what's her story?" the filly asked as she pointed at Boo sitting nervously in the corner. I'd been so coated with blood that she hadn't come any closer to me; I was a little worried that she might try and run off.

"I don't know. I've seen at least a dozen; all earth ponies, same color, eyes and everything. The only ones that are different are the big, aggressive ones. Otherwise, the only difference is gender." I gave a little shrug and looked at Boo again. "I think she's been around longer than the rest. She was hungrier than the others and knew to hide to stay safe."

"Yeah, but the others? We saw two just stand there when some of Red Eye's ponies were playing target practice. They didn't get what guns were, didn't try and fight them off or anything. They just stood there, and when one died, the other just looked at her. It's like they're animals or something," Rampage said with a frown. "Stupid animals at that."

I sighed and shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine." I looked out the door; this place was hazardous and a whole lot bigger than I anticipated. "The only question... okay, the big question is: where's Sanguine?"

Rampage replied, "One of Red Eye's ponies said they were dicking around with Chimera. Apparently, they got back and are trying to get EC-1101 to work while they finish loading something." That would be the tanker cars, I suspected. "They say this place is too damned dangerous."

"They're under attack." By something; the thing in the Core? I sighed and rubbed my nose. Then I remembered something else. "Have you two been seeing ghosts too?" Predictably, both of them looked at me like I was crazy. I sighed, waving my mangled limb, wincing as the repair magic pulled and pushed and remolded the leg back into its original form. It felt like the whole thing was made of wax. "Okay, okay. Not ghosts, but images? Transparent things that are there one moment and then gone the next?"

"You're our expert on seeing things that aren't there," P-21 said with a sigh. "What is it this time?"

"Twilight Sparkle, Goldenblood, Sanguine, and the two brothers. When she came here to find out about how Flux was made; apparently it was a big stink. Goldenblood first told her to go, but something changed his mind. Then they were touring this place." I rubbed the back of my neck with my good foreleg. "Then I got tackled by Brass, so I dunno if they said anything after that."

P-21 looked at me for several seconds before he finally shrugged. I looked at Rampage, but the striped filly just deadpanned, "Don't look at me. I got as much clue about stuff like that as she does!" She gestured over at the oblivious Boo.

I sighed, rubbing my head. "I'd just be glad if I had a map."

"Oh, we found one," Rampage said as she looked at P-21. Okay, Blackjack. Don't facehoof. I looked at him, but he simply gave me a flat stare in return. Ugh, what was wrong with him? He dug into his bag after several seconds of me staring and pulled out a folded piece of paper. I focused on it, then finally got it levitated and unfolded.

"Hey, not bad!" Rampage said with a confident smile.

"I figure I'll be able to use a gun again in a year or ten," I replied dryly, trying not to flush at the compliment. I could count the number of times somepony had complimented me on my magic on zero hooves.

"Yeah. I figure you'll have that whole magic thing licked in no time. Dunno if it's worth it, though. Seems overrated. All those prancy unicorns with their magic and wine and cheese. And don't you have to sparkle and shimmer?" she asked with a snort.

"It's a steep price, I won't lie," I said as I scanned the page and the crude drawing, then glanced at P-21. He wasn't having any of it. I shook my head and looked back down at the page.

'I know you keep getting lost down here, but don't let security catch you with this' was mouth-scrawled at the top of the page on the back of a some sort of spreadsheet. There were six circles on a ring around a larger central circle. The circle at the top was marked 'Security / Barracks'. The upper left and lower left circles were 'Storage / Pens' and 'Distribution / Receiving' respectively. The bottom circle was marked 'Organs / Live Storage / Refrigeration', the lower right circle was 'Fusion' and the upper right 'Copyroom'. In the middle was 'Production'.

There were halls connecting to the center, but the note was finished with a warning. 'No matter how late you are, never try to cut through production. Those security ponies do not accept 'I'm late' as an excuse. If you absolutely *have* to cut through, you can follow the elevated pipes to get from the copyroom to distribution, but you'll have to shell out at least fifty bits at each end. And remember the golden rule: *never* go down below into production. It's practically all red tunnel down there.'

I didn't see anything marked 'Chimera' or 'Control', so I had to assume it was either in the middle or somewhere down below. I suspected it would be in the most secure area of the facility. Still, something about the layout made my eyes linger. I frowned; why did it look... familiar? Then it hit me: it looked almost exactly like the symbol used by the O.I.A. Somehow, I didn't believe that could be a coincidence.

"So... we can just go straight to production?" I asked with a frown, looking at Rampage.

P-21 sighed and muttered, "Blackjack, when has it ever been as simple as 'go straight there'?" Of course... silly me.

"There're big doors that are closed up tight. Heck, even the vents are barred," Rampage said with a frown. "We'll have to find another way around."

I looked at the map, then tapped the circle marked 'Copyroom'. If there was a way to get to production undetected from there...

"So we just continue around past fusion to here, and look for pipes," I said, smiling at the others. Rampage nodded, but P-21 just stared off into space. I trotted up next to him. "Hey, you with me?"

"Yeah. Just tired," he muttered, closing his eyes. "Can't stop thinking about Priest. How he died. Right there, just like that."

Rampage frowned. "No offense, but aren't you taking this just a little bit hard? You knew him...

what... two days? Not exactly a long time." He glared sharply at the striped filly, but she didn't balk. "Don't get me wrong. He was a good pony, but it wasn't like you two were making adorable sweaty buck lovin', right?"

"I don't have to justify my feelings to you, Rampage!" he snapped. "I liked him!"

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah. So did everypony else. He was the nicest damned pony in the Wasteland. Really. I think he had an allergy to being mean or something," Rampage said as she trotted towards him, looking evenly into his eyes. "But it takes a lot more to make a relationship than a few days of cuddling. You have more of a relationship with Blackjack than you did with Priest."

"Rampage, that's enough!" I snapped, then looked at the miserable-looking blue stallion.

He sighed and shook his head. "I just hope that when we kill Sanguine... some of these things I'm feeling die too. I'm so sick of this place." I sighed too, looking at Rampage. The filly just snorted softly and turned away, muttering about him needing to lose an extremity before being allowed to be sick of Hoofington.

I forced a smile, nudging his shoulder. "Come on, P-21. Let's get this done so we can go catch up to Glory and Scotch. Then you can tell her everything she needs to hear."

He didn't open his eyes. "What if she's dead, Blackjack? I waited so damned long... what if she's gone?" He hissed sharply and smacked the floor beside him, gritting his teeth and thumping the back of his head against the wall.

"Then you tell her anyway." I was the Equestrian grand champion of kicking myself. I knew the signs, but I'd never have expected them in my stoic blue friend. "But no matter what, we've got to get through this first. All that stuff comes later." I nudged his shoulder. "We'll be there when you do, either way."

He relaxed a little, nodding. It's not all about me; I had to remember that. I had to. P-21 had his problems too, problems he bore silently and with dignity. I smiled at him and spread my forelegs wide. "Hug?"

He looked at me, then sighed and pulled himself to his hooves with a groan. "Let's get going."

I blinked at him as he stepped back out of the office, my legs still spread wide. Then I slumped. "What's the matter with him?" I said after a minute. "Did I do something, or..." Not all about you, Blackjack. Remember?

"It's probably just me... but he's using an awful lot of Med-X," Rampage said quietly.

"So?" I asked as I looked back at the filly. She facehoofed.

"Hello, Blackjack, weren't you ever taught about drug addiction?" she asked in a sarcastic tone.

"Sure. We watched a movie about a pony hoarding stable supplies because she, like, needed healing potions or something. But P-21 isn't anything like her. I mean, she had sores and huge hollows under her eyes and I think there was some foaming at the mouth. Like, she was crazy without them." I frowned at her incredulous look and added, defensively, "I know that Scalpel mentioned something about

chem damage over time way back when.”

Rampage looked at me in shock. “Okay... wow. You really should know this... everypony should. A lot of chems like Med-X, Mint-als, even booze... they all carry the risk of dependency. You get hooked on a chem, and pretty soon your body doesn’t know how to function when off it.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ve seen addicts. Remember Flank? He’s not an addict,” I said as I looked at the closed door. It seemed so stupid. He didn’t have that gaunt look or anything. Look at what he’d done with the grenade in that last fight! Could an addict do that?

“Not all addictions are grossly physical, Blackjack. There’re all kinds of mental side effects to a lot of drugs!”

“Yeah, and then you pop a Fixer and everything is okay... well, except for the damage,” I countered with a small frown. “Glory kinda explained this when she was going on about chems being bad. Sure Fixer’s like temporary and stuff, but all we’ve got to do is get him some. I’ll keep an eye out.”

“Blackjack, if P-21 is hooked, he’s going to need a lot more than just Fixer. Doctors can take care of the physical conditions. If he’s using it because of something in his head--” But I whirled on her at that.

“There is nothing wrong with his head. Okay? He’s not an addict. If he says he needs it, then he needs it. And who are you to talk, Rampage? You eat Mint-als like they’re candy! You loaded yourself up with ‘everything’ back in Flank, remember?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah! And if I wasn’t eternally regenerating, I’d have died long ago,” she snorted, pointing a hoof at me. “And don’t you deflect this onto me, Blackjack. This is about his problem.”

“You’re sounding like Glory,” I muttered, and I didn’t like it because Glory was usually right. I always thought the whole ‘chems are bad for you’ line to just be her thing. Chems had saved my life more than once and saved her eyes in the sand dog tunnels. I remembered those hollow-eyed, slat-sided wretches outside Flank, and P-21 wasn’t like that. *Those* were addicts. He wasn’t like that, so he couldn’t be an addict.

Back in 99, nopony had problems with chems because they were strictly controlled out of medical. Anypony stealing chems for whatever reason could be flogged for possession or use. Even possession of an empty syringe could be construed as guilt. I admitted, since coming out of 99 I’d had brushes with chems, particularly the effects of too much Buck and Hydra. There’d even been times I’d felt like I absolutely had to have them to win and overcome. But they were a tool. I never took them just to take them.

Of course, Hydra had effectively rotted my heart with all the taint that had contaminated me... I met Rampage’s hard glare and said firmly, “He’s not an addict, okay? He’s just not. We’ll get him talking with Scotch and work out his problems and you’ll see.” I didn’t know how I could convince her... I wasn’t precisely sure if I was convincing myself.

* * *

We picked our way through the next area, ‘Fusion’, with few problems. Aside from the occasional white pony just standing around and one or two of the huge fatties, there wasn’t anypony about. There were a lot more ghosts, though; I saw Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood as flickering images, but the moment I moved they faded away. Other times, if I walked just right, they’d linger and persist.

Occasionally, I heard distant words and other strange noises.

More than once, P-21 and Rampage assured me that they couldn't perceive any signs of the ghosts... if that was what they were. I couldn't explain it; at times like this, I really wished Lacunae was around. If she didn't know outright, perhaps the Goddess did.

I spotted the fusion megaspell chamber but felt no desire to explore inside. I still had creepy memories of a cockatrice fusing with me.

The closer we got to the Copyroom, the more white ponies there were, as well as the occasional fatty. The three of us took one down, though P-21 blasted a grenade a little too close to me for my comfort. Still, I could take it, and we killed the creature without too much hassle. Beneath the straps lashed to the thing were three Rage injectors and a sensor module. I assumed that this might account for the aggression their smaller and less mutated cousins didn't display.

Finally we reached the 'Copyroom'. Like the fusion megaspell chamber, it was a large round room, but it held a strange piece of equipment that resembled a large tree of metal, the golden bark spattered with old blood and filth. Fat white nodules hung from the branches like swollen fruit. The rest of the room was decorated like a forest, as if the architect had tried to ease the creepiness. It really hadn't worked. Large pipes dropped down from catwalks over the metal tree in the center of the room, and a whole herd of ghostly white earth ponies stood quietly in clumps. There were more than a few dead bodies, too, and pits full of Flux. I imagined the blanks being shoved into them until they mutated into the hulking fatties.

"What is that?" Twilight asked at my side, and I jumped in shock, looking at the ghostly mare's floating head. Slowly, I moved till she came fully into view. Goldenblood appeared as well; Trueblood and the twins had departed.

"This? Come now, Twilight. You read about everything Project Chimera developed. Or did you only pay attention to the fusion aspect?"

"Don't lecture me, Goldenblood," she said irritably, her ears folding back. "What *is* this?"

"This is one of the many heads of Chimera," he replied as he gestured to the machine. "The biomagical replication system. We simply call it the copy machine. Mix a biological sample with the Flux, and it can produce a perfect biological copy of that pony. A clone, if you will."

"A clone?" Twilight Sparkle murmured, her eyes widening. "But... I thought Chimera was all about fusing ponies with other beings!"

He looked almost disappointed. "Chimera's goal was to prevent ponies from coming to harm. That was my promise to Fluttershy: to make certain nopony was hurt as badly as I hurt her," he said with a firm frown before turning back to the machine. "Strengthening ponies was simply the beginning. How could we stop there? The organ extraction and preservation technology was used to save thousands of ponies all across Equestria. But we needed a source for those organs. And that source is this machine."

I stared at the machine. Sanguine had said he could replace my failing body's organs, but by using this? "You're butchering ponies for... for body parts?" Twilight said, aghast. "Does Fluttershy know about this? Does *Luna*?" she added a moment later.

"Perhaps... but that depends," he said as he walked to a terminal. I started to walk too, but it made them all fade out again. In the time it took to move back to where I was, I missed whatever he did. There was a hissing noise, followed by a pop. A ghostly white pony stallion appeared, standing before Twilight. "Is this a pony?"

"What is that?" Twilight murmured in faint curiosity. "Who is he?"

"This is what we call a blank. Normally I'd show you a complete copy, but with Chimera sealed, all we can do is produce blanks by cycling the systems," Goldenblood said as he circled around the white pony. "Every single organ and body part found in the pony body, all the components perfectly assembled. No less... and nothing more than that."

"Nothing more? You mean... there's no mind?" Twilight asked as she took a closer look. The blank's eyes didn't even follow her as it stood there.

"None. Less than an infant. And no soul, either, or at least none we've ever been able to detect. A body made of pure Biomagical Flux." He gestured to the blank. "Is this a pony? It has no parents, no magic, no spark. It has enough instinct to sleep when it gets tired or eat when it gets hungry, but it otherwise will die without care."

"It's fascinating, but... Goldenblood, this is wrong. Luna could never--" Twilight began, but was cut off as her eyes met the scarred stallion's gaze. "She doesn't know about this. She can't."

"She can and does. She sees nothing wrong with using Chimera to help the lives of thousands of actual thinking, feeling ponies." He looked at the blank standing there. "And think. If we could somehow give blanks intellect, we wouldn't need ponies to fight anymore. We could produce whole armies of blanks, suit them up in power armor or fuse them with dragons, manticores, and phoenixes and send them against our enemies. With Chimera, we could conquer the entire world, if Luna willed it!" he said with a grand wave of his hoof, before he dropped it and stared into her eyes. "And she will. Maybe not today, or tomorrow... but she will. The temptation is inescapable," he finished in a dreadfully quiet voice; I couldn't tell if he was talking to Twilight or to himself.

Twilight stared at the blank in horror. Goldenblood stared into her eyes, then asked in a voice soft as a lover's whisper, "Twilight... have you given a thought... just a thought... about what Equestria will be like if we win this war?"

She swallowed, staring at the simple ghostly pony. "I've been... occupied." He glanced at her, then shook his head with a faint sigh. She looked back at him and asked quietly, "Have you?"

He frowned at her before speaking as if confessing a horrid crime. "Lately? I've been incapable of thinking about anything else."

They moved away, flickering out. Rampage looked at me expectantly while P-21 just sat there looking sullen, as usual. "Okay, so this is the source of the blanks," I said, spotting Boo peeking out from behind some trash bins. I pointed at the pipes overhead disappearing into the golden tree. "The Flux stuff flows in, but with Chimera sealed, all it does is put out these generic copies."

"Pretty clever," Rampage muttered. "I mean, given all the experiments these guys were doing, they needed somepony to try them out on. They couldn't have only experimented on us." She rubbed

her chin thoughtfully, eyes narrowing. "Wonder what this shit is worth."

Wait... us? I looked at her sharply and saw a heart-shaped loop of barbed wire cutie mark. Somepony else? But then she caught my eye. "Rampage? Is that you?"

She scowled at me. "Fuck... I think..." She shook her head hard. "Fuck... what's the matter with me?"

"Can we just cut to the chase and shoot her in the head?" P-21 muttered sourly.

"Experiments. You were talking about ponies experimenting on you?" The question seemed to draw the barbed wire out of the tangled mess on her flank. Her expression hardened and became more insolent. I'd drawn them out... whoever was inside her. "What's your name?" I asked gently.

"Razorwire, Pink. You want my real name, you can check my motherfucking file."

"Pink?" I asked, glancing at P-21. He was clearly of the 'shoot her in the head' attitude.

She rolled her eyes and sneered, "Fine. Officer." She said the word like I might say 'Overmare'.

She thought I was some sort of guardpony? And from her attitude... she was some sort of ganger? I had to keep her out; if she realized she wasn't Razorwire anymore, she'd fade away again. Or freak out. I was sure glad she wasn't full grown. Still, I had to be careful with my questions. "What are you in for?"

"Trying to make friends with the prisoners, Pink? Fuck you. I've been to Shattered Hoof twice. Twice. They couldn't break me. Hightower won't either." Hightower jail... Rampage rolled her eyes, tapping her lips. "Let's see; civil disobedience, trespassing, defiance of royal edict, theft, larceny, burglary, curfew violations, trafficking stolen goods, distribution of controlled substances, lewd misconduct, and fraternization with the enemy." She narrowed her eyes at me. "So, you going to take me upstairs? My turn in the attic? Fucking Pinks." She spat in my face.

"Maybe," I said, trying to think fast as I wiped it away. There was a narrow window before her personalities became aware and freaked out. "What happens in the attic?"

"Oh, you don't want to ask that, Pink. Big trouble to ask that. You ask that and they'll throw you in the cell. Cut you open." Then she looked at P-21. "Shoot you in the fucking head." Then she blinked. "Shoot you in the fucking head?" She started looking around and hugged her head as her pupils contracted. "Shit... shit shit shit..." she stammered as she started to shake, "They shot me in the fucking head!"

I grabbed her shoulders, staring into her eyes as she started to cry. "Razorwire! Focus. Who did? Why?"

"They shot me! They fucking shot me! Fucking shot me!" she screamed louder and louder before she looked at me. "I'm dead! I'm dead! They fucking shot me and I'm dead!" She wrapped her little forelegs around mine. "You killed me! You fucking killed me, you Pink!"

Even as a filly, she was damned strong, but I just held her. I wasn't going to snap her out of it the easy way. "Yes, you were killed, Razorwire. But not by me. I didn't kill you." She screamed and fought with me in a thrashing frenzy, her power hooves sparking as they kicked my legs. "I didn't kill you!" I told

her again and again. Her rage slackened off, her struggles growing weaker and weaker before she finally stared at me with a forlorn, wide-eyed expression.

"Blackjack?" she whimpered, her bottom lip shaking.

"Yes... Rampage?" I asked softly as she slowly bowed her head.

She fell against me, sobbing, "They killed her, Blackjack. She was so mad. Why did they kill her?"

"You remember her?" I asked as I held her firmly in my hooves.

"Like... like reading a book a long time ago," she sniffed. "She was a criminal, a thief. She boasted that stealing was her special talent. Thought of herself as Daring Do." She sighed, holding her head as she sniffed and shook. Daring... ah, right, the pegasus from those adventure books. From what little I remembered, the comparison might have been accurate. "Really loved the bucks. Partied hard, did special favors for Pinkie Pie. Scared to fucking death of her..." She sniffed and rubbed her eyes. "Got caught in a raid selling to zebra refugees. Got sent to Hightower. She thought Pinkie Pie would bail her out again, but... she didn't. Left her to rot."

"And the guards killed her?" I asked softly, stroking her mane. She pushed me away, though, then sniffed and rubbed her nose.

"Yeah. They cut her open and put something inside. Then... bang." She shook her head. "Wow... this is the first time I actually..." Then she frowned a little. In fact, she looked a bit spooked.

"What? First time what?" I prompted.

"Don't worry about it," she replied with a sigh, looking up at the catwalks over the mechanical tree. "There's got to be a way up there. Let's find it, finish jerky pony off, and go."

"Yeah. I'm worried about Scotch," I said with a frown as we trotted to a stairwell on the far side of the room. The pale blanks moved out of our way, staring dully. A few seemed to be dying of hunger. A part of me wanted badly to give them food; maybe with enough time, they might become more like Boo. Or maybe she'd stepped in some Flux and it'd done something to her. As we reached the top of the stairs, I put my forehooves on the rail, looking at the strange tree.

"What are you thinking?" Rampage asked.

"Sanguine said he could clone me new organs. Even a whole new body, if he had Chimera." I frowned, knitting my brows together. "What if we could use Chimera to help Scotch?"

"Do you have a clue how to? I'm pretty sure none of us have a mad scientist's certification. I mean, I know I don't," Rampage retorted. Then she knit her brows together. "At least, I hope I don't!"

I gave a little half smile, but it faded as I looked back at the golden tree and watched as one of the pods popped open and dropped a drippy, goopy blank mare to the ground. She blinked and just sat there, looking around... well... blankly. Okay... I hated the thought, but I had to say it. "We'd need Sanguine's help," I said quietly. Suddenly, a harsh snarl sounded from P-21 that made all three of us stare, Boo included. He glared at me with disgust.

"Well, I'm so glad Priest, Dusty Trails, and countless more died for nothing," he growled in a low, harsh voice. It'd been a long time since he'd ever spoken to me like we'd just left 99. "Bravo, Blackjack. I think you're the only pony in the Wasteland capable of brushing all that off." I'd rather he'd hit me than have said that.

"I'm not saying we let him win. I'm saying we get EC-1101 and make him use Chimera to help your daughter," I said sharply, and he jerked as if I'd kicked him. I looked at P-21 and Rampage. "There's something that Sanguine wants; I think it's more than just 'this building'. Maybe... maybe we can work out a deal?" P-21 snorted in disgust.

"I'm pretty sure that, even if we get really lucky, any deal we make with him is going to include 'let me go'," Rampage pointed out.

"So we promise him whatever he wants, get Scotch's clone, and then kill him," P-21 said so matter-of-factly that it chilled me. Worse, a part of me agreed with him. Kill him afterwards. That sounded so neat. So pat. So...

So exactly what Sanguine would do.

When I'd lost EC-1101, it was like losing Stable 99 and Scoodle. They were moments where my actions had led to complete failure and terrible consequences for others. I wanted to win so badly that I could taste it. He'd probably believe me if I told him we'd let him go; I had that whole 'noble idiot' thing going. P-21 could rig something to go boom. We could do it. I could not only win, but also get vengeance on the bloody monster.

And I wanted to, as well. I had to admit that. I wanted to win; after being chased, shot up, and raped... I wanted to be on the giving end. I wanted to be the one who trotted away with everything because I was the sneaky pony who got away with it. All I had to do was get EC-1101, promise him whatever he wanted, get it, and then kill him.

Then a little orange pony bucked me right upside the head. Was that what I wanted? Deep down? Vengeance on my enemies? Lie. Cheat. Steal. Destroy. Was that what Security was all about now?

I didn't know anymore. I felt myself slipping away. I wanted to win and I wanted to be a good pony... to do better... couldn't I do both? Was that too much to ask?

In the Wasteland... yes.

"Well, we're putting the cart in front of the pony," I muttered. Sanguine might not even give us a choice. I'd kill him rather than let him just escape or kill P-21. With me taking the lead, we walked along till we met up with the pipes. A narrow catwalk just wide enough for one pony led gradually uphill.

Towards Sanguine and EC-1101.

The pipes emerged into an enormous hexagonal room, a room I'd seen before. Twilight had accused him of copying Maripony; I didn't know how accurate that was, but in this place I saw almost exactly what I'd seen in Spike's cave. It was a cruder design; the ceiling was held up by six massive pillars instead of being freestanding under a volcanic chimney, and instead of computer equipment, these walls were covered with pipes and mechanisms. Flickering lights blinked on and off over a massive lake

of pink mist that undulated and swirled around heaps of machinery barely visible through the fog. The air tasted foul and poisonous.

And there were warning signs everywhere. Some were almost as large as the Hoofington Arena's scoreboard. 'Warning: absolutely no eating or drinking on the floor, no matter how good it smells.' 'Warning: absolutely no sneezing.' 'Warning: report any and all instances of music and/or singing; do not participate in any musical numbers.' 'Warning: anything and everything can explode when thrown, even you.' 'Warning: report to medical if you find your body drastically different when you wake up tomorrow. Blue spots = bad spots.' 'Warning: be on alert for unusual weather shifts.' 'In the event of catastrophic Flux spill, please think of your fellow workers and activate the water flush system; we will remember your sacrifice.' 'Only you can prevent a horrible fate worse than death.'

Of course, they were slightly better than the other signs. 'We're not just mixing chems and dangerous substances here: we're mixing *science*!' 'When in doubt, throw science against the wall. See what sticks.' 'You are a trusted friend in science!' 'Not never but NOW!' 'Your right to work, no matter how hazardous, horrible, or harmful that work may be.' 'Three bit work; aren't you glad you're being paid four?' 'Donkeys: doing your part for Equestria!'

Then, on each pillar, I saw a red box about the size of a pony. The warning on these was far more straightforward. 'Warning: high explosives.' I had a sneaking suspicion that most of the employees here had been illiterate, desperate, or suicidal.

In the very center was a large metal pillar. Pipes of all sorts sprang from it, some coming up to meet the pipes running underneath the catwalk I was on while most dropped down to the strange machines. A metal catwalk ring surrounded the pillar about twenty or so feet from it. Carefully, the four of us made our way over that poisoned expanse towards the pillar. A guard lounged where the catwalk we were on joined the ring surrounding the silver spire; she might not have been taking her job seriously, though, given that she was smoking and looking out at the mist, but I couldn't think of any way we could get close enough to take her out without giving her a chance to get off a warning. And shooting in here... even I could tell that that would be a bad idea.

Then I looked back at P-21, who was staring out into space with that sour expression. I nudged him and pointed up the ramp at the guard. He frowned and lifted Persuasion in his hooves with a questioning look. I rolled my eyes and then shook my head, mimicking lifting something with my hooves and puckering my lips. He looked at me like I'd lost my mind, then blinked and nodded. Silently, he moved closer and pulled Scalpel's blowgun from his bags. He raised it to his lips and fired without a sound. The dart pinged off the rail next to her, and I felt my mane stand on end as she bent over to examine it. Fortunately, the second dart buried itself right in her rump. The Fixer and Moon Dust mix shot into her, and she swayed on her hooves before flopping on her face.

I just gave him a look, smiling and arching a brow inquisitively as he looked back defensively. We trotted up to the ring, and he collected the missed dart. Fortunately there were drums and crates to hide behind as we moved around towards the far side, where pieces of equipment sparked and whirred. Barely audible over the noise from this distance were several voices. As we moved around towards the front, I saw a generator surrounded by dozens of spent spark batteries. It was connected to one of the machines hooked to the exterior of the pillar. 'Flux Extraction Pump #26' was written on the casing.

"Try it again!" came Sanguine's shout. "It should work for you! What are you doing wrong?"

"It's not. It won't work!" Psychoshy sobbed. "It just keeps telling me how Blackjack is going to kill me. It won't open the casing."

"It must! EC-1101 was designed to work for only a select few ponies or their offspring. It must work for you, Fluttershy! That's what it was designed to do!" Sanguine hissed, and then I got far enough around the column to spot the guards, then him, and then the sobbing yellow pegasus. She looked like hell; great wads of yellow feathers had been torn from her wings, her mane was ripped and torn, and her yellow hide was bruised. "Stop screwing around and just open it!"

"I can't!" she sobbed, hanging her head as her hoof rubbed the Delta PipBuck that had been ripped out of my leg and duct taped to hers. It was rubbing her limb raw.

The half-dozen guards snickered to each other, watching the pair. I didn't know if they were protecting them or trying to prevent them from escaping. Sanguine looked at her and said, in a low voice I barely picked out over the pump, "The last tanker is almost full. Goliath and his mother have already teleported back! As soon as it's full, they're leaving, and either they are going to kill us or that thing is going to completely occupy this facility! You can do it."

"I can't. It just keeps telling me how Blackjack is going to kill us. You didn't say anything about a dead pony talking to me!" she suddenly wailed.

What was that? Was she talking about... Dealer? But... but he was my crazy! Wasn't he?

"I'm a dead pony talking to you, and I'm telling you this is our last chance. If we fail now... or if Glue cracks Twilight's work... there won't be another! I won't leave them down there!" the ragged ghoul said as he pointed down at the pink mist.

Now I really wanted to have a nice long chat with the bastard.

Should I act or should I wait, though? Even if the guards weren't on Sanguine's side, I doubted they would just let me trot right up and take him. I looked over at P-21 to see if he had any ideas. He did...

He was pointing Persuasion right at Sanguine and Psychoshy.

I knocked the barrel up, either just in time to prevent him from firing straight or accidentally triggering it. The launcher made its soft thump, the grenade pinged off the side of the pillar, and then exploded overhead. From the glare he gave me, I wondered if I was back on his shooty list.

Okay... time for plan D.

"Security!? Get her!" Sanguine shouted as he grabbed Psychoshy's tattered wing and dragged her behind cover. The six began to spread out and open fire with SMGs and battle saddle mounted light machine guns while two more circled around. 'Get her?' Really? He was hitting the villain clichés hard!

Of course, he'd be laughing last if they did manage to get us. "Rampage!" I pointed behind us, and the filly gave a salute and scampered in that direction.

A few seconds later, I heard her yell, "Tag! You're it!" Followed by the crack of her power hoof.

That left the three of us being shot at by four ponies, and Sanguine was somewhere with his

poison breath. Boo immediately took cover behind a barrel, curling up as tightly as she could. P-21 pulled out a frag grenade, bit off the stem, and threw it over towards the guards. He wasn't the only pony with that idea, as an apple grenade bounced off the crate behind me and landed in my lap. I jerked, tossing it over the edge, where it detonated a fraction of a second later in midair just below us.

P-21 leaned to the side to get a better look as he readied another grenade while I fired with the revolver. Really, right now, I was just grateful for the lack of griffins. My aim was a lot more careful, but with automatic machinegun fire you didn't need skill, just luck, time, and a large enough supply of bullets. P-21 rolled a grenade across the catwalk to the base of their cover. "Get ready," he said.

"For wh--" But the what was answered when a cloud of thick white smoke billowed up, cutting us off from them. I sure wasn't wasting any time! The gunfire slackened somewhat, and I sprinted across the gap, launching myself over their cover. Now was my chance to administer a beatdown on somepony else in a battle saddle! I hooked my metallic forehooves around one light machine gun and pulled back. The mare it was strapped to clenched down on the trigger as I swung her around. Screams and shouts filled the air as the guards fired wildly back at her.

Finally, the pins holding the machinegun came loose and I yanked it free. Several rounds smacked into the mare as I swung the gun up and rested it across her back. I looped my hoof around the cable trailing from the trigger to the bridle and jerked it taut, bracing the gun against her body as I fired every round in the magazine in the direction of her comrades.

One came out of the dissipating smoke and slammed me against the catwalk rail, the gun falling silent as the mare I'd used for cover went down. The bulky earth pony struggled to simply toss me completely over the edge and into that vast swirly death below. And she was doing it, too! I wrapped my hooves around her neck as she shoved me over, halting my plummet. I grit my teeth and hooked my hind legs through the railing, then extended my fingers and grabbed her own shoving forelegs. With a yank, I pulled her over the edge after me, dangling there upside down as she screamed and landed on some equipment below us.

The fall hadn't killed her. As she started to howl and choke, I suspected she wished it had.

There was another grenade explosion as I hauled myself up the side of the catwalk rail with my robofingers and finally flopped over on the safe side. Then Sanguine emerged from the thinning smoke and took a deep breath. I covered my face with my hooves as his thick pink poison washed over me. I might have held my breath, but it did me little good. Every inch of exposed skin burned horribly as the concentrated gas touched it. I felt my hide grow... sticky. When I rolled to the side to get out of the spray, I felt my skin tear; a second longer and I'd have been fused to my barding and the floor! As it was, I'd left a few square inches of hide glued to my forelegs and the metal beneath me.

I could only hope I'd regenerate... provided I survived. If I hadn't been half synthetic, I think I'd have been permanently glued down by that toxic plume.

I reached for the revolver, but it'd fallen out somewhere. Sanguine drew in another breath as I stared up at him; I needed a magic bullet. I needed it now! I focused... imagined... concentrated... Oh, this was so much easier in S.A.T.S.! Then the white ball of light flashed out and struck him in the face! It wasn't full power, but it was enough to knock him back and halt a second dose of the Pink Cloud.

Psychoshy had *kissed* him? How did she still have a tongue?

Unfortunately, lying there made me prime target for one of the guardponies. I didn't have a gun, and my horn still ached horribly from one half-strength magic bullet. The bloodied guard levitated an SMG with a look of pleased satisfaction in my imminent demise.

Then there was a chatter of rapid fire directly behind me; shooting wild and uncontrolled. But with machineguns, you just needed one or two lucky shots. The unicorn mare jerked as two bullets pulverized her face, ripping out her eyes and the top of her head, her own fire going wild before she dropped and lay still. I rolled to my hooves, expecting to see P-21. Instead, my eyes popped wide as I stared at Boo gripping the mouth trigger of one of the guns. Her blank eyes stared back, and she swallowed. The gun went off again, spraying me briefly and punching a whole slew of holes in my limbs as I raised them reflexively. I'd just regenerated those! The terrified mare let the gun fall out of her mouth as she curled up into a trembling ball again.

I didn't have any time to be indignant though, as a second blast of poisoned breath washed over me. I jumped away, my body quivering from the toxic spew, and I turned to face him. One side of his face had fallen away, uncovering bone from mouth to ear and letting tendrils of pink ooze out the side of his mouth. "Now I see. EC-1101 must be... be locked onto you or something. When you die, it'll work. I'll be able to save them."

"You couldn't save a bottlecap by gluing it to your face," I countered.

"I can save them!" he shouted, his eyes going wide. I wondered if he was going to go feral right in front of me. "I'm a doctor! That's what I do! I save ponies!"

"You're a murderer, Sanguine!"

"You made me one!" he screamed. "I didn't want to kill them. I didn't want to kill anypony! I just needed Chimera to save them. If you'd just given it to me, then we'd all have been better off. Red Eye would have his I.M.P.! I would have a comfortable life in Fillydelphia! My family would be safe! Everything promised to me by Goldenblood and Horse would be mine!" He started to pace. "I wasn't supposed to become this. My family wasn't supposed to die. I was going to be Equestria's greatest biological researcher!" He pointed a hoof at me and yelled, "It's not fucking fair!" A cloud of pink rose up from his mouth.

"Your family?" I blinked as I stared at him. "You have a family?"

"Is it that much of a surprise?" His horn glowed, and from his pocket he pulled out cut up little pictures like the ones I'd seen in the office and flung them to me. My pathetic magic only managed to catch one, and I stared. The buck whose face was cut out had been kissing a pretty, blushing orange unicorn. I could see the ghoul's charcoal face through the void before I let the photo drop. He hissed, the Pink Cloud spraying out between his rotten teeth. "Yes. My family. We were supposed to be safe in Stable One. The finest and safest stable in all of Equestria. But the poison... we couldn't reach it." He shook his head. "I got them here, but we were sick. Oh so sick. There was nowhere safe. Here they'd be safe. Where I could heal them. Clone them new bodies... transplant organs... they'd live! They'd have to. All I needed was Chimera!"

"You were doing all this to save your family?" I gaped at him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He snorted angrily. "Are you saying you'd believe me after what I did to your stable?" He had a point. I'd taken one heck of a pounding since then. I'd needed to see that office first. Read that message

from a loving wife. “The sick fact is that what I am... this... this walking corpse... doesn’t deserve them. But their memory is the only thing keeping me from becoming a mindless feral. Saving them gives me purpose.”

I scowled at him. “Why’d you feed me that grand vision experiment on the Wasteland crap?”

“Do you really think Red Eye is big on sentimentalism? Or Reapers? Or monsterponies? I needed Red Eye’s help, he needed Flux and the Impelled Metamorphosis Potion. He’d be able to care for my family! Give them the life and safety they deserved. I wouldn’t have my wife raped by raiders or my sons turned into savages. Red Eye is creating schools. Civilization! And he doesn’t care if you’re a ghoul... unlike Tenpony.”

“You put them in stasis pods, like the others,” I said as I stared at him.

“Yes... but once activated, I couldn’t open them! I can’t even monitor their status. Chimera would have to be activated first. I tried tampering with them from time to time, but it was risky. Killed the occupants of some by accident, woke up some of the others. Told them I could fix them, or give them whatever they wanted and needed. Set up some with the Reapers.” He glanced at Psychoshy before he resumed pacing back and forth. “I learned that the stasis pods had a flaw: not all ponies put in stayed unconscious. Some were trapped and went insane.” He shuddered, hanging his head. “I couldn’t wait after that. Not knowing if my family was trapped in their pods, trapped in their heads, screaming. Sent Deus after your stable... last place Silver Stripe traced it. And then...”

He looked at me and screamed, “Then you fucked everything up!”

He launched himself at me in a frenzy, a toxic cloud pouring out of every gap and hole in him. I kept backing away, using my fingers to throw crates and barrels in his face whenever he started to exhale. It was different than fighting an enemy with a gun, though. The vapors burned, even without a direct hit. Holding my breath did no good; the toxins were entering through my hide. Finally, I trod on one of the corpses and my leg slipped out from under me.

I rolled onto my back once more, and he stood over me. Pink vapors burned my cheek; I felt the flesh bubbling from the contact. He drew a long, slow wet breath. Then I looked above him...

Glory?

The crate dropped on Sanguine’s back with a resounding crunch, and he collapsed beneath its weight. A pink spray poured down through the catwalk grate into the sea of noxious vapor beneath us. I rolled away, feeling my flesh drip. Oh, I really, *really* hoped I could regenerate this! Then I stared in shock as Psychoshy landed beside him, tears streaking her cheeks.

“You said it was going to be you and me, Sanguine. That it’d be us in our life with Red Eye,” the orange mare sobbed. “Were you going to kill me once you had Chimera? Or were you just going to dump me and run off with your family?”

“Stupid... ungrateful... wretched... traitorous... meat. I should have thrown you away when I had the chance,” he hissed beneath the crate. Then his lips curled. “Well, it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Oh yeah? Why?” I asked with a snort, then a wince. I really hoped I still had the left side of my

face! At least I could still blink that eye.

"Ahem," coughed a voice behind me. I turned and stared at three hovering griffins in power armor and a dozen more guardponies, similarly equipped. One pressed a gun to P-21's head as he pinned the struggling stallion. The lead griffin, pointing a high caliber precision rifle at my head, said, "We wanted to tell you that we've got the Flux loaded and are ready to leave." He looked at the pinned ghoul. "Do you have Chimera?"

"Almost!" he rasped, his broken hooves scraping at the catwalk grate. "I'm so close. Just kill her... and... I just need a little more time!"

"I see," the griffin replied as the guards trotted past us and Sanguine gave a growing smile. But then they simply collected their fallen comrades and their wounded, doing nothing against me or to help free him. His glassy eyes popped wide when they started to trot back out the way they came.

"No. What are you doing? No. No no no... you can't! You need me!" Sanguine shouted after them.

The griffin just snorted. "Glue cracked Twilight's notes three days ago. We don't need you for anything. Red Eye thanks you for your offer of prewar aid but says he can't extend any more time or resources for Chimera. In addition, for your crimes against the mining settlement at Brimstone's Fall, Red Eye wishes for me to personally inform you that you will be shot on sight if you are seen anywhere in the vicinity of the Cathedral or Fillydelphia."

I stared as they released P-21 and started to go. "Wait... you're just leaving him?" I asked. The griffin looked amused. "You're not going to kill us?" Somehow, I felt a little... surprised... that somepony else was showing us mercy rather than just killing us for the fun of it. That it was coming from one of Red Eye's people was a touch more disturbing.

"You're welcome. Near as I can tell, leaving you alive in this hellhole is worse punishment than killing you. Besides, the robots in the tunnels will probably do that. As for us, our Contract is done. We have the Flux needed, and we'll deduct his payment," he said with a wave at the pinned ghoul, "to cover the extra costs and loss of life." The griffin gave a snide grin. "Be glad I'm not Vermilion, Sanguine. After the annoyance you caused him... well, I'm pretty sure he'd take the time to get creative." He flew off towards the others. I watched them go and sat down hard. "Come on. Let's get out of here. I've had enough of pony freaks, ghouls, and killer robots in general. Hoofington can kiss my tail."

When they'd disappeared down the catwalk I turned back to look at Sanguine trapped beneath the crate, saying, "Well that was interes--"

P-21 had jammed a grenade in his mouth.

"Stop!" I yelled. Psychoshy looked shocked, Rampage sighed, Boo flinched, and P-21 scowled. Sanguine stared back at me, his pink breath trickling around the apple.

"No, Blackjack. Fuck no!" P-21 yelled, hoof poised over the stem. "This bastard needs to die. He needs to die in the worst possible way."

"I'm not arguing that," I said as I stepped closer to him. This was it. Get the PipBuck back... kill him. Or was I going to go for the triple win and lie to him to help Scotch? Kill him. Finish him off. Or let

somepony else kill him. My hooves would be clean then... right? I sighed as I sat down, looking at the ghoul. "Why didn't you just tell me the truth?"

"Damn it, Blackjack! You swore to kill him! You swore to Dusty Trails as she was dying!" P-21 yelled at me. I knew I had. I did, but... "You can't just let him live! I'll kill him if you won't! I'll do it."

"No. You won't," I said evenly, looking him in the eye. "Because I know that you're a good pony, P-21, and good ponies don't kill in cold blood." He shook, his hoof tapping against the metal case of the grenade in Sanguine's mouth. "Besides, I want to hear his answer."

P-21 gave a ragged, exacerbated laugh. "Who cares what his reason was! Does it matter? Is there anything he could possibly say that could excuse what he did in the mine? What he did to Priest?" he demanded, his eyes drilling into me. "Sweet Celestia, Blackjack! Just kill him!"

"Your call," Rampage said with a little shrug. Psychoshy simply kept her head turned away as she wept. Boo stared, wide-eyed.

"I'll do it. I will. I will!" P-21 yelled as he shook, gritting his teeth. One flick. Just one. I moved even closer to him. I wanted to win. Wanted to avenge Dusty and Priest. Wanted to do all of that. And so did he. Then I put my hooves around him and held him close.

"He's not the Overmare," I whispered softly. P-21 froze and then leaned against me as he sniffed. "Killing him won't be killing her. And it won't bring Priest back." He let out a soft sob, muffled by my mane as I held him close. "I wish I could follow through on that promise to Dusty... I do... maybe I still will. But not like this."

He ever so slowly pulled his hoof away and murmured, "Maybe... but he should be killed. He's done horrible things... he deserves to die for them." And I couldn't argue with that. He was right. Sanguine should die. It would be a win. The right thing to do.

But I'm not an executioner.

P-21 moved aside, and Rampage sighed, "Softest damned heart in the Wasteland, I swear." The filly shook her head and carefully tugged the grenade out. Then she narrowed her eyes. "I don't have a soft heart, so if you so much as sneeze at her, I'm going to do a power hoof tapdance on your skull. Understand?"

"Sure," he replied quietly. He hadn't taken his eyes off me. I heaved the crate off him, and he rose slowly, staring. "Your friend is right. I do deserve to die."

"Ponies keep telling me that." I stared back. "What I don't understand is, if you know what you're doing is so wrong, why do you keep on being bad? I know what it's like to screw up. All I can try and do is do better."

"Well, some of us weren't so good even before we became monsters," he replied. "So. What now? As soon as those tankers leave, this place will be overrun."

"I'd love to know by who, how, and why, but I don't have time for that. When I was dying, you said you could replace organs for me using Chimera. Well, now I have a friend who breathed a whole lungful of chlorine gas, and if she's not dead now, she may be soon," I said as I stared into his eyes. "So

I'll unlock Chimera if you'll do what you have to do to make a clone for her."

"You'll just give me Chimera for that?" he stammered in disbelief.

"No. I'm not giving it to you. Sorry, I don't trust you or Red Eye with it. But I will let you help your family. And if this is an O.I.A. facility, then I can't believe it doesn't have some kind of automated defenses."

"It does..." he murmured, then lowered his eyes. "You asked me why I didn't tell you about my family. Why I talked like some sort of mad scientist from a bad pulp novel? The answer is simple... I'm ashamed. Being a mad scientist ghoul was better... easier... than being a father unable to beg for help. And because I never imagined you'd believe me or help me if I did."

Rampage ripped my PipBuck off Psychoshy's leg. The pegasus with the ratty wings couldn't look at anypony. Sanguine glanced back at the golden-maned mare. "I'm sorry I used you, Fluttershy. Only a pony descended from a Ministry Mare could use EC-1101."

"Is she a clone or something?" Rampage asked as she passed me my PipBuck.

"No," Sanguine said simply. "She's Fluttershy's daughter."

* * *

Sanguine and Psychoshy weren't talking much about the details of that little bomb. P-21 wasn't talking to anypony. And Rampage was duct taping my PipBuck to my limb until Scotch could wire it up properly. And now my vision was filling with all kinds of fancy little images, displays, and pictures. I winced and said, "Okay, did you mess with all my settings or something?" Had my E.F.S. always flashed and twitched like this? It was making my head hurt a little... no... strike that. It was making my head hurt bad.

Then, just like that, it all stopped. Everything did. The pain, the flashes... everything. I felt like I'd just entered S.A.T.S. and was frozen in the moment of calm consideration.

And the Dealer was there before me. The cards shuffled repeatedly in his hooves... and with each shuffle I saw numbers in the margins of my vision shifting and randomizing and disappearing again. His pale eyes stared into mine from under the brim of that dark hat. "So... what are you? You're not my crazy, are you?"

"Let's play that game when we've got a little more time to spare," he rasped as he turned over the deck of cards. "You've got enough on your plate as it is." He had a point, not that I liked it.

"You know. I thought for a moment that, when I left here, I'd have fewer questions than when I arrived." I added a mental stomp of my hoof. "I wonder if LittlePip wants to trade? I'll go fight brain-reading monsters, and she can deal with all this mystery horseshit!" Not like there was much in my brain worth reading.

"You ought to know better," he muttered, tilting his hat up. "You sure you want to do this, Blackjack? That ghoul doesn't deserve your spit, let alone your mercy."

Was I sure? "What happens if I unlock Chimera?" I remembered Ol' Hank talking about

machines waking up and getting conflicting orders. "It'll stop the conflicting orders here and wake up the systems, won't it?" He smiled, seeming impressed.

"Sure. Here and everywhere. Word will go out to let Chimera be accessible along the networks and allow anyone with the right access codes to use the files. I have no idea how far and wide those networks stretch," he admitted with a shrug of his shoulders, and then he frowned. "Funny..."

"Funny... what?"

"Nothing. Just something familiar," he said as he stared into my eyes. I almost would have blushed if I could move. "Just be careful. Once you open something, you can't always close it again."

I wasn't very sure about that, but I needed to help Scotch. This didn't sit well with me, though. Once I unlocked it, then it would stay unlocked. What would stop Sanguine from coming back in ten years and starting all this back up again? I slipped out of S.A.T.S. and looked at Sanguine sitting there. He looked like a corpse. Not just the boiled appearance, with his face half torn off. He looked dead. I wondered just where the line was between a sane ghoul like Harpica and the many ferals I'd seen elsewhere, and just how close Sanguine was to crossing it.

"Sanguine. Those explosives?" I pointed at the really big bombs on the pillars. "What are they for?"

It took him a while to shake out of his fugue. "If we ever lost containment, they would detonate, collapse this space and focus the force of the primary explosion," he replied tiredly. Wait? Those big explosives weren't for the *primary* explosion? "Not sure if it would do any good, but it was preferable to letting it loose."

"It?" I asked with a frown. He gestured towards the round pillar in the center of the catwalk ring. I approached a short extension that stretched halfway across the void and looked up at the smooth face of the pillar. At the chimera carved into the face. Goat... lion... snake... all mixed and jumbled together. Written at the bottom of the strange mish-mash creature were the words: 'Project Chimera'.

Suddenly, I stiffened and felt as if a powerful hoof had suddenly pressed down on my mind. My hooves moved to walk me up to the very edge of the catwalk. The flickering numbers became even harsher, flashes and glares disrupting my sight. Suddenly, the room lit up; the pink mist had vanished, and below me whirled and clanked dozens of strange machines filling up thousands of barrels with rainbow Flux. My friends all disappeared, and I couldn't move or speak as Twilight Sparkle and Goldenblood walked up to stand together on the edge before the immense polished cylinder. Twilight wore a look of horror on her face as she looked at the carving.

"No..." she whispered softly. "It can't be."

"You can turn back now, Twilight," Goldenblood murmured.

"Open it," she hissed. "Right now."

"Twilight..."

"Open it!"

Goldenblood sighed and spoke formally, and I felt my lips move with him as I spoke his words.

“Project Chimera containment open. Password: a wonderful, wonderful thing.”

The immense pillar rumbled as motors within jerked into life. A moment later, there came a hiss and crack. The top of the pillar slowly peeled open, unleashing a rainbow glare. I'd have shielded my eyes if I were capable of movement. Two panels swung wide while a third expanded downwards to form a bridge. My eyes adjusted to the light, and I saw it came from orbs embedded in the interior. I'd seen orbs like these before. A hoofful had utterly annihilated the Hoofington museum. Here, a grid of dozens, perhaps hundreds, were evenly spaced out in a foot-by-foot grid covering the inner surface of the cylinder. Metallic hoses connected the pumps outside to the object in the center.

Mounted on a small pedestal in the middle was a glittering silver statue of the strange creature I'd seen on the outside of the cylinder. It wore an expression of absolute terror, twisted as if it had frozen in that state. The detail was such that I almost swore it was alive. “This is the basis of Project Chimera; the source of Flux. This is what your I.M.P. research is ultimately based upon. What causes the contaminations and mutations you've encountered time and time again. This is the secret you wanted to know so badly!” Goldenblood proclaimed as he gestured up at the silver statue.

“Discord,” Twilight Sparkle whispered in horror, her eyes wide as she pressed her hooves to her mouth.

Then a low, snide, nasal-sounding voice croaked in a condescending tone, “Hello, Twilight Sparkle. Long time no see.”

Footnote: Maximum Level Reached.

(Author's note: as always, I'd like to thank Kkat for creating Fallout: Equestria and Hinds, Bronode, and Snipehamster for making it worth reading. I'd also like to apologize for the chapter being late. I was horribly sick last weekend with a sinus infection. Thankyou to everypony who leaves comments and feedback, and thanks to everypony that leaves tips at David13ushey@ gmail. com through paypal. Every bit keeps this story going. I hope the chapter was entertaining. Thank you for reading.)