

Fallout Equestria: Project Horizons

By Somber

Chapter 28: Orientation

"Thanks guys, you're all great friends too, even when I don't understand me!"

"What am I afraid of? Seriously? I've seen some real fucked-up shit around the Wasteland. I've seen foals bought, sold, and rented. I've seen monsters tear a pony to pieces. I've seen ghouls crawling out of the earth. But, for the most part, I've never been afraid of it. I'm usually more 'oh fuck, this is gonna hurt', than 'I'm afraid'.

"You want fear? Fear is being strapped to a table as a permanent lunch for a bunch of cannibals. Knowing they're going to rip you apart and eat you over... and over... and over again. Fear is knowing you might spend years or centuries that way, your flesh fueling the nightmare and you helpless to stop it.

"But even that's nothing. You want real fear? Fear is not knowing. Fear is looking at the future and knowing that something bad is hidden in it. And the greatest fear of all is knowing that the something bad might be you.

"I'd rather take a dive through a dragon's digestive tract than face that."

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Okay. Four Zodiacs. One of them was a heavy mech, the zebra probably had dangerous sniping skills, and I anticipated some sort of deadly diversity from the bow-wielder. The pegasus... eh, I had nothing. Poisons on the needles? On our side, I was unarmed, my horn wasn't working, my legs weren't working, Rampage was a filly, and Scotch, P-21, and Lacunae were unarmed. Well, only one thing to do.

"Rampage! On the zebra! Lacunae, arrows on the big guy! P-21, use whatever you have hidden on the pegasus! Scotch, find Glory! Arrows is mine!" And with a battle cry, I snatched an eating utensil from the table in my teeth and lunged towards the bow-wielding green unicorn.

Nopony moved as I flopped on my belly with my mouth set determinedly around my weapon. "Eil chut yer eart oot!" I swore as I swung my head wildly in his general direction. Everypony just stared in shock as I wiggled towards him. Then Triage's magic enveloped me, and I was lifted into the air and dangled in front of her as if held by the scruff of my neck.

"The Collegiate is the home of the Zodiacs, you half-horned idiot!" the grey medical pony told me firmly and with just a hint of exasperation. "How do you think we get the caps to keep this place running? Trust me, sickly ponies are not cash makers!" I glared at her, my teeth tightening on the weapon's handle, and she looked at me a little uneasily. "And take that spoon out of your mouth!"

I spat it right in her face as hard as I could, and the impact distracted her just enough to break her magic's hold. Lacunae's purple glow immediately enveloped me, and I threw my forelegs around Triage's neck, pressing my horn to her throat. "Now my horn may be... compact, but I bet it's long enough to hit one of those vein thingies in your neck. And since you saved my life like, three times, it'd be really shitty to kill you, but I'm not going anywhere with them. So. Zodiacs leave. We get our gear. We get Glory if she's feeling better and... wants to come. Then, and *only* then, will I meet this professor." I felt her

swallow.

For a tense moment, I hung there, wondering just how big a mess this would be if somepony said 'no'. Then the security bot said in a tinny mare's voice, "Please back down, Sagittarius. I believe that Security will come see me now in good faith." The security bot's metal head turned towards me. "Correct, Blackjack?"

I glanced up at the indentation my horn was making on the paralyzed Triage and didn't dare nod. "Sure."

The green unicorn had an arrow trained right at my eye, but he couldn't be sure I wouldn't take Triage with me. Then he nodded once, and the four carefully backed out of the cafeteria. "Go get our things, Rampage. P-21, check on Glory," I said as I hovered there in Lacunae's magic. If the Zodiacs tried something, they'd have the best chances of surviving and evading. "Got me, Lacunae?"

"Easily. Though I feel obliged to point out that, typically, heroes do not take doctors that have repeatedly saved their lives hostage," the purple alicorn said wryly. "The Goddess does not know if she should be impressed or disappointed." Or concerned, but she didn't add that one out loud.

Triage didn't say a word till my friends returned. "I couldn't find Glory," P-21 informed me as they dumped my gear on the table. "Dusk and the other one are gone too," he continued, clearly worried about how I'd take this news. To be honest, I didn't like it, but I couldn't help Glory myself. Ever since meeting me, her life had been one painful mistake after another. If Dusk could get her back to the Enclave, good.

Wasn't like I was going to be around much longer anyway.

Now that I had guns, barding, and leg braces, I released Triage. She staggered back, rubbed her throat with her hoof, and stared at me in shock. "You... you would have killed me?"

"Dunno. Maybe," I replied as Lacunae buckled the braces onto my limbs. I looked at her shocked and hurt expression and pointed to the scar on my chest. "You see that? Leo Zodiac did that. Aries burned me. Heck, even that Virgo mare used hostages to try and kill me. That's beside the dozens of ponies I've had shooting at me for a bounty! So, having four trot in on me like that was not good. Once my friend was okay, you might have pointed out that I needed to talk to the professor. No problem. Like to meet her. But springing four Zodiacs on me was not a smart move." Lacunae helped me strap the barding on over my braces. "Be glad that it didn't go bad."

"Still... I can't believe that you did that," Triage muttered, flushing.

I wasn't feeling very sympathetic at the moment. "In case you didn't notice, ponies try and kill me a lot. You didn't take me seriously, so I grabbed what leverage I could." And you're a bit of a nag, I added mentally. "Yeah, I help ponies. Yeah, DJ Pon3 thinks I'm a hero. Me? I'm just Blackjack. And I'll do whatever I have to against any enemy to survive and save my friends."

Triage actually smiled. "That's the first sensible thing I think I've heard you say." Getting approval from Triage was certainly a mixed sensation. Sort of like Scalpel telling me 'good job'.

Armed and armored, the five of us walked out. I might not have been a smart pony, but I was

nopony's fool.

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Clearly, my treatment of Triage hadn't endeared me to the Collegiate, but I was in little mood to worry about that. Finding out these ponies had sent the Zodiacs after my head didn't endear them to me, and while I was grateful for their doctors saving my life and the lives of my friends, I wasn't going to roll over for them.

The planetarium was on the northeast corner of the complex, a huge, heavy concrete building topped by a massive dome. The Zodiacs, with the flaming red Aries in her power armor, the blue Aquarius colt, and a soft pink unicorn mare, presumably Virgo, wearing a PipBuck were in attendance. I looked at the first Zodiac I'd ever encountered; she looked the same age as Scotch! Back outside Miramare, I hadn't realized I'd almost shot a filly. I'd been more concerned with the color on my E.F.S. back then.

As we stepped inside the heavy structure, Scotch Tape balked. "We're... we're not going underground, are we?" Panic rapidly spread across her features as she looked around the foyer; with the heavy gray walls, it looked a lot like we already were.

"Relax, Scotch," I said, smiling at her. She didn't, but she continued with us.

The green unicorn, now without his bow, greeted me with a challenging stare. His eyes took in my weapons; I supposed we'd have to leave them behind to meet this professor. Instead, he looked at Taurus's rifle. "I heard you killed Gem, Mini, and Taurus," he said gravely. "Is that true?"

The question took me by surprise. I could still hear Gem pleading her twin to 'go ghosty'. "The Reaper Deus killed Taurus. Mini died in an accident. Gem killed herself to kill Deus," I replied softly. "I would have killed them if I had to. They were after my head, after all."

"They were after your PipBuck. Sure, they might have been a little... intense... about getting it, but they weren't after the bounty," he explained with a little shrug. "Virgo was the only one after the money; she didn't understand why you were different from the others. Kid's a prodigy, but damn thick sometimes." He took a deep breath. "We were just wondering. We didn't know." With that, he turned and led us up some concrete stairs. We passed a two-century-old display: 'Explore the constellations! Get your free temporary magic zodiac cutie mark tattoo at the gift shop!' declared a Twilight Sparkle cutout.

"How can you use fillies and colts to collect bounties?" P-21 asked curiously. Rampage did not look happy about that... which was a bit odd to see, considering her current apparent age.

"Because they're willing and able," he replied evenly. "We don't use just anypony, and this place needs caps the same as any settlement. And they work. Any village has colts. Aquarius can blend in, get intelligence, drug drinks... kid's good like that. Gemini was even better getting in and taking down marks. It was a game to those two. Virgo's more of a special case. She's a Zodiac because her father's a Zodiac." He screwed up his face and added, "Sorta..."

He stopped at a pair of double doors. "Okay. Professor Zodiac is inside. She's protected, so don't try and pull something again. She just wants to talk. Alright?"

"I can do talking. I like talking," I said with a smile. See? Blackjack being the calm, civilized pony. Sagittarius didn't look particularly convinced.

The door opened into an immense, domed chamber. I immediately thought of the Reapers' arena, though this room was still far smaller than that immense space. A dozen tiers ran around the perimeter of the room; some still had black floor cushions scattered on them, but most of them had been removed for the rest of the junk that occupied the space. In the center rose a massive black piece of equipment studded with hundreds of gemstones that twinkled brightly; a large metal cylinder stood next to it. Cables snaked all over the place, and I spotted several pieces of what looked like sand dog bionics. Countless robots, ranging from Protectaponies to sentry bots, stood silently on the tiers and around the edge of the central floor, and, in my amber night vision, I thought I could see a telltale stealth ripple next to one of them.

"I love this part," Rampage muttered to Scotch Tape. The olive filly shrank away from all of the mechanical devices surrounding us, chewing on her bottom lip and fidgeting with her goggles.

The lights suddenly dimmed, and the massive machine in the center lit up and slowly rose into the air. From the countless gems emerged a million points of light that splashed against the great dome overhead and formed slowly into a starry sky. Unlike the arena's enchanted ceiling, this projection looked... deeper. Still, I couldn't help but feel these little motes to be somewhat lame; they just didn't match up to those tiny lights I'd seen in Maripony's memory.

Wait a minute... The stars were moving, slowly, then flying off the ceiling and drawing together into an immense glowing unicorn head floating in the air above the central machine and staring down at us! A booming voice echoed throughout the chamber. "I am the great and powerful Professor Zodiac! Mistress of the Mechanical! Lorekeeper of Legend! Look upon me and tremble!"

Scotch Tape gave a little shriek and dove under me, shaking as she hugged my hoof. P-21 kept backing up towards the door. Lacunae was staring at the image in mild confusion. Rampage, however, just grinned as she looked up at the starry head. I looked down at Scotch and scowled, then levitated out my shotgun and turned back to the floating head.

"Yeah? Well I'm Blackjack the tired and annoyed! So turn down the volume and turn up the lights before I start sharing my bad day!" I bellowed up at her as I racked a round into the chamber.

She blinked in shock, and then the stars almost instantly scattered back into their original positions. The room lights came up a bit, the volume dropped to a normal level, and from the device in the center flickered rainbow beams. They formed into a middle-aged, normal-sized silver mare with glowing white eyes who scowled at Rampage. "You told her, didn't you?" There was something... off... about her, though, besides her being a glowing, translucent projection. Was it her face? Her tail? She looked... just odd, somehow.

Rampage fell back, laughing. "I didn't say a word. I knew Blackjack wouldn't fall for the great floaty head of doom routine, Zodiac. That's fifty caps you owe me!" The ghostly mare snorted, and one of the Protectaponies trotted over to Rampage. A little door opened up, and out tumbled a hoofful of caps. "Here, hold on to these for me, Blackjack," she said as she dumped them in my bags. I noted that my PipBuck counted only forty-five caps.

The flickering, ghostly silver mare looked at me and snorted softly. "Fine. Again, without the showmareship. I'm Professor Zodiac, head of the Collegiate. I was hoping to talk to you earlier, but you

just trotted right out of here. Wanted a word before you left again.”

“About what?” I asked sullenly, suspicious of flashy ponies wanting things from me. And I just knew it had to be something to do with the program in my PipBuck.

“Your bill,” she replied. “We utilized a considerable amount of our limited supplies, time, and resources to restore you and your friends... you in particular,” she said with a grin, pointing a hoof at me, “More than we would have for anypony else. Certainly more than we would have for free.”

“I... I...” I blinked and considered the caps we’d amassed. “How much do you want? I think I can swing a few thousand...”

“Oh, you used enough healing materials to well exceed that. One trip through the booth costs five thousand caps. So, I think we’re looking at... for the five of you treated... and you, two additional times... plus surgery... healing potions... rejuvenation talismans... time... eh... fifty thousand caps!” she said with a grin. “Rounded down.”

My mouth worked silently. Suddenly, I felt like I was back at Megamart with Deus putting a price on my head. “Fifty... fifty thousand...”

“Oh yes. And that’s not counting hospital time for your friends...” she said as she rubbed her hooves together. “But! I am happy to waive that fee and all future uses of our medical facilities...in exchange for EC-1101.”

I felt my head spin. “What? What do you want it for? Project Chimera?” Of course! With that, she could make all kinds of freaky new pony-things to use as bounty hunters.

“Project Chimera? You know about that?” She was momentarily surprised, but then laughed. “What do I look like, a Canterlot ghoul with delusions of grandeur? Don’t be ridiculous.” She shook her head in amusement. “I’m interested in an entirely different project,” she said, then looked at me levelly. “I want Project Steelpony unsealed.”

“Ah... excuse me. Question!” Rampage said as she waved her hoof over her head. “What the heck are Project Chimera and Project Steelpony?”

P-21 nodded grimly. “Yeah, I’d kinda like to know that as well.” Lacunae nodded primly, and even Scotch Tape seemed to overcome her worry to look at the glowing unicorn questioningly.

Professor Zodiac smiled smugly and opened her mouth. “They,” I said, “were secret projects during the war. Project Chimera made Gorgon from a pony named Stonewing and a cockatrice. Project Steelpony made Deus. He was originally a soldier named Doof who was convicted of raping a squadmate.” Four pairs of eyes stared at me in shock. Professor Zodiac’s expression, though, was more intrigued.

“There are perhaps three or four ponies outside this room who know that information,” she murmured softly.

My friends were a little less sanguine about it. “You mean you know who made Deus?” P-21 shouted, then waved a hoof at the ghostly pony. “And she wants to be able to make more of him?”

“Gorgon was one of the few Reapers I liked! What do you mean he was made that way? Who?

How? Why?!" Rampage demanded as she grabbed my head to look me in the eye.

"Was that monster in the tunnels from that project stuff?" Scotch Tape asked as she tugged at my leg.

"The Goddess wishes an immediate explanation, Blackjack! How is it that you came by this information?" Lacunae said imperiously and in full Goddess mode, despite her expression of discomfort.

I looked from one to the next, my head spinning. "Well... I... I must have told you! I mean... didn't I?" I looked from one to the next. "I mean... I've told you about Goldenblood. The O.I.A.?"

"You never told me you found out what Chimera was," P-21 said with a scowl. "And the only time I've heard you mention Goldenblood was when you told me he was up to something. I thought you were referring to Sanguine, but you were so focused on helping Glory I didn't press you."

Zodiac chuckled softly. "Well, Security. It looks like you've got some explaining to do. But, first things first. Now, as I was saying, I can take all debt and worry off your hooves in exchange for EC-1101." A robot approached, two mechanical arms ending in PipBuck removal keys.

I was so overwhelmed that I landed firmly on my butt. My friends were pissed with me... and now I owed more caps than I could even imagine! I wanted to scream! I wanted to hand it over, along with all my questions, worries, and annoyances. Just then, I wanted to give it all up to a pony who actually seemed to have a clue about what to do with the damned thing. Take my PipBuck. Enjoy! I was toast anyway. Take this damned weight from off my hoof and do something better than trot all over a damned city with it.

Then a clear, wonderful voice shouted over the babble. "Blackjack doesn't owe you anything!" I turned and stared at the sight of Glory looking more beautiful and radiant than I'd ever imagined, even with one wing replaced by a dull nub. She looked at me with her brilliant purple eyes and gave me a smile that made me want to melt in her embrace then and there.

Zodiac frowned at Glory. "Excuse me, but we spent serious money on you and your friends..."

"Did Blackjack agree to assume these debts?" Glory asked sharply, pointing her wingtip at the flickering pony projection.

"Of course not, she was unconscious. But Rampage..." Zodiac began, but Glory cut her off with a magnificent sweep of her wing.

"Did Blackjack ever say that Rampage spoke for her and the rest of us? You might want to collect your fifty thousand caps from *her*."

Rampage blinked, then the striped filly suddenly grinned. "Sure! I got fifty caps on me. I'll pay the rest later." Zodiac looked like she'd swallowed a shot of The Price... well, like Rampage did when she'd swallowed a shot of The Price. Rampage nudged me. "Hey, Blackjack? Can I get my fifty caps back?"

Glory stepped past us to slowly walk back and forth in front of the projection. "Not once did Blackjack agree to pay you anything. Not once, I bet, did you ask her, or even mention that you were going to want her to pay for it. You spent all that material before telling her so that you could spring all of

it on her at once and guilt EC-1101 out of her.” My jaw dropped as I stared at the shimmering mare. And it had almost worked!

Zodiac looked pissed for a moment, then finally slumped. “Okay. I admit it. I was hoping to get her to pass it to me and leave and be grateful.”

“But you had me unconscious for hours. Why didn’t you just take it?” I asked as I rose and stepped forward next to Glory.

The professor rolled her eyes. “Blackjack, do you know how much success anypony’s had at taking *anything* from you? Your PipBuck? Your life? Your friends? Heck, you’ve faced half the Zodiacs and lived! If I were Sanguine, I’d be living in constant terror of the day you finally track him down!” She sighed. “I hoped that, if I just convinced you to give it up, you’d move on. No harm, no foul.”

P-21 stepped next to me. “Well, then, if you don’t mind... right now, I think we’d all love to hear everything Blackjack knows about... everything,” he said, looking a little bit hurt. “Along with an explanation of why she didn’t tell us sooner.” Oooh, there was fifty thousand caps worth of guilt right there in his expression. I hung my head and sighed.

Everything I knew... well, that wouldn’t take long. “It’s not like I was trying to deceive you or keep it from you. It just... snuck up on me,” I said as I took a seat, rubbing my striped mane. Glory sat down next to me, stretching her wing across my shoulders, and the others sat in a circle around me. I sighed as I was gently pulled against her. Smelled her sweet hide. Heard the faint beat of her heart. Okay, I could do this. “Well... I guess I should start with a pony named Goldenblood...”

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“How do I feel about Blackjack? Do... do I have to answer? Okay... she’s... she’s not going to hear this, is she? ‘Cause... you know... I don’t want to say anything bad. Okay...”

“Blackjack is... scary. I don’t really mean that I’m scared of her. I mean... I am. A little. But I know she’s not a bad pony. She cares. But Blackjack... I think she’s a little bit crazy. She left the stable, which was crazy. She came back, which was crazy. She killed everypony... which was crazy. And I think, if she was given the choice, she’d do all three again. And that makes her crazy scary.

“So, I know if something bad happens, she’s not going to do what’s smart. She doesn’t think about things like that. She just does things and hopes that they work out. And sometimes they do. And sometimes they don’t... but no matter what, she’s going to do something. She just doesn’t hang back and think. She goes... and if what she does is crazy, then it’s better than just standing around doing nothing.

“I mean... she said she wet the bed... I mean... really? Heh... Thanks, Blackjack...”

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A few hours later, their questions for me were exhausted, as was I. I’d told them every bit I could think of about Goldenblood, the O.I.A., and the projects. The only things I omitted were Gardens of Equestria and Spike. The professor, using more robots, had brought drinks and snacks, playing the part of the contrite host. My friends’ reactions varied from worried, to baffled, to suspicious, to bored, to angry. I never expected Lacunae to be the angry one. “That... that fiend. That plotter! That... oooh... the

Goddess does not want to hear any more!"

"But how could the O.I.A. pull off such a widespread deception?" P-21 asked. "Didn't anypony think to check what he was up to?"

The professor chuckled softly. "Oh, Goldenblood was a sneaky bastard, but, really, back then, most ponies didn't think about things like that. They were used to a thousand years of Celestia running things. Celestia was always open and honest. Luna's government was as different as night from day, using deception and obfuscation to keep ponies confused and obedient. And Goldenblood knew all the loopholes, tricks, and intricacies. After all, he helped Luna set them up." She rubbed her ghostly chin. "And I suspect that Luna herself enjoyed the games on some level."

"But you can't tell me the Ministry Mares were okay with that!" Glory protested as I slumped against her shoulder. Had she always smelled this good?

The professor shrugged. "They were used to working for Celestia too. They expected straightforward deals from their ruler. Friendship. Trust." She sighed and shook her head. "Luna respected the Ministry Mares and their capabilities, but... really, I was always shocked they were sucked in as readily as they were. They really seemed to believe Luna was their friend. I doubt that the Princess ever had a real friend."

I looked at the shimmering projection, the others followed my gaze, and then P-21 asked the questions on all our minds. "What are you, and how do you know all this?"

The shimmering image seemed to consider him before responding. "I am Professor Zodiac. What you're looking at is an arcane projection. A nice little modification of the planetarium system developed by Flash Industries. It's a pleasant way for me to have conversations with ponies." She gave a little shudder I nearly missed. "As for how I know... well... I was there two hundred years ago." She looked right into my eyes and gave an apologetic little smile. "I was one of the research leads of the Office of Interministry Affairs."

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We'd had to take a little break. My brain was reeling. Here was a pony who'd tried to trick me out of EC-1101 and who'd actually known Goldenblood. Who'd worked under him. Who possibly had answers to all my questions. Glory and I'd gone up to the roof; I stayed in the doorway while she took in some air. Rampage and Scotch Tape had finally left with the Zodiacs; the machinery clearly scared the filly to death. She wasn't over the tunnels yet. Lacunae had walked off, still talking to herself in the plural and apparently very put out with Goldenblood; I wondered if she knew I could hear her faint telepathic babble. P-21 skulked off to be on his own.

"How are you feeling?" I asked softly.

She glanced over her shoulder at her missing wing for a moment, then immediately lowered her gaze to my hooves. "Grounded... but better." She looked at me, and her smile returned. Goddesses, she was so beautiful. "You actually tracked down my sister to help me?" she said, cocking her brow at me.

"It was all I could think of..." I said lamely, tapping my rubbery hooves together.

She gave me a wry smile. "You realize that Dusk and I hate each other, right? I think she spent more time shouting at me and comparing me to Mother than comforting me." I winced, but she smiled. "It was the kick to the rump I needed. Thank you."

"I knew... I knew I couldn't help you." She looked at me more sympathetically as I went on. "I cost you your wing. I cost you everything. All I've done is hurt you, Glory," I said with a sniff, feeling myself start to shake.

And then she was hugging me. Holding me. I took a deep breath to try and steady myself, feeling her feathers, so soft on my cheek. "You saved my life, Blackjack. Again and again. I don't blame you for my wing." She drew back enough to look me in the eye and smiled. "Not telling me about Goldenblood and the projects, though..."

"I'm sorry," I repeated for the twentieth time. "I really didn't mean to keep it from any of you. It wasn't a big secret. It wasn't a big deal at first. Just... sorta cool, secret stuff. Stuff that happened two centuries ago. But then I found out about Chimera and the other projects... saw Goldenblood's memories... It all sort of built up around me."

"Well," she said, relaxing a little bit, "I think that Lacunae is even more upset. I think you managed to offend the Goddess big time by not mentioning that Sanguine has Chimera." Then Glory looked me in the eye, stroking my cheek under my eyepatch. "And how are you doing?"

"Me?" I felt a cold shiver along my spine and lied with every bit of effort I could. "Fine. Never better. Just great. They fixed me up swell..." I felt my grin become so tense that it felt like it'd snap. She looked at me like she was about to cry. Finally, I slumped. "You know, huh?"

"I was there for part of the procedure... while they had you open..." Glory said softly.

"Oh." I sighed, hanging my head a little. "And do I really look that bad inside?"

"You really do," Glory said softly as she stroked my cheek. "Your organs are in bad shape, Blackjack... Triage told you?" Clearly, she shouldn't have, from the look on Glory's face.

I grinned. "Oh... about the whole six months thing? Pppfft. Never tell me the odds," I said as I grinned back at her. "I'm sure I can pull off... like... a year..." I was grinning, right? "No big... big deal..." Smile, damn it! Damn it... My head slowly bowed as I started to shake again. She put her hooves around me as I pressed my face to her chest as the sob broke out all at once as the inexplicable truth crashed through me: I was going to die.

I was going to die! Without Glory's suffering and the Zodiacs and the professor to distract me, there was nothing I could do to avoid facing it. The taint inside me was going to twist my body up more and more until finally something critical failed. Better if I blew my brains out now while I was still whole and 'healthy'. Better if Red Eye's slavers had killed me! I could almost feel my insides churning up, my sick and diseased heart beating slowly. My braces clacked as I hugged her close and sobbed against her again and again. I hated it... hated these tears... but I couldn't... stop...

"It's... It's not fair..." I gasped. I shook with each new spasm of tears. "... I wanted to save Mom... I wanted to save Midnight... and... and everypony in 99. I wanted to save you. Have a kid someday. Have a... have a life! I found something to live for, damn it!" I said, my voice hoarse and choking as snot and tears seemed to flow equally. "And now... now I'm just... just going to die?! Why the

fuck is this happening to me? What the fuck does it take for me to get a fucking break? To have something fucking good happen? Anything!" I yelled into her chest. "I'm sick of it!"

I used to think that there was a bottom to tears. That eventually you just couldn't cry anymore and then you'd feel better. But now I knew better. Whatever strength I'd shown facing the Zodiacs was a lie. My confidence was a front. I was going to die... and it was going to be a bad death. And, like that, I was falling into a pit from which there was no escape.

Then I felt Glory's tears falling on the back of my head. "I'm sorry..." she whispered softly in my ear. "I'm sorry I can't help you. I wish there was somepony in the Wasteland I could find to help you."

I closed my eye. What was I doing? How could I be crying and pitying myself like this now? It wasn't fair? No, it wasn't fucking fair. It wasn't fair that Glory had lost her wing. It wasn't fair that P-21 had been raped. It wasn't fair that Scotch Tape was an orphan, that Lacunae was the dumpster for a Goddess's insecurities, or that Rampage had been denied her own identity. None of it was fucking fair!

Am I trying to turn us into the deadliest band of angsty, whiny ponies in the Wasteland? Maybe. Despite everything, I finally put a lid over that pit inside me. Right now, Glory needed me to be strong. I sucked at being strong, but for her, somehow, I pulled myself together and wiped the tears from my eye to look at her.

"You do, Glory. Every second I'm with you, you make things better. Make them easier. I couldn't do this without you," I said as I looked into her eyes. Our brows touched.

Our lips did the same. Sweet Celestia, how I missed this.

I was going to die, but at least I wouldn't be dying alone.

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"Sooo, am I forgiven?" I asked as we trotted back down to the planetarium.

She smiled. "Dusk may be an infuriating mare who tried to kill me, but she said that anypony who'd do what you did after the stable shouldn't be touched with a ten foot cloud... unless she did what you did when you found out how hurt I was." She gave my rump a nudge with hers. "Then you should probably get another chance." She had a weird little smile... and why was she blushing?

"I always liked Dusk, you know?" I said as trotted along, my braces clattering.

"She also said that you were a terrorist and an idiot and would probably get me killed," Glory added.

I cocked my head, thinking about that for a moment. "Mmmm, nope! Still like her." I glanced at her and, of course, risked injecting a cloud into the discussion. "Did she have any news from Thunderhead?"

Glory sighed and nodded. "Yes. Most of it mixed. Dad refused to resign, challenging my 'confession'. I'm MIA at the moment, since my 'remains' couldn't be magically analyzed. So, technically, there's a warrant out on me. Lambent and Lucent were both pretty upset by it all." She looked at me and asked in concern, "Do you know anything about a surface pony named Red Eye?"

"I know he took over Paradise. Apparently, the Stable Dweller is fighting him." I had images of magical unicorn power armor striding around firing death beams from its horn. Pzow! Pzow!

"Well, he's got the rest of the Enclave stirred up. And, apparently, they're very upset with Thunderhead. They're blaming the Volunteer Corps for drawing attention. And I suppose they have a point," Glory said with a sigh. "Even though DJ Pon3 barely mentions us at all, most ponies wouldn't even think of us if it wasn't for the Volunteer Corps."

"The Volunteer Corps is also pretty much the only good thing I've heard about pegasi doing since the war," I said softly as I bumped her rump back.

She gave a pleased little smile. "Well, the rest of the Enclave is using it as an excuse to demand all sorts of things from us. They want new energy weapons, new talismans, and a larger food reserve built up in Neighvarro. And they want the VC ended, never mind that our food trade is how we're getting the materials for weapons, gemstones for talismans, and new food."

I didn't like the thought of the Enclave getting more weapons, but I was more surprised by that last bit of news. "The pegasi are importing food? From the surface?" I blinked in shock.

Glory smirked at me. "Believe it or not, that's one of the major selling points of the VC. The fact is that only a few surface crops were adaptable to cloud seeding. It gives us basic staples but lacks something in the way of variety. Have you ever tasted a strawberry?" I shook my head, and she gave a shiver. "Well, neither had anypony in Thunderhead. Father won a major vote to get the VC more assistance from the security forces after passing out a dozen cartons. And there was nearly a riot when blueberry samples were provided."

"A riot? For berries?" I muttered, stunned.

"Oh, yes. Cloud grain may be nutritious, but it's hardly tasty," she said with a laugh. "Folks were so amazed by the flavor that now anything with the word 'berry' in the name is classified as a controlled substance. So, despite all the stories of death and disease, VC recruitment numbers haven't dropped off as much as some anticipated."

"They do know that the Society is probably the only place in Equestria where you can find berries, period, right?"

"I think that they gloss over that point in the interview. But the public consensus seems to be changing to the surface being worth something rather than just being death, misery, and violence. That's leading to some major gusts of foul air with the rest of the Enclave, though; the VC period is bad enough, but anything good about the surface... I guess the science and political broadcasts are having a sunny day bashing Thunderhead right and left. Criticizing our independence and our willingness to break tradition." She actually sounded proud of that. Despite the fact that I still wanted to buck Lighthooves to the stars, Glory made Thunderhead sound like the Blackjack of the Enclave.

They were doomed...

* * *

Once we'd all gotten back inside the planetarium, Professor Zodiac shimmered into being before us as the robots cleared away some of the junk and brought over cushions from the seats. "Sorry.

Normally I don't have visitors. They come, are awed, and run off."

"Sorry for being so jaded," I replied as I settled down. Braces might let me walk, but they were a long way from comfortable.

The silvery projection laughed brightly. "Oh, don't be. Aside from my Zodiacs, I never have as much company as I'd like."

P-21 looked towards the door. "What is your deal with them? Is it like a Reaper thing?"

"No. Honestly, it's more like the Zodiacs have a deal with me than the other way around," the professor replied softly. "Many ponies have come through here for help. We do what we can, take what payment they can make, and send them on their way. A few, however, stay. The Zodiacs are twelve ponies who see themselves as... I don't know? Knights, I suppose. While their activities abroad are as bounty hunters, bringing in caps we need, here they protect the Collegiate. This is their castle and I'm their princess. I don't command them, though."

Zodiac Knights. "So, then, why'd they come after me?" I asked with a little frown.

She gestured at my hoof. "Because I needed your PipBuck. Virgo thought you were just another exceptionally large bounty. Oh, and thank you very much for not killing her," she added quickly. "The others were hoping to get it from you one way or another. They actually turned it into a bit of a contest till I told them to cut it out."

I sighed as I settled in on my cushion. "So. What's your story?" P-21 asked.

Professor Zodiac sighed and looked around at the walls wistfully. "Well, originally my name was Silver Stripe, and I was a professor of engineering and arcane science here at Hoofington University." Suddenly, the professor's image dissolved and the air overhead filled with dancing lights that coalesced into a moving image of a lecture hall. The view seemed to be from a camera set in the corner of the room. A white unicorn mare with gray zebra-like stripes on her legs and mane was writing on one of the boards at the front of the hall with a piece of chalk. She finished writing a line of weird mathy stuff, put the chalk down, and sighed.

"There. Well, I hope that you've found my lessons useful. The university will see to getting you an acceptable instructor for this class by next week," she said, turning to a lecture hall that was virtually empty but for a dozen students. They didn't seem to be paying much attention, either, and most of them shuffled out immediately. A few gave her commiserative farewells though, and one even offered a comforting hug. The professor maintained her composure as she said her goodbyes and put her notes into a saddlebag but slumped after the last student had exited.

"So sorry you lost your tenure, Professor Silver Stripe," a rasping voice said. A soft cough followed the words as the voice's owner walked down from the back of the lecture hall. I pointed him out, and my friends murmured softly as the scarred buck approached the mare in the picture. "I suppose that the board of regents felt a halfblood to be a complication in the present climate," Goldenblood said in his raspy, rusty-nails voice. He looked like hell, even worse than at the Gala; his pale hide looked raw, as if it were flaking off.

She flushed, narrowing her eyes. "Yes, no thanks to you and your grand speech! The ministries have made it abundantly clear that a zony like myself is a liability to the war effort and tantamount to a

spy.” He hacked sharply, sitting and bowing his head, and she softened a little. “Are you all right?”

“There’re apparently several ponies in the Ministry of Peace answering that question. I’ll be fine in a moment,” he said, catching his breath. The scarred buck then leveled his golden eyes at her once more. “I sympathize with your predicament, Professor. No pony, or zony, should be discriminated against for their lineage. I have some personal experience in that regard.” And, more and more, I saw her relax.

“Well, regardless, the ministries have made it abundantly clear I am not trustworthy,” she said as she slipped on her saddlebags. “So, whatever it is you desire of me, I can assure you the ministries will not approve.”

“Your father is Doctor Propos at the Roam Academy of Sciences and a part of the Caesar’s cabinet. Your mother is the aunt of a ministry mare. The suspicions of the ministries are unfortunate but not unreasonable,” he said in his soft, raspy voice. It made Silver Stripe lean towards him a little. “However, I am not here on behalf of the ministries. I am here looking to recruit you for an alternative program of my own. And, I assure you, I could not care less about your lineage.”

The image scattered, and the shining projection returned. “That was my first meeting with Goldenblood. I’m sure you noticed his timing; approaching me right at the end of my last lecture?” she said as she arched a brow. “How he pointed out that his own lineage had been used against him? That was classic Goldenblood to a T. He got me involved in the Office of Interministry Affairs as a science advisor.”

“You were a zony?” Scotch Tape asked, drawing a slightly annoyed look from the projection.

“Even after two centuries...” she muttered, then sighed. “Yes. My father was a zebra. My mother was a pony. Hence, zony. The only consequence of it should have been an inability to have children, but it was used against me from the start of the war until the burning of Hoofington. I didn’t have any loyalties to my father’s people, even when Equestria was making it so hard to be a productive member of society, but ponies just saw the stripes. Goldenblood really didn’t care, though; I honestly can’t remember a single instance of my background being used against me at the O.I.A.”

“But... what did the O.I.A. actually *do*?” Glory asked with a little frown. “I mean, Blackjack said that they were supposed to facilitate projects between the ministries. How did you get from that to... making Deus?”

“Luna’s government was nothing like Celestia’s, but few ponies truly appreciated how radical it was. On the surface, the ministries handled most of the functions of government, and the rest were covered by Luna herself or the civil service. But in the shadows was the O.I.A. It did what it was supposed to do, let the ministries work together on projects more easily, but it also got things done that couldn’t have been done otherwise. Sometimes the Ministry Mares would have a project that simply couldn’t be done in public view. Monsterponies? Extensive cybernetics? The public couldn’t handle it. So, the O.I.A., ignored by or unknown to the public, was tasked with developing these projects in the shadows to their fruition.” She gestured to herself. “I was involved with some of the technical aspects of Project Steelpony and Project Eternity.”

“And Sanguine? He supervised Project Chimera?” Lacunae asked, sounding like she already knew and just wanted confirmation. “I thought it’d been destroyed...”

“Yes. And Trottenheimer handled everything to do with Project Starfall and Project Horizons.”

She rubbed her chin, then waved a glowing hoof. "Don't ask me about specifics of the other projects, though. Goldenblood was very adamant about keeping information contained in each project, and I only know the most basic information about the ones I wasn't working on."

"So what was Project Steelpony?" I asked.

The air above her flashed into a still image of a hospital ward full of ponies with missing limbs. Fluttershy and Redheart were looking over them with aching concern in their eyes. "Like Chimera, Steelpony got started in the Ministry of Peace. Despite the M.O.P. pushing healing magic to its limits, ten years had disabled thousands of combat and non-combat ponies." The image changed to a mare swinging a silvery foreleg and hoof. "Originally, we focused on prosthetics. Making them resilient, adaptable, and as effective as the missing limb." Then images of diamond dogs getting their limbs replaced filled the air. "Eventually, most of the research was done in Hoofington. Reconstruction and the battlefield gave us a constant supply of needy test subjects.

"Then we had soldiers wounded in battle who returned to the war and found themselves more effective than before." The overhead image showed steel-legged ponies smashing zebra soldiers in brutal hoof-to-hoof combat. "Suddenly, the emphasis of Steelpony wasn't just replacement but augmentation. But that pushed things further than Fluttershy or Applejack were comfortable with. It's one thing to want to protect ponies; it's another to turn a pony into a war machine." The image overhead showed Applejack and Fluttershy shaking their heads gravely at a solemn Goldenblood and frustrated-looking Silver Stripe.

The image disappeared, and Professor Zodiac grinned at us. "So we continued it anyway."

"You what?" P-21 blurted. "How?! I mean... it had to take money and materials and... somepony should have caught on."

The professor shrugged. "Goldenblood was related to royalty. He never had problems paying for materials. I don't know where the money came from, but he always paid his bills on time." I frowned; had Goldenblood been fantastically wealthy in addition to a sneaky bastard? Could even a fantastically wealthy pony's money have covered all of the O.I.A.'s secret expenses?

Zodiac seemed to take our silence as a cue to continue. "It was thought that, if we introduced the augmentations gradually, the ministries would accept them. We started with animals before working up to non-pony sophonts and then ponies themselves. Doof was our first fully augmented battle model. And he exceeded our wildest dreams."

Another moving image took shape overhead, this one showing Deus being dropped, literally, from a skywagon onto an enemy tank. He landed like a multi-ton cat, smashing an indentation in the turret's armor, and proceeded to blow apart the enemy lines. Some of the zebra hoof-fighters inflicted considerable blows on his armor, but they repaired themselves before my eyes. Heavy weapons tried to blow him apart, but he was either too tough or too fast for them. Eventually, the zebras scattered. I suppressed a shudder; if it hadn't been for all the munitions blowing up in his guns, could we have ever beaten him?

Then he started raping the survivors; Glory snapped her wing in front of Scotch's eyes, in time I hoped, and immediately after that the image scattered. The professor coughed delicately. "Sorry about that. We determined we had to leave some parts of him intact for psychological reasons. Other test subjects became so listless and apathetic after conversion that they just lay there till deactivated." Funny.

She said 'deactivated' like I would have said 'retired' not long ago.

"So what happened?" Rampage asked. "Balefire bombs fell, everypony died?"

She shook her head with a sigh. "Nearly, but not quite. Towards the end, the O.I.A. went too far. Goldenblood did something that pissed off Luna... immensely. She removed him and put Horse in charge, but the fact was most of us were loyal to Goldenblood. That tick Trueblood was the only one who sucked up to Horse. And Goldenblood had made damn sure that all of us were integral to the O.I.A. Horse wanted to fire all of us, but he wouldn't have had an O.I.A. left. If he'd had a year, he would have cleaned us out and put his own ponies in charge. But as fate would have it..." She made a gesture.

The next moving image that shimmered into being was of a city. A massive city far larger than even Hoofington. Balloons of... Pinkie Pie?... floated in the air as if looking for naughty ponies. It looked like a perfectly calm, blue-skies day around noon. Normal. Like life was supposed to be. The viewer was standing in a posh café far up in a fancy building.

I glanced at my friends as they stared up at the image of life before the bombs. I was the only one among us, with the possible exception of Lacunae, who'd really seen it before... well, if you counted memory orbs. Scotch seemed astonished at the sight. P-21 looked more pensive. Glory's expression was mixed, but then, she'd grown up in a civilized world with a view of the sky. Rampage... well, clearly not all Wasteland ponies were interested in old times, as she was picking at her nose with a hoof. Lacunae appeared coolly indifferent, even a touch scornful; after all, what place would she have in such a world? Me? It looked... nice.

Then a second, smaller sun burst to life low in the sky. A roiling, green sun with a garish rainbow sheen that clawed at the eyes. All around, ponies began talking in worried tones. More murmurs, almost curious rather than worried. A purple field rose up over every window in the room. Directly in front of us was a large pink building. I wondered if the architect had intended it to kinda resemble a--

In a horrible flash of stabbing light, it was transformed into a black silhouette. From behind it rose a dome of fire expanding in all directions. It flowed like water between the skyscrapers and along the narrow streets. Moving like a living, hungry thing, it probed and poked and crept around every building till they were all aflame. Some buildings it shoved over entirely. Others, protected from the flash like this building and the distant pink tower by flickering magic shields, became consumed in the firestorm like party candles.

The artificial sun receded, but the fires spread farther and farther. The clouds of smoke in the skies stabbed down with thin spikes, and at the tip of each spike another green sun was born. No moon rose above the opposite horizon in that artificial twilight, a darkness punctuated by bursts of terrible light and fire. No pony in the café screamed. Talked. Moved. Not till one turned away. Then another. Babble. Screams. Cries and sobs. Reality, such as it was, reasserted itself.

The image flickered away. Professor Zodiac hung her head as she said quietly, "I survived in the Manehattan M.A.S. hub along with everyone else fortunate enough to be inside the tower when the world ended." She looked a little pained. "At first things were... as good as could be expected, under the circumstances, but my O.I.A. affiliation and sterility made my place in the Twilight Society rather difficult. I put up with it for a while but eventually decided to leave and try to find a new home for myself. Fortunately, my augmentations gave me quite an edge. I ended up falling in with a group of others with roughly the same idea, and, after some time spent wandering what used to be Equestria, my friends and I

dared venture into Hoofington.”

Twilight Society? What was-- “Excuse me,” Glory said with a frown. “Your augmentation?”

“Oh. Well...” There was a hiss next to the projector, and the walls of the metal cylinder peeled away to uncover a glass tank within. “I wasn’t just in charge of Project Steelpony...” she said as we stared at the contents of that jar. In the hazy water was a pony, technically a zony, flayed of its skin and missing three of its limbs. Wires and tubes snaked in and out of the carcass and into a port in the floor. Tangles of wires emerged from empty eye sockets and missing ears. And, maybe it was just me, but the corners of the ragged mouth curled in a smile as the projection declared, “I was also a client.”

And that was when Scotch Tape started screaming.

* * *

“Do I like Blackjack? Are you serious? Really?”

“... ”

“Fine. No, I don’t like Blackjack. Because every second I’m around her I’m reminded of a place that hurt me. Because every time I think I’m over it she does something to remind me of how much it sucked. She’s a walking, talking reminder of everything that I hate. Sometimes, I don’t think that I’ll ever be over it till she’s dead.

“But no matter how much she hurts me, I know it’s nothing compared to how much she hurts herself. She seems to have this masochistic need to suffer for simply surviving. She runs on guilt and angst, and one day she’s going to choke on it. And I hate it because there’s nothing I can do to stop it. She’s like an addict hooked on martyrdom. She’ll sacrifice her body, happiness, sanity, and life trying to help others even if they don’t deserve it. And she’ll beat herself miserable when she fails.

“How can you like a person like that? How can you love a person like that?”

“...No more stupid questions.”

* * *

Okay. Letting Scotch watch the end of Equestria... kick... Letting her sit in on the meeting... kick... Letting her leave Chapel with us in the first place... kick kick kick! I mentally kicked myself over and over again as I waited outside the hospital room that had once housed Glory. I suspected that at this rate they were going to name a wing of this place ‘The Blackjack and Co. Trauma Wing’. Maybe two wings.

Triage stepped out with a sigh. “She’s sedated. Just upset.”

Glory shook her head softly. “She’s not the only one. What the heck was Professor Zodiac thinking? How could she think that that was appropriate for a filly to see?”

Triage just looked at her levelly. “Right, because most things in the Wasteland are age appropriate,” she said in a tone saturated in sarcasm. She pulled out a cigarette and lit up. “Anyway, you survive for two hundred years, spend the last twenty stuck in a jar, and then tell me what’s appropriate

and inappropriate. I'm glad the prof isn't a complete basket case."

"But what happened to her?" Rampage asked as she looked in the direction of the planetarium. "I mean, most ponies don't end up in jars. Not unless you folks take making pickles to a whole new level."

Glory coughed at the smoke. "Excuse me..." she said, fanning her wing and wafting the cloud aside.

Triage ignored her and snorted another roll of smoke from her nostrils. "Not quite. She took an exploration team down the elevator shaft you lot came up. When she came back, half her body was gone. If it wasn't for her augments..." She shook her head slowly. "The Collegiate got her stabilized and in that jar, and she's been that way ever since."

I sighed, looking around. No sign of P-21 since we'd left the planetarium. I scowled, *not liking this at all*. Whether he wanted to admit she was his daughter or not, he should at least be here! Lacunae was also MIA.

"Excuse me!" Glory said again. "You're smoking? In a hospital? Around patients? And oxygen tanks?" Her eyes blazed. "You're a doctor!"

Triage blinked at Glory. "So? Look around you." Glory snapped her wing out and swatted the cigarette out of the air. Triage scowled. "What are you, the last Ministry of Peace inspector?"

"You are a doctor. That means being more than a pissy, bitchy, angry nag. You're supposed to be a professional. Act like it!" she said as she brought her hoof down on the burning end. Wow. Go assertive Glory! "Now, to the subject of Scotch Tape and not the person who tried to trick Blackjack. Are you certain there's nothing else you can do for her?"

"Look, unless you want us to start messing with her memories, there's nothing I can do. And memory therapy was hard enough before everything was blown to pieces," she said crossly, glancing down at the mashed cigarette.

"But you can do it?" I asked with a small worried frown and a glance at Glory. Somehow, this felt... easy. It made my stomach churn... though, honestly, that could have been the taint.

Triage sighed, glowering at Glory one more time before floating another cigarette to her lips but not lighting it. "Well, I did get a few books from the Fluttershy Clinic on how the spells are performed. I know enough to remove a block of memory. Everything from event one to event two. I'm not going to start dicing up her memories to take out just the bad stuff, though, and I'm *definitely* not going to try adding things. That's freaky stuff even I can't do."

I sat down with a clatter as Rampage trotted up beside me. She was definitely aging, looking much more the mature filly. Still needed about a day, though. "Blackjack? Are you actually going to do this?"

"I don't know," I muttered.

Triage rolled her eyes. "Well let me know when you do know. I'll be outside, finishing my unprofessional cigarette."

Rampage watched her leave. "I think she's angrier about losing a cigarette than nearly having

your horn through her throat.” Personally, I could do with a shot or two of Wild Pegasus. Could I just... have her memories taken away? Would that fix her? Make her happy? It felt dirty. Like a cheat. Rampage seemed to read my thoughts. “You can’t do this, Blackjack. Taking away her memories just to make her happy is wrong.”

“She had a panic attack, Rampage. Are you saying we should just let her keep suffering?” Glory countered with a worried look.

“Should we take Blackjack’s memories of 99 away?” Rampage asked sharply. “Or yours, Glory?” I could never forget 99. I didn’t deserve to forget that scream or that smell. The striped pony took in a deep breath. “Our memories make us who we are. Scotch Tape is hurting really bad, so we help her work through it. Send her back to Chapel and the other Crusaders. Let her get over it.”

“And what if she never does, Rampage?” Glory countered. “What if she can’t get over it? So she loses two lousy days of pain and misery. There’s nothing in that day I want to remember anyway. I could do with losing an hour or two myself.”

Rampage stared at both of us. “Not... remembering... sucks. As terrible as it is, I wish I remembered killing Thorn... and...” She closed her eyes and swallowed hard before continuing, “because it would feel like I actually did it. Then my guilt would be justified but I think about it and all I remember is crying and then... nothing! And next thing I remember, Blackjack got me disintegrated and everypony was pissed and... and Thorn was...” She gritted her teeth. “I’d give anything to remember so I could understand why!”

Glory sniffed and rubbed her nose with her wing before resting her hoof on Rampage’s shoulder. “It’s not the same. Scotch didn’t do anything in that time but experience monstrous things. She’s not losing anything.”

I slowly pulled myself to my clattering hooves. There was only one way to deal with this. I trotted across and tried to use my magic to open the door. Thankfully, the glow flickered a few times and then stabilized long enough to turn the handle and let myself inside. I closed the door behind me; I’d heard from positions A and B, but now I needed to hear from position Scotch.

I hated hospital rooms, I realized. I hated the equipment that told you second by second if you were living more or less. I hated the promise that you are always going to get better when in reality, some day, you wouldn’t. My days might be numbered, but I wasn’t going to end them in a place like this if I could help it. Scotch looked tiny and abandoned in the hospital bed. And thinking about P-21... perhaps she was.

“I haven’t seen you for a while,” I said quietly to the Dealer.

The old pale buck stood opposite me. “Haven’t needed to be seen. I reckon you got enough on your mind without me.” He paused. “You look like hell, Blackjack.” I felt like it too. Goddesses, I was tired of being shot up. It didn’t matter how many times they’d stuffed me in a magic healing box, I felt injured. I’d give anything to remember what it was like to not know how it felt to hurt all the time.

“Eh... I’m dying,” I said with a shrug. Just like that. Tears of angst to a shrug. I really had to be crazy. “So... what’s your position on this?”

"My position is no position," he replied softly. "What happens, happens."

"Because I'm screwed either way?" I muttered quietly. Goddesses I wished I could shoot the Wasteland right in the face.

"If you want to think of it that way," he replied as he shuffled his cards and dealt a three of hearts, a four of hearts, a five of hearts, a six of clubs, and an eight of hearts. "You might have a hand like this. Can't win with it. Got to discard one. So what do you chose?"

"The six of clubs. Better chance at a flush." He tossed it away and dealt the next card. Ace of spades. I smirked. Of course I didn't get the card I needed. "Surprise surprise."

"Yeah. You lost. So tell me, should you be kicking yourself for not discarding the eight and going for a straight?" I blinked in surprise, and the cards disappeared. "You want to do the right thing because you're afraid that, if you do the wrong thing, she'll suffer for it. Celestia wanted to do the right thing. Twilight Sparkle wanted to do the right thing. Even Goldenblood. But no matter how you analyze and predict, the fact is, sometimes you just lose. And you have to deal with it. Dealing with it isn't looking back with regret for making the wrong move."

"Yeah, but... she's just a filly..." I murmured softly. A filly who was watching me with a look of confusion. Sedated didn't mean unconscious. Right. She was looking at me with more than a little worry, which was probably not unjustified. I smiled, rubbing the back of my head. "Ah... sorry! Just talking to myself. Me and my crazy... me..." Okay, she wasn't smiling. I sighed as I trotted to the side of the bed. "I'm sorry, Scotch."

"He's not coming, is he?" she whispered. "I'm not really his daughter, am I?" Ooooh, P-21, you are in SO much trouble right now... and so am I for spilling the beans. "Mom told me I was different from other fillies. That... that I had a daddy in the stable. I had to look up that word in the database; it'd been blacked out of the books at school. And when you told me I... I thought it was a good thing. I thought I wasn't alone." She squeezed her eyes closed. "I wish you hadn't told me, Blackjack."

I stroked her mane with a soft sigh, trying to figure out how to tell her I could take it all away. Or if Rampage was right and we should just help her struggle through, painful as it was? I stroked her mane gently. "Don't worry about it. You'll be fine..."

"No, I won't. I can't look at a wrecked wagon without wondering if it's going to move. I saw that... that thing in the jar, and I thought she was going to eat me! I loved working on machines. I do. Mom taught me how to fix stuff when I was just a foal. If something in our quarters broke, she'd show me step by step what went wrong and how to make it work." She shook her head. "Now... now I think the machines are going to eat me."

Damn it. For once, I'd like the Wasteland to be 'Here's a nice and easy choice, Blackjack! Door A with fluffy bunnies and carrots or Door B with spikes and landmines!' Oooo, tough call. "Just try and rest. The doctor will check up on you in a bit," I said quietly. She didn't say a word, closing her eyes again with a miserable little sniff. I wanted her back in Chapel now. With fillies her age, fixing up the place. Playing with Allegro and Adagio. Having a better life than any other filly in Equestria. But this wasn't Equestria. This wasn't even the stable. This was the Wasteland, and I should just be happy she was alive. But I wanted to give her more...

What was the price of peace of mind in the Wasteland? Could I give her that? That indulgence?

How could I not?

* * *

I told Triage what I needed. She couldn't care less either way. I could have asked her to cut Scotch's head off and stick it on a spike and she probably would have. She just made sure I understood that she'd be erasing everything from the tunnels to now. The story would be that she was injured in the tunnels. Glory nodded; Rampage muttered a 'whatever'. Both would be present while Triage did the spell.

That left P-21. Unfortunately, I had no idea where to find him... until I glanced out a window and was amazed to see him sitting with his back against a dead tree in the muddy quad as the rain drizzled down. I trotted out to him but slowed as I got a good look at him slouched there. I knew that slouch. He had a barely touched bottle of Wild Pegasus and an empty syringe of Med-X next to him; I guessed his leg still bothered him. "I thought this stuff was supposed to make you feel good," he said as he nudged the bottle with a sour frown. "Just makes me feel sick."

"You get used to it," I replied as I carefully levitated the bottle. "You mind?" He groaned and gave a dismissive wave of his hoof. I pulled the cap off, took a pull, and then looked down the neck at the amber contents. It was like looking into a glass well of piss. I felt like I'd stepped across a mirror in that hole underground and now nothing was right. Glory had one wing. Rampage was pissed. The Goddess was back in spades. And I'd lost my happy friend for this blue lump.

"Scotch Tape?" he asked softly as the rain pattered around us.

I tried to assemble a response, feeling that dull glow starting in my gut. Thank the Goddesses for that. "Asked for you," I replied, seeing him wince in response. "You don't have to worry about it now, though. Triage is altering her memories. As far as she's concerned, you're a stranger now."

"I always was," he replied crossly. "I never wanted to father her." He scowled at me; I snorted and took another drink, making his frown increase. Then I stood and started for the planetarium. "I never had a choice!" he shouted at me.

I rounded on him. "Yes, you did! Maybe not in 99, but you had one now!" Maybe it was the rain or the booze, but right this second I wasn't taking it. "You could have been something to her. You could at least have been nice!" I hissed at him as I glared. "She never wanted to lose her mother, home, and everypony she knew. Damn it, you could have at least tried!"

He closed his eyes and laid his head back against the tree. He looked like a corpse. I sighed. What was I trying to do, make him feel even more like a shit? I could still see that mark around his throat. Even P-21 had a limit. I sighed. "Well, now you don't have to worry about it. If you want to be her father, you tell her yourself. You don't? Don't." I floated the bottle back into his hooves. "Take it from a booze pony like me, P-21. If you're gonna drink, don't do it out in the rain. Hangovers are bad enough without adding a head cold to the mix." And with that, I turned again, leaving him under that dead tree and the hard, cold, Hoofington sky.

* * *

"So, if you were involved with Project Steelpony and Eternity, what was Eternity all about?" I asked as I sat in the planetarium. I still had questions and a choice to make.

"Eternity?" the flickering image said sourly. She'd been scanning the ruins to the east with some sort of bobbing sensors on top of the buildings, letting me get a look at the activity around the Skyport. I'd half hoped to catch a glimpse of Lighthooves there. "Eternity was a complete flop. Rarity micromanaged that project into the ground and wouldn't let me get past setting her up at Hightower Jail." The air above her came alive showing a number of pages of text that made little sense to me.

"Why was Rarity managing it? Was it related to Image?"

"If it was related to Image, Rarity wouldn't have needed the O.I.A. She would have just done it herself." She sighed and mused, more to herself than to me, "A way to keep her friends safe forever..."

Forever. Sounded nice. Better than six months. "What's it like?" I asked softly as I fiddled with my leg brace. She looked at me in surprise and a little confusion, so I elaborated. "To live longer than anypony, I mean?"

Professor Zodiac smiled sadly. "I want to go to a Pony Joe's and get a chocolate-dipped cinnamon ring with extra sprinkles. I know they don't exist anymore. Haven't for two hundred years, but there's a part of me that's always back there. I think about friends. Work. A vacation I was slated to take after the conference at Tenpony. You'd think it'd all fade away, or blur, or something... but it doesn't. It just gets stretched out."

"But how do you deal with the pain?" Again, she looked baffled. "... I found a memory orb from Deus. He was in agony every moment."

"Ah. Yes." The flickering image hung her head a little. "It rather depends on the nature of the augmentation. Deus's implants were invasive and the link to his nervous system was fairly crude. When I was forced to get my upgrades, a year of refinement had taken place. But it doesn't feel... normal."

I regarded the flickering projection with a little sympathy. "Why'd you get them in the first place?"

"Oh. That." She sighed. "Let's just say that some ponies took Big Macintosh's death quite personally and any held anyone with stripes culpable. I was accosted by a mob on my way home. It was quite unpleasant... and afterwards I needed a new heart... among other things. Fortunately, hearts were the first synthetic organ we'd made for Steelpony. After that, it was a gradual process of replacing this for that. New eyes. New lungs. Stronger legs and a reinforced hide. I never installed an augmentation I wouldn't put in myself," she said with a touch of pride.

"Not even Deus? I don't see hydraulics sticking out of you," I replied. Why was I defending him? Deus had been a monster... but... did he really deserve all that for one mistake?

She looked at me and said levelly, "I am sorry for the pain I caused him, but Deus was a convicted rapist. I honestly did not expect him to survive the battle testing." Boy, that was reassuring! "When he did, Goldenblood put him in stasis somewhere. The point was made. If things hadn't exploded, I anticipate that all Steel Rangers would have been augmented into steelponies within a year. Why worry about power armor when you can become power armor?"

"Probably because you can take power armor off and it doesn't hurt all the time?" I suggested.

She rolled her glowing eyes. "You sound like Applejack."

I sighed, pressing my lips together. Sanguine wanted Chimera to make new and interesting monsters. Zodiac seemed nicer, but I trusted her as far as I could throw that projector. Did the O.I.A. intentionally go after borderline nutjobs, or did working for Goldenblood turn them that way? I didn't like thinking about what two hundred years in the Wasteland had done to her. "So, Trueblood wants to make monsters. What about you? Going to make an army of Deuses?"

"Monsters? Is he still going on about that?" Zodiac said with a sad smile. "All that 'endless possibilities and biological potential' garbage?" The glowing projection shook her head sadly.

I blinked. "Are you saying that he wouldn't do that?"

"Oh, eventually. Probably. But I doubt that that's what truly drives him," she said with a sigh. "But as for making more Deuses, no. I don't want Steelpony to win a war two centuries over that was pointless in the first place. Very simply, I want out of this jar," the projection said as she trotted to the metal cylinder and soundlessly gave it a soft tap. "You probably noticed my meat parts, but the reality is that I'm in bad shape. My repair talisman, which is responsible for rebuilding damaged components, needs to be reactivated. With that fixed, I could repair my internal healing talisman. With *that* fixed, I could get out of this bathtub. Otherwise, this jar isn't just my prison, it's my casket too. Five years... ten... fifteen..."

"So you're in the same boat I'm in," I muttered.

She looked at me with a slightly sympathetic smile. "I suppose, but I've at least had a decade to come to terms with it. To the well prepared mind, death is nothing to fear. Of course, after years in this jar..." The glowing projection sighed. "To be honest, I owe you an apology. You see, I was the one who told Sanguine that EC-1101's routing ended at your stable."

"What... you're... you..." I spluttered, trying to get a handle on my anger. "How could you?"

"It was my only hope to get out of here," she replied firmly. "Would you turn down the only hope at getting your life back? I had no idea that Stable 99 was intact. Most of the stables were complete failures, so I saw little point in not telling him." That helped me get my emotions under control. It wasn't like Zodiac had gone out of her way to screw 99. "He gave me the usual sales pitch... find EC-1101, use it to force open Chimera and Steelpony... So six months ago I tracked down the data paths with the help of the Collegiate. Of course, as soon as I told him where to find it, he cut off contact."

"But if you were to get out... are you saying you wouldn't return to your research?" I said skeptically.

The glowing pony smiled, cocking her head as she rolled her eyes a bit. "Oh, perhaps. One day. But it would take years to set up new augmentation production. Maybe a decade to get production scaled up to the point where it could help the Wasteland." She sighed softly. "Funny, when the six of us came out here after so long, I was so eager to return and find out what became of the O.I.A. and Steelpony. Now I wish we hadn't." She shook her head. "This city has a way of tempting you with exactly what you want."

"You were with Big Daddy!" I blurted.

She chuckled and nodded. "And Awesome, Crunchy Carrots, Finders Keepers, and little Dawn. Six friends trying to save Hoofington." She sighed and shook her head. "Such a horrible time. So much killing and for nothing. And eventually we turned on each other." She looked at me and her eyes seemed to turn soft. "You care for your friends, don't you?"

I nodded.

"Then leave this place. Spend what remains of your life somewhere else. Hoofington destroys everything around it. It consumes friendship as readily as life. Go to Tenpony. New Appleloosa. Friendship City. Stalliongrad. Trottingham. Even Fillydelphia... but get out of here as fast as you can and don't look back."

"But... what made you split up?" I asked softly. The projection went still for a long moment, frozen in place.

Zodiac looked back at me, and her lips curled in a little smile. "Sorry, Blackjack, but I usually don't talk this much, and I think the projector's getting overheated. Why don't you come back tomorrow?" she asked, and the big machine flickered and went dark. Big secret? Painful memory? Both? I paused at the entrance and gave a look back over my shoulder, my eyes lingering on that metal cylinder.

* * *

I needed to think, which was a bad sign. I'd spent most of my life not thinking about things. My time in Hoofington had changed all that. Now I couldn't stop thinking, and my poor mutated brain kept tumbling over and over again. If only I was able to dig through all the stuff rolling around inside my head for something useful... like what I was going to do now.

Think. Think think think. What would the Stable Dweller do? "Sheeee'd... cast a failproof failsafe spell that would instantly make the right choice just pop right out at her. And then she'd hop into her magic flying tank and do it! 'Cause she actually knows how to do this heroic crap!" I said with a grin. I slumped. Once more, the vast gulf between the Stable Dweller and myself loomed inside me.

Well, I could try to find out what somepony who knew what she was doing was doing, at least. Not that it was likely to get anything done, but it wasn't as if I had a better idea. I turned on my PipBuck radio and started to pace. It wasn't long before the music stopped and DJ Pon3's voice burst out of with news about the Stable Dweller. Clearly, Homage must have been a fan. So, the Stable Dweller... was all the way down in Fillydelphia?! And apparently she'd just screwed over Red Eye and reestablished DJ Pon3's eyes and ears down in the city! I expected at any moment to hear about how she'd personally and literally punted Red Eye right out of town, but Homage just gave another thank you and put on more music.

Was it just me, or did Homage have a... nah. Though... a super unicorn mare capable of doing all that? Heck, I'd be a bit moist in the... "Uggghhh! None of this is helping, Blackjack!"

I needed to make a choice. I hated making choices. In 99, my choice was 'Do what I am told'. Outside, it was 'Get away from Deus'. For a while, it was 'Find out what EC-1101 is'. Now it was 'Try not to get anypony killed'.

And, if I was honest, 'Don't die in six months' was really up there too.

"Try to think what you should do, Blackjack..." I said as I trotted through one of the Collegiate buildings.

"What about what Security would do?" I heard a voice mutter. I looked around. I was in some kind of gymnasium; there was a swimming pool full of murky water that looked more than a little unhealthy, but next to it were two bathtubs. Big beautiful basins brimming with steamy water. Oooh, whatever pony had invented self-heating bathtub talismans, thank you!

"Well... first of all... I know what Security would do." I tested my horn's magic; it seemed like it was finally starting to return, at least for basic telekinesis. Then I shucked my barding and my braces and... flopped... into the nearest unoccupied basin. These tubs were clearly 'Big Macintosh' sized; I didn't even take up the entire thing! I lay my head back and stared up at the roof.

Blackjack was a frayed bundle of neurotic impulses. The Stable Dweller was a pony too awesome to really imagine. What about Security? I hadn't thought of that identity in a while, the one manufactured by Homage's imagination... but in the end, ponies around Hoofington didn't care about Blackjack. Hell, Blackjack had almost speared a doctor's throat. Security wouldn't have ever done that.

Security saved ponies. Mom had told me that back when I believed it to be true. Security wanted to save Hoofington and everypony who could be saved. Ponies who followed the most basic laws like 'Don't kill other ponies just because you want to' deserved a chance to have a safe life. Security would trust her friends to take care of themselves, help them if they asked for it, and not agonize about dying in months when she could die tomorrow.

"But would Security help Professor Zodiac?" I muttered.

"I sure hope so!"

I blinked at a pony... thing peeking at me from the other side of the tub. It was half pony, but the other half looked like... like an eel or snake or fish... thing! It had a webbed spine for a mane, and though it had forehooves of a sort, there was another smaller spined webbing along the backs of her limbs. The soft pink pony... thing... smiled warily at my expression.

Then another one popped out of the tub next to me, this one turquoise, and leaned over with a wide, pony-eating smile. "Boo!"

"AHH!" It was some sort of monsterponies! Taint monsters! They were gonna eat me! My horn flashed as it tried to shoot my magic bullet spell. It really tried! The flickering ball of light struck the turquoise pony in the face with a zap that blackened her face with soot. She stared at me and coughed a little cloud of smoke before flopping back beneath the water with a groan.

"Capri!" the pink one shouted and jumped from the tub I occupied into the tub beside me with shocking grace. I flopped about, trying to climb out and get my gun, but instead I floundered and flopped in the slippery metal tub. The pink one cradled the other pony in her hoof... flipper... things. "Sagi warned us not to mess with Security!"

"Who... what... how...?" I babbled, pointing my right hoof at them. Then I saw the hurt in the pink one's red eyes and sighed. Okay, freaking out not helping anypony. "Sorry. I didn't know these tubs

were... occupied."

"That's okay... most ponies don't come down here, anyway. Sagi and Virgo, mostly," the pink one said shyly. "I'm Pisces. This is Capri. Well, Capricorn, but she doesn't like being called that."

"Blackjack," I replied, feeling adrenaline giving way to shock, and even that wasn't lasting long as Capri recovered. The turquoise pony ran her hoof... flipper... thing... along her bright blue spines. "Sorry about blasting you," I said. She had a sort of rubbery hide that transitioned to small scales halfway down her body.

"You're *sorry*? I'm sorry I forgot you could do it. Pretty sensible reaction, if you ask me," Capri said as she washed her face off in the tub. "Do I still have my eyebrows?"

"What are eyebrows?" Pisces asked with a little frown. Capri just sighed, shaking her head with a little groan.

Okay. These were Zodiacs... right? Chimera monsterponies? Something... else? "Um... if you don't mind me asking... what are you?" I gave the best smile I could.

Capri smiled broadly. "Well now, that's a great question, isn't it? What are we? Are we perhaps the vanguard of the royal seapony invasion force, coming forth to establish ties with the land ponies? Are you prepared to submit to the rule of the great Oceanus and his mighty leviathan?" That set off a few fuses in my brain, not least of which was wondering what a leviathan was. Capri continued on. "Or maybe we're the result of some super secret military naval program to make seaponies to swim into zebra harbors and blow stuff up? Or we're taint super mutants with powers beyond your--"

"We ran into killing joke," Pisces said softly.

Capri immediately slumped against the wall of the tub. "You always give away the ending, Sis."

"Sis?"

"Right. Sister. As in sibling. As in related to by blood. All ponies were in our village in Ghastly Gorge," the turquoise water pony said. "As for killing joke... well, it's a blue vine you can find here and there. None around Hoofington, thank the Goddesses. One time I'm glad almost nothing grows here. But if it touches you... well... it likes to play jokes on you."

Pisces nodded. "That usually get you killed."

"A vine that plays... jokes?" I needed to scavenge a box of brain fuses. Here I was almost convinced that maybe I'd found out all the messed up stuff around the Wasteland.

"Well, to elaborate, once I said to Sis, 'Gee Sis, wouldn't it be great to be a sea pony?' to which Sis replied..." and she pointed her hoof flipper at the pink pony.

"Shoo be doo... Shoo shoo be doo," Pisces said with a little smile. "That's from the sea pony song," she said with a little nod.

"So one day we were starving and decided to find our way into the Everfree looking for something non-radioactive and un-poisonous to eat... not one of my smarter choices, in retrospect... and we came across killing joke. It burst out of the ground and played its joke by turning both of us into this," she said

with a broad smile. "By the way, did I mention that we were miles from any water source?"

"That's the killing part," Pisces pointed out.

"So, yeah, we flopped around the Everfree... drying out... crawling on our bellies... really not happy with life. We finally found a pond we could wet ourselves in."

"That was full of radigators," the pink pony pointed out.

Capri rolled her eyes with a soft snort. "Which was full of radigators. Fortunately, the joke gave us a few little tricks that let us drive them off... probably an accident on its part. We eventually flopped and flipped our way to a creek and just followed it downstream. Went underground for a while, then eventually ended up in what turned out to be the Hoofington Reservoir. That's when we came across other ponies."

"Mean ponies," Pisces said with a shiver.

"Raiders?" I asked with sympathy. Capri snorted with a scowl.

"No. Fancy high to do Society ponies," she said with a flick of her tail. "Caught us in a net and threw us in a jar. They took us to be a part of some menagerie... fancy name for a zoo. Stayed like that for six months. The Society'd rap on the glass to make us move around. All... the... time..." she said through grit teeth.

Pisces whimpered, covering her ears. "I don't want to remember the tapping. They just wouldn't stop!"

Capri hugged her. I wanted to do that myself. "Anyway, Professor Zodiac found out about us and paid a whole bunch of caps to King Jackass to let us go. She had to give up something really valuable that she said was hers, too. But she said that nopony should be locked up for looking strange." I thought of a zony trying to teach in an empty lecture hall.

"So now you're Zodiacs?" Pisces smiled and nodded.

"That's what Sagittarius said. He was the one who told the professor about us being in Awesome's menagerie." The pink sea pony flushed at Capri's glower. "I mean... King Jackass!" That mollified the turquoise sea pony a little bit.

Capri leaned against the back of tub, and on her rump I saw an odd symbol: a zodiac magical tattoo like the decals we'd worn leaving Megamart... wow, that seemed too long ago. "Now we do whatever we can to help out here. Sometimes we catch bounties if they live near water. Sometimes we scavenge sunken wreckage. One good thing about being like this is that we don't seem to get any more mutated by taint or the crud in the water." She looked at the pink sea pony. "We're going out to the bay soon. Gonna see if we can pull something useful off the *Luna*."

"That sunken battleship?" I asked, and she nodded. "You can't tell me there's useful stuff on that wreck!"

"Plenty!" she laughed. "All kinds of talismans still intact. Tons of equipment that's still sorta useful. That ship had so many enchantments protecting it that it took years before it finally sank. Barely

any rust on it at all, in spite of all the saltwater.”

“So if I found that killing joke stuff...” I speculated, rubbing my chin. “I’d love to be a taint-free, two-eyed, non-jellylegged pony again...” I said to myself and any killing joke I might encounter in the future.

“You’d be an idiot and dead,” Capri said flatly. “Killing joke doesn’t help ponies. Ever. It screws them. You can’t say ‘I’d love to be Princess Celestia’ and dive in... because it’ll mutate you into an alicorn that can’t do magic and fly or something. Or turn you into a two-hundred-year-dead copy of the Princess. Or do something you said back when you were a filly. Trust me, you are not the first pony to think of using killing joke to do something cool.”

I blew a raspberry. “And once more reality squashes what would otherwise be a completely awesome plan.”

“Yeah,” Pisces said with a sigh. “If it wasn’t for stupid reality, we could have chocolate milk rain and cotton candy clouds.” I sighed as well. Wouldn’t that be awesome? Rivers of Wild Pegasus. Sugar Apple Bomb bushes...

“Hey. Quick question,” I said as I looked at the pair. “Why’d the Zodiacs go after me and my PipBuck?”

Capri shrugged. “Sagi’s idea. He heard that the professor needed it really badly.” She folded her hoof flippers under her chin. “He’s the oldest Zodiac, so he’s kinda in charge. The idea was it’d be a surprise or something.”

Pisces nodded. “Libra spilled the beans, though.”

Capri shivered. “Professor was so pissed... I don’t think I’ve ever seen her so mad before.” The turquoise pony looked at me with a sympathetic look. “She said you’d never help her now.”

That lined up with what I’d heard from the professor herself. “Well, it sure doesn’t help,” I muttered. I lifted the leg braces with my faltering magic and tied them on my forelimbs.

“Does that mean that you’re thinking about it?” Pisces suddenly arced back into the tub I occupied and gave me a very squishy hug. “Please help her! Please. I know she’s creepy and freaky and strange but she’s the only pony who’s been good to me and Sis. Please!” Oh, wasn’t this awkward?

“Pisces!” Capri said, and her tail slipped out to smack the back of her sister’s head. The pink sea pony went even redder, flushing and bowing her head in embarrassment. “Sorry. She’s like that...” then the turquoise mare tapped her hoof fins together as she chewed on her bottom lip. “But... if you did decide to help the professor...”

I sighed and slipped from the tub, putting on my last two braces. “Yeah. Like I said, I’m thinking about it.” And if my answer was no, then I’d better be well gone from here before giving it.

* * *

What is the Goddess’s interest in Blackjack? Your question is so simplistic that it makes one wonder why you would bother to waste the Goddess’s time with it!

Our first interest is the interest that We have for all of ponykind: elevating and preserving all ponies through Unity in the Goddess. We know that through Unity, ponykind will be transformed into a state of being perfectly suited to thrive in this wasteland. Once a hoofful of trivial complications are resolved, We will give all of ponydom a safe and prosperous future in Us.

However, We are also interested in Blackjack for her capability and her determination. The Goddess appreciates ponies of mettle and fortitude, and she has demonstrated that she excels in both areas. Despite her copious flaws, she has managed to persevere against tremendous odds and yet seems to consider them quite ordinary. She seems hopelessly unaware that only a few ponies could face what she encounters daily and still continue onward. Such traits are... valuable.

Thus, the Goddess's interest in her is the same as anypony's: how can We use her to achieve Our goals? Is that not how all heroes are eventually exploited?

* * *

Saying it was about to rain in Hoofington was like saying the Wild Pegasus would run out: it was inevitable and dreaded at the same time. Triage was in the middle of the procedure. P-21 was somewhere... Rampage wasn't speaking to me... Lacunae was meeting with the professor. That left me and Glory with nowhere to go, nothing to do, and nopony shooting at us. I'd found a window and was staring at the gray world outside while she calmly did some maintenance on Vigilance beside me, replacing the firing pin with one from a battered ten millimeter IF-21 Caramel.

Where'd I pick up that gun? Red Eye's goons? Scavenged it? Was it from the tunnels? I couldn't remember any more. So many damn fights. So damned tired of fighting. And yet I couldn't stop. Who knew how long I had before I died... no, not even that. Ponies died of cancer in 99. It was rare and horrible, watching them struggle for months. Weeks. Days. Bodies falling apart as they fought for one more day before either the disease killed them or they begged for the needle. Now that was me. Would I last months before the taint crippled me? Weeks before tumors devoured my organs? Days?

"Sanguine contacted me," Glory said softly, not looking up from her work. "That Psychoshy brought a message while you were... getting your things in the eatery." I said nothing, just inhaled. Her hooves, normally so sure, dropped the firing pin from the Caramel as she added quickly, "Dusk and Lightning Dancer were with me. She didn't try anything."

I felt nothing. I thought nothing. I was as gray as the world beyond. "Huh," was all I could say.

"She told me... she told me to let you know that he could regrow my wing with Chimera." It was amazing how she could even keep her voice; how she fought to keep the tremble of desire to a minimum.

"Mmmm..."

"And... she said that he... he could clone you new organs. A new heart. Lungs. All the parts of you that are failing."

What could I say? What should I say? I listened to the drops as they hit the window.

What could she say? What would she say? She sniffed softly. "I want you to do it, Blackjack. I do..." I didn't blink. Didn't turn away. I stared into the reflection of my own eye. I wondered if I could see

my soul.

I wondered if it was tainted too.

"But... I know you shouldn't accept it," she said with another sniff as she nudged the pin into place with the tip of her hoof. She was so gentle like that. So careful. I could see her crying in my mind. Slow tears. "I know he's a monster... that he'll do terrible things with Chimera. That he'll probably stab you in the back anyway before he helps you. I know it's the wrong thing."

But she wanted it anyway. I wanted to do it for her. I did. I wanted it so much that it hurt inside.

But we don't always get what we want. Even when we deserve it.

I sighed softly and dropped to my knees beside her. Now it was her turn to be held. The guns forgotten, she pressed her face into my shoulder and sobbed. "I know it's wrong but I want it so damn much!" And that was all that needed to be said. All that could be said. And like the rain in Hoofington, tears would come. But eventually the rain would end.

* * *

"The Goddess would have a word," Lacunae said from the shadows of the hallway. I marveled at the slide... could Glory have somehow made the action even smoother than when I'd first gotten it? "You will pay attention to us!" The Goddess stomped her hoof firmly. I used to do the same thing when I was a filly.

I didn't look away from the chamber. A lot of mechanical work had gone into this weapon. I heard the soft rasp of metal on metal, barely audible after being oiled. I wondered if this had been custom built for Card Trick. Slowly, I worked the slide back and forth. That rasp was still there. "Go ahead, Your Deityness."

"We command you turn over EC-1101 to this Sanguine character. We have need of Chimera. It could be the key to the future of ponykind." I saw her scowl in Vigilance's reflection. "You will do as the Goddess commands!"

"No," I replied softly. There was a little bit of wear on the slide. Nothing serious. Goddesses, Glory did nice work with what she had.

The Goddess stared at me with Lacunae's face. She'd gotten rid of the dress. She looked... ordinary. Mass produced. Not the alicorn who had saved me so many times. "No?"

"It's two letters," I replied as I slid a magazine home and loaded a round in the chamber.

Her eyes flared in rage. "You gave your word!"

"Yup. So it looks like I'm a liar too," I said before looked at her. "Project Chimera came before Twilight's alicorn project. And you have Twilight's memories... or something... inside you. So what do you need it for?"

"IMPUDENT FOAL! THE GODDESS NEED NOT EXPLAIN HERSELF TO ANYPONY! WE ARE THE FUTURE OF EQUESTRIA! WE ARE YOUR SALVATION! THE GODDESS--" she began, and that was it. Before she could get past that point, Vigilance was shoved in her mouth. She looked so stunned

that I might have found it funny that she'd cut off her tirade even though she had just been beaming it straight into my head.

"Let me make something clear. I do not like the word 'Goddess'. I can't even think of Celestia and Luna as Goddesses anymore. I don't even think there are Goddesses at this point. All I know are friends and enemies. Lacunae is my friend. The Goddess isn't." My eye narrowed; I hoped Lacunae would forgive me for this. "So my suggestion would be you let Lacunae speak for you, Goddess, because right now I'm pissed off enough to ignore you out of spite." I wanted to find a certain ghoul and make a pink, smoking wallet out of him!

For a second, I was sure that I was going to have to pull that trigger. Then I saw the slight tensing around the eyes that was more worry than indignation and pulled the gun from her mouth. "I'm sorry, Lacunae," I said softly. I felt ashamed for doing that.

She worked her jaw a moment before saying softly in my mind, "It's all right, Blackjack. But as you said, the Goddess is definitely not your friend."

I sighed and looked at the rain creeping down the window panes. "I don't like beings that think they're perfect. Powerful. Better." I spotted my reflection in Vigilance's polished silver plating. "I know I'm weak and powerless. I don't need some Goddess rubbing it in."

Lacunae was silent for a second and said, in a voice tinged with irony, "You have an odd understanding of the concept of weakness."

I smiled slightly. How in Equestria did the Goddess believe humility, restraint, and compassion were weaknesses? If the Goddess had been like Lacunae, Equestria would be flocking in droves to join Unity. No pony wanted to be a part of something that believed it was already better without them. "So why does she need Chimera?"

"It's a rather simple problem of biology," she replied softly. "You see, all alicorns are biologically female." I just blinked at her, not comprehending the problem. She elaborated delicately, "And we require males to procreate."

I blinked, furrowing my brows. "Well, I wouldn't ask P-21 for the honors, but there's probably a lot of males who'd take you up on that offer."

She shook her head slowly. "We are... unfortunately... incompatible with male ponies of any variant."

Now I was frowning. "Wait a minute. If you can't breed with pony males... then where the hell did Celestia and Luna come from?" I blurted.

"That is a great mystery. Twilight theorized that alicorns may have been manifestations of some primal magical energy, but Celestia and Luna never confirmed this. Since the fusion megaspell originated with Chimera, though, the Goddess theorizes that perhaps it can be adapted to create a male of the species. To be honest, the Goddess is expending all her energy on various possible means of solving this dilemma. She is under a great deal of strain."

I sighed softly. "I won't give EC-1101 to Sanguine. Not to save my life... not to save your species." Not even to replace Glory's wing, damn me. "But if I can find some way to help you as you

need to be helped, I will.” I looked up and gave her the best smile I can. “That’s the most I can promise.”

She seemed to be listening for a moment. I heard the faintest of whispers as Lacunae bled over snatches of conversation. There was a mention of a book, and using ‘LittlePip’ to get it. From the little bits I gathered, she was more intelligent and less stubborn than I. The name nagged at me; where’d I heard it before? Finally, an agreement seemed to be reached as Lacunae said, “The Goddess is not happy, but she accepts your offer.”

“Good, because I honestly don’t know what I’d have to do otherwise.”

“Oh, that is simple. I would have teleported behind you, raised my shield, killed you with my magic, torn the PipBuck from your limb, and returned to Maripony,” she said quite matter-of-factly. “Of course, I promise you that I’d feel absolutely terrible about it afterwards.”

I chuckled softly. Couldn’t get much more fair than that, could I?

* * *

There are certain things that get my attention. Nuzzles to my flanks. The sound of a shotgun shell being actioned into the chamber. The sweet smell of Wild Pegasus. And the impact of a nearly full grown Rampage slamming into me from behind and sending me sliding down the hall. Normally I would have rolled with it to my hooves, but my braced limbs clacked as they struggled to support me and move as they were supposed to. That gave her the time to jump right on top of me.

“Hi. I wanted you to know that Scotch is done. She doesn’t remember anything from the tunnels. Not a thing,” she hissed down at my face. “Do you know what she did? The very first thing?”

“Rampage, I’ve had a lot of people jumping on me today...” I really hoped I wouldn’t have to shoot her in the head again.

“She asked for me!” she shouted in my face. “Don’t you get it? She’s young and scared and afraid and asked for me to see her.” I saw the tears beneath the rage. “Just like Thorn! Just like...” She grimaced and sobbed, pressing her face to my chest. “I had to tell her no. I ran from her. She needed me and I ran!”

Because otherwise she might kill Scotch Tape. “Rampage... I’m sorry.”

My striped friend rubbed her nose. “Why’d you have to do it, Blackjack? Scotch is a tough girl. So she had a scare or two... she’d get tougher from them. But now she’s scared and all she knows is I can’t be around her. And I can’t tell her... not the reason why she doesn’t remember or why I can’t give her the hug she needs.”

I sat up. “Who’s with Scotch now?”

“Glory and the Zodiac filly Virgo. I think she’s the first friend that Scotch Tape’s had.”

I gave a little smile. “Maybe she should stay here, then, instead of going to Chapel.” She certainly wasn’t -- and then Rampage’s hoof across my face ended that thought process.

“Don’t you get it?” Rampage shouted in my face. “She doesn’t want to go back to Chapel anymore. She wants to stay with us! So if we send her away, it’ll seem like we’re all abandoning her. It’ll

break her heart even more!" To my shock, she started to laugh. "It's funny, when you think about it. Like me catching the killer only to become a killer myself." There wasn't any mirth in that laugh. Only a ragged madness that grew sharper and sharper. She slammed me harder and harder into the tiles. "I killed her! I killed her!"

There was something very wrong when you needed a bullet in the head to calm somepony down.

As she regenerated, I made sure to get out from under her and on my legs. Two Collegiate ponies came around the corner and spotted the crimson spray on the wall and the sight of her head pulling itself together. From the way they ran off, I supposed that Scotch wasn't the only pony needing their memory modified.

Of course, being shot in the head didn't solve anything.

"Rampage... I'm sorry. I did what I thought was right. Maybe I'm wrong, but if I can give Scotch Tape some peace, I will. She'll be upset for a while... but then she'll get better. And we'll get her someplace safe and happy as soon as we can. Okay?" Was I trying to convince myself or her?

"I don't want another Thorn," she said softly as she turned away. "I can't take another Thorn." And then she quietly walked back down the hall, leaving patters of blood in her wake.

* * *

It was getting late. After my little display in the meal room, the Collegiate had found a place for us on the second floor over the old gymnasium. The classrooms were full of junk and stank of musty carpeting and dust, but they were dry and private. We'd lit a fire, and the orange and yellow flames danced and flickered across the faces of my friends. The rain had picked up again and was washing the fog away. It sounded as if it was trying to scour the entire city away. A flash and boom made the windows rattle, and Scotch Tape jumped for cover underneath some blankets. I couldn't blame her. Every flash made my hoof jerk in response.

Scotch looked confused; she had since she rejoined us. Her eyes were big and round and afraid, not of what she'd experienced but of what she'd lost. We'd fed her lies: she'd been injured in the tunnels and knocked out. She'd swallowed them and now they were sour and heavy in her stomach. But she didn't complain because she didn't know any better. Children should listen to their parents. What should parents listen to?

"I need to decide what to do," I said softly, my eye turning from one to the next. Scotch hadn't been the only pony to lose. Not even the first. Ever since my alarm went off for that last shift in the stable, I'd been losing. So had everypony with me. So had everypony in this damned city. Hoofington was a maw that--no, not all at once. No, that would have been decent. That would have been respectable. Hoofington was a leech sucking everything away as slowly as possible.

Right now, I hated this city. I hated it with every bit of my being. I stood up to address the others. "As some of you realize, I'm not doing too well at this rate. Triage gave me six months before taint eats me up. Even if I say 'fuck that' and live twice as long... I'm still dead in a year. Professor Zodiac's told me to leave Hoofington... and that all of you should too. Go somewhere else. Help the Stable Dweller... something." I closed my eye, taking a deep breath. "But I'm not going to."

P-21 was almost completely turned away from me. Only the thinnest sliver of his face showed in

the flickering light as his forehooves incessantly rubbed his rear leg. He stared off; was he looking into Stable 99 right now? Was he hearing the Overmare? He was a smart pony... but not a good one. The chance to be a good pony had been taken from him. Now he was just trying to not be a bad one. Priest would never love a bad pony.

"It's also been suggested that I give EC-1101 to Professor Zodiac. Hand it over and let her deal with it. And I'm mighty tempted to do that," I said softly. "She seems a decent sort... if a little weird. But I'm not going to do that. Like it or not, this is something I have to see through." I looked at Lacunae in the corner, feeling the stare of hundreds of eyes reflecting the flame. "It's also been suggested that I give EC-1101 to Sanguine. Get myself some new organs, Glory a new wing, and the Goddess a date.

"Well I'm not going to do that either. After what he's done, Sanguine's never going to get his hooves on Chimera if I can help it. Maybe we can get that project to Professor Zodiac or something and explore that possibility later. But not through Sanguine. Not after 99 and Deus." I looked at the dark alicorn, wondering if I was addressing my friend or my enemy.

"What about Steelpony?" Glory asked. "Maybe the professor could do... something?"

I shook my head. "It's not like there's a great overabundance of bionic parts out there. She'd have to make the synthetic organs from scratch. There's not enough time for that to save me. Sorry." Glory hung her head and nodded silently.

The fire flickered and danced across Rampage's face, every lick of flame from the barrel seeming to make her change. Was she a foal-murdering psychopath? Perhaps an ardent defender of law? A zebra traitor? Someone else? She'd be back to full strength in the morning, but what would she do?

What would I do?

Glory looked at me. She'd follow me to the end. I didn't want her to. She deserved her own life. Her own happiness. I'd reunited her with her sister, at least. Who knew what else was possible?

"Goldenblood did something before the end of the war. I'm sure of it. He did something... and I suspect it was something big and something bad. EC-1101 is at the heart of it. If I have a short time left, I'm going to do what I can to find out what. And I'm going to do whatever I can to stop the fighting. We're going north, and I'm going to tell the Steel Rangers we were behind that attack and see what we can do to end their war with the Reapers."

Rampage snorted softly. "You'll be going into a meat grinder, Blackjack. That's Flash Fillies territory. They like Psychoshy and don't like you."

"We could circle around to the east. Towards Black Pony Mountain," Glory suggested.

"That's right by Paradise. Red Eye's there," Rampage countered.

"Well... go past Red Eye and along the eastern mountains."

"Even worse idea. Ever hear of an Ursa Major?" From the gasp from Lacunae, one of us had. Rampage didn't elaborate. "Let's just say there's a reason everypony stays away from Black Pony Mountain."

"It doesn't matter. If the Flash Fillies want to fight me, they're going to fight me. But somepony's

got to talk to the Steel Rangers and get this stopped before one side wipes out the other.”

“Wouldn’t it be better if they did?” P-21 said quietly, staring off into space. “You’ve pretty much said you won’t back the Reapers. If they’re so determined to kill each other... let them.”

“Nothing’s going to get better if we do that! So the Reapers kill off the Rangers or the Rangers kill off the Reapers. That’ll just lead to another round and another round. Eventually, there won’t be anything left!” I said, with a stomp of my hoof, the brace clattering with the motion. I looked at Rampage. The poison spreads a little more year after year. I looked to each of my friends. “If we’re going to matter at all, then we’re going to have to do better. All of us. Not just we six, but everypony. And if I’m only here for a short while, then I’m going to do my damndest to encourage folks to do better.

“Or die trying...” I finished grimly. The Dealer stared at me from the far side of the burning barrel, his lip curling in a small smile.

And that was that. Decision cast. I would stay in Hoofington and chase down Goldenblood’s secret projects and learn what that bastard had done with the O.I.A. Because I suspected that, apocalypse and two centuries notwithstanding, it wasn’t dead yet. Just sleeping, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to know what would happen if it woke up.

Twilight Sparkle had created Gardens to save Equestria. Goldenblood wanted to save Equestria more than anything.

With all the resources of the six ministries, what could Goldenblood have created?

* * *

“Do I love Blackjack? That’s... an oddly personal question. I’m not sure how to answer. ‘Yes’ would suffice, but it really wouldn’t explain much, would it? I suppose what you’re really asking is: why do I love Blackjack?”

“When Blackjack is at her best, she’s like ponykind at its best. I really believe there’s nothing she can’t accomplish when she’s like that. It’s almost scary just what she can get done when she puts her mind to it. She tracked down Dusk, fought a whole slew of Red Eye’s soldiers, and brought her back to help me. And it worked. I don’t think Dusk and I have ever talked like we did when she saw my injury. And that’s why, when she talks about saving Hoofington and Equestria, I think she might be able to do it.

“At the same time, I’m scared of her. I’m scared of what she’ll do; what she can do. She killed her stable because she thought it was the right thing to do. She almost killed herself for the same reason. I don’t know what snapped her out of that, but it had to be miraculous. She went through those tunnels and she kept going when we all just wanted to die. And so I’m scared that one day she’s going to go somewhere... and I won’t be able to follow her.

“So, do I love her? Yes. But will I always be able to be there for her? I don’t know...”

* * *

There wasn’t much discussion after that. My friends knew my plan. Would they leave me? It would probably be for the best. Rampage had no reason to stay and every reason to go. P-21... there was a better life waiting for him in Chapel. Lacunae... how could I know that the Goddess wouldn’t just

sweep her aside and take over? Scotch should be left behind; where I was going was no place for a filly. And, though I loved her more than my own life, it wasn't a place for Glory, either. I was destined for a bad end.

I still didn't want to be alone again... I hated being alone. But I hated my friends being hurt by me even more.

I rested my head on Glory's chest, listening to the beat of a sound and healthy heart, and let it soothe me off to sleep.

~ ~ ~

My hooves crunched softly beneath the snow, the night turned to amber hues as I trotted along with my PipBuck clicking in my ears. For some reason, I was dressed all in black. Black gas mask. Black barding that completely covered me horn to hoof. Black coat covering it all. The heaps of snow seemed to glow on their own as I trudged silently along the road.

Above me hung a city of dreams, or maybe nightmares, on a grand and terrible platform clinging to the side of a cliff. My lips moved silently, but the familiar words were dull and meaningless. Streamers of gas seemed to trickle off the edges of the city. The rancid taste of orange filled my mouth from a tube at the corner. There were other tracks in the snow. Bodies in the snow. A trail of dead ponies. I walked on them whenever I could to get out of the snow. The dark clouds overhead continued to dump layer after layer of the fluffy material. It was knee deep now.

There were lights ahead. Skywagons. Tents. Ponies milling about, crying softly as they huddled in the shelter of the vehicles. I moved off the road, as silent as the snow around me, creeping closer.

"Get another case of Rad-X opened and keep them out of this green snow," a mare wearing bright yellow barding called out. "Get those emergency suits handed out. Foals first, damn it!" she yelled as she waved her hoof at the ponies around her. The suits were marked with the Ministry of Peace's butterflies. There were soldiers, too, looking scared as they stared out at the night.

I crept closer. A soldier said to the mare in the yellow emergency suit, "Is it true? Is Hoofington gone too?"

"There's no reply on any of the emergency channels," the mare replied. "We might be able to make it to the Fluttershy Medical Center... if it hasn't been hit..." There was a note of despair on the edge of her voice as she looked out at the darkness. "...is there any place that hasn't been hit?"

"Long as we hit them too," the soldier muttered softly as she scowled up at the dead city. "I don't think anypony else is coming out of there. We can't keep this evacuation center here forever." She stamped her hoof in the snow. "I can't believe that the Steel Rangers just abandoned us. 'Recalled' my ass. What were they recalled for?"

Then I floated a rifle out in front of me. The leg-long scope made the soldier's head leap clearly into view. Matronly. Definitely a motherly type. Not the sort you'd expect to find in combat barding. Crosshairs aligned on the side of her head. A small hole appeared just behind her temple; her body blocked most of the sight of the blood spray in the snow. The mare in the emergency suit froze, but the glassy helmet distorted my targeting. A second later, the rifle fired silently into her. Chest shot. She

dropped and started to crawl towards one of the wagons.

The other soldiers in the evacuation camp began to scramble. “Sniper! Zebra sniper!” they called out as the refugees started to scream.

Crosshairs swept the camp. Soldier with a rifle. Headshot. Soldier with a rifle. Headshot. The others were behind cover. Taking another sip of rancid orange, I rose and moved towards the camp. The rifle disassembled itself in the air above me, returning to my bags, and out came two matte black submachineguns: IF-44 ‘Angel Bunny’s. A hoof-long silencer was screwed to each as I moved like black death upon the camp, the cylinders muffling the noise and cutting down the muzzle flash.

Soldiers came out of cover, trying to protect ponies in a dying world. The Angel Bunnies thumped silently as three-round bursts of ten millimeter ammo cut them down. My black barding protected me better than their combat armor as I systematically eliminated all opposition in the camp.

A little more death in Equestria.

No more bullets being fired. I headed to the medical crates and began to resupply. Rad-X and RadAway first. Healing potions next. Bullets from the fallen soldiers, even if I didn’t have weapons that could use them; I wasn’t going to leave anything that could shoot me in the back. Food and purified water last, as much as I could carry. There wasn’t much left after that.

“Please. There are children here,” the mare in the Ministry of Peace emergency suit gasped. “You’re killing children...” she begged as she hugged my back hoof. “Please... enough ponies have died...”

For a moment, I looked down at her, then drew a pistol from the mare who had died first while wanting to protect the evacuation camp. I checked the soldier’s pistol and walked to the fallen skywagons. “No. Please, no!” she shouted behind me, stretching her hoof after me.

Killing foals was no different than killing their mothers. They screamed, bled, and died like animals. One round in each head to make sure. Nine millimeter rounds were trash anyway. In less than five minutes, the soldier’s pistol was tossed into the snow. “Why...?” the medical mare gasped as she crawled towards me. Not that she could understand. They were all dead. All of them. Of radiation. Poison. Lead poisoning. Time. I was simply saving them the pain. She gets to live. Maybe. Maybe she’ll figure it out. Maybe not.

I continued on the road east. No answer. Not a word. No forgiveness any more. No absolution. Only the mission. The snow consumed all her wails and cries. She should be thankful; she had enough supplies remaining to maybe last a few months. Me? I had a pony to kill.

~ ~ ~

I raised my head, looking at the amber hues of the room and my sleeping friends. Scotch had scooted up under Glory’s wing. P-21 was a dark blob in one corner, Rampage another in the opposite corner. Lacunae stood as still as stone by the cold fire barrel. I stared into the darkness and whispered, “What the hay...?”

* * *

I paced back and forth in front of the projector. "And then I just left her there. Like I was trying to teach her a lesson! And I just trotted off with all those stolen supplies! Like... where the hell did a dream like that come from?" I asked, trying to ignore robots peeling away withered flesh from some blasted bionic parts against the far wall.

The flickering projection just shrugged. "If you asked me the strength to mass ratio of enchanted silver or the velocity of a southbound pegasus carrying a coconut, I could tell you. I'm an engineer, not a psychologist." She cocked her head. "What do you normally dream about?"

I sighed, looking in a box marked 'medical supplies': Med-X, Rad-X, Buck, Steady, Dash inhalers... well, Dash had kept me alive long enough to get to Scalpel. "Gassing Stable 99... usually. Sometimes I get other freaky dreams. Blowing up Deus." One filly torn in half... One crushed in an embrace... A lullaby... "That thing in the tunnels... me and sleep aren't real friendly." I held up a few needles of Med-X and boxes of Rad-X tablets with a little smile, and the projection sighed and nodded. Score!

Once I'd refilled my stock of chems, I sat on one of the cushions. Fortunately, one side effect of being a cyberpony: you really didn't need that much shuteye. "So, the theme was right up there... but everything in it was out of left field. I mean, it felt almost like a memory orb, but far more real and familiar. Like... it was me remembering them, not just watching the experiences of others."

"Well to be honest, I can't imagine. If it wasn't an internal dream, then it must have been external. You've been exposed to unprecedented levels of taint and Enervation. It's caused microtumors in your brain that are thus far fairly benign but could possibly be affecting your mental processes. Your friend Glory helped us determine their growth rate." 'Cause Glory was just awesome like that. And me having brain tumors sure would have explained a lot back in 99.

I sighed and shook my head. "Can I ask you something? Triage mentioned you went down the elevator too. Why?"

She sighed. "Well, you know that I was predominantly involved with Steelpony, but I heard rumors about the other projects. It was a bit of a game back then to try and find out each other's secrets. The only pony who knew everything was Goldenblood... and maybe Vanity."

"Vanity? His uncle?"

She nodded slowly. "He was always accompanying Goldenblood. Technically, he worked for the M.o.M. keeping an eye on bad ponies in the military, but after the Marauders disbanded he was brought into the O.I.A. directly." She frowned. "Some ponies think that he was really spying for Pinkie Pie. That he turned over something that made Luna dismiss him from his position, because he worked with Horse and Trueblood. But if he really was against his nephew, Vanity could have done a lot more damage to him. So it's a mystery."

The projection then smiled. "I'd heard about those ruins and the memories. Rarity and Goldenblood had been down there. I was hoping to catch a memory of either of them, especially Goldenblood. Unfortunately, I was down there so long that... well..." She pointed a glowing hoof at the jar.

"And did you find out anything?" I asked eagerly.

"I did encounter one memory... but... let me see if I can do this..." The room lights began to flicker, then darkened as the projector lit up the space overhead. The colors combined and oriented themselves into that dreary buried ruin. There were no swirling motes of light. Just magic lamps illuminating the crushed stone.

It was back in the ruins, and there were two mares, not counting my host, collecting pot shards. It became apparent why the memory was selected when Rarity walked past. "Wonder what she's in a hurry about?" a mare I guessed was the host said.

"Leave it be, Dewdrop. Rarity's going to have you sweeping floor scraps if she catches you eavesdropping," one of the two replied.

My host chuckled. "I'm not eavesdropping. I'm collecting pot shards." And she happened to be collecting them very quickly in the direction the white mare had gone.

Rarity trotted along through the buried ruins, looking particularly magnificent in her purple rubber boots and coat that shielded her from the water dripping from above. Goldenblood stood at one of the walls next to a hole the water in the cave was trickling into. His eyes were distant as he floated a piece of rock in front of him, turning it over and over. The spiral chunk of silvery stone glittered coldly in the light of the lamps and seemed to have him mesmerized.

"Goldenblood, a word," Rarity said softly, but voices carried in the tunnel and whoever was remembering this moved closer. The wheezing, scarred buck regarded her with an arched brow. "I wanted to... thank you. For helping save Pinkie Pie. If that bomb had gone off..." She took a deep breath. "I've never faced the possibility of losing my friends before."

"Never? Not even when facing Nightmare Moon and dragons?" Goldenblood said softly but with a small, sincere smile.

She brushed a hoof across her mane, smiling sheepishly and giving a feigned carefree roll of her eyes. "Ah, the invulnerability of youth... but no. Not even then." She closed her blue eyes and took a deep breath. "But when I heard about it..."

"Most credit goes to Pinkie Pie and the Marauders. She sensed it, and they evacuated the club. I simply gave her a nudge in the right direction," he said as he turned the spur of stone over and over in his magic. When she looked at it, he smiled. "Fascinating, isn't it? We've been finding more and more of this ore the deeper we excavate. Its properties and potential are astounding." Rarity dropped her gaze, chewing her lip. Clearly she didn't want to discuss stupid rocks.

"Goldenblood, I need to ask a favor. I need a project. A... a secret project," she said quietly. "Normally, I'd never ask, but... after Pinkie..." She chewed on her lip. "I think I may have a way to protect my friends. But... I need... something. Something terrible."

Goldenblood just stared at the hard spiral as he turned the rock over in his magic. "I see..."

"It's... it's a new kind of magic. Or perhaps a very old kind. I'm not sure... but... I don't trust it. I need to make certain it won't hurt my friends," she said softly, keeping her eyes on the water as it trickled over the edge and through that dark gap. "If it works, I can keep everypony safe forever."

"You need test subjects," Goldenblood murmured softly in his watery, rusty voice. Rarity flinched

but then nodded. "Say no more. I'll get you situated. We'll call it..." He mused a moment as he stared at the rock before saying softly, "Project Eternity. After all, forever is a long time to keep a pony safe."

"I... thank you, Goldenblood," she said with a relieved smile. She started away, then hesitated. "I... I think that you and Fluttershy make a wonderful... erm... couple." She grinned sheepishly at him, pawing at the water-covered stone.

He smiled, but his eyes simply looked sad. "Thank you, Rarity. I hope I prove worthy of her."

"Yes. Quite. Well... ah..." She bobbed her head once more. "I look forward to hearing from you, Goldenblood."

The viewer immediately rushed back to collecting pot shards as Goldenblood looked in her direction. The image dissolved. "This is an hour later," Zodiac said as a new picture took shape. "It was a long memory, and nothing particularly interesting to a non-archaeologist happened in the intervening time." Well, this was an improvement over being stuck in a memory orb.

"Come on, everypony. Last ride out of this hole," some buck called. The viewer trotted to the elevator and it started to rise out of the earth. It flashed by other subterranean workings as it lifted before finally reaching the top. It looked like the foundation of a large concrete building. Ponies started filing out, trotting towards the exit and laughing about their day.

All except for Goldenblood. He stood against the rail surrounding the elevator shaft as ponies left. His eyes stared right into mine. "A minute, Dewdrop."

"Um... yes... sir?" my host said softly.

"You heard my conversation with the Ministry Mare." It wasn't a question. The silvery metal turned over and over beside him as he approached her. My viewer started to back away. "What did you think?"

"It was... it was... ah... interesting..." the mare stammered.

"Interesting. Indeed," he said softly as he kept approaching. Now I realized what so disturbed me about Goldenblood, more than the scars and the sickly cough and ragged breathing; on top of all that, he didn't seem to blink. "Do you know what the three most precious things in Equestria are, Dewdrop?" he asked, and she could feel the breeze blowing out of the shaft on her flanks as he backed her right up to the metal rails surrounding the dark, bottomless-looking pit.

"Family, sir? Friends? Um... money?"

"Family is a dime a dozen," he said with a soft snort. "Friends are articles of convenience. And money is trash." He shook his head as his horn glowed, and he whispered softly into her ear, "No, the three most precious things are loyalty, love... and secrets."

Suddenly, the rails weren't there anymore and she was falling back over the edge, just barely grabbing on with her forelegs. "Help! Somepony help me!" she shrieked. The glowing metal bars that had twisted away behind her slowly returned to place. "Please... I have a family!"

"My condolences, but I'm afraid that some ponies just can't be trusted with secrets." And with that, he stood there and watched as her legs and then her hooves slowly slid over the edge. He didn't

look away. He still didn't even blink... The world became tumbling darkness. I shuddered, closing my eyes and unable to watch any more. That was a long way to fall...

The image flickered out. "That's the memory I experienced in the cave. When the memory ended, I was nearly dead and was fortunate to get back up the elevator before I completely dissolved.

The Goldenblood-being-a-murderer thing. I was... disappointed. I'd hoped that I'd be wrong about him. That once you got past all the secrets and lies, there was a good pony. How could he kill somepony just to keep a secret? Loyalty, love, and secrets. And a relationship with Fluttershy? How did that happen? I had more questions than when I'd started! It was supposed to go the other way around! Well... nothing to do but start trying to get answers to them.

"So Rarity was... experimenting? On ponies? *Rarity?*" I said, now trying to wrap my head around that one. How does a pony go from dressmaking to that?

The glowing pony nodded once. "Mhmm... what kind of experiments... and how she was planning on protecting her friends... I don't know. I know that she pursued it for several years, then abandoned it abruptly. Beyond that, I only know it was based out of Hightower Jail. Here." My PipBuck chimed softly. "You can investigate it yourself if you like."

I checked my map and saw the blank square to the north. "And there's nothing you can tell me about the other projects?"

She shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid not. Chimera was Trueblood's baby. Starfall and Horizons were Trottenheimer's. I don't even know who oversaw the rest. I'm sorry. I wish I could be more help."

I gave the projection a tired smile. "I wish I could be more help," I said. She looked confused. "Well, it's just, I'm nobody special. I'm just staggering through all this the best I can."

The professor shook her head with a small smile. "Nobody special? Blackjack, you emerged from your stable with one of the deadliest war machines in history after you and lived. Since then, you've destroyed that war machine, helped stabilize Flank, are virtually the patron saint of Chapel, brought together sand dogs and ponies in mutual protection, ended one of the gravest raider threats to the city, and during all of that you were also unraveling a two-century-old conspiracy involving one of the most secretive and powerful ponies in history. You've gotten to the point where your whim is a major consideration for all the powers of the Hoofington region and you carry with you our single best hope for recapturing the greatest technological and arcane treasure troves in all of Equestria. If you are a nobody, then you are the greatest nobody in the history of the world."

I blinked, blushing hard as I rubbed the back of my head. "Gosh... when you put it that way..." I was still a nobody, but at least it was nice to hear she regarded me so highly. I looked at my PipBuck... "I can't give you EC-1101, Professor. But... if there's a way I can give you access to Steelpony... I will." I looked at her stunned expression. "It probably won't do me any good, but you might make some use of it."

"I..." She stared at me, and then the glowing projection threw its arms around me. The light flickered and sparkled, dazzling my eye. "Thank you... so much." She drew back. "Well... if you can get to the Flash Industries headquarters's maneframe and use EC-1101 to unlock it, I should be able to

extract the Steelpony activation files and schematics from here.”

“Flash Industries?”

“One of several cover companies we worked with while developing Steelpony. I’d direct you to the Aegis Security headquarters, but it took a direct hit from a balefire missile. There’s naught left but a crater.”

My PipBuck chirped as a few new icons lit up. “These are the O.I.A. fronts I know of where you might find something useful.” Boom Inc. O.I.A. Progress Office. Horizon Laboratories.

Hippocratic Research.

I felt lightheaded. Places all in the northeast corner of the outer city. Places where I might find answers. A place where I might find Sanguine himself. I nearly trembled in anticipation. “Thank you. This is wonderful! I don’t know what to say!”

She flushed... well, her cheeks were a little shinier than before. “And if I can make one last request... I’d like to interview all of you. I think it’s something that might be valuable someday. Ponies are going to want to know just who Security and her friends were.”

I couldn’t think that that would ever be valuable; in six months I’d be gone and in seven probably forgotten... except maybe by Glory and my friends. “Well... I’ll tell them when I see them in the morning... but don’t hold your breath.” The projection arched her brow and I coughed into my hoof. “You know what I mean...”

* * *

“What do I want?”

“Gosh, that’s an easy one. Give me a box of Sugar Apple Bombs and a bottle of Wild Pegasus and I’m good... Look, I’m not a complicated pony. Really. I’m not smart enough to be a complicated pony. I want folks happy and safe. That’s it. If my actions make some ponies able to live their lives, then I’m good.

“Of course, that means that sometimes I have to take lives as well. I never like doing that. I know some ponies feel a rush when they kill, but it’s just something I have to do. And sometimes... sometimes I’m really good at it. I wish it was as hard for me as it used to be, but I guess that’s growing up, huh? So if I do kill, I try and kill the ponies who cause harm. I do my best to make sure that nopony gets hurt who isn’t causing hurt.

“But what I’d really like is a nice place to live with Glory, a kid of my own, in a safe place, with a weekly poker night with my friends. I’m pretty sure that’s all I need. If I get that, I’m pretty sure giving whatever I have to everypony else who needs it isn’t much of a problem.

“Oh... I suppose I should throw ‘not dying’ in there too...”

“Crap... can I do this again?”

* * *

I waited at the north gate, calmly checking my shotgun, rifle, and twelve millimeter ammo. Fresh healing potions from Triage for the next few days. Food and purified water. The thunderstorm was soaking everything, transforming the quad into a muddy lake.

Glory trotted out of the mist, her beam rifle shifted to the side to compensate for her missing wing. She smiled broadly up at me in her Equestrian Air Guard barding. "Leo didn't want his gun back?" I asked with a smile of my own.

"He did, but I beat him..." she said with a chuckle.

"You fought him?" I asked in shock. Glory fighting for a gun?

She brushed her purple mane out of her eyes. "No. I guilt tripped him about almost killing you when you were going to do so much for the professor, so he dropped it."

I smiled at her. "I love you." She flushed in delight.

Scotch Tape came staggering out of the fog. "Don't go! I'm coming with you."

My smile strained. "You're sure..." I'd done all I could to convince her to stay here with Virgo or return to the Crusaders. She remained adamant. Rampage had been right...

"Of course. We Stable 99 ponies have to stick together," Scotch said brightly. She wore her brown work goggles and 99 utility barding. I sighed at the sight of her with the nine millimeter automatic pistol. She'd have to go through her first kill all over again. Hopefully it wouldn't be for a while.

"Yeah. We have to stick together," P-21 said from my side. I jumped... okay, I would have jumped clear over Glory if my legs were working right. My blue friend gave me a small smile and shrug. "I've stuck it out with you this long. I can manage a few more months. Chapel's not going anywhere." His eyes flicked down to Scotch, and for a moment I thought he was going to say something. Then he just flushed and looked away. The filly dropped her eyes with a sigh.

"The Goddess shall not be excluded," Lacunae pronounced as she trotted forth in her black dress. No gun, but we'd find some way to remedy that. In the meantime, she had her magic. Her purple eyes stared down at me coldly, but then shifted and softened as she smiled. "The Goddess is quite curious about what you will find in the future."

"So she's not going to try and make me find Chimera for her?" I asked, arching a brow curiously.

"No. The Goddess anticipates that she may task another to that end. Hopefully that one will be far less... stubborn," Lacunae finished with a soft smile as she looked at me fondly.

I looked out into the mist-shrouded quad and the hazy outlines of the buildings. I expected Rampage to emerge any second. Any second...

Any second...

"Where's Rampage?" Scotch Tape asked with a worried frown.

"I guess... she's not coming." And I supposed that would be for the best. Damn it, it still felt

wrong, though!

We filed through the gate, past the guards and the beam turrets. Hopefully I'd made a big enough dent in the ghoul population that we wouldn't have to fight for a while. I took point, Glory watched the left, and P-21 watched the right. Scotch Tape was in the middle. Lacunae doffed her dress and took to the air... really, why had she bothered putting it on at all? The entire Collegiate had seen her wings while the Goddess was in control of her.

I turned back, looking at the gray block buildings through the haze of the rain. For a moment, I thought I saw a white pony with a flash of red atop one building. But then the rain stung my eye and I blinked... and she was gone.

Footnote: 50% to level.

(All thanks and praise to Kkat for creating Fallout Equestria. Much praise and thanks to Hinds and Bronode for making my lousy writing decent enough for all you folks. Comments are craved desperately. And if you'd like to donate a bit or two to the writer, the tip jar is to David13ushey@gmail.com through paypal. Thank you so much for reading.)